Not long ago I had dinner with a young man who had been on several short-term mission trips. It was great to catch up with him, but discouraging to find that he is no longer following the Lord. For over a decade, I have been involved in sending and taking teenagers like him on mission trips around the world. The trips deeply affected many of the teenagers, and some of those teenagers have gone into full-time mission work as a result. But it seems that for every one whose experience was positive in the long term, I know of another who is living an apathetic Christian life or who has fallen away from the Lord. What am I to make of these discouraging facts? Aren’t short-term missions the great spiritual panacea for teenagers?

Whether or not you actively participate in short-term missions, you are no doubt well aware of their growing popularity. Recent Barna research indicates that 23 percent of evangelical Christians have been on a short-term mission trip (Barna Group 2008). Terence Linhart claims that “by conservative estimates, nearly 250,000 middle school and high school students” went on mission trips in 2003 (2005, 256), and David Livermore emphasizes the growth of short-term missions (2006, 42). These facts should give us pause for thought. Are short-term missions a passing fad or a long-term part of God’s strategy for the Church? Do short-term missions really make a lasting difference in the lives of our students? What are the pitfalls we should avoid?

Last fall’s issue of Christian School Education contains articles on the importance and benefits to Christian schools of short-term mission trips. Ray Sutton gives encouraging examples of how mission trips have had a powerful impact on Pacific Academy and its students. He also states how important he believes it is that Christian schools get involved in short-term missions: “To achieve the goals that flow out of a biblical vision requires our Christian schools to become involved globally.” He adds that “to develop the skills necessary to live out a Christian worldview requires our young people to test and stretch the boundaries of their world, to move outside of their comfort zone, and to think and act beyond the self-centred level at which their human nature wants them to operate” (2008–2009, 16–17).

Many others echo Sutton’s sentiments. Ken Smitherman writes, “In my years of Christian school administration, I can identify no single curricular activity that has had a greater or more lasting influence on our students’ lives than personal involvement in a missions trip” (1999–2000). The eminent missiologist Ralph Winter writes, “Short-term missions are a worthwhile activity. I would not have become a missionary had I not gone on a three-week [mission trip]” (2004, 12).

The benefits of participation in mission trips can be many for high school students. These benefits include an expanded worldview, exposure to poverty, developed spiritual disciplines, a greater sense of gratitude and generosity, an ability to share their faith, exposure to other cultures, and a greater desire to serve others. Most of these lessons cannot be learned in the classroom alone; students best learn them when those students experience real-world situations in which they are challenged to test what they have been taught and in which they have opportunities to make a visible difference in the lives of others.

But Winter gives this warning: “History tells us there are more wrong ways to do mission than right” (2004, 13). A good deal of research has indicated that although mission trips can have a powerful, positive effect on participants, the trips can also have negative consequences. Randy Friesen made some surprising discoveries after carrying out a study of 116 short-term mission participants over the course of 2 years. One was that “a year after participants returned home from their mission assignments, many of them had regressed in virtually all of the positive changes they had made, in some cases to below their pre-trip level” (2005). Many who have studied the movement question whether the benefits outweigh the costs at all. And probably every mission coordinator or hosting entity knows stories of mission trips or individual participants gone bad.
If short-term missions can be so beneficial to participants, as many studies and much anecdotal evidence claim, why can they also have negative outcomes, as other studies and anecdotal evidence show? The answer to that question is complex because each participant is unique and because a large number of factors affect his or her experiences. If Christian schools are going to take advantage of the powerful potential of school-based short-term mission trips, how do we help ensure that the trips achieve positive results in the lives of our students?

To answer that question, I believe we should start by asking another: How would Jesus do short-term missions? Although some might think that short-term mission trips are a modern phenomenon, the Gospels give two clear examples of Jesus Himself using short-term ministry trips to train His disciples. The first is found in Matthew 10 and Luke 9: “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:1–2, NIV). Then in Luke 10:1, we read that Jesus “appointed seventy-two others and sent them.”

Christian schools can glean several valuable lessons from these two examples. The first is the importance of personal experience in spiritual training. Jesus wanted a specific message spread in the regions to which He sent His disciples, but He also intended these trips to be teaching moments in which His disciples would practice what they had been learning from their Teacher. They had heard His teachings and had seen Him heal the sick and feed the hungry; but Jesus knew that to understand better what He would be teaching them over the next 2 years, they had to experience preaching, healing, and casting out demons for themselves. And He sent them out “like lambs among wolves” (Luke 10:3). It seems that He acknowledged risks to His disciples but that He considered the risks well worth the lessons. After all, He was training them to become world changers, a role that is risky business. If we desire our students to really grasp and own the spiritual lessons we offer them, we must give them opportunities to test these truths in real-world settings even if the settings appear risky to us.

The second lesson is the importance of proper preparation and debriefing. Before the disciples left, Jesus took ample time to prepare them, carefully explaining to them not only the spiritual components of their mission (Matthew 10:5–8) but also the logistics (vv. 9–10). After the disciples returned from their trip, Jesus spent a significant amount of time debriefing them. He understood that they needed to reflect on their experiences and to receive guidance regarding recognizing and applying the lessons the experiences afforded. In Luke 9 and 10, we read that upon their return the Twelve reported to Jesus what had happened during their trips. They were excited, and they couldn’t wait to share their experiences with their Teacher. Jesus recognized this powerful teaching moment, so they “withdrew by themselves” (Luke 9:10).

If any aspect of a short-term mission trips is done hastily or skipped altogether, it is usually the debriefing. Participants return to hectic lives put on hold during their trip and often fail to reflect on what they could learn. Often, team members experience frustration and depression, which if left unresolved can lead to spiritual setbacks. Linhart points out another possible negative outcome:

Part of the problem recognized by observers of these trips has been the lack of transfer from mission experiences of students into their lives after the trip. The moment the trip concluded, the support and feedback structures of the trip were removed from the students’ lives. The students no longer met together and did not discuss ways to become servants at home and in the community. Nor did they support other team members in any structured ways. The cross-cultural experience ended, but what import did it exhibit in the students’ futures? (2005, 265)

In observing Christian school mission teams over the last decade, I have seen these negative outcomes many times. On the other hand, the schools that made mission trips an integral part of their overall school mission and that prepared their students and followed up the trips with plenty of debriefing and mentoring have found that the majority of participants grew significantly in every way. Friesen’s study came to the same conclusion (2005), and Linhart states that “short-term mission needs to be situated as part of an overall emphasis, theologically and pedagogically, on service and mission within a youth ministry,” (2005, 268) or, I would add, within a Christian school.

A third lesson is the timing. A growing trend among Christian schools is to make the senior trip a mission trip. The class forgoes the normal trip to the beach or Disneyland in order to serve others. This is a wonderful trend as long as the senior trip is not the first time the students have gone on a mission. We do not know exactly how long it was after Jesus chose the Twelve that He sent them on their first trip, ...
but it was likely between 6 and 11 months later (Barker et al. 2002, 1512–13). Presuming that the Twelve were with Jesus for about 3 years and making a comparison to our high school students, we might say that Jesus sent out the Twelve when they were His freshman or sophomores. Jesus knew that by sending them out early on, they would be better students for the next 2 or more years. We see evidence that Jesus continued to refer to those mission experiences as He taught His disciples in the following months (see Luke 22:35). The two mission trips on which Jesus sent His disciples were clearly part of His long-term curriculum for them. Many Christian schools miss out on the opportunity and responsibility to disciple their students after trips by waiting until the students are seniors to send them out. And in doing so, those schools often miss out on the excitement, maturity, and leadership that these students could bring to the schools in the following years.

In Matthew 10 and Luke 9, we read that Jesus gave the Twelve power and authority to carry out their tasks. As we teach the truth of Scripture to our students, they will undoubtedly hear that they too have been given power and authority to carry out God’s commands to take hope and healing to the nations. But untested truth quickly becomes stale, losing its power. The risk for Christian schools is that we stifle the spiritual growth of our students by not sending them out to serve others and share their faith. Mission trips as stand-alone experiences are not a spiritual panacea for our students, and even when the trips are done well, not all the participants will necessarily exhibit great life changes. But when the trips are not only included as an intentional component of the spiritual curricula of our schools but also accompanied by solid training and good post-trip discipleship, the trips will more often than not bring positive results that can radically change our students and our schools.

References


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