QUESTIONS 4: SHORT-TERM MISSION

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I had been planning to address this question later on in this series, but a comment on yesterday's post pushed it up the agenda.

Short-term mission trips are something of a rite of passage for many Christian young people, today. They form an alternative to a gap-year of backpacking through Asia for evangelicals. Over the years, I've written a lot about short-term mission and if you want to dig through the archives, you can find them hereÂ (oh, and I give my definition of short-term mission here).

Getting practical, what should a church leader do if they are approached by someone who wants to go on a short-term trip and is looking to the church for support? I think there are three areas that need to be looked at.

The Person

Church leaders know more about this than I do. Would you genuinely recommend that this person gets involved in some sort of Christian work? Do they have something to contribute? Do they have the maturity needed? Are they committed to church? etc. etc...

If you aren't very positive about the person, then don't support them in going on the trip. However, you should explain to them why you aren't supporting them and you should give them advice on how they can grow and develop.

The Trip

Is the organisation running the trip signed up to the Global Connections code of conduct for short-term mission? If not, then suggest that the person find something that is.

Putting it bluntly, is the trip more of a sanctified holiday than actual involvement in mission work? Any visit to an exotic location will have some element of adventure and sight-seeing, but if that appears to be the primary purpose, then I'd suggest that you don't support the person. If they want to go on holiday to Thailand (and who wouldn't?), they should pay for it themselves. Sorry if that sounds uncharitable, but most churches don't have a lot of money spare and what there is needs to be used wisely.

Is the trip doing something harmful? The idea of sending a group of young people to build a classroom in Africa might sound fantastic, but why would you spend thousands of pounds to send a bunch of unqualified kids out to do a job when there are local craftsmen finding it hard to make a living? Exporting unemployment to underdeveloped countries is not a good idea. Similarly, avoid anything that smacks of orphanage tourism like the plague.

Is it really a mission trip? The thing is, there is no such thing as short-term mission. Mission, by

definition, involves a long-term engagement. There is however, a place for short-term teams or individuals getting involved in long-term projects, as I wrote three years ago:

> *However, just because mission itself is long term, this doesnâ€™t mean that there is no place for short term mission workers. What it does mean is that short-term mission work must take place within a long-term framework.Â Short-term missionaries can bring valuable skills and manpower to bear at critical points in a long project. The key is designing short-term mission projects that support ongoing mission work.*

Make sure that if you are sending people on a short-term mission trip that it integrates into a long term strategy.

Your Church?

What is your church's strategy and involvement in world mission? (If you've not thought that through, watch this space.) I would argue that any support for short-term mission work should align with what the church is already involved in. Unless you are looking to expand your concern into new regions, you should only support short-term workers who are going to be involved in a country, or a type of work that you are already supporting.

Are you being proactive? Rather than waiting for people to put themselves forward for short-term mission trips, why not identify people that you think could make a real contribution and learn a lot from visiting a mission partner, or supporting some work and actively send them out?

You might think that my approach here has been negative and you would be right. I think that short-term mission trips have the capacity to do enormous good. We really profited from the support of a couple of short-termer when we lived out in the African bush. I also believe that people can learn a huge amount from an involvement in mission work and that supporting short-termers can be a real blessing to a church. However, for short-term mission work to be a success it needs to be carefully thought through and implemented. It isn't a rite of passage or something that every Christian young person should do once in their life and the evidence that it helps develop a life-long interest in mission (as is often argued) is tenuous at best. Good short-term mission is a fantastic blessing for the individual and the church, but that means we need to ensure that the trips are good.