Missionaries’ Perspectives of Short Term Mission Trip Participation

Courage Mudzongo, M.S & Brandy A. Randall, PhD
Department of Human Development and Family Science
North Dakota State University

Introduction

- Short Term Missions (STMs) are generally undertaken out of a desire to alleviate poverty, increase access to education and to improve the quality of life for the mission beneficiaries (Priest, 2006).
- STMs are a fast growing phenomenon and yet previous studies have shown mixed results about their benefit to both receiving communities and missionaries.
- An upper Midwest based church has been undertaking STMs to Nicaragua for the past 18 years in an effort to improve the quality of life, however, their STMs have not yet been studied.

Objectives

- To understand missionaries’ perspectives on their experience, including the possible impact on their lives and faith
- To assess if the STM was conducted in a manner consistent with the set standards.
- To examine potential ways to improve STMs for missionaries

Method

Purposive sampling from missionaries who participated in a STM to Nicaragua in the Spring of 2013.

Participants

- 10 Randomly selected participants; 7 male
- Email recruitment facilitated by the sending church
- Members of a church in the Upper Midwest (n = 5)
- Members of other churches (n = 5)
- Age range 45-69 (mean age 50.4 years)
- Varying social and economic backgrounds

Data collection

- Individual interviews (n = 10)
- Conducted in English

Data analysis

- Descriptive content analysis
- Coding for themes and categories

Table 1. Results (Major themes and subthemes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre STM</th>
<th>During STM</th>
<th>Post STM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THEME 1: Reasons for participating</td>
<td>THEME 2: Preparing for the STM</td>
<td>THEME 3: Mission activities &amp; projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Nonspiritual reasons</td>
<td>Nonspiritual mission activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. To reach out to the poor</td>
<td>1. To participate in the school renovation project.</td>
<td>1. Doing construction related tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To participate in the school renovation project.</td>
<td>3. Personal exploration</td>
<td>2. Distributing donated goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Having a missionary background</td>
<td>4. Learning about country and culture</td>
<td>3. Going to holiday retreat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEME 4: Impacts</td>
<td>THEME 5: Benefits of STM to missionary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Spiritual growth</td>
<td>1. Receiving blessings from God &amp; Nicaraguans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. No change in faith and financial giving</td>
<td>2. Gaining a sense of purpose and calling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEME 6: Recommendations for improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>1. More time for devotions for US missionaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonspiritual reasons</td>
<td>1. Recruiting new missionaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. To reach out to the poor</td>
<td>2. Getting more information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To participate in the school renovation project.</td>
<td>3. Learning Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Personal exploration</td>
<td>4. Interacting more with Nicaraguans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Having a missionary background</td>
<td>5. No need for any changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

- STM was said to have led to spiritual growth and positive impact for missionaries, their families, friends and communities. Some of the reported changes began during the STM and continued upon return.
- Missionaries had increased awareness of global poverty and wish to continue playing a role in improving the standards of living for people in developing countries.
- Some STM participants reported that there was no change in their community activities, however, evidence supports that these changes took place as a result of their participation in earlier STMs.
- Overall, missionaries felt their STM was well organized and consistent with identified best practices. More, however, can be done to surpass the set standards.

Future research

- Future research should examine the perspectives of the receiving Nicaraguan communities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the STM participants and the sending church for assisting with this study.

Contact: courage.mudzongo@ndsu.edu

Some exemplary quotes from the interviews

Reasons for going to Nicaragua

These people are so poor and neglected. They are forgotten and we ministered to them. The food distribution was coupled with the ministry and we did all that... It is because people are desperately poor and they need education and the Lord Jesus (Jamie, M, 54).

Impacts on the missionary

I believe that God has opened my eyes. I feel closer to him... My mind is always on God now... I listen to more Christian music. It means more to me (Victor, M, 49).

Benefits of STM for the missionary

We are so blessed. God has given us that opportunity financially to do these trips... (Lori, F, 65).

Meeting the people is primary for me. ...Relationships are what actually last (Terry, M, 58).

Recommendations for improving STMs

I am not very fluent in Spanish. My wife and I did buy Rosetta Stone... but found it challenging...What we wanted was a small group. Perhaps that can be put together to help learn (George, M, 55).

I don’t know what to say because they are doing a really good job. (Carol, F, 60)