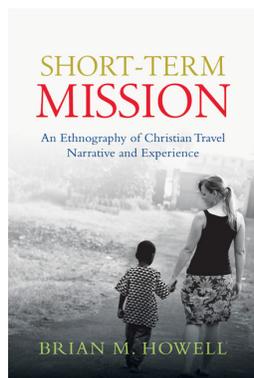


BOOK EXCERPT



*Short-Term Mission:
An Ethnography of
Christian Travel
Narrative and
Experience*

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Narrating the Short-Term Mission Trip

My initial attraction to this project came from the many stories I heard from my students about their short-term mission trips. Some of these were brief accounts delivered in a one-on-one conversation or a thirty-second description in class. Others were formal presentations in chapel with music, PowerPoint slides and prepared testimonies. What stood out from all these settings were the similar themes, phrases and images that often accompanied these varied presentations.

Refrains of “I received more than I gave,” “I was changed,” and “I learned that people are the same everywhere” were stock phrases in many of these personal or corporate narratives. Photos of teams, often in the matching shirts, with arms slung around shoulders, a single white face surrounded by brown-faced groups of smiling children and images of North Americans engaged in manual labor were the stock images. These converging narratives were my first clue that some common cultural process was in place helping people to create meaning in the context of these trips. Needless to say, once we returned, I was looking forward to hearing how the members of our team to the Dominican Republic would narrate our trip. . . .

The first formal presentation of our trip came at a youth group meeting where two of the members of our team, Henry and Emma, were asked to share briefly about their experience. . . .

When it was time for [them] to talk about the trip, [they] took the microphone and talked about the work we did, sharing some memories and encouraging other members to consider going on a trip next time the opportunity became available. Emma, having gone two summers, said it was “really incredible to get to know these kids [at La Casa].” She explained how she could “see God working” in the Dominican Republic, stressing to her fellow youth group members that “you can’t really understand unless you go.” Henry also exhorted his fellow youth to consider a trip, and he talked about the work we did. Referring to the kids in Gato Negro who would join us at the construction site, Henry said, “It was a great witness, great opportunity to just be with these kids, speak a little bit of Spanish and be able to communicate with them. You just know, just by the way that we

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were acting, they could learn from us.” Henry also encouraged his fellow youth group members to pray about going on a trip themselves.

It was not surprising that the narrative of the trips given by the teams to their youth group would emphasize the work we did, focusing on the elements of sacrifice, spiritual growth, God’s work through our actions and relationships with people in the countries we visited, while downplaying tourist activities and educational outcomes. The setting of the presentation was designed to emphasize those very things. . . .

For the members of all Central Wheaton Church’s teams, exposure to “need” is an explicit goal of the trip. Even some of the parents of the kids on our team mentioned to me their desire for their kids to “see how it is” in other parts of the world and “appreciate what they have.” As Megan’s mother said, “I just want my daughter to see that it’s not everyone who has this life, this kind of life with all this.” But just as I noticed throughout our trip, in the post-trip narratives understanding need was not the same as understanding poverty as a social or economic phenomenon. As in Kersten Priest’s (2009) research, need was framed first and foremost in spiritual and relational terms, rather than social or economic ones. The needs of non-Christian Dominicans (or those perceived as non-Christians) were often viewed as the emotional or spiritual needs that were manifest in physical needs.

At the same time, among Dominicans perceived as Christians, physical poverty was understood as a means of spiritual maturity or blessing, thus “need” became a more complicated category as applied to both impoverished Dominicans and wealthy North Americans. As returned short-term-mission (STM) travelers re-narrated their encounters and experiences of the trips, the North Americans gave meaning to the nature of “need” in themselves and in the world. . . .

In the varied tales of my team members, every person, adult and student, pointed to personal relationships, with the long-term missionaries or Dominicans, as one of the most significant outcomes of the trip, a way in which they were “changed.” For some this was about particular individuals they had come to know and with whom they planned to have a long-term friendship. Others talked more generally about the “the kids we worked with” or “the Dominican Christians we got to know,” but particularly for

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the students, these relationships were narrated through the STM encounter as a spiritual connection in which theological lessons of gratitude or contentment offered the transformative (if temporary) insight into their own spiritual condition. Although these lessons were often reflective of the “spectacle society” characteristic of these trips (Terry Linhart 2006), it draws on a vision of the self and a moral rhetoric similar to what Rebecca Anne Allahyari (2000) calls a “personalistic” view of service. By engaging in service with those in need, and giving selflessly, the narrative of STM expects personal transformation to follow. . . .

For Christians seeking to understand inequality, poverty and cultural differences, it is clear that the aspect of narrative emphasizing personal relationships and the modeling of Christian behavior in the presence of social others is problematic at best. As the narrative weaves together the physical poverty with emotional/spiritual poverty, the presence of a foreign group lacking linguistic skills, cultural competence and significant time seems an inadequate, if not counterproductive, response in terms of the social problems ostensibly being addressed by the work. Of course, it should be asked if the perceptions the short-term travelers have of the needs of local people—indeed the perception of the context itself—correspond with reality. In looking back on their trip, some of the members of my own team became aware of the ways the STM narrative and focus shaped their own ability to perceive the people and places of Linda Vista.

—Adapted from chapter eight, “Of Course You Always Grow Closer to God on a Missions Trip’: (Re)narrating a Short-Term Mission Trip”