



FIND A MISSION TRIP

Five Pitfalls of Short-Term Mission And How to Avoid Them

By Hannah Nielsen and Jenny Collins

A person doesn't have to do much reading about short-term missions (STM) to discover criticisms leveled against it. Rather than despairing, though, because mistakes could be made, let's focus instead on avoiding those pitfalls.

Just as the people who go are not perfect, so the trips themselves are not without fault. However, with forethought you can help your STM experience be a good one. Individuals going on a short-term mission trip can help by examining their own hearts, approaching a trip correctly (preparation) and choosing wisely.

Below are five common pitfalls facing STM, along with ways to steer clear of them.

Pitfall 1. Thrill Seeking

The ease of travel and the number of agencies eager to accept short-termers has made it possible for "experience junkies" seeking an adventure to participate, even though they may not be truly interested in selfless cross-cultural service. This can leave the nationals or long-term missionaries embittered, feeling as if they have been used to host a glorified vacation that used up valuable time, energy, and finances.

How to Steer Clear

While there is a certain adventure to STM, it's important that one's focus remain on ministry. Check your heart. Maintain a servant attitude.

For more information about avoiding this pitfall, see Standard 2, Empowering Partnerships, in [The Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission \(SOE\)](#).

Pitfall 2. Lack of Preparation

Teams may arrive with proper motives but inadequate preparation. They may be sincere but lack the cohesiveness that develops through team preparation and are therefore prone to interpersonal difficulties and lack of focus. They may also lack cultural sensitivity and an awareness of their own ethnocentrism – which can cause offense, giving negative impressions of Christianity – and have a diminished capacity to understand the people and their needs.

How to Steer Clear

Teams should be prepared prior to arriving on the field. They need team-building, spiritual and cultural exercise, as well as possibly training in skills they'll use on the field. All that without touching on the potential need for language skills. Proper training not only helps remove roadblocks to ministry, it also paves the way for valuable interaction with national hosts and others. Is your team prepared? Are you prepared? Perhaps you need to research the place you're going, or maybe in all your busyness you've neglected time with God. You can remedy that.

For more information about avoiding this pitfall, see Standard 6, Appropriate Training, in [The Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission](#).

Pitfall 3. Self Focus

Mission trips today are often used to bring about change in the participants. A trip to another part of the world may well change how a visitor views that world or how that visitor understands God. Life change of the goers, however, was not the motivation for missions in the past.

These groups might also spend large amounts of money on souvenirs without any thought to how this appears to nationals who struggle under incredible economic difficulties. It is possible that such teams, though sincere, may cause more harm than good.

How to Steer Clear

Remain focused on God and his purposes for the trip, rather than being focused on yourself. Ask yourself, “Why are you going on this trip?” Although experiencing and serving in a different culture may open a participant's eyes, this result should be secondary to the ultimate goal for the trip. How can you see what God's doing when you're focused on what's happening inside yourself? This pitfall often also reveals itself in how you talk about your just-completed trip. Focus on what you saw God doing, rather than emphasizing how you were changed.

For more information about avoiding this pitfall, see Standard 1, God-centeredness, in [The Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission](#).

Pitfall 4. Project Selection

Not all service projects are created equal. In the book *The Short-Term Missions Boom*, Michael J. Anthony describes one ten-day trip where his team did nothing but work long hours digging a trench on a Caribbean island. They did not experience the culture or meet any nationals. Worse yet, he found out later that the trench was filled in and never used. His point is that each project should be evaluated carefully beforehand.

In the case of the trench, according to Anthony, a national worker could have been paid a few dollars a day to dig the ditch, enabling him to feed his family for months.

How to Steer Clear

To safeguard yourself against having this experience, it's vital to choose your trip well. Ask questions of the organizers. Look for trips that are connected with the local church and/or long-term workers. If you're interested in a work trip, perhaps you can select one that places you side by side with nationals. In the case of evangelism work, is there a way for the local church to follow up with contacts that are made?

For more information about avoiding this pitfall, see Standard 3, Mutual Design, in [The Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission](#).

Pitfall 5. Dependency or a Quick-fix Mentality

Sometimes short-termers introduce methods and technology that create dependency. Well-meaning groups may bring equipment and techniques that are not locally sustainable, leaving nationals dependent on ongoing assistance rather than empowered and confident to do things for themselves when the group leaves.

Some nationals discover quickly that many short-termers would rather give five dollars than five minutes to assist them, and get great satisfaction from giving away clothes and other supplies, creating an expectation of receiving material support.

How to Steer Clear

Creating dependency is best prevented at the trip planning or selection level. Choose your trip carefully. Ask questions. A quick-fix mentality can occur on both planning and individual levels. Examine your motives and actions.

While the best prevention of dependency and a quick-fix mentality is on the trip planning and selection level, one way to greatly reduce your risk of falling prey to this pitfall is to select a trip that is associated with long-term workers. They're aware of the culture and how things will likely be viewed.

For more information about avoiding this pitfall, see Standard 2, Empowering Partnerships, in [The Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission](#).

Short-term missions can make a significant contribution to God's global purposes with long-term results. Avoiding these five pitfalls will go a long way to ensure your STM will produce lasting Kingdom fruit. To learn more, download the [booklet on the Seven Standards of Excellence](#) (PDF, 24 pages).

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The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest fields.

Matthew 9:37-38



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