

growing into something new

a disciple is transformed

Everyone going on a short-term mission experience hopes that the time, gifts and skills they give will make some kind of difference. Sure, we can all say the right thing and modestly claim that we'll be happy to wait until eternity to find out what that might be, but let's face it - it would be pretty pleasing to know sometime before then!

Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this but there's a regular and sometimes even heated debate in long term organizations like the one I work with about the value of making time and room for people coming for just a few weeks or months. The question 'Does it make a difference?' is at the centre of those discussions. Personally, I believe it does because so many long-term people have told me about the difference short-termers have made. This is usually just before asking for more like them. Of course this is not true of every person in every placement which is why the question still comes up.

People being changed

But there is one area in which change is guaranteed.

It's the change that takes place in the people who go. Most people find that leaving their comfort zone to serve Jesus somewhere else - meeting needs, sharing Good News, indeed, being Good News - changes them profoundly. They're not quite the same person when they come back - and it's more than their gut flora that's changed! This shouldn't shock or surprise us because if being a follower of Jesus is about anything at all, it's about changing, or to use another word for it, growing.

“ if being a follower of Jesus is about anything at all, it's about changing..... growing ”

growing into something new

Where does this kind of change come from and how does it work out as we get involved in short-term service? Jesus spent time with his disciples preparing them for what was going to be quite literally the mission-experience of a lifetime. John records a lot of what he said in his Gospel (chapters 13-17).

At the heart of it, Jesus tells them that, like branches on a vine, being connected to him, staying close to him is going to be the biggest factor in their growth and fruitfulness. 'Pruning' is likely to be part of their experience but they are to stay close to Jesus, indwelt by his Word, in community with one another and with prayer as part of their regular experience.

Even before he started talking about vines and branches, he made it clear that they are not on their own. The Holy Spirit is in them, bringing Christ's presence and life into their day-by-day experience. **(Check it out in John 14:15-27, 15:1-17.)**

Pruning is what you do to a plant, like a vine, to get it to grow more fruit in the future. The dead and diseased bits and the bits that are no longer needed are cut out to make room for fresh growth. Millions of keys have been tapped on this subject as people have told their stories of how this has worked out in their lives - so I won't add to that. But there's no doubt that in getting into short-term service we find that our lives are often trimmed back, and we find out what's really essential. The culture, the role, the job, the home, the relationships we're most comfortable with are no longer there. How do we respond to this? It can be painful but it's a real chance to grow. We want to grow as much as we can, don't we? So we might as well work with this. After all there's no point in wasting all that experience - otherwise we might as well have just gone on holiday!

Getting ready for change

It all starts in our heads. Being aware that this is going to be an opportunity to grow as a Christian is a good place to start. It takes you in your mind to the purpose behind what you're doing, because it's easy to forget that in the exciting rush of new experiences, or even in the preparation leading up to the mission placement. How is growth going to come? It will happen in the same way that it always happens; sticking close to Jesus, getting his word into you, getting with a Christian community, and praying are all going to be part of it.

So before you go, as you go, and when you come back these key elements need to be part of your Christian life. There needs to be people praying with you and for you. Your service opportunity cannot just be about you doing something different for its own sake. Work out what you want people to pray for, get them involved in it with you; don't simply go it alone.

Time with God, not just time for God

Make sure that before you leave, while you're there, and when you get back that you are able to make time to interact with the Lord as you read the Bible, pray alone, and reflect on what you're learning. This can be a challenge when everything around you is changing. Personally I find keeping a journal that includes what I'm learning, questions I'm asking, stuff I'm praying about to be really helpful when I'm out there away from the routine.

growing into something **new**

Keeping in Touch

While you're there it's also good to keep in touch with that community of Believers you're part of back here. Telling them what's going on and keeping in touch helps them to pray. And their prayers in turn help you. But the process of telling them what's going on is really helpful to you. As you spell out to others what your hopes and fears are, what you're learning, what you hope to achieve, so you stop and reflect on the experience whilst you're in it. Some people use blogs well for this purpose. It keeps a record of what's going on, gives those who want to be part of it something to pray for and enables them to get back to you with comments, encouragements, insults, abuse and whatever. If you're concerned about security these can easily be set up so that only those who are invited get to read it.

part of the body

While you're on placement, try and connect with local believers there in some way. It's a great opportunity to be part of the body of Christ with people from another culture, or a just completely different set of circumstances to your own. Look to make real friends with some of these people, and remember that friendship is two-way. The love Jesus talks about in John 15 is worked out as disciples in community give to and receive from one another. There may be times when you will need to be on the receiving end of the love of brothers and sisters. Embrace that opportunity to be the body.

The challenge of coming back

Coming back to everyday life can be a big challenge. It can seem pretty empty and boring and your home church a bit bland if you compare it to what you have experienced. It's sometimes made harder because many people will simply not 'get it' that you have been through all those experiences and been touched so deeply. Don't give up on these people, don't judge them or put their backs up - like it or not, they are your brothers and sisters.

Try and hold on to what you have learned and begin the tough journey of figuring out how those lessons could be applied back in your own context. This backwards culture-adjustment is not easy, especially when it takes you by surprise, but there are some good books about this. There should be some people in your church who you can debrief with and report back to. If you go with an agency they should offer this, so take up the offer. Of course there is no substitute for finding someone who does know what it's like and giving them the joy of hearing you tell your story slowly. Don't ask me how you find them. Like visitors to Narnia, these people tend to find each other, and there may be one closer than you think!

The journey goes on

A lasting difference from short-term service is not dependent upon a successful placement. Mark was someone who had a disastrous time on a short-term mission. He ended up going home and his team-leaders even fell out over whether he should have another chance. But that wasn't the end of the story; he went on to be the first to write down the truth about Jesus. We know his work as Mark's Gospel. As you go and come back, don't miss the opportunity to grow.

John Ayrton Interserve



interserve entry found on page 49



growing into
something **new**

a church is transformed

Jo Jowett talks to Roger Sutton, Senior Pastor of Altrincham Baptist Church about the growth and transformation that has taken place in his local church as a result of getting into short-term mission.

Can you describe how as a church leader you began to see members of your congregation getting involved in short-term mission?

For some years we had a few people go out on short-term mission, but the real breakthrough came when, as leader of the church I joined a group of 21 people on a 2 week visit to Jinja, Uganda. This created a wave of enthusiasm in the church which has consequently led to over 150 people serving in short-term mission all over the world with different agencies. A number of people go every year, and it has now become part of their lives. Separate charities have been formed, hundreds of young people sponsored, two local councils have formed a friendship link, and long-term missionaries have been sent. This has been primarily a move of God's Spirit among us that we have joined in with and tried not to hamper.

Many people who have done some form of short-term mission come back to their home churches to a lack of enthusiasm from their church leaders. Can you tell us how you came to catch the vision?

My own journey in short-term mission involvement has been simply about obedience to a call of God. I knew I had to lead a trip, others came alongside me to support and off we went. It was meant to be a one-off and has turned so far into a 7-year adventure and I wouldn't be surprised if this now lasts a lifetime.

I think it is vital that the senior leader of the local church takes the lead and goes on short-term trips on a regular basis. The church should if possible fund these trips since they have such an important part to play in the development of the church. The leader comes back enthused and naturally starts to share stories with the congregation, which in turn gives permission and encouragement for others.

In what ways have you seen your church members grow through their connections with the wider world?

Short-term mission service has had a profound effect on the lives of those involved. Even a one-off trip can be used of God to create change and growth, but the more trips people go on the more effect takes place. I have observed a number of growth points in people's lives:

People getting out of their comfort zones creates an exercise of faith, trust and obedience.

People faced with the poverty of the developing world have to re-assess their own lifestyles, and often their consumerist habits are challenged to the core.

Forming friendships with brothers and sisters overseas or just outside of their normal context creates a whole new dimension to their faith and human development.

growing into something new

a church is transformed



Can you give us an example / story of one of your members who was transformed as a result of serving on a short-term programme?

Phil is a self-employed car mechanic who visited Jinja, Uganda in 2002. He was appalled at the state of the vehicles and wanted to do something about it. Over the last 4 years he has raised thousands of pounds to set up a mechanics training centre in a very well-run vocational college in Jinja. In February 2007, he will be the guest of honour at its opening. This is a very ordinary guy who has been led by the Spirit to achieve a great vision; his faith has grown, his confidence has increased and his life has been changed. This is the kind of thing short-term mission can do.



As a church leader, how have you grown personally as result of this involvement?

I am not the same person I was 6 years ago; my values and habits have been profoundly challenged. My mind has been expanded and my faith has been stretched. Although the journey has not been easy at times, I am profoundly thankful to God for opening up this new horizon from which life itself makes better sense.



Do you feel there are any disadvantages to sending people out into mission beyond your own locality?

There is obviously a cost the church pays in encouraging short-term mission. People may well find themselves deeply involved in the projects they visit and give significant time and money that could have been used in the local church. The key is to see this involvement not as loss but as a kingdom gain; to see the time and money released as an extension to your own ministry, not in competition with you. The gains however outweigh the loss many times over. Because many more people will come back off short-term mission enthused into local mission, their commitment to the church will increase both in giving and time.

“ I am profoundly thankful to God for opening up this new horizon from which life itself makes better sense. ”

growing into something new

What would you say to those who feel that mission is just for the 'keenies' or to those who feel we have enough challenges on our own doorstep?

Mission is for everyone because we are Christians, those who follow the missionary God into this world. God's nature was missionary when he reached out to us in Christ and continues in the power of his Spirit. That mission is to the local, national and international context. It is a greatly impoverished gospel to believe in Christ but not to believe in his calling to go into all the world. Most Christians' main calling will be to their own doorstep, but that can never be to an exclusion of a wider calling. Every Christian should express their commitment to Christ with some dimension towards the wider world, with a particular focus to the poor. This may be simply sponsoring a child or committing to one overseas short-term mission trip in a life time. Whatever way God leads, a wider vision will need to be expressed in some way.

How would you advise an individual who is enthusiastic about mission but is part of a local church or Christian community which doesn't share their vision?

Please just get on and do some mission. Pray for your church; seek to influence it, but don't let others' disobedience stop you from doing what you need to do. Life is too short and there is so much need, so please seek God as to how he would have you serve in this world. Share that with some trusted friends and get on with it and see what God will do. You will inspire others more through example than words.

Is there anything that you believe God is saying to the church in relation to his heart for the world that local churches need to listen to?

Over the last few years so many churches have begun to hear the call of God to the world. Hundreds of churches and thousands of individuals are now regularly connecting to churches in other parts of the world. This is producing a new wave of renewal in the lives of individuals and churches that is profound. I think in years to come we will look back on this movement, started around the turn of the millennium, and see the hand of God beginning something of deep significance. I hope the book on the revival of the church in UK is written in 30 years time, and if it is, I think there will be a chapter dedicated to the impact that a new move of short-term mission had on the spiritual formation of churches and Christians.



**Roger Sutton, Senior Pastor,
Altrincham Baptist Church,
Manchester**



Altrincham Baptist Church entry found on page 28