

Ten Commandments for Short Term Missions

By Paul Cull

We hear much in missions circles about short-term outreach teams, their exploits and adventures. Usually, however, we hear only from the perspective of the team itself. This article, written from the perspective of a long-term missionary, is intended to bring a dose of reality to those planning and preparing for a short-term outreach.

So you're ready for the Great Missionary Adventure. You've got your visa and your airline tickets, had the immunization tablets and shots, bought lots of film for your camera, and made some contacts with mission bases in your target country. You've heard about some short-term trips that didn't turn out quite as expected, but you're sure that this will be different. After all, you have a genuine burden for the people you will be visiting, and have received definite confirmation that the Lord will use you and your team to reach the lost during this trip.

So, what remains in your preparation?

My answer to this question would be one word: "lots". My experience with short-term teams and visitors has convinced me that we need to emphasise some basic points in order to increase the effectiveness of such teams and decrease the possibility of unpleasant things happening during or after the team's visit.

Let's consider the ten commandments of short-term outreach. Bear in mind that these are written for outreach teams, such as church groups or teams from a Bible school, who have no specific technical training, and who are coming to work alongside an existing long-term base. There will be some exceptions to these rules, such as in the case of pioneering ministry to unreached areas, and the case of teams which have been formed of trained individuals for a specific technical task (ie medical, disaster relief or community development).

We'll begin with the most important commandment:

- 1. Thou shalt always remember that the primary function of a short-term team is to learn, and not to help.**

After months of preparation you're finally going to The Mission Field - and now someone tells you that you're going to learn and not to help! What about all those lectures about serving, all that preparation for witnessing, and those prophecies about the souls that would be won into the Kingdom through your visit?

Try for a moment to see things from the perspective of the long-termers - those who have been working for maybe years in the same location, learning the language, gaining the trust of the community and living the gospel, often at great personal cost. A short-term team, especially one without local language skills, cannot possibly understand the often complex situation of the field: the superstitions and prejudices, the previous misunderstandings and perhaps even misrepresentations of the gospel, the way the culture views foreigners and Christianity, and the

sometimes tangled relationships between local churches. All of these things take time to understand and appreciate, and quality time on the field is one thing that the short term team will never have.

So what, then, is the purpose of a short-term mission? My belief is that the primary benefit of a short-term trip is to expose the team members to something a little like the reality of the mission field, to give them a taste (albeit, often sugar-laden) of the reality of the call, and to perhaps motivate them for later involvement in world missions.

Am I saying that God won't use short-termers during an outreach? No, not at all. He can use all of us when and how He pleases, and often surprises us with the ways in which His grace can flow through us to the needy. However, we must remember that the task of evangelism and discipleship is often a long-term job, and obviously the long-term workers will play a more decisive role in this work.

That brings us to the second commandment, which is like the first:

2. Thou shalt always defer to the long-term missionaries, even when thou dost not agree with them

Remember that the long-termers, for all their human frailty, have spent more time on the field than you, and have consequently gained a greater understanding of the local situation. Try to respect their wishes and advice about security, team activities and timing, and even seemingly little things like dress code. They may not always be able to articulate or explain the reasons behind their decisions, however it is important to remember that they do have experience on the field that the short-termers do not have.

That is not to say that you cannot recommend different activities, or question the reasoning behind current practices, however this should always be done in an attitude of humility and a willingness to learn.

3. Thou shalt surely leave all thy agendas at home before thou arrivest on the mission field.

It is essential that a short-term team be very flexible about the activities they will be involved in, and the results they expect to see. If you feel that God has shown you a strategy or revealed a plan for your team, be sure that all of the team's activities are approved by the leadership of the base where you will be staying. Short-term team which are truly coming to serve and work alongside the long-termers will gladly abandon their own plans and expectations in order to help in the base activities; however teams who come with their own agendas will often be, at best, a distraction from the true work of the mission project, and could even be counter-productive.

What if you feel that God has given you an activity or strategy for your team which doesn't fit in with what the project is doing? My advice would be to present your ideas to the leadership of the base where you are staying, and then leave it all with God. Maybe He will change the hearts of the leaders, maybe the idea was from God but the timing wasn't for now, or maybe you just plain heard wrong. Whatever the case, respect the wishes of those who are hosting you, and under no circumstances go against their advice or authority.

4. Thou shalt be prepared to spend large amounts of time doing nothing, for thus verily is the way of the mission field.

Short-termers, especially those who have not been exposed to different cultures, can often be frustrated by the time that is apparently wasted in travel arrangements and appointments which fall through. It is not uncommon for a team to wait several days in order to visit a project or activity, only to find it cancelled at the last moment! Yet all of this is a very real part of the mission field. Many cultures don't have the same value on efficiency and time management that we Westerners do, and for them it may be perfectly normal to spend several days - or more - waiting for a contact to arrive.

For this reason, it is important that the team leave plenty of slack time in their schedule to allow for missed buses, guides or interpreters who never turn up, weather conditions which may make travel impossible, and a thousand and one other reasons why things will not always run like clockwork.

Short-termers may feel that they have spent so much money in coming to visit, that they deserve priority treatment in order to obtain "value for money". Yet, we must remember that the team's visit is probably taking workers away from their true work and is, in reality, often an interruption in the busy life of the mission project. With this in mind, the short-termers must be prepared for days of inactivity, foregoing their own plans and expectations if necessary.

5. Thou shalt be careful to obey, in all details, the security rules and advice of the project which thou visitest.

Security is probably one of the biggest issues facing a short-term team on the field, yet it is often a neglected topic. While it is true that the Lord does protect us, in often miraculous ways, it is also true that we must act with wisdom at all times. Security issues include the personal security of team members and their belongings, the security of the project, its equipment and personnel, and wider issues involving the reputation and legal standing of the project, and its coexistence with the community.

It is often difficult for a short-termer to understand the reality of security risks, especially as these are not always immediately visible. Street children, youth gangs, drug dealers, organised crime gangs, vigilantes, corrupt police officers, and hostile authorities may all pose threats which are not apparent at first sight to the newcomer. In addition, the project itself may be under scrutiny by the community, authorities or criminal elements, and apparently innocent activities, such as taking a photograph, hugging a child or an unguarded comment, may create immediate or long-term problems for that mission.

For this reason it is essential that short-termers converse with the long-termers upon arrival, and establish security norms to be followed. It may be necessary for foreigners to always carry identity documents, to establish a curfew, or to define when and where photographs may be taken. It may also be necessary to guard money and valuables in a secure location, and to determine the places where the visitors can be on their own. If the team is large, consider splitting into smaller groups while visiting project activities for security or logistical reasons.

Remember to always obey the security rules, even if you think they are excessive or unnecessary. By virtue of their having survived on the field, the long-termers have proven that these regulations really

do work! Even if they prevent you from doing something which you are sure does not pose a threat to your security, remember that your hosts feel responsible for your well-being during the time of your visit, and that as such it is important for you to abide by the established security measures.

6. Thou shalt be both attentive and accurate in the communication with the mission base before thy visit.

It is vitally important that the team communicate important information clearly with the base prior to departure. Here is a preliminary checklist of useful items to discuss:

- The number of team members, broken down by male and female, and singles and couples (This information helps your host prepare for your accommodation)
- The availability within the team of members who can speak the local language
- The level of physical fitness required to accompany the missionaries' regular routine, and
- special equipment that may be needed (e.g. hiking boots or backpacks)
- The inclusion within the team of members who have health conditions which may require medical assistance or supplies
- The costs that will be involved in your stay, including transport, accommodation, food and miscellaneous expenses
- The climatic conditions of the area (Should you bring an umbrella? Warm clothing? Sunscreen?)
- Appropriate, culturally acceptable clothing
- Baggage limits (Be aware of the methods of transport that will be available to the team, and be careful not to bring more baggage than each team member can carry on his or her own.)

Likewise, it is necessary to pay attention to any special advice or requirements from the mission base. Remember that the base may not be equipped to receive many visitors, so be careful to follow its advice if it requests that team members bring items such as cutlery or bedding.

7. Thou shalt be careful to pay for all the expenses of thy visit.

Although I've briefly touched on this in the previous item, it is important to clearly define the financial responsibilities of the team and its members before the visit. Remember that bases often run on a shoe-string budget, and that hosting a team can be a significant drain on their resources. Make sure that each team member has sufficient funds available to pay such expenses before leaving your country. It is also considerate to offer to pay the project in advance as this may be the only way it can afford to buy the necessary provisions for your team's stay.

If a missionary host is acting as a guide or translator for the team, don't forget to offer to pay the expenses of their travel, including incidentals, such as food while on the road. Although the team will probably be paying the project for the expenses of their stay, it is possible that individual missionaries who are helping the team could easily end up out-of-pocket at the end of your trip.

8. Thou shalt take great care in thy giving and thy spending, lest thou appearest to be filthy rich.

As much as we love to give, especially when confronted with the reality of urban poverty, it is important to be discreet and wise in our giving. Check with the full-time missionaries before giving to beggars or children, as it is probable that the missionaries will have a better understanding of the situation and will know whether giving, in a particular case, will be beneficial or harmful. As a general rule, if someone asks for money for food, it usually better to buy food rather than give money which could be misspent.

It is also good to be restrained in unnecessary personal expenditure, such as junk-food, as what we may consider to be inconsequential can appear to be extravagant to those in the third world.

9. Thou shalt be careful to respect the doctrinal and theological views of the project which thou visitest.

Despite the increasing emphasis on networking and interdenominational partnerships within missions, it is nevertheless necessary to remember to respect the ministry model and theological framework of the mission that you will be visiting. Find out what is and is not acceptable to them in terms of “ministry”: ie whether it is acceptable to pray for individuals, or to speak in tongues, or preach on certain topics. Be especially careful with the more debated topics, such as the end-times, renewal-type physical manifestations or prosperity teachings.

10. Thou shalt surely keep thy word in regards to follow-up activities.

Remember: if you make promises to the missionaries or to locals while you are on the field, be careful to fulfill your word when you return home. For example, if you’ve promised to send copies of the photographs you’ve taken or video that you’ve filmed, be careful to do so quickly. Likewise, if you’ve promised to make some inquiries or send some items, remember that the missionaries may be eagerly awaiting your reply, even if they did not say so. It is also a nice touch to write a letter or send an email message following your visit, thanking your hosts for their assistance.

After reading through all of this, you may be wondering whether a short-term missions trip is a really a good idea after all. The answer to that is a qualified “yes” - as long as you keep your expectations realistic, and remember that your trip will almost certainly be much more beneficial to you personally, than to your hosts. After you have been confronted with the reality of the modern mission field, of the suffering and abandonment of so much of the world’s population, of their poverty in the face of our affluence, don’t be surprised if you find yourself with an increased burden to be involved in world missions, maybe eventually in a long-term position on the field.

And it could all start with a simple, short-term trip.

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