The Impact of Short-Term Missions: A Case Study of House Construction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch

KURT ALAN VER BEEK

This study surveyed 162 short-term mission participants who traveled to Honduras to help build homes after the 1998 devastating Hurricane Mitch. The survey found that while participants reported that their trip had resulted in significant changes in their lives, including their financial giving, their donation records did not reflect any substantial differences—a fact which calls into question the self-reported positive changes in other areas. This study also compares the responses of over 30 Honduran families who had new homes built for them by North American short-term mission groups after the hurricane with those of a similar number of Honduran families whose homes were built not by North Americans but by Honduran Christian organizations. It found that having homes built by the North American STM groups versus Honduran Christian organizations seemed to make no difference to the new homeowners—positive or negative—despite the fact that the STM group spent on average over $30,000 to build a house the local Christian organization could build for $2000. Finally, the author proposes that both STM participants and the Honduran recipients resemble saplings, which can be bent and held in one place for a week or more, but once released quickly return to their previous state. The author ends by reflecting on how this "sapling model" explains the fact that local Christian organizations had a much more substantial impact on the families than the STM groups did and its implications for increasing the impact of STM in the future.

Introduction

Short-term missions (STM) is a rapidly growing trend, especially among North American Christians. Students, professionals, and retired people travel the globe to

Kurt Alan Ver Beek is a professor of sociology for Calvin College. He lives with his family in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and directs Calvin’s off-campus semester there. Ver Beek has a Ph.D. in Development Sociology from Cornell University and did his dissertation fieldwork among Honduras’ Lenca Indians. Ver Beek contributed a chapter to the book Commitment and Connection, edited by Gail Gunst-Heffner and Claudia DeVries-Beversluis (University Press of America: New York, NY, 2002) and has published several articles about Honduras’ maquiladoras. He and his wife, Jo Ann, are among the founding members of the Association for a More Just Society (www.ajshonduras.org).

Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XXXIV, no. 4, October 2006
spend a week or a month building schools, painting homes, evangelizing, or providing medical care. According to best estimates, the number of North American STM participants grew from 125,000 in 1989 to between 1—4 million in 2003.

Critics say North American short-term missionaries often lack necessary training and respect for “nationals,” do not speak the local language, are culturally inappropriate and insensitive, and focus on short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions and meaningful learning experiences (Allen 2001, DeHainaut 1995, Heydron 2002, Ver Beek 2002). Others argue that these trips too often become expensive efforts that assuage North Americans’ guilt and satisfy their curiosity but do little lasting good. They point out that short-termers can easily spend $30,000 in traveling costs to build a $2,000 house with less spiritual change than if the work was done by local Christians who follow-up on their efforts. Short-term missions, they argue, also distract full-time missionaries while leaving the local population dependent and misunderstood (Becchetti 1997, Jeffrey 2001, Searle 1982, Van Engen 2000). The millions (probably billions) of dollars spent could be better invested in long-term efforts.

Proponents argue that North American participants change the lives of those they serve by providing needed goods and services and sharing the gospel. In addition, proponents say STMs open North Americans’ eyes to needs around the world and make them more faithful long-term supporters of the STM beneficiaries (Hestenes 2000, Anderson 1992, McDonough 1996, Kirby 1995). They also say STMS strengthen participants’ faith and act as stepping-stones for young people considering long-term mission careers (Pocock 1987, Loobie 2000, Beers 1999, Tuttle 1998).

Which view is right? The following study sought to evaluate the impact of short-term missions on three groups: short-term work groups, “beneficiaries” (the communities receiving the short-term groups), and “sending” and “receiving” organizations. It did so by studying a housing project in which short-term groups built some homes while local non-profits built others.

Overview of Research Goals and Methodology

In October 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, leaving more than 5,000 people dead and 1.5 million people homeless or displaced. Hurricane Mitch also created tremendous sympathy among North Americans. The Christian International Development Organization (CIDO) raised over $2 million for reconstruction in Honduras, most of it used to build 1,082 new homes. CIDO channeled the majority of these funds through their partners in Honduras — Christian development organizations that normally receive CIDO funding for programs in areas such as health and agriculture. Most of the homes were built in regions where these organizations already worked and for people with whom they already had a relationship. Each of these homes cost about $2000 to build. Nearly all of the recipients were required to help build their own homes and pay back part or all of the home’s cost. CIDO also had 31 STM teams (26 from Canada and 5 from the United States) assist in building homes. Each team spent an average of $30,000 in airfare, lodging etc. These work teams were coordinated by CIDO and CIDO partners in Honduras.

In this study we sought to overcome the methodological problems of previous studies. Of the more than 40 research initiatives published in the last 20 years, only...
one surveyed Third World communities where STM groups worked (Baar 2003), only 9 had sample sizes of over 100, nearly all surveyed the returning North Americans immediately after returning from their trips — while they were still on the “high” from their experience — and very few triangulated respondents’ answers with secondary sources like organizational donation records. All of these issues lead to very North American perspectives on STMs, and the emphasis on self-reporting, small sample sizes, and surveys filled out soon after returning make it likely that results showing positive impacts on STM participants are exaggerated. To address these issues, we surveyed 162 participants between one and three years after their experience, triangulated self-reported giving with CIDO’s donor records, and evaluated the impact of these STMs on not only the short-term work groups but also the “beneficiaries” (the Hondurans whose homes were built by STM groups) and the “sending” and “receiving” organizations (in this case, CIDO and its Honduran partner organizations).

First, we were curious about the long-term impact of the STM experience on short-termers’ lifestyles—do they now pray more, study more, give more? We mailed surveys to 162 short-termers and received responses from 127 (a 78% response rate). We also triangulated self-reported giving to CIDO with CIDO’s donor database and, finally, randomly selected 10 respondents for follow-up phone interviews.

Second, we wanted to know the long-term impact these groups had on the communities they visited and how the Honduran beneficiaries evaluated the experience. We were presented with uniquely advantageous circumstances in that we had two groups of new homeowners: those whose homes had been built by STM groups and those whose homes had been built by Honduran Christian development organizations and thus served as a control group. By comparing these two groups, we could isolate the effect that an STM group’s presence (or absence) on Honduran families and communities. To collect data on both groups, a Honduran social worker and a North American social worker fluent in Spanish interviewed 78 beneficiaries in six regions of Honduras, about half of whom lived in homes built by STM groups and half in homes built without short-termers’ help. The interviews were taped, reviewed, and summarized by both researchers. We tried to determine how having the home built by an STM group or not had impacted the beneficiaries’ views of their homes, their relationships to their neighbors, their faith, etc.

Third, we were curious as to how the sending and receiving organizations viewed the benefits and difficulties of working with short-term teams, what they had learned, what they would do differently in the future, and if they noted any differences between the two groups of homeowners. We interviewed the agency’s employees as well as 15 representatives from seven of the agency’s partner organizations.

**Results/Findings**

**Honduras Results**

After extensive review and discussion regarding the interviews of the 15 partner agency employees and 78 beneficiaries of STM-built and non-STM-built homes, we grouped our findings under four headings: (1) Little or No Difference between Groups, (2) Missed Opportunities, (3) Importance of Agency Management, and (4) Sending Money vs. Coming in Person.
I. Little or No Difference between Groups

We should begin by clarifying what we are not saying. We are not saying that the lives of the families in both groups were not changed by having a new, well-built home — it was clear that all were extremely grateful for their homes and many mentioned that it was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. But when comparing families and communities whose homes were built by STM groups with families and communities whose homes were built by other means, there was little or no difference in the areas outlined below.

No Difference in Level of Spiritual Impact

We originally hypothesized that building homes with STM groups might have more spiritual impact on beneficiaries than building by the Christian organizations: as well as providing a house, STM-group members would be sharing their love of God in both actions and words. However, we could detect no noteworthy difference in the level of spiritual impact between the two homeowner groups. The majority of both the STM beneficiaries and the non-STM beneficiaries either said they felt closer to God after receiving their new house or that they had always been close to God. Similarly, Honduran development workers saw no difference between the spiritual lives of families whose homes were built by STM groups and those whose homes were built otherwise.

Before, I always prayed.... Now I pray for help with the home payments ... I told God that I wanted a home for my children and he answered me. (STM beneficiary)

My mom was Catholic and asked God for a home, whether of wood or cement. She said she would serve him and change religions if he gave her the home. He didn't give her a wood home, rather one made of cement. She gives thanks to God... [and] has changed a lot. Now she understands us, listens to us, and is very loving towards us. (non-STM beneficiary)

No Difference in Level of Satisfaction

We were also curious about how having an outside group build a home would affect a family’s sense of ownership and satisfaction. Possibly they would value it more, since they saw how much a group of strangers had invested in it. On the other hand, they might feel less ownership, believing others should fix any problems with the home. However, we found no notable difference in the level of satisfaction with the project between the two beneficiary groups. According to both the beneficiaries and the organizations working with them, both groups were equally grateful to have their own homes.

Because of God’s help and the help of the agency, now we have our own home. (STM beneficiary)

The good thing [about the project] is now we have our own home. (non-STM beneficiary)

Now, no one can kick us out of our home. (non-STM beneficiary)

No Other Long-Term Difference

Finally, we asked both beneficiaries and the development organization staff if they could see any differences between the two groups — whether one group was
paying their loans more faithfully or was more motivated to participate in community projects, for example. But no consistent differences between the two groups emerged in our interviews with beneficiaries and organization representatives.

In summary, critics would have predicted that the STM groups would negatively impact Honduran families — making them more dependent and less proud of their homes. STM proponents would have predicted that the groups would cause positive changes — Hondurans would have stronger relationships with God and be more thankful for their homes. But in our interviews with nearly 100 beneficiaries and development workers, it appeared that while having a new home was life-changing for the Honduran beneficiaries, the STM group had neither less nor greater impact than the Honduran Christian organizations despite the difference in amount spent to build each home.

II. Missed Opportunities

While interviewees felt the short-term groups had not made any greater impact than the Honduran organizations in the lives of the new homeowners, many mentioned ways the groups could have done so — areas we will call missed opportunities.

Build Stronger Relationships

Interviews revealed Honduran communities felt most North American work groups had missed opportunities to build stronger relationships. Although the majority of communities felt that the groups carried a positive message, many said they would have liked more contact with them. For example, the majority of STM groups ate nearly all their meals with their own group, not with the community. Agency representatives and community members alike said an attitude of openness, not language, was the most important factor in communication.

We don’t have much interaction with the groups — only when they need materials, nothing more. They do not share anything with us. They buy sodas only for themselves and drink them in front of the Honduran construction workers that are with them without offering them one. (agency promoter)

Mutuality of Experience

During our interviews we asked Hondurans what they had learned from the North Americans and what they believed the North Americans learned from them. Many said they were impressed by or learned from the groups’ unity, work ethic, and eagerness to serve.

We didn’t just receive things from the group, we also learned things, things that we didn’t know before the group came, and things we wouldn’t have learned if they hadn’t come. (STM beneficiary)

The Hondurans also said they believed they had nothing to teach their North American visitors. Project recipients did not feel valued, and the learning felt one-sided. Interestingly, North Americans participants expressed in the survey that they had learned much from Hondurans — so while both groups felt they learned from each other, neither had taken the time to acknowledge it.
III. The Importance of Agency Management

While we did not find a noteworthy difference between recipients of Honduran-built homes and recipients of STM-built homes, we did find other differences among the homeowners we surveyed. Some communities we visited were motivated, united, and confident that they were going to continue to grow as a result of the housing project, while others were passive, pessimistic, and suspicious. These differences were due not to the presence or absence of a short-term group but rather to the strategy and integrity of the CIDO partner organization. The factors which appeared to have the most positive impact were (a) implementing a clearly defined strategy, (b) a training program to accompany the construction process, and (c) transparent management of the funds and resources involved in construction and loan repayment. Doing these things well resulted in families who (a) were more grateful for their homes, (b) felt more ownership of their homes, (c) were more motivated to participate in other community projects, and (d) were paying off their loans on time.

_The whole community helped the rest. We constructed 15 homes in all. The families all worked together. Because of the project we are now more unified._ (non-STM beneficiary who worked with a CIDO partner that had a clear strategy)

_It has been five years and no one has paid a penny for their homes. Because of this we have not been able to invest more money into the community. We do not have the resources._ (agency promoter from CIDO partner that lacked a consistent strategy)

IV. Sending Money versus Coming in Person

Finally, we wanted to know what community members and agency employees would do if they could choose to have another short-term group come down and build two homes or to have this group stay home and instead send the money they would have spent on travel expenses — enough to build 10 homes. The respondents’ answers were more nuanced than we expected.

Most interviewees started by demurring that it was too difficult to choose, or that the groups wouldn’t send the money instead of coming — but when we encouraged them to answer as if they controlled the situation, the majority of community members and five of the six agencies leaned toward asking the North Americans to stay home and donate the money they raised to the housing projects instead of spending some of those resources on coming to Honduras themselves.

Many community members were reluctant to recommend that groups just send money because they clearly valued the personal connection and hoped the trips would change the North American participants. Their feelings were summed up by one community member: “It’s better if the groups come, because of their love for others.”

However, when the community members weighed the good that could be done with more resources against their experience with the STM group, they mentioned two reasons why it would be better to just send money.

**Great Need/Help More People**

_It is better for them to send the money in order to help more people who are in need._ (STM beneficiary who cried when she spoke about the beautiful experience she had with the STM group.)
The group's presence can reduce the help that families receive because of all the expenses for the trip. (agency promoter)

More Jobs for Hondurans
Some interviewees noted that the work done by STM groups could have been done by Hondurans who desperately needed employment.

They gather money to come here to do work, work that we are capable of doing. (agency promoter)

The truth is that they don't have to come here to build homes.... If they come, they should come for the friendships, for the cultural exchange.... The most important is the relationship with the people. (agency promoter)

However, the same person who in the end recommended sending money would often mention reasons why both options were good. Community members most often mentioned three reasons for groups to continue coming: (1) to build relationships with Hondurans, (2) to experience a change of heart or outlook, and (3) to build bridges of continuing support to Honduran communities.

Building Relationships
This was the most common reason Hondurans gave in support of STM groups.

The best thing was the friendship we had with the group. (STM beneficiary who named her daughter "Laura Michelle" after two of the group members)

What I remember most was the group's joy, their love for us... because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. They loved us and the children very much. (male STM beneficiary who began to cry as he said this)

Changing Participants
Some interviewees mentioned the change that took place in the short-termers themselves.

They left changed, not because someone told them about the work, but because they came and saw it for themselves. (agency director)

Building Bridges
Others mentioned the importance of linking the short-termers' world with the Hondurans.

One girl who came with the group has come back as a volunteer doctor and another group of five to six young people are coming every year with her. Now she is raising money for the clinic. (STM beneficiary)

Conclusions from Honduras Interviews
Dozens of interviews in Honduras left us with some surprising findings. First, having homes built by STM groups versus Honduran Christian organizations seemed to make no difference to the new homeowners — either positive or negative. Both groups were almost unanimously happy and motivated, felt closer to God, and felt
more secure in general, regardless of who built their home. However, making some changes in how the short-term groups interacted with the Hondurans may have made their specific contribution (beyond the construction of the house) more impacting.

While we did not find a noteworthy difference between recipients of Honduran-built homes and recipients of STM-built homes, we did find other differences among the homeowners we surveyed. Some communities we visited were motivated, united, and confident that they were going to continue to grow as a result of the housing project, while others were passive, pessimistic, and suspicious. These differences were due not to the presence or absence of a short-term group but rather to the strategy and integrity of the CIDO partner organization.

Finally, Hondurans, if they could choose, would prefer North Americans stayed home and sent money, thereby spending less on travel expenses and more on the people they intend to help — but Hondurans also clearly value the relationships they make during a short-term mission trip and believe such trips play important roles in helping North Americans learn and be changed.

North American Results

I. Description of Participants

A total of 127 individuals responded and completed the survey. Of the 121 who indicated their gender, 70% were male and 30% female. Of the 127 respondents, 9% indicated being between the ages of 15 and 25, 44% between the ages of 26 and 55, 45% between the ages of 56 and 75, and 2% older than 76 — the median age was between 46 and 55. Of the 125 volunteers who indicated their marital status, 85% said they were married and 12% said they were single and had never been married.

Of the 123 volunteers who indicated their highest level of education, 9% had less than a high-school education, 11% had some high-school education, 15% had a high-school degree, 29% had some college education, 23% had a college degree, and 12% had a graduate degree. Income levels were indicated by 108 of the respondents, with the majority (41%) stating that their combined household income the previous year was between $25,000 and $49,999, 19% stating that they earned $50,000–74,999, 17% stating they earned $75,000–99,999, 14% stating they earned under $25,000, and 9% stating they earned more than $100,000. Of the 127 respondents, 47% were working full time, 28% were retired, and the rest were a mix of students, part-time workers, and homemakers.

Of the volunteers, 87.3% had not been on a short-term mission trip outside of North America before going to Honduras, and 65.9% said they had not gone on a short-term mission trip outside of North America since going to Honduras.

II. Survey Results — Selected Findings

We have grouped survey responses into two categories: (1) lasting changes in participants, divided between more and less tangible, and (2) importance of relationships and follow-up.

Lasting Changes in the Participants

We were most interested in the amount of lasting change the STM experience caused in participants. The surveys and follow-up phone calls clearly demonstrate
that participants were glad they had gone on the trip and impressed by what they saw. Most mentioned Honduran community members’ kindness, happiness despite their living conditions, and impacting faith testimonies. All 122 of those who responded to a question asking if they would recommend a similar experience to others stated they would “recommend” or “highly recommend” it. However, we wanted to see if this positive experience was also life-changing: if one to three years later the participants were praying more, reading more about missions and poor countries, giving more money, etc. We asked respondents to compare their lifestyles before and after the trip by rating how much they had changed (from “decreased significantly” to “increased significantly”) in these areas and others after their trip to Honduras. The table below depicts lifestyle changes as reported by the volunteers since their STM experience. (Before reviewing the charts, the reader should be aware of social desirability bias: survey participants tend to exaggerate positive behaviors when self-reporting.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Stayed the Same</th>
<th>Increase Somewhat</th>
<th>Increased Significantly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time spent in Prayer</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent Volunteering</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving of money to CIDO</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of CIDO</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for CIDO</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in your church</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in poor countries</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy for poor</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in more short-term trips</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in long-term missions</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent reading and learning</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about missions, poverty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tangibles average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intangible average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, 16% of respondents reported a significant positive change in these areas, 43% a slight positive change and 39% reported staying the same. However, while in intangible areas (such as interest in missions) 21% report significant positive change and 45% slight positive change, in more tangible areas (such as time spent in prayer and money donated) only 11% report significant positive change and 39% report a slight positive change. Comments from STM participants in phone interviews and free-response survey questions confirmed this trend.

Verifiable Changes: Level of Giving to and Support for CIDO

We were able to verify through a third party one of the more tangible changes we asked about: financial donations to CIDO. About 10% (13 individuals) responded that their financial support for CIDO had increased significantly, and 49% (about 60 individuals) claimed it had increased somewhat.

However, based on CIDO’s donor information, 75% of the 162 participants in the short-term teams to Honduras did not send in any direct donations to CIDO in the two years after their trip (2002–2003). The total amount given to CIDO by the STM participants went up only 6% from $5076 before the trips to an average of $5386 in
the two years after. Divided equally among all 162 participants, giving averaged $31 per person per year before the trips and $33 per person per year after the trips. The number of donors increased from 21 before the trip to an average of 31 after the trip, and CIDO gained 14 new regular donors, but 10 participants who had given donations before their trip did not give either of the two years after — so CIDO had a net gain of just 4 regular donors out of the 162 STM participants.

We recognized that respondents might choose to donate to CIDO not directly but via church offerings — so we examined their churches’ giving to CIDO in the same years. For the 17 churches that sent groups to Honduras (the other groups were not sent specifically by one church), we found that average yearly giving among the churches changed from $20,427 to $20,635, an increase of about $200 or 1%. This is certainly not what CIDO would have hoped for given the amount of time and energy invested in each group. Also of interest is the fact that of these 17 churches, 6 increased their giving after their short-term mission trips to Honduras but 11 decreased their contributions.

Intangible Changes: Attitudes and Ideas

Throughout the survey comments and phone interviews two themes emerged: (1) poverty and wealth and (2) global awareness/consciousness/compassion.

1. Poverty and wealth. Nearly everyone interviewed commented on poverty and wealth and were often (a) shocked by the poverty in Honduras, (b) surprised by how happy the Hondurans seemed despite this poverty, and (c) uncomfortable with their wealth and/or thankful for all they had.

a) Shocked by poverty

*I just realized what those kinds of countries are like, you know, just so poor.* (North American participant)

b) Surprised by Hondurans’ apparent happiness (This was the most common theme.)

*I find it rewarding in a lot of ways, you see how content those people are with how little they have, and we whine ‘cause we never have enough.* (North American participant)

*The main thing I think that it did for us was getting to know the people and see how they lived, with how little they had and how thankful they were for what they had.* (North American participant)

c) Uncomfortable with or more appreciative of North American wealth

*Who are we that we are blessed in this way? It gives you a much greater appreciation and more of a sympathy and empathy for people in Third World countries.* (North American participant)

*Why have I and he has not?* (North American participant)

2. Global awareness/consciousness/compassion. Many of the respondents also said the trip made them feel more aware of the world and more connected to people in Honduras and similar countries.

*These trips make you more aware of how other people have to live. You can’t watch news programs about the Third World and not feel much more strongly connected;*
you can’t separate yourself from what they’re dealing with anymore. (North American participant)

We are so much aware now of the poverty and the poor in the other countries and also of the disasters they have to endure and how they can’t get back on their feet right away. You hear on TV, “hurricane struck again,” your ears perk up, you know? (North American participant)

Who Benefits?

Participants in the work groups reported some adjustment in the way they saw the benefits of their project. Before going to Honduras 31% thought the trip would more greatly benefit Hondurans, but after returning only 20% thought that Hondurans had received the greatest benefit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group vs. community benefit</th>
<th>before trip</th>
<th>after trip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All group</td>
<td>2 6%</td>
<td>2 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More group</td>
<td>6 8%</td>
<td>15 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More community</td>
<td>23 1%</td>
<td>13 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All community</td>
<td>7 7%</td>
<td>6 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>59 8%</td>
<td>62 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance of Relationships and Follow-Up

When volunteers were asked what the most meaningful part of their STM experience was, nearly all mentioned connecting with Honduran community members — in church services, while working together, etc.

Interviewer: “What was the most meaningful thing?”

I would say the relationship that you built with the people there. Yeah, I was amazed at how quickly we could really love these people, and that was the most important part of the whole thing. (North American participant)

92% stated they had “meaningful contact” with Hondurans for a “small or large part of every day,” and over 80% felt somewhat or very satisfied with that interaction. Despite the importance participants gave to the relationships they established in Honduras, since returning 76.4% had not stayed in touch with the community they had visited.

While we were there, you know, you have notions of maintaining contact with them, but we never have. (North American participant)
So while 85% of the volunteers gave a presentation to their church and 56% did some debriefing/follow-up after returning to North America, over 76% had not stayed in contact with the community. Furthermore, in discussions with CIDO staff it became clear that there was no institutional structure to follow up with the volunteers, keep them informed about what was going on in Honduras, or solicit their continued support (for example, CIDO did not have the names and addresses of the majority of the volunteers). So while the relationships were what the volunteers most valued while in Honduras, neither they nor CIDO made many attempts to maintain these relationships after the trip ended.

III. Analysis

Finally, we wanted to see if the people who reported the greatest changes in their lives had something in common. Finding “key characteristics” among them might give us clues about how to make STM trips more life-changing. To help us search for such characteristics, we combined the following eleven life-change items mentioned above to form a “Life Change Scale:” time spent in prayer, time spent volunteering, giving of money, knowledge of CIDO, financial support of CIDO, involvement in home church, interest in poor countries, advocacy for the poor, interest in more STMs, interest in long-term missions, and time spent reading and learning about missions and poverty. Respondents assigned each of these one of five possible values ranging from “Decreased significantly” to “Increased significantly.” We then tested to see if there were significant correlations between increases in these eleven items (together and individually) and responses to the other questions in the survey (amount of orientation, number of trips, etc.).

It’s worth noting that some items we would have guessed to be correlated with significant life change were not. These factors included: (1) number of short-term trips respondents had participated in, (2) who paid for the trips, (3) how much respondents learned about CIDO, (4) whether they gave a church presentation after returning, and (5) whether they were debriefed in North America and if so how well. None of these factors showed significant relation with the amount of lasting life change in the participants. However, we did find four significant correlations:

1. Difference in Qualifications — Life Changes: The Scheffe test indicates respondents who described themselves as “Not very qualified” for the tasks they performed in Honduras indicated greater life change by a statistically significant amount compared to those who identified themselves as “Very qualified” for carrying out tasks in Honduras. ($F = 3.175, p = .028$)

2. Difference in Satisfaction — Life Changes: Those who rated their satisfaction with the experience a 5 (the most positive rating on a 1–5 scale) indicated a significantly higher life change score than those who rated the experience lower than 5. ($F = 3.34, p = .023$)

3. Difference in Learning — Life Changes: Those who reported learning “A lot” about poverty and how to best help the poor (5 on 1–5 scale) had a mean life change score significantly higher than those who chose 1 or 2. ($F = 3.39, p = .021$)

4. Differences in Education — Life Changes: The Bonferroni test indicates that life change scores indicated by those who had a “graduate degree” were higher by a significantly statistical amount than those who had a “high school degree.” ($F = 2.53, p = .034$)
How much did they really change?

While about 16% of respondents on average reported significant positive changes in their lives and about 40% reported slight positive changes as a result of their trip to Honduras, there is reason to question whether respondents exaggerated the extent of change:

a. While 59% of the survey respondents indicated their financial support for CIDO had increased, CIDO’s giving records indicated that only 10% of respondents were new donors and only 30% had given any direct donation in the last three years.

b. Social desirability bias: As social research expert, Earl Babbie states, “Whenever we ask people for information, they answer through a filter of what will make them look good.”

c. The largest changes were in intangible areas (66% reported significant or slight increases in interest in poor countries and STMs — with 21% reporting significant positive change) while the more tangible areas show more modest changes (under 50% reported increases in prayer, volunteering, or financial giving — with only 11% reporting significant positive change).

Summary of Findings

1. The North American work teams seemed to have no greater impact on the communities than the Honduran Christian organizations — either positive or negative. When asked about sense of ownership of the new homes, spiritual life, loan repayment, motivation to participate in community projects, and other factors, neither beneficiaries nor development organizations could identify any noteworthy difference between families whose homes were built by STM groups and those whose homes were built otherwise. This lack of difference sharply contrasts to the expenses incurred when a STM group builds a house.

2. The North American work teams missed opportunities to have a more positive impact. Several community members and development organization representatives believed the STM groups might have had a more positive, lasting impact if they had been more involved in the Honduran communities. By attending church services, eating meals together, etc., they would have built stronger relationships and demonstrated that they wanted not only to give to but also learn from Hondurans.

3. The work of Honduran agencies has substantial, lasting impact. While the study did not find a significant difference in impact made by the STM groups vs Honduran NGOS, the strategies used by the Honduran agencies for training, construction, loan repayment, and follow-up did have a lasting impact on the self-concept and motivation of Honduran individuals and on the unity of Honduran communities. The factors which appeared to have the most positive impact were (a) following through on a clearly defined strategy, (b) accompanying the construction process with a training program, and (c) managing funds and resources involved in construction and loan repayment transparently. Doing these well made families (a) more grateful for their homes, (b) feel more ownership of their homes, (c) more motivated to participate in other community projects, and (d) more likely to pay off their loans on time.

4. Nearly all Hondurans surveyed gave reasons that it was good for STM groups to come to Honduras, but in the end they believed that rather than using up resources on plane tickets, food, and lodging, North Americans could better spend their money on building more homes. Hondurans made it clear they valued the relationships built and the changes brought about in the STM participants. Hondurans also hoped these
participants would become more committed supporters. But in the end, when faced with the great need for housing around them and the shortage of construction work for their neighbors, they believed sending money to build more houses would be the greater good than spending so much on airfare, lodging, etc.

5. North American STM participants reported a small, positive, lasting change in their lives as a result of their short-term experience in Honduras. In areas such as amount of time spent in prayer, time spent volunteering, level of financial giving, and interest in poor countries, about 16% reported a significant positive impact and about 40% a slight positive impact.

a. This reported impact was strongest in intangible areas such as interest in poor countries and weaker in tangible areas such as financial giving. This pattern may accurately represent the changes brought about by the trip, or it may reflect the fact that changes in less measurable areas such as interest in mission are more easily exaggerated than changes in more measurable areas.

b. While 59% of the STM participants claimed their donations had increased after returning from Honduras, only 25% had actually given a direct donation, the total increase in giving was only 6%, and sending churches' donations went up only 1%. These results are less than would have been predicted by the respondents' answers to the questionnaire and also probably less than CIDO would have hoped for, given the resources it invested in these trips.

c. Based on CIDO's financial giving records, the fact that people tend to present themselves more favorably in self-reported surveys, and the fact that the largest reported changes were in areas that cannot be measured objectively (interest, attitude, etc.), the actual amount of change in participants may be quite small.

d. Finally, we attempted to discover if the individuals who reported the highest levels of positive lasting change had any common characteristics. Three of the most interesting commonalities were (1) the amount of pre-trip preparation, (2) the amount of learning the participants experienced during the trip, and (3) whether they stayed in touch with the Honduran community where they worked.

Tentative Conclusions and Agenda for Future Research

I recognize that in this study we looked at one type of STM group (construction) that worked in one country and with one organization — what follows are my attempts to generalize from this study and draw tentative conclusions which will require more research to confirm or refute. However, I believe considering the implications of this research is worthwhile as we attempt: (1) to guide practitioners who can judge these conclusions against their own experiences, (2) to guide future research, and (3) to demonstrate that academic research can improve practice.

1. Why didn't giving go up more?

Research on STMs has always found a significant increase in giving after STM participation. However, every study so far has been based on self-reporting, most have been done soon after STM groups' return, and hardly any have triangulated responses with donor records — making it likely that reported giving increases are overstated.
Furthermore, many repeat "short-termers" are not looking for lasting giving relationships with an organization but rather for a variety of experiences in different countries with different types of STMs. At the very least, our research has demonstrated that increases in giving are far from an automatic result of short-term mission trips. I hope future research explores variables that cause substantial giving increases or decreases. I would venture several hypotheses:

a. Increased giving is directly related to the promptness and consistency of follow-up, updates on the project/community STM participants worked with, and appeals for donations. Before we started this research project, CIDO did not have a list of the people who had participated in the STMs and had not done any targeted fund-raising with them.

b. Increased giving is directly related to the extent to which STM participants see the connection between the project they work on and the organization sponsoring the trip. Because the volunteers were working with CIDO partners and may have only seen CIDO employees for a few hours at the beginning and the end of their time in Honduras, the connection between CIDO and the project may have been weak.

In summary, if future research proves me correct, short-term mission trips by themselves do little or nothing to increase giving. Rather, the short-term experience is a potentially powerful event which a well-planned fundraising program can use as a catalyst to change participants' giving habits.


The most common theme mentioned by North Americans respondents asked to describe what they had learned went something like this: "Hondurans are so happy despite the fact that they are so poor." I have heard this comment many times in my years working in Central America and it troubles me somewhat.

Respondents may truly admire their Honduran hosts for remaining "happy" despite their material poverty. This response may also reveal how discontented many North Americans are despite our material wealth — money does not bring happiness. A point well taken.

However, at least two implications of this comment are more troubling:

a. "Hondurans are so happy...." Is this even true? Just because they are smiling and generous in sharing their small homes and rations with North Americans, does that mean they are happy? I have met a Honduran child dying of malnutrition, another who could not go to school because her parents couldn't afford the required uniform, and a family whose home, along with all their possessions, was destroyed by a hurricane. None of them were happy. North American guests should not mistake good hospitality, something we too would offer guests even when we were suffering, with happiness. Host organizations may have failed to help North American see the reality of Honduran life — both its joys and pains.

b. "Hondurans are happy... so I don't need to feel bad about not helping more." Believing or convincing ourselves that Hondurans are happy in their poverty may be a way of assuaging our guilt about not doing more. I believe this implication is most likely, and most troubling. If Hondurans are happy despite not being able to feed their children or send them to school, then I as a North American, who may not feel very happy despite my wealth, need not pray more, give more, or care more.
Future research must dig below this comment that “Hondurans are so happy” to see what it means to people and how it influences their actions.

3. Neither Honduran communities nor North Americans are easily changed.

Before beginning this study, I thought Third World communities, especially those ravaged by disasters like Hurricane Mitch, were fragile entities, and that groups of North Americans who did not understand the native culture or language and came with a “fix the poor’s problems” mentality would not empower poor families and could easily create dependency. At the same time, I believed North American short-termers, while less “fragile” than poor communities, were also vulnerable — a one-week experience in Honduras could easily “shake-up their world” and cause lasting changes in giving, prayer, and other areas. The first assumption is common in literature critiquing STMs while the second is common among STM proponents.

I now question both assumptions. Rather than seeing communities and North Americans as easily changed entities, I wonder if they more closely resemble saplings, which can be bent and even held in one place for a week or more, but once let loose quickly go back to growing vertically. Those saplings need to be held in place for a much longer period of time for the change in direction to become permanent.

This perspective would have predicted that a North American group’s one — or two-week visit to a Honduran community would be a good experience for the community but would not likely lead to important, lasting change. It would have predicted that the impact of having a house and the presence of a Honduran organization working in the community for three to five years would have a much greater influence on Honduran families.

This perspective would have also predicted that the majority of the North Americans who go to Honduras for a week or two and then return to their jobs, families, and mortgage payments would not be drastically changed. It would predict that we would find, as we did, that increases in preparation, learning during the process, and continued contact with the community would result in slightly higher amounts of change. This perspective would also foresee that some people would keep seeking out new STM experiences in hopes of reliving the pleasure of previous experiences or of seeking to make life changes inspired by previous trips more permanent.

*It becomes very... addictive, you’ve just got to do it again and again and again... When you go on these trips you never come back the same and you think you’ll never complain again, but unfortunately after a couple of years you do complain.* (North American participant)

This new perspective also contradicts most previous STM research. Regarding STMs’ impact on North American participants, other research has found more noteworthy increases in areas like financial giving, prayer life, and volunteering (see McDonough and Peterson, 1999). It will require more research to determine if and when substantial change in North American participants takes place, but both our findings and common sense support this new perspective: It is very difficult to make lasting positive changes in our own lives or our neighbors’.

Regarding the impact on Honduran communities, this research does not contradict existing literature, since there is so little, but it does contradict views expressed
The single STM research initiative from the last twenty years that included Third World perspectives, only interviewed national missionaries (not the communities) and found that they were mostly positive about STMs, while the expatriate missionaries who coordinated these efforts were more critical than positive (see Baar, 2003). However, personal accounts and the popular press emphasize the dozens, hundreds, or even thousands who have received housing, medical attention, or salvation.

Our research design overcomes an inherent assumption in the traditional perspective. Nearly all of the previous research and the popular press imply that if STM groups didn’t build houses, work on water projects, etc., these projects wouldn’t be done at all. For example, members of a Third-World community might be asked how they feel about a water system built by an STM group; the implicit comparison is to their previous state of not having a water system, and the conclusion of both the press and the third-world community is that the STM was worthwhile, since it brought them a service they previously lacked. In such a case, the community and the popular press are probably correct — something done is better than nothing.

However, in our research project we were able to compare families whose homes had been built by STM groups to families whose homes were built by local NGOs. By comparing two groups that each received new houses (instead of comparing STM-provided houses with no houses at all), we were able to isolate the impact of the STM group — did the group add some special value that made it worthwhile for 20 individuals to spend $30,000 in travel, food, and lodging to build a $2,000 home? What we have found is that the impact on the families appears to be no more positive (or negative) than if the NGO built the house on its own. However, the quality of the work done by the NGO, which is present in the communities before, during, and after the visit by the STM group, does have considerable impacts on the lives of families.

4. What will bring lasting change?

We found the quality and community empowerment strategies of CIDO’s partner organizations to be the most important factors in causing lasting change in Honduran communities and families. North American short-term groups could move that strategy forward or hold it back slightly, but were unlikely to have a major effect in either direction. If future research supports this finding, development organizations should focus on improving and strengthening their partners’ strategies.

More research is also necessary to support my hypothesis that the key to causing lasting change in North American STM participants is making the short-term experience just one piece in a structure that also includes support and accountability before and after the trip. The more the short-term experience in Honduras can be inserted between preparation before participants leave and continued education after they return — and the more participants are shown (1) how they can continue supporting the communities they served and others like them and (2) how their support is making a difference — the more likely the changes will be substantial and long-lasting.

I believe we have at least two strong arguments that the North American STM participants want to change themselves and the communities they visit. First, volunteers spent a substantial amount of time and money to participate. Second, the most common
theme in the survey responses was the participants’ unsettledness about the differences in wealth and contentment between themselves and the Hondurans they met.

I hope this research will contribute to making that long-lasting change more probable.

References Cited
Allen, Marshall
Anderson, Duane “Chip”
Baar, Corrie L.
Becchetti, Noel
Beers, Stephen Thomas
1999 Faith Development of Christian College Students Engaged in a One-Month Study Abroad Mission Trip. Muncie, IN: Ball State University.
DeHainaut, Raymond K.
Hestenes, Roberta
Heydron, Jo Ann
Jeffrey, Paul
Kirby, Scott Harrison
Loobie, Susan G.
McDonough, Daniel P.
1996 The Role of Short-Term Missions in the Great Commission: A Study of the Effects of STEM Ministries’ Short-Term Mission Program on the Participants. Calvin Theological Seminary: Grand Rapids, MI.
McDonough, Daniel P., and Roger P. Peterson
1999 Can Short-Term Mission Really Create Long-Term Missionaries? Minneapolis: STEM Ministries.
Pocock, Michael
1987 “Gaining Long-Term Mileage from Short-Term Programs.” Evangelical Missions Quarterly 23 (2): 154–160.
Searle, Howard G.
Tuttle, Kathryn A.
1998 *The Effects of Short-Term Missions Experience on College Students' Spiritual Growth and Maturity.* Los Angeles: Talbot School of Theology, Biola University.

Van Engen, JoAnn

Ver Beek, Kurt

Notes
1. The author wishes to recognize the valuable research assistance of Isidra Gonzalez, Melanie Holwerda-Hommes, Jo Ann Van Engen, Cathy Peterson, Jason Alfonse Fileta, Heidi Kage and Abram Huyser-Honig This research was partially funded with a Deur grant from the Sociology Department, Calvin College.
2. The development agency that was the subject of this study prefers to remain anonymous. The Christian International Development Organization (CIDO) is a pseudonym.
3. For a complete bibliography visit Kurt Ver Beek’s website at Calvin College: www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm.
4. A copy of the survey and complete results are on Kurt Ver Beek’s website: www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm.
5. A copy of the survey and complete results are on Kurt Ver Beek’s website: www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm.
6. A copy of the donor records are on Kurt Ver Beek’s website: www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm.
7. For a complete bibliography visit Kurt Ver Beek’s website: www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm.