

# Issues & Trends in Short-Term Missions

An interview with Ray Howard, Cindy Judge and Doug Calhoun

*Short-term missions is an ever-evolving ministry form, affected by a number of issues within the church and around the world. For this issue of Mobilizer we interviewed three men and women who have their fingers on the pulse of how short-term missions is being practiced by American local churches. We asked them what key issues and trends they see that are shaping how short-term missions will be done in coming years.*



**Ray Howard** has been training short-termers and short-term leaders since 1981, and is the Director of Cross-Cultural Training for the Gateway Mission Training Center. He has also worked on the staffs of Mission Training International, ACMC, and InterVarsity. He worked for two years in Latin America with the Peace Corps.



**Cindy Judge** thrives on helping newcomers know the joy of serving on their first mission trip. She serves on the Missions Team at Wheaton Bible Church in Wheaton, IL. Formerly she served in leadership in Extension Ministries at Willow Creek Community Church for 10 years, where she wrote STM curriculum and trained teams. She is the author of *Before You Pack Your Bag, Prepare Your Heart*, a Bible study guide for short-term missions preparation.



**Doug Calhoun** is the missions pastor at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Oak Brook, IL. He has been leading teams and developing short-term mission programs in two different churches over the past 15 years. He served for 10 years with InterVarsity, including two years as a missionary. He now also leads the planning team for the annual National Short Term Missions Conference, at which he has also been a regular presenter.

**Mobilizer:** *What issues within the Church do you see that are currently most affecting where and how churches are participating in short term missions?*

**Doug Calhoun (DC):** I'm finding that our church partners overseas have fewer construction projects for us, and instead want "real help", like developing their leaders. Our own people are asking about every short-term trip, "How is this really going to make an impact?"

**Cindy Judge (CJ):** Churches are becoming much more creative in their short-term missions involvement. They are getting involved in one location or a few partnerships and are finding ways to give their strengths to the field, for example in youth or women's ministries.

**DC:** Unstable economic times affect different people in different ways. Some people who are well off financially can weather a few months of unemployment, and so invest more time in short-term missions. Others are reluctant to spend the time on trips or raise support when they feel like they should be looking for work. Also, it used to be nothing to ask for time off of work, because companies would give it and folks weren't afraid of losing their job. Due to layoffs, our people who have jobs are usually working a lot of overtime to pick up the slack of those laid off. They're less willing to be gone on a short-term trip for extra time or during a time that isn't in the employer's best framework. Some employers tell our people that they can't be gone or if they do they will lose their job. People have tougher choices to make.

**Mobilizer:** *What issues outside of the church do you see that are currently most affecting where and how churches are participating in short-term missions?*

**CJ:** Churches are sending fewer teams, to cheaper places, due to economic downturn.

**DC:** Uncertainty in the Middle East and the events of 9/11 caused short-term

trips to take a big hit. A number of trips got cancelled. We've offered fewer trips than normal and we've stayed away from the Middle East. Also, before 9/11 Americans were generally safe if we got into problems overseas. Now we don't assume that. Teams have to go much more prepared with a contingency plan in the event of an emergency. And we should be prepared in this way for most places around the world, not just in the higher-risk places.

**CJ:** The fear factor is huge right now and so churches are tending to go where it's safe. Frankly, I think that this trend is good because it's forcing short-term teams to go to what I believe are more appropriate places. The more dangerous places are often places where the cross-cultural gap is substantial. When short-termers go places that are more westernized, they can connect with people better. Short-termers can do a lot of damage where they can't easily connect culturally or relationally.

**Ray Howard (RH):** Some estimate that the number of short-termers since 9/11 has dropped in half. In addition, the potential of exposure to health problems is another risk factor. Take, for example, the AIDS issue. Churches shy away from sending teams to places in sub-Saharan Africa where AIDS is rampant. Yet they're unaware that the rate of the spread of HIV in Asia and Latin America is faster than it ever was in Africa; it just started later. That's why that just about regardless of where your team is going, one thing that should be on the team application is the applicant's blood type and whether he has been tested for HIV. Whoever is coordinating the team needs a plan for how to provide a safe blood supply for individual team members.

**Mobilizer:** *What core values do you see that are most influencing where and how churches are sending short-term teams?*

**DC:** I think that the value of relationship is driving many churches to tie their trips

to their missionaries. Churches want the result of their trips to be relationships with the field rather than the satisfaction of having "done a trip." The value of partnership has driven how churches do long-term missions for some time, and now it's filtering into short-term missions. As a result, churches are less concerned with what they want to do on their short-term trips and are more concerned with what the host nationals need.

**RH:** I believe that a poor value that is driving what churches are doing in short-term missions is an overconfidence in what short-term trips can accomplish, and an underestimation of the risk of damage that they can do. My deep concern is that many churches send individuals and teams with a much too cavalier attitude toward the immense potential value of short-term missions.

Another inappropriate value driving short-term missions is the conviction that short-term missions can substitute for long-term commitment. I know of some churches where short-term missions is the way that they primarily do missions. Such churches don't intend for short-term missions to be a stepping-stone for sending long-term missionaries. They discourage their members who want them to support them long-term through a parachurch agency. Short-term missions is really more of a popular program than a core value in such churches.

**CJ:** Churches want to see mutuality through their short-term trips, with both sides (senders and receivers) benefiting from the trips. Another key value is strategy. Churches are far more strategic in their short-term trips. Simple exposure is becoming less of a sufficient motivation for short-term trips.

Increasingly, quality pre-field training is becoming a more widespread value. Churches are even less willing to send teams around the U.S. without good

training. Churches want to make sure that team conflict does not ruin what could be a life-changing experience.

**DC:** The value of leadership development is driving several churches to use short-term trips for training existing leaders or identifying potential leaders. Their short-term trips become a springboard for small groups or community service after the trip. In other words, these churches don't see trips as end points, but as pivot points for what God might do in an individual or an affinity group in the church.

**Mobilizer:** *What kinds of questions are churches asking about short-term missions?*

**DC:** I find that there are two tiers of questions about short-term missions. The first round of questions tend to come from churches that have sent short-term teams but now want to be more strategic. So they are asking how to develop infrastructure, how to train leaders, and how to choose where to send teams. The next tier of questions comes from churches that have addressed these sorts of issues and want to deal with how to develop long-term relationships on the field and how to deal with people who repeatedly go on short-term trips.

**RH:** Most questions that I get from churches deal with logistical details. What I'd like to hear churches asking more would be how to deal with follow-up after the trip. I haven't seen many churches that have developed excellent processes for helping short-termers process their experience and turn it into either long-term local ministry or preparation for more extensive missions involvement.

**CJ:** Many churches want to know how to connect with a good sending agency partner. That's difficult. I tell churches to start communicating with several groups. Find out if you like what they're doing, and how they would partner with your church.

**Mobilizer:** What aspects of short-term missions are churches doing differently or are more concerned about today, as compared to ten years ago?

**RH:** Churches are sending teams to riskier and more culturally different places. This is a two-edged sword. Certainly there's more cross-cultural exposure in exotic, more dangerous places, but it's also usually more expensive to get to those places and there's less chance for impact because the culture is so different.

As a toe-in-the-water experience, it's good for one's initial exposure to be to a place where there's greater cultural similarity, and where God is obviously at work. Yet at the same time we need to give people exposure to places where God may call them to long-term service. I believe that short-termers should "wade" in more shallow waters, i.e., more culturally similar places, and should "swim" in tougher places where God may be calling them to go.

**CJ:** Churches are more concerned about what I would call the "integrity of the project." Churches want to know that what they are doing through short-term missions fits into the big picture of what the missionaries and nationals are doing. Churches don't want to simply do what they personally want to do, or worse, to do busy work that missionaries have created to occupy the team.

Churches are also more concerned about the screening process for teams. They don't simply want to send warm bodies, but to send people who are prepared to help the team and maximally benefit from the experience. By using a screening process, churches are giving team leaders more say in who gets on to short-term teams.

**DC:** In the beginning, some churches offered a little training for their teams. Today training is more common, and churches are now thinking more

seriously about debriefing folks and turning their experience into long-term personal involvement in missions. Churches are finding that a number of their members have gone on short-term trips. The question arises regarding how to help people change their lifestyles and priorities after the trip, for ongoing impact.

**Mobilizer:** *How are mission agencies changing their short-term programs in light of how the church is doing short-term missions differently?*

**DC:** Many agencies didn't have short-term programs twenty years ago, or if they did, their trips were geared toward individuals, usually college students, who were going for two or three months. Now most agencies have whole short-term missions departments and many flexible avenues for short-term involvement.

**CJ:** Certainly agencies are designating staff to short-term missions. Yet I would hope that agencies would increasingly partner with churches and help them with training resources.

**RH:** Some agencies are doing short-term missions reluctantly and poorly. Others are grasping its potential and moving forward with it rather aggressively. I am concerned when I hear from mission agency leaders that some large churches are insisting upon almost complete control over the screening, training, and ministry of the teams they send to agencies. They insinuate that their long-term relationship will suffer if the agency does not give such control. This puts agencies in an extremely difficult position.

**Mobilizer:** *In the early days of the short-term missions wave that began in the 1980s, churches and agencies routinely questioned the cost value and ultimate effectiveness of short-term missions. Do you believe that that debate is settled, or still occurring?*

**RH:** The debate is assuredly still going on. Non-missions-oriented leaders in churches often still resist short-term missions. There is still significant but decreasing resistance on the part of long-term career missionaries toward short-term missions, because they've had so many bad experiences with short-term teams. They're not interested in risking their ministries on teams that aren't adequately prepared. Many missionaries have never seen a well-prepared short-term team.

**DC:** I hope that we never stop asking that question. Short-term trips are no longer a fringe movement; they're definitely now embraced by the mainstream of churches and agencies. Frankly, we're spending millions of dollars on it. Many people still ask if we shouldn't give that amount of money to the nationals and not go on trips. I'm convinced that if we stopped short-term trips, the same amount of money wouldn't be given to missions. When my team members raise money for short-term trips, my guess is that 50-75% of their funds come in from unchurched co-workers or relatives who are personally connected to the short-termers. Short-term missions funding draws from a substantially different group of givers than does traditional missions. A good number of those people then proceed to support the short-termer who goes long-term or become givers to the church's missions budget.

If a short-term trip is done even moderately well, the impact of short-term missions on the team members is worth far more than you spent on it. It creates a larger and larger crowd of missions fanatics in my church whose ears are open to what missions is all about. They pray for missionaries, they give generously, and they tend to increase their own involvement in ministries of the church or to the community. That's a superb investment.