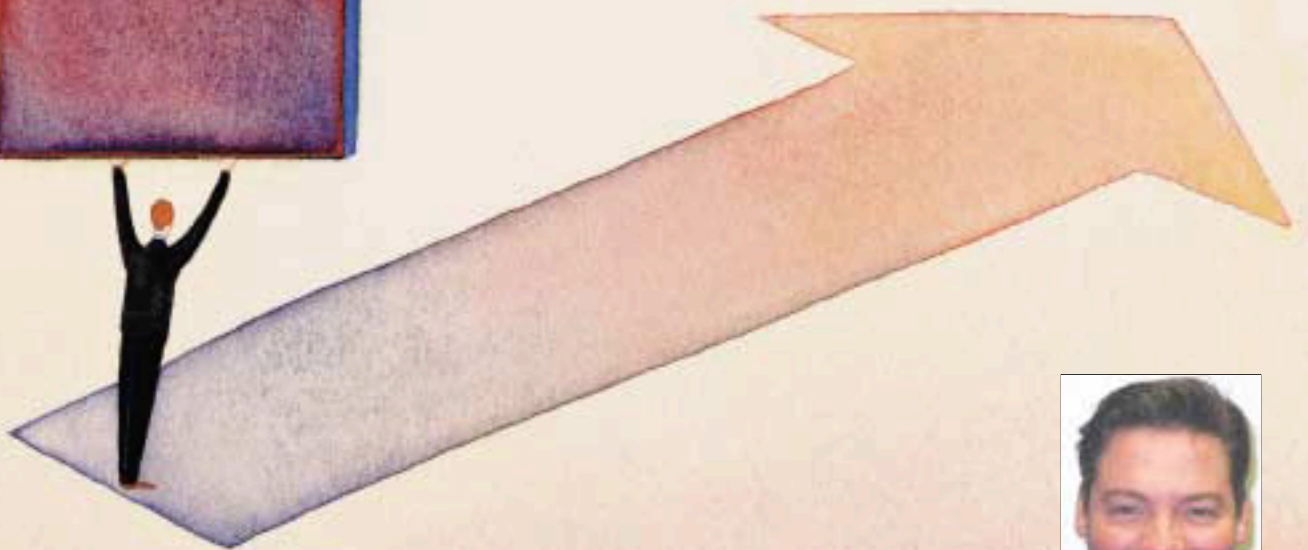
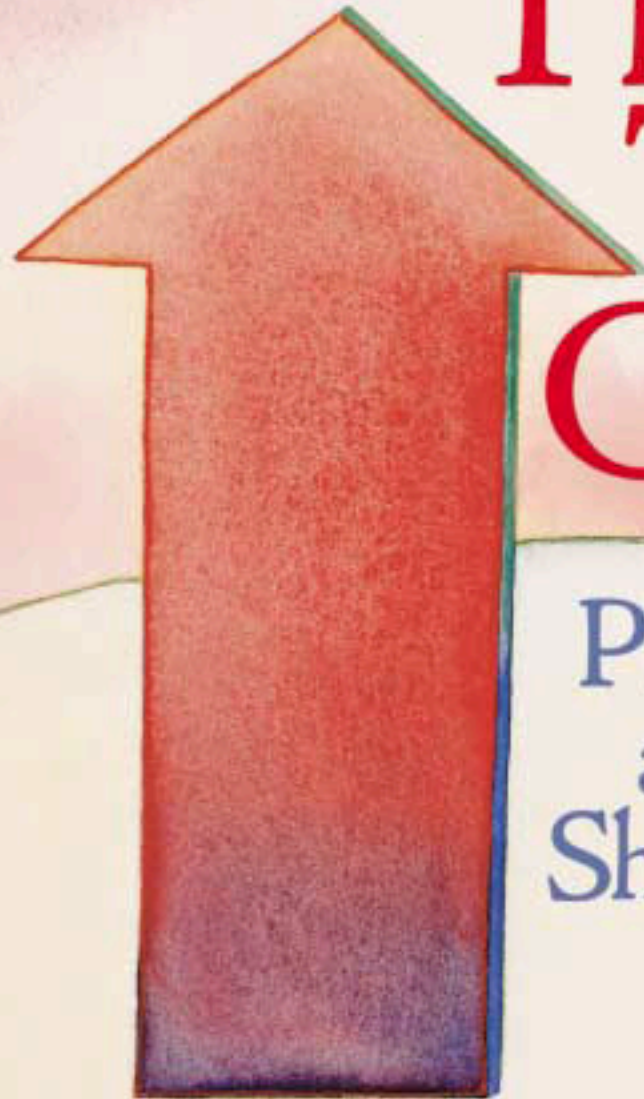


The Training Challenge

Preparing
an Effective
Short-Term Team



By Larry Ragan

Properly preparing a short-term cross-cultural team is both a challenging and exciting experience. It can also be an overwhelming process. By taking on the role of short-term team preparation, we are assuming responsibility for training, guiding, mentoring, and developing people for cross-cultural ministry. Additionally, planning for a myriad of logistical details and preparing for a host of potential problems is quite time consuming. All said, short-term team preparation is difficult yet rewarding work.

Excellent pre-, on- and post-field preparation not only increase the effectiveness of the team on the field, but also increase the long-term life change that can result long after participants have returned. How we approach preparation will make all the difference.

Preparation: A Discipleship-Oriented Philosophy

Short-term missions preparation is far more than simply preparing people to do a ministry task. Properly understood, this training is essentially discipleship, leading short-termers into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Too often, short-term team trainers focus on *what needs to be done* rather than discipleship.

The goal to which we are called as found in the Great Commission is to *make disciples*. The scope of that goal is *all nations*. Often in short-term preparation, the emphasis on *making disciples* is forgotten.

“But wait!” you may say. “I’m going to be involved with a missions trip! How can I be accused of forgetting about making disciples of the nations?” Certainly the broad goal of discipling in the nations is inherent to any short-term experience. However, it is often practically forgotten in the preparation process.

As team trainers, we have the opportunity to disciple those who will be making disciples of all nations on our trips. We are privileged to teach our team members as they experience the preparation process, and to impact our team members’ lives as many of them experience God in a global context for the first time. Our training philosophy, then, should be one of discipling rather than preparing for a task. By viewing the short-term missions experience through the lens of discipleship, we become servant leaders whose desire is to develop *world Christians*. These new world Christians in turn will desire to lead others to deepen their relationship with God. The leader focused on developing people will see people mobilized long-term for God’s kingdom. Through this approach, short-term mission trips become a step in a life development process, not merely a one-time experience.

The Essential Elements of Preparation

In 1993 I led a team whose ministry was teaching English to 150 students in Bulgaria. Soon into our trip, 10 of our 15 team members got sick with food poisoning. At this point,

I knew I was poised to see if their preparation was going to pay off. Would the team be culturally sensitive to the hotel cooks, church hosts, and the Bulgarian doctors? Would they prayerfully turn to God as their hope and strength? Would they remain faithful to the ministry God had prepared for them? Would they be unified as a team?

Looking back on that experience, I realize the criticality of well-prepared teams, both for their sake and particularly for the sake of their hosts. Missionaries and nationals need teams ready for whatever may occur. They need teams that will, under any circumstances, bless the field site rather than cause damage. Therefore, all of your church’s team preparation should include the following elements:

Teamwork

Throughout your preparation conduct what I call *teaming*. *Teaming* is the process of purposefully creating environments in which participants can get to know and depend on each other. Each preparation session should include a form of *teaming*. It may be as simple as giving the participants Lego toys and allowing them 10 minutes to build an object without talking. By doing these types of exercises, the team learns to depend on each other to reach a common goal.

Pre-field Paperwork

Pre-field paperwork includes everything from passports to prayer letters, from visas to immunizations. Yet even these

issues can be accomplished in creative ways. For example, as part of preparation, one church's teams each hold a prayer-letter-writing party. The team members meet in an office-like location with computers, printers and a copier. They bring in pizza and assist each other in crafting and copying their letters and preparing them for mailing. By so doing they "team", have fun, and accomplish a task.

Cross-Cultural Research

Just as Joshua and Caleb spied out the promise land, all short-term teams should "spy out the land" by researching the cross-cultural settings of their coming ministries. As one preparation session I've divided teams into small groups that each research an aspect (history, culture, economy, religion and geography) of a country, using simple tools that I provide. I then ask each team to present their research creatively. Teams have created hilarious presentations such as game shows, songs, videos and news broadcasts. By so doing they find out about the "giants" that they will encounter and need to pray about. Help your team view these giants as opportunities for ministry and faith.

Cross-Cultural Preparation and Sensitivity

Having a proper attitude toward a foreign culture is essential to effective cross-cultural ministry. Therefore, teams should study passages such as Philippians 2 and learn about Jesus' proper attitude as

He left His heavenly culture and came to an earthly environment. Additionally, educate your teams about the normal stages of culture shock. Lingenfelter and Mayers' *Ministering Cross-Culturally* contains a very helpful cross-cultural assessment which helps people anticipate what types of problems they will most quickly face in a new culture.¹ Once your team members have learned about themselves from such tools, they should discuss the cultural adjustments that each member will need to make to be effective.

Spiritual Development

If a short-term trip is not being used to disciple your people, you will miss a great opportunity for spiritual development. Preparation should include Biblical reflection that helps team members understand the Biblical basis of missions, God's heart for the nations, prayer, and spiritual gifts.

Reentry Debriefing

Post-trip debriefing is one of the most neglected yet most critical elements in the preparation process. I know of one woman who recently returned from the field and soon found herself in a dark depression. Her needless experience was due primarily to the fact that no one helped her prepare for what she would expect when she reentered her home culture. No one spent time helping her apply her experience to her life ahead. Debriefing and reentry training are vital to the

emotional and spiritual development of team participants. How you debrief will help determine the depth and length of the trip's impact on the lives of team members.

In addition to the elements discussed above, you cannot

forget about properly preparing for your specific ministry (construction, evangelism, drama, children's classes, teaching English, etc.) as well as travel and packing logistics, and health issues. Excellent preparation entails so much, yet so much is at stake.

Some other principles are important if your preparation will truly be discipleship-oriented.

Transform Team Preparation into Discipleship

Stop Having Meetings

The quickest way to kill a team is to simply have traditional "meetings," meaning, giving information in a one-directional way. Discipleship cannot take place in these settings. Design participatory training sessions, as learning retention increases dramatically when learners learn by doing.

Be a Student of Your Team Members

Make it your goal to observe your students during your preparation. Learn how they are gifted and how they need to grow personally and spiritually. Learn how to encourage them, guide them, and respond to them in an individualized manner. Who is reserved, outgoing, confident, or insecure? Ask God to teach you how to disciple each member. By observing during preparation you may be able to anticipate problems in advance that may occur with a particular team's personality mix.

Balance Your Preparation Curriculum

Take time to train the whole person. Walk your team members through support raising, team building, and cultural and task preparation. In addition, spend time sharing your lives with one another, studying God's plan for the nations, and praying together.

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leaders' training e-mail CULLINK@aol.com.

(Footnotes)

¹ Lingenfelter, Sherwood and Marvin Mayers, *Ministering Cross Culturally* (Baker, 1986). The text in this book may be used by paying a \$1 fee per test to Baker.