Introduction: Theme Issue on Short-Term Missions

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Abstract
Like the anthropology of tourism, research on short-term missions has had to overcome a bias against what is often assumed to be a trivial phenomenon. As scholars in a variety of fields have encountered this growing, global phenomenon, they have begun to develop a vibrant and multifaceted research-based literature exploring its cultural, historic, economic, and political aspects. This introduction to a special issue of *Missiology* on short-term missions presents a brief overview of the development of this emerging literature, as well as synopses of the six articles advancing our understanding of short-term missions.

Keywords
Short-term missions, tourism, anthropology, cross-cultural travel

Research on short-term missions (STM) bears remarkable similarities with research on tourism. In the 1960s, scholars gingerly began to turn their attention to tourism as an emerging and increasingly visible worldwide phenomenon. Although tourism would soon grow into what is, by some estimates, the world’s largest industry, anthropologists and sociologists originally imagined the fun-seeking tourist as a subject barely respectable in the academy. Pioneering scholars initially found little support for their efforts to research this seemingly trivial phenomenon, and even into the 1980s,
many studies of tourism began with an apologetic, clearly feeling the need to defend the importance of tourism as a cultural, social, and economic phenomenon worthy of serious scholarly attention. But when senior scholars such as Nelson Graburn and Dean MacCannell directed research attention to the practice and theory of tourism, and when several significant edited volumes on the topic were published, tourism research moved into the center of mainstream scholarship as an important arena for studying globalization, transnationalism, and cultural change.

Starting in the 1980s, short-term missions found itself in an analogous position vis-à-vis the academy. In post-War North America, STM grew from a relatively small number of participants barely noticeable among the established missionary community into a massive phenomenon involving upwards of two million people per year (Priest and Priest, 2008; see also Howell, 2012: chs 3–5). Yet with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Montgomery, 1993), STM did not have a significant presence in research literature until recently. While scholars in secular disciplines appear to have been largely unaware of STM, missiologists were clearly aware of the phenomenon, but treated STM as an “amateurization” (Winter, 1996) or “McDonaldization” (Adeney, 1996) of Christian mission, with mission trip participants understood simply as “at play in the fields of the Lord.” This was not a topic for serious scholarship. While a fairly extensive populist literature on short-term missions had emerged by the early 1990s, it would be another decade before a significant body of serious scholarly research would begin to emerge.

In the last decade a considerable body of scholarly research on STM has begun to appear. Some of this comes out of PhD research in missiology (e.g. Brown, 2008; Park, 2008; Richardson, 2008; Wang, 2008). Sociologists also have begun to publish on the topic (Ver Beek, 2006; K. Priest, 2008; Wuthnow, 2009; Trinitapoli and Vaisey, 2009; Offutt, 2011; Beyerlein et al., 2011), as have anthropologists (Birth, 2006; Zehner, 2006; Adkins, 2009; Occhipinti, 2009).

We (Robert Priest and Brian Howell) have been working on STM ourselves for nearly 10 years. We have co-organized two separate panels at the American Anthropological Association (2006 and 2009), bringing together scholars from Christian and secular institutions, looking at STM from the perspectives of the communities visited, the travelers, and the representations of each. Priest has organized other academic conferences on the topic, has edited a book on STM (2008), and guest-edited theme issues on this topic for the journal Missiology (2007) and the Journal of Latin American Theology (2008). He has also written several articles on the topic (e.g. 2007, 2010, 2013). Howell has published the only ethnographic monograph to date focused entirely on STM (2012), and has also published journal articles on the topic (e.g. 2009).

We are encouraged with this emergence of research and writing on STM. And yet much more is needed. This theme issue of Missiology provides an important advance in the published scholarship on this topic.

The articles collected here demonstrate the presence of STM across a wide diversity of denominations and traditions, from Orthodox (Kostarelos), to Catholic (Moodie), to mainline Protestant (Farrell, Hancock) and evangelical (Hancock, Zehner). They examine the impact of STM participation on the travelers themselves
Farrell, Hancock, Moodie, Probasco) and/or explore their relations and impact in diverse destination settings, from El Salvador (Moodie) or Peru (Farrell), to Thailand (Zehner) or the Muslim communities of Europe and the Middle East (Hancock).

Anthropology as a discipline is uniquely positioned to help us understand how STM encounters are experienced and engaged by host communities, something current research has not sufficiently addressed. Zehner’s, Moodie’s, and Farrell’s contributions here are particularly strong in this respect. Like previous work pointing out the importance of “linking social capital” to these communities (R. Priest, 2007; K. Priest, 2008; Wuthnow, 2009), these anthropologists note that far from being reluctant partners imposed upon by pushy North Americans, those receiving or hosting STM teams find in these encounters resources aligned with their own ministry interests.

In Zehner’s Thailand case, the priorities of the sending churches only “partly correspond[ed]” to those of the receiving congregations, yet the Thai leaders were able to leverage the visits of outside groups into what they perceived as productive results for their own ministries and internal church life. Rather than contributing to unhealthy dependencies, Zehner suggests that STM visits and accompanying relationships were utilized by church leaders as “leverage to increase functional independence and strengthen congregational life.”

Moodie’s research in El Salvador found a rather different dynamic, where inequalities of wealth led to a personally poignant encounter in which she experienced firsthand the complicated relations of hosts and guests in this religiously mediated travel. The quest by short-term mission participants for “authentic” encounters across socio-economic divides carries with it inherent limitations. Attending to the affect engendered by her own experience of an insider–outsider position and the testimonies of Salvadarians and U.S. Americans, Moodie foregrounds provocative questions of the possibilities and limits inherent in these unequal encounters.

Hunter Farrell provides an impressive case study where Christians in La Oroya, Peru, were able to forge strategic relationships with visiting STM participants, leveraging “significant social capital, including media coverage, professional and political contacts and expertise, scientific information and services, as well as prestige, legitimacy and political power” in ways they could not have accessed otherwise, to bring social change where it was desperately needed. Zehner, Moodie, and Farrell all push the research to attend to the multilayered experiences of local communities and the varied interests and motives at work among guests and hosts.

A number of these articles also provide helpful treatment of the impact of STM involvements on STM participants. Thus, Hunter Farrell shows how new understandings of mission were forged, with a significant number of participants deciding, as a result of their STM experience, to attend seminary or to change “their career path to study public health, law, or social work.”

Fran Kostarelos not only provides the first scholarly treatment of STM in the Orthodox Church, and describes how Orthodox Christianity in America historically has been characterized by ethno-national parochial enclaves, but suggests that STM has contributed to a “breakdown” in these ethnic enclaves, promoting changes in the ways American Orthodox Christians view their own Christian identity.
Similarly, Mary Hancock asks how STM shapes the views of participants about the religion of others. She trains her eye on the representations of Islam among three student ministries organizing mission trips to the Middle East: Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and Xtreme Team (American Baptist). Like other research focused on the guiding tropes and narratives of STM (e.g. Howell, 2009, 2012), Hancock argues that STM produces a mode of globalization shaping the encounters with perceived Others and the understandings of Self “at home.” Like the previous articles, but with a more explicit foregrounding, Hancock highlights the role of theology in shaping the conceptions and perceptions enmeshed in the STM project. She argues that these instantiations of STM are “offering new models for thinking about the boundaries between secular and religious realms,” with a transformative potential not clearly articulated by the travelers themselves.

Finally, using quantitative methods and data from Wuthnow’s 2005 Survey of Religious Engagement, a national random survey of 2131 Christian church members, LeErin Probasco summarizes survey findings and explores the impact of high school mission trips over the course of lives. Challenging some previously held claims with her analysis of the data, Probasco provides both insight into the current context of STM and inspiration for further research on the outcomes of these travels. “If exceptional religious experiences like travel can better be linked to the routine and reinforcing habits of religious life,” she argues, “religious institutions may find new ways of socializing members into supporting their congregations and communities through volunteering and charitable giving.”

The contributions here reflect a growing awareness of, and interest in, short-term missions from a wider variety of perspectives than ever. Scholars in both secular and Christian institutions, including anthropologists and sociologists, are beginning to ask how this form of travel is transforming those going and those receiving. What are the dynamics of change and stasis? People claim, and experience, changed lives as a result of their involvement in, and even exposure to, short-term mission. The directions of this change, the mechanisms of change, and the force of change, where it occurs and where it does not, gain a small measure of transparency from the work here. We can only hope this inspires further exploration of this significant movement.

Note
1. This number takes into account the annual 1.6 million U.S. adult participants in international mission trips reported by Wuthnow and Offut (2007), but also allows for the significant numbers of American high schoolers participating in such trips abroad, a population not included in Wuthnow’s research. Also not included in Wuthnow’s numbers are the numerous participants in STM from other countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Costa Rica, or the UK.

References


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