Labouring Together, Listening Together?

Improving the effectiveness of short-term mission in Moldova by understanding church leaders’ experiences of working with foreign short-term missionaries

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‘Virtually all of the published research related to short-term missions focuses on the perspectives of the short-term missioners themselves… with very little research exploring the experiences and perspectives of those in the receiving communities.’

Priest (2007, pp179-180)

Introduction

As a Christian missionary working in Moldova since 2007, this author has hosted many short-term missions teams. Consulting the missiological literature, it became clear that short-term mission, like Moldova itself, has been neglected by missiologists; and that, just as Moldova is a young country barely out of its teenage years, this is a young discipline also at a significant juncture. The vast majority of literature concerning short-term mission has been written from the perspective of senders/goers whilst the opinions of recipient cultures and host churches have seldom been heard or sought.

This troubling observation led this author to devise a “listening exercise,” based on interviews with 22 Moldovan church leaders experienced in working with foreigners on short-term mission. Whilst this research shows the significance of partnership and cultural sensitivity, good communication in the form of feedback is ultimately regarded as the most important factor, since through this other issues can be addressed.

The Short-Term Missions Movement

Mission historians have tended to describe the short-term missions movement as a post-war phenomenon, with the 1960s in particular seeing the formation of mission organizations with a short-term emphasis, e.g. YWAM and Operation Mobilisation (Backholer, 2010, p11). By the 1980s, the number of people involved in short-term missionary service was increasing sharply, such that Reapsome (1982, p112) could already refer to an “explosion” of volunteers. Made possible by cheaper international travel and drawing on greater global awareness, the movement gained momentum, seeing more church groups going overseas, especially from the United States to Latin America. This trend, more recently involving millions of Christians each year, was both a product and a cause of globalization. It was also connected to a broader understanding of mission beyond the traditional focus on evangelism, suggesting that short-term mission is indeed part of a new missional paradigm.

For the purposes of this paper, short-term mission is understood as the temporary going out of Christians into cross-cultural situations, to participate in kingdom-building activities, including but not exclusively evangelism, for a period of up to one year. They go from one part of God’s church (their local church, or a mission agency) and in His name, preferably to work in partnership with national Christians.

Some 50 years after the modern STM movement started, there remains fierce debate about whether or not STM is a force for good. Winter repeatedly criticised the ‘re-amateurization’ (1996) of short-term missions, claiming it was not actually ‘missionary activity [but rather]… a
very high-quality educational activity' (2004b, p13) and that the quality of such missionaries was ‘mainly inadequate’ (2004a, p4). More recently, Ver Beek (2005, 2006, 2007) has written influential papers that, though not against short-term mission per se, have been critical of their lack of long-term impact.

In response, Priest has argued that ‘STM trips… have a strategic role to play’ (Priest and Priest, 2008, p71). Poston (2008, p9) has tried to shift the focus away from the duration of a mission trip, towards their actual function, adding that instead of ‘continuing to castigate today’s young people for their lack of long-term commitment, we should instead capitalize on their short-term bursts of energy’. Greene (2003, pp14-15) goes as far as listing 21 advantages of short-term mission – though most of these benefits are accrued by goers rather than hosts.

**Hosts – The Missing STM Perspective**

The growing missiological literature concerning short-term mission has approached its subject from several different angles, and there has been considerable research into the impact such trips have on “goers”. There is a danger that STM trips prioritize their experiences and spiritual journeys – and that whilst we should not be surprised to find God working in the lives of His people through such experiences, it is a different thing altogether for mission trips to have such spiritual development as their primary goal, rather than a missional or kingdom-building focus.

In a discussion with Priest, Ver Beek observed that ‘out of the 40-some studies that we found published before 2004, only one interviewed “receivers” of STM’ (2005). Little has changed since their discussion. From a methodological perspective, one can understand that it is easier for a researcher to interview a class of American students who have been on a summer missions trip than to interview a host church or a group of national leaders. But this alone cannot fully account for the fact that so little research has been done into the experiences of host churches and communities.

Over a decade ago, Krabill (1998, p130) called for greater research into those on the receiving end of mission trips – a call that has since been echoed by Priest (2006, p429), Thomas (2010, p9) and others – yet this remains almost completely untouched territory. It is hoped that this research paper can illustrate the value of such research, and provide suggestions for further research in this area.

**The Moldovan Context**

Moldova is an Eastern European country, formed in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Moldova was historically part of Romania, reflected by the facts that 76% of its people are ethnic Romanians and the official language is Romanian. As King observes, since independence ‘nation-building and… national identity of the Moldovans have remained topics at the center of political life’ (1999, p225).

Moldova is Europe’s poorest country, with average incomes at 6% of the USA. According to the latest Human Development Report (UNDP, 2011, p126), Moldova has the lowest Human Development Index of any European country, and a lower ranking than, for example, Bolivia, Gabon and Mongolia. As such, missionaries in Moldova have focused not only on evangelism but also on ministries amongst the poor and marginalised.

Moldova is generally an Orthodox country, with 3.44 million Orthodox compared to 138,000 Protestants and independents (Johnson and Ross, 2009, p337). Pickel (2008, p198) puts church attendance throughout Moldova at 11% in 1999/2000. In the absence of any official figures, it is difficult to estimate the number of Christian short-term volunteers coming to Moldova. Discussions with various Christian leaders enable us to tentatively suggest that
some 1200-1500 short-term missionaries come annually, participating in perhaps 150-200 mission trips.

**Research Findings**

Listed below are the key findings of the 22 in-depth interviews this author conducted in 2012:

- Research participants had hosted an average of 17.5 STM teams. Their collective experience was 385 STM trips.
- STM volunteers came from the USA and the UK and, to a lesser extent, Romania, Germany and the Netherlands.
- Their principle activities were evangelistic events and children’s camps, followed by construction projects and practical help.
- Planning was more likely to be carried out by foreigners than by Moldovans, though often it was done jointly.
- Where hosts and visitors had engaged in feedback, it had led to change 64% of the time.
- Hosts see the main benefits of STM as: locals being attracted by foreigners and more likely to listen to them; financial support; and teams inspiring local churches.
- Hosts tend to credit STM teams with having clear aims and objectives: 73% said that this was the case.
- 59% of Moldovan hosts thought that STM teams were largely effective. Other respondents had mixed comments and one person regretted that ‘A few times they were useless.’
- 68% of hosts thought that STM fitted very well with their church’s vision.
- 36% of Moldovan hosts thought there were significant differences between their beliefs and volunteers’, e.g. relating to baptism in the Holy Spirit; spiritual gifts; working with other denominations; and the role of women in the church.
- Moldovan church leaders politely protested that short-term missionaries know either nothing (27%) or very little (41%) about Moldova before coming.
- But visiting teams did make some effort to learn about, and adapt to, Moldovan culture during their stay: “definitely” (18%); “to a large extent” (50%); and “to some extent” (27%).
- STM teams did not always respect Moldovan customs and traditions. Examples of disrespect included not being dressed suitably in church; smoking; consuming alcohol; complaining about gender roles.
- A large majority of STM hosts claimed they would say if they had been offended by a STM team. But whilst many respondents said they would share when teams had been offensive, they felt that other Moldovans would be reticent.
- 86% of hosts said they had an established way of sharing and giving feedback. The most popular form of sharing and evaluating was the daily team meeting, followed by just leaders meeting together or simply **ad hoc** chats.
- 32% of hosts said that STM teams always listened to them and a further 50% said they were usually listened to.
- Moldovan hosts described STM teams **positively** as: desiring to serve; dedicated; sacrificial; friendly; and willing.
They described teams negatively as: too liberal; not wanting to see things differently; disrespectful of local leaders; and coming merely for adventure.

The advice most frequently given to STM teams was to learn about Moldovan culture before arriving (both church culture and general culture). Other advice was to accept the living conditions uncomplainingly – whether food, toilets or accommodation.

Further pieces of advice are true of STM in general: be flexible; build long-term partnerships; don’t make promises you won’t keep; and be patient with co-workers. Those who are not spiritually mature should not pretend they are just because they come from a more “developed” country.

These results provide an important contribution to the missiological literature by demonstrating host perspectives on different aspects of STM. Amongst the positive comments and heartfelt appreciation were repeated concerns about behaviour, communication, spiritual immaturity and unpreparedness.

### Appraising the Effectiveness of STM

To assess the effectiveness of short-term mission, we need to reflect on what are we measuring – the impact of what on whom? The following areas have been reviewed to see whether STM has had a positive impact: STMers’ charitable; number of STMers training as long-term missionaries; better interethnic relationships; greater levels of “social trust”; “spiritual impact” on STMers; STMers’ “level of satisfaction”; interest in missions; “increased religious participation”; “solidified religious belief”; and “youth civic action” (Priest et al, 2006; Ver Beek, 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey, 2009; Beyerlein et al, 2011).

Whilst these impacts are all desirable, it is troubling that it is increasingly common to measure the effectiveness of short-term mission trips according to their impact on goers or the sending community, rather than on the host community. There is a danger that STM is becoming more about discipling young Westerners and less about serving other Christians and working with them in mission. Local churches are in many ways best-placed to decide the effectiveness of STM because they have the best understanding of local reaction to it. This is especially true when we remember that some of the fruits (or problems!) of short-term mission may only be revealed in the long-term, after STM teams have returned home.

### Improving STM Effectiveness in Moldova

Based on the in-depth interviews and a seminar with a further 14 Moldovan STM hosts, this author suggests that the following three areas are crucial to improving the effectiveness of short-term mission in Moldova: (1) Partnership, (2) Cultural sensitivity, and (3) Feedback.

**Partnership**

In some parts of the world, there seems to be a pattern of short-term mission where change is the norm: either a church sends an STM team to a different host church each year; or it sends different people each year to the same host church. Given that mission is intrinsically relational, it is difficult to see the wisdom of such discontinuity. Conversely, a repeat trip means that returnees can continue their friendships as well as their working relationships with their hosts, deepen mutual trust, and share in each other’s lives and ministries. For Nelson et al (2011, p38), such “mutuality” is a key concept, a ‘state of mind through which we, with humble sensitivity, work together, listening and learning with an attitude of genuine respect,’ seeing one another as ‘partners in God’s activity’ (p17). More meaningful
partnerships for Moldovans would include exchange visits, sharing of prayer requests, and mutual encouragement.

Cultural Sensitivity

The second key factor in improving the effectiveness of short-term mission in Moldova was a recurring theme in the research interviews. Indeed, it is a commonplace complaint that short-term missionaries often display grave cultural insensitivity, what Livermore (2006) calls low “cultural intelligence.” Greater cultural sensitivity is important for a number of reasons: short-term missionaries who are more attuned to Moldovan culture are more likely to modify their behaviour. Such cultural sensitivity wins the respect of Moldovan hosts and reduces the likelihood of cross-cultural tensions. And cultural sensitivity means that members of the host community are more likely to be receptive to STM team outreach.

For foreigners to understand and safely navigate Moldovan culture and its religious nuances, they need a guide – somebody familiar with both cultures, such as a foreigner who has lived for several years in Moldova; or a Moldovan who has lived in the USA or the UK. However, at least one mission organization operating in Moldova takes a generic approach to STM training, bringing in temporary leaders for their teams, who may be skilled leaders but have not lived in Moldova and do not understand its culture.

Feedback

Here, we define “feedback” as intentional and preferably two-way communication between relevant parties, which reflects upon shared experiences, with a deliberate aim of improving future participation and outcomes.

Feedback is important because as imperfect creatures we invariably make mistakes. It is important because cross-cultural communication can lead to misunderstandings, which can normally be clarified through feedback. It is important because constructive feedback enables us to mature as Christians. It is important because it enables us to see the world through the eyes of others. And it is important because the very act of sharing and encouraging through feedback can draw Christians together and increase their trust and unity, and hence their missional effectiveness.

What might biblical feedback look like – are there general principles to be discerned in the same way that we might discern a biblical approach to, say, leadership? This author proposes seven key values:

(i) Begin with Listening

As James writes to his ‘dear brothers and sisters…Everyone should be quick to listen’ (Jam 1:19a). Prov 18:13 adds that ‘to answer before listening – that is folly and shame.’ Both Old and New Testaments encourage Christians to listen to others before hastening to state their own opinion.

(ii) Accept Correction

Prov 12:1 states that ‘whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid,’ and biblical wisdom instructs us that we must accept correction (in some translations, “criticism” or “reproof”) in order to learn and to grow in understanding.

(iii) Strengthen and Build Up
Biblical feedback does not undermine others but rather encourages those involved: ‘Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs (Eph 4:29). It is important to remember that encouragement is a spiritual gift (Rom 12:8) and that constructive feedback can be regarded as exercising this gift.

(iv) Do Not Judge
As one Christian gives feedback to another, he should be careful not to judge those with whom he has been working. The type of feedback that God would have us practise does not permit us to consider others inferior, and we should refrain from judging others altogether: ‘Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged’ (Matt 7:1-2a).

(v) Practise Humility, Gentleness, Love
Visiting short-term missionaries often have more formal theological training than their Moldovan co-workers. Such an imbalance means that when a short-term missionary proposes something, he is often accorded greater (and perhaps unmerited) status. But a biblical approach challenges such false claims to power: ‘be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love’ (Eph 4:2-3).

(vi) Be Slow to Anger
With the honest sharing of opinions and thoughts, comes the possibility of offence. But if we do find ourselves upset by feedback, we should heed the Bible’s advice and be ‘slow to become angry’ (Jam 1:19b). If we overreact to people’s feedback then we make it less likely they will share honest feedback in future.

(vii) Speak Truthfully
Finally, biblical feedback represents things fairly: ‘each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body’ (Eph 4:25). As well as avoiding untruths, it is important when giving feedback to avoid exaggeration, crass stereotypes and unwarranted assumptions – traps that short-term mission teams may fall into as they work cross-culturally but without time to understand that culture deeply.

Contextualised Feedback
Continuing to develop our theme of feedback as crucial for improving the effectiveness of short-term mission, and following on from our identification of biblical principles for the sharing of feedback, it is important to note that good feedback must be contextualised. That is to say, how feedback can be given, how it is received and understood, will vary from culture to culture. So whilst on a general level we may be able to recommend more or better feedback, on a practical level the nature of that feedback will necessarily differ. In Moldova, pertinent issues which affect the nature of feedback include understanding power differentials between hosts and STM workers; and appropriate methods of communication, especially in societies which prioritise oral over written communication.
Further Missiological Implications

This study raises several questions with broader missiological implications, not least what is the role of short-term mission today? To many, it is a sign of God’s church being innovative as a younger generation of Christians responds in its own way to the serious task of global evangelization. Moldovan churches continue to invite short-term mission teams to serve alongside them, and are asking for deeper partnerships, not fewer. This strongly indicates that the short-term mission movement is considered effective by local churches, using their own criteria of usefulness, rather than ours.

Secondly, it should be a matter of concern that non-Western voices are practically inaudible – for every research piece exploring the perspective of host churches or host communities there are dozens commenting on the impact on team members. As Nelson et al note in their discussion of the local church’s role in global mission, ‘over and over again, our Southern partners remind us of the need to listen’ (2011, p120).

Thirdly, is there a distinctly Eastern European perspective on mission; a “second-world” missiology? In the last fifty years there has been much progress towards listening to “decentred,” feminist, postcolonial and other “non-Western” perspectives, whether from Africa, Asia or Latin America. This author suggests that, missiologically speaking, we also need to listen to different, quieter voices from within Europe and not it as a homogenous whole.

This research has shown that it is both possible and desirable to listen to the perspectives of those who receive short-term mission teams. This author encourages other researchers to investigate indigenous perspectives on short-term mission to complement the considerable amount of research conducted into sender/goer perspectives. With little modification, the survey used here could be applied to other countries.

Conclusion

This listening exercise was conducted in order to understand the perspectives of Moldovan church leaders hosting short-term mission teams and was based on the collective experience of nearly 400 short-term mission trips, together with informal feedback from many other Moldovans. It was important to give voice to Moldovans involved in short-term mission because around the world very few missiologists have prioritised host perspectives.

By listening to these perspectives, we have everything to gain: not only do we acquire a deeper understanding of the missional context; but we grow closer to our international brothers and sisters in faith. We honour host churches and host communities when we put their needs and priorities above our own desire for personal growth or “horizon-broadening.”

Our discussion of the effectiveness of short-term mission saw how, ultimately, host churches are in a better position to gauge the impact of missional activity. We also saw that effectiveness increases when we pay special attention to partnership, cultural sensitivity and feedback (which can be based on biblical principles). Such feedback should be contextualised, like so many aspects of cross-cultural mission.

As a missiological discipline, short-term mission is scarcely older than the Republic of Moldova, which gained its independence in 1991. For much of that time there has been sustained criticism of how we do short-term mission – but as the global church becomes more experienced in this type of mission we trust it is also becoming more competent. As we learn from our mistakes, we must be alert both to the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, and to the opinions of our international co-workers in Christ. Missiologists and missionaries need the humility to seek out and accept the perspectives of host Christians as we labour together as God’s fellow-workers (1 Cor 3:9a).
References


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