Expectations are always high when it comes to short-term mission experiences. After all, the sometimes multi-year process of identifying where to go, who will go, and how they will get there usually comes to an exhausting, but successful conclusion, complete with video clips and jet-lagged participants. The reentry from the trip commonly brings with it the requisite refrains “I’ll never be the same,” and “It changed my life.” These oft heard phrases are standard fare in the midsummer heat of peak short-term mission season, but they are all-too-often distant echoes, at best, by the time the opening kickoff takes place at your local high school in the fall. Because this lackluster outcome can be mixed with other personal stories of men, women, and children who have experienced sustained change, a fair question that we must pursue is: Can short-term missions experience truly play a significant role in the substantive Christian formation of those who participate?
BIBLICAL MISSION: EXPRESSED FOUNDATIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Before directly attempting to estimate the value of STM for Christian formation, it may be helpful to, first, frame the discussion in terms of the biblical rendering of mission. Many times, our notions of what the Bible teaches about mission start, and many times end, with a handful of New Testament texts, but Walter Kaiser argues that this is an inadequate approach to capturing the biblical picture:

The Bible actually begins with the theme of missions in the Book of Genesis and maintains that driving passion throughout the entire Old Testament and on into the New Testament. If an Old Testament ‘Great Commission’ must be identified, then it will be Genesis 12:3—‘all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you [Abraham].’ This is the earliest statement of God’s purpose and plan to see that the message of his grace and blessing comes to every ethnolinguistic group on planet earth. The message did not begin there. The basis for it, in fact, went all the way back to Genesis 3:15.1

In Genesis 3:15 (ESV), God issues a key post-Fall promise to the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O’Brien note that “Christian scholars have understood this as the protoevangelium, the first glimmer of the gospel.”2 T. Desmond Alexander further clarifies that this promise of “good news” in “the seed of woman” is to be seen as “referring to a single individual and not numerous descendants.”3 The move toward the fulfillment of this promise, then, becomes the key narrative element in the remainder of both the Book of Genesis, as the narrative is structured, and the whole of the Old Testament.4

The manner in which this fulfillment unfolds is clarified and refined in each of the further promises of the Abrahamic (Gen 12:1-3) and Davidic (2 Sam 7) covenants.

By the time we reach the end of the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis, there are 70 established “nations.” It is against this backdrop that the promise to Abram is given in Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV):

Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’
This pledge is not alone in its emphasis on Abraham’s offspring being a blessing to all nations, through the Man of Promise, “the seed” of Genesis 3:15. A similar message of Gentile inclusion and engagement with the reality of God is captured in both the texts of Exodus 19:5-6 and Psalm 67. Each of these passages offers an explicit injunction to Israel, and her constituent members, to understand and rejoice in God’s inclusion of the Gentiles.

The mission emphasis in the Old Testament is largely on God bringing blessing and restoration to the nations, rather than a far-reaching missionary deployment from among Israel’s ranks. However, there are notable exceptions to this: the eschatological sending of messengers in Isaiah 66; Jonah’s task; Elijah’s ministry to the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:8-24); and Elisha’s trip to Damascus (2 Kgs 8:7-15). These are unique examples, but they do demonstrate an incipient practice of God sending messengers to the nations, as part of His activity among them. This “sending of messengers” image is more fully developed, and normatively expressed, in the outline of mission in the New Testament.

**BIBLICAL MISSION: EXPLICIT STRUCTURE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In the Old Testament, the mode of mission is primarily “by attraction, not by active invitation.” Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert note that, “Missions, in the sense of God’s people being actively sent out to other peoples with a task to accomplish, is as new as the New Testament.” In the New Testament, this God-centered mission is extended and clarified, as the Father sends the Son to accomplish the missio Dei (“mission of God”), by means of the Son’s determined obedience to the Father (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:29). This obedience was ultimately pointed toward his willingness to die in the place of his people (Phil 2:8), for the sake of his own exaltation and the glory of the Father (Phil 2:11). After completing this “saving mission,” Jesus then sends his disciples to carry out their resultant “commission” (John 20:21).

This “Great Commission,” which is sometimes confined strictly to the content of Jesus’ teaching to the apostles immediately preceding His ascension (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8), may be thought of more broadly. New Testament scholar Robert Plummer applies this concept, and title, to all passages that address “Christians’ obligation to share the gospel with non-believers.” Plummer says that in
order for the Great Commission to be rightly understood and expressed, it must be realized in broader terms than simply “explicit imperatives.”

He offers an understanding of the theme of the Great Commission that includes: (1) the command to make disciples (Matt 28:19); (2) “the role of God’s Spirit in empowering and directing the gospel’s spread” (Acts 5:32); and (3) Paul’s epistles, for example, which focus on “the gospel as God’s dynamic word that inevitably accomplishes his purpose” (Col 1:6). The movement of the gospel into and among the nations of the earth is comprised of all three of these active Great Commission elements.

Disciple-Making and the Great Commission

First, in Matthew 28:16-20, we have the command to “make disciples,” which is the nucleus of the apostles’ mission. Disciple-making, in Matthew’s account, is seen as instruction that is thoroughgoing and rooted in “all things” which Jesus has commanded his disciples. However, it also prizes the importance of the apostolate following the model of Jesus in their teaching. Instructing the followers of Jesus means communicating both “a teaching and a lifestyle.”

Gospel living may be more caught than taught, as the cliché goes, but it may be that these are to be interdependent. Lifestyle teaches the student, and biblical teaching that “lives,” is both understood and integrated into the learner’s life. These Christian disciples are those “who live in community, in fellowship with teachers and with other followers of Jesus.”

The point of emphasis in this commission is that Christ will build his church globally (Matt 16:18), through the establishment of local congregations, via the missionary work of the apostles and subsequent generations of disciples.

Spirit-Directed Advance and the Great Commission

Throughout the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke’s emphasis is on the Holy Spirit and his work within the believing witnesses to disseminate the truth (e.g., 2:4, 37-41; 4:8, 13; 6:5, 10; 7:54, 57). While each of these instances displays the work of the believer, as he is empowered by the Spirit, Acts 5:32 contains a nuanced understanding of what is actually taking place. Here, Peter declares: “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” Unlike the texts which point to the work of the Spirit in
and through the witnesses, the statement here seems to indicate that the Spirit also bears witness to the truth of the gospel in “direct parallel” to the proclamation of the apostolic witnesses. Bill Larkin comments on these emphases in Acts:

Luke does not neglect the ‘salvation accomplished’ portion of the gospel: the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. However, the main focus is on ‘salvation applied’ — the church in mission taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Luke constantly reminds us that this is the mission of the Triune God. Not only does he send and guide his missionaries (apostles, witnesses to the resurrection, evangelists, believers), but he is directly calling people to himself as his word grows and the number of his people increases.

It is this activity by God, both parallel to and in concert with his “sent ones,” which is the power from which the disciple-making effort draws its real strength. His Spirit bears witness to His absolute magnificence, even among those who reject this message, as the extension of His gospel truth accomplishes His stated purposes, eventually among every people group.

**Gospel Extension and the Great Commission**

In his letter to the Colossian believers, Paul observes that this gospel “... which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth” (Col 1:6). Here, the gospel is active in “bearing fruit and growing.” As Plummer puts it:

Paul’s understanding of the gospel as God’s dynamic word that inevitably moves forward and accomplishes the divine purpose provides a theological basis for the church’s mission ... for Paul, when the gospel is genuinely present in a congregation, he is confident that the dynamic nature of that word will guarantee its ongoing triumphant progress.

As this global mission is carried out, through going, teaching and baptizing, the aspects of disciple-making and the successful establishment of the church, by this “word,” are accomplished by the Spirit. This is the active process, and method, that is fulfilling the Great Commission, through and in the local church, to the glory of God the Father.

**STM: Definition and Relationship to Christian Formation**

If the directive to make disciples panta ta ethne (“of all peoples”)
necessitates Spirit-directed gospel extension, and this mandate is given to the church, through the apostles, where do we properly place STM in the landscape of this mission advance? While there is much debate on whether or not all STM experiences may properly be called a “missionary” exercise, the historical proliferation of shorter terms of service, particularly in North America from the 1960’s on, seems to indicate that the practice is here to stay.25

While missionaries prior to, and during, the twentieth century had no pretense of frequent returns home, if they ever returned, partly because there was no ability to travel with any degree of relative ease. Modern travel has changed that forever.26 Even many career missionaries who go overseas for a “lifetime” come back on home assignment at regular intervals, and they speak to family and friends almost daily, in some cases, using video communication programs that are now readily accessible.

This means that definitions of, and options for, time frames deployed to the field have dramatically changed as well. Current categorizations vary, but generally long-term, or career, missionary service usually applies to any period of 2 years, or more, in length. Any term that is between 3 months and 2 years is generally labeled mid-term, although some organizations and missiologists categorize these as short-term.27 These designations are basic guidelines, because deployment terms and expectations are established by each agency, or church.

Some organizations and churches utilize these “levels” (long-term, mid-term, short-term) as steps to what they hope will be progressively longer seasons of service. The principle idea is that the tiered approach allows participants to be involved in mission activity and, progressively, progress to the next sequential step. The operative thought is often that this exposure helps them see what life is like firsthand, and it also allows the agency, or church, to see if the missionary demonstrates the ability to be successful during progressively longer periods of deployment.28

It is the grouping of the “shortest” mission trips (3 months or less) that will be, predominately, in view here. The “participants” in view will include Christian children, adolescents, and adults, so the observations will apply, in varying degree, to these distinct but interrelated groups. The following working definition of STM, as
offered by anthropologist Brian Howell will be employed: “short travel experiences for Christian purposes such as charity, service, or evangelism.” This accommodating definition will allow for the widest geographic variety of STM experiences, so domestic and international trips will be in view, with primary observational emphasis on cross-cultural experiences.

Some would say that a prioritization of attention toward formational benefits to those who go simply demonstrates that STM of this persuasion should be questioned. This mindset appears to present a false dilemma, as Christian disciples are witnesses and heralds of the King, while they are also concurrently hoping in the gospel, in the midst of a cruciform life of service (Col 1:24-29). This is not to propose that service is the primary indicator of formation, as progressive sanctification in Christ is, chiefly, an inward reality that engenders specific outward evidences (Eph 5:19-21; John 15:10-12; Col 3:1-11; Isa 66:2; Rom 7:14-25; Matt 6:1-3; Luke 9:26; Matt 4:4; 1 John 4:11-18; Eph 6:1-2). The sobering truth is that general “serving” does not have any inherent relationship to formation, or even being in union with Christ (Matt 7:21-23).

When we dig at it deeper and consider the full ordo salutis ("order of salvation"), while paying specific attention to the thread of sanctification throughout, the discipleship value of formational intention becomes increasingly more apparent. Timothy Paul Jones and Michael Wilder provide a helpful definition of progressive sanctification, to further guide our thinking on this point:

Sanctification is the process of being set apart for God’s purposes and restored to the image of God by means of the Holy Spirit’s gracious work in the believer’s life from regeneration through glorification.30

The restoration of the imago Dei ("image of God") is made possible by Christ’s finished work. This restoration of God’s image entails being renewed in “knowledge” (Col 3:10), so that “we become more like God in our thinking.”31 This restoration is a growing into greater maturity and likeness to Christ (2 Cor 3:18).32 Paul Barnett’s comment on Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians, as it is connected to God’s ultimate aim in his sanctifying work, is informative:

Paul makes it clear that we must understand our transformation to be the will of God for us and that we should actively cooperate with him in bringing to reality the eternal destiny for which we were
predestined (Rom 12:1-2, 28-30). Our transformation is nothing else than a transformation into the moral and spiritual likeness of the now glorified Christ. It is transformation into that Christ-likeness which will be ours in the end time, when he will be the ‘firstborn among many brothers’ (Rom 8:29).³³

This progressive transformation, then, is holistic in its scope, with its full realization to be experienced in the eschatological kingdom, such that even now it is a renewing of the whole of the believer, as he conformed further to the image of the one who is the exact image of the Father (Heb 1:3).³⁴

If this transformative work is holistic, then an operational summary of Christian maturity might be “a regenerate person’s act of living a life that more accurately reflects the glory and image of God in his behavior, thinking, passions, and motivations.”³⁵ If we work from this formational vantage point, in the construction of STM approaches, these short-term experiences may have a substantive role to play in supporting Christian formation.

STM: A CONSCIOUSLY FORMATIONAL APPROACH

There are several philosophical and programmatic norms that can encourage the conscious stitching of STM into the discipleship fabric of church and home. It is not enough to treat mission trips as transformative vehicles, in and of themselves, apart from the ongoing Christian formation understanding and exercise of the local church.³⁶ Therefore, the approach outlined here will offer philosophies, and street-level practices, which cover ground far beyond the discrete arena of STM trips; however, this material is offered in an attempt to firmly situate the whole of the short-term process within the more foundational portrait of local church formation and discipleship.

The Church and STM: Formative Relationships and Teaching

First, to appropriate short-term missions for Christian formation, we must root the STM approach in formative relationships and teaching, within the local church. Familial, intergenerational, and community emphases are integral to the New Covenant community. Examples of these biblical concepts are: (1) the parental, and particularly paternal, responsibility to instruct and train children (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Psalm 78:5-8; Ephesians 6:4); (2) the intergenerational nature of church community discipleship (e.g., Titus 2:1-10); and (3) the biblical portrait of community as a reconciled people (not
unrelated individuals) to God and each other, by the “mercing” work of the gospel (e.g., 1 Peter 2:9-10).

Formative Relationships for STM
Since all of these relationships are innately related to Christian formation, the particular gravity of familial relationships is of first order significance.\(^{37}\) Since many of those who engage in short-term mission, in a given annual term, are children and adolescents, the central role of parental direction and influence must be considered.\(^{38}\)

The training of children is the discrete domain and responsibility of parents, and this instruction, by necessity, includes worldview formation (Deut 6:4-9; Exod 31:3, 6; Deut 34:9; Ps 127:3-5; Prov 1:7). It then follows that the economy of the family is vital to the formative process of children ascertaining and embracing mission perspective and proclivity, as part of this complex of philosophical life perspective. Also, the potential for mission experiences with parents to build into children and adolescents a formative “lifelong impression” is strong.\(^{39}\)

The convergence of family-based biblical instruction, gospel-centered living in repentance and faith, and shared STM experiences provide an environment where ongoing conversation can take place regarding truth and practice.\(^{40}\) In light of this priority of the home, equipping parents to disciple their children, through and in gospel mission, is a crucial responsibility for the pastoral and volunteer leadership that aspire to capitalize on transformational aspects of STM.\(^{41}\)

The related ability of parents to share these formative training opportunities with pastoral leaders and trusted adult volunteers, actually provides an opportunity to surround a student with supportive relationships. This benefit is also true for STM participants of any age, as supportive as local church-based relationships that exist before, during, and long after the brief field experience will best serve to shape the whole of the person. The biblical undergirding for this multi-relational, community oriented approach is, in part, that formation was intended to take place in the context of community.\(^{42}\)

The individual family is intended, then, to prioritize relationship to his redeemed people (God’s family), as they are adopted brothers and sisters reconciled to God and to one another, through the work of the Son (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:14-22; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet 2:9). Mission is a constituent element of what it means to be a doxologically-
motivated local church, so living as a part of this reconciled people is most foundationally driven by this God-centered impulse (Col 3:12-17). Therefore, a local church intent on understanding and actively promoting the role that parents, leaders, and other disciples play in the lives of one another avails itself of discipleship and mission engagement processes that can best achieve these relational goals, as parents and pastoral leaders shepherd children and adults.

The church must not only support these individual believers in short-term mission experiences, but it must also think well about its own cultural values related to mission prayer, direction, strategy, training, sending of personnel, and funding. Entailed in the taking on of a “mission culture,” will be a local emphasis on community engagement with the gospel, as well as, optimally, the identification of a specific people group, or region, for ongoing support and partnership.

This approach, again, allows STM to be one piece in a broader formational process to invest in long-term outcomes (e.g., short to long-term deployment progression for missionaries, sustained prayer through the formative years for children, and sacrificial generosity toward the missionary work among the same people group by families). This longitudinal approach allows STM to be consistently cast within the larger picture of Christian formation, locally (in the ministry of the supporting church) and globally (in the ministry of the missionaries and church among the adopted people group or region).

**Formative Teaching for STM**

The formational process would also include the church’s identification of a well-defined mission curriculum, which is more comprehensive than preparatory training materials for specific short-term trips. When identifying and developing curriculum for mission emphasis, it may be helpful to think in terms of three essential categories: (1) biblical and theological instruction; (2) historical and philosophical instruction; and (3) cultural and anthropological instruction.

These three domains are listed in order of primacy, as biblical teaching and preaching, that inform and direct parental, pastoral, and small group-based dialogue and discovery learning exercises are crucial to STM preparation and sustainable bearing on student lives. Scripture is the rule and standard by which we must judge all other experiences and realities. The biblical plumb
line is the only means by which we may faithfully ensure that the epistemological basis of the one being formed is scripturally-moored. This approach allows for a biblically-informed perspective on historical and cultural issues in mission, rather than starting with the issues of culture and historical interpretation.

This curricular scope can be seen in the following example, based on teaching Psalm 67. If, in teaching the Psalm to the participants, the teacher emphasizes the primacy of this prayer’s hope in God for the peoples of the earth to worship and glorify God, as the pinnacle outcome for mission and life, you can also canvas textual markers that demonstrate this theme throughout the Canon of Scripture (e.g., Isa 43:6-7; Jer 13:11; John 12:27-28, 17:24; Rom 3:25-26; Eph 1:4-6; Rev 21:23).46

Since the “nations” here are “people groups,” a teacher might also describe to them what it means for these ethno-linguistic groups to be without the gospel, giving them details about their number and place in the world. This approach enables participants to see where the exclusivity of Jesus and the state of sinful humanity come to bear on their view of global reality. This perspective can be informed by, and properly placed within, the scope of the metanarrative of Scripture as well, so that the participants understand where this material relates to creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

At this point, offering biographical sketches of missionaries to one of these groups can round out the intentional progression from biblical, to philosophical, to cultural instruction, in one teaching session. This type of approach allows the participant to not only understand the session content, but also begin to think in this holistic manner himself.

This inclusion of historical and philosophical study, informed by theological foundations, is supportive to formational approaches to STM. Considering how the church has understood and expressed cross-cultural mission, through the centuries, can both challenge and inform missionary disciples. Expecting disciples to have a “global vision” is no new standard, and emphasizing this through the study of church history, historical theology, and missionary biography can reinforce the biblical reality that Christ is keeping his promise to build his church, across generations (Matt 16:16-18).47

This historical and philosophical study can also support a proper understanding of worldview.
development, as well as the effort to identify and contrast philosophies that run counter to orthodox Christianity, which can offer STM participants basic logic and philosophy instruction as well as an introductory apologetic background.

Mission education that is wed to STM involvement will also need to assist participants in understanding how and why people live, act, and interact, within their culture the way in which they do, from a biblically-rooted anthropological perspective. This brings the discipline of anthropology back to its genesis, since it was originally conceived as a way to “understand people from a theological perspective,” which is key to effective cross-cultural ministry. Understanding, even in elementary terms, the nature of culture and man will, ideally, give STM participants the ability to begin to wisely navigate cross-cultural situations with greater wisdom.

As mentioned above, the formative relationships of parents and pastoral leaders are critical in formational STM experiences. The reason for this is not the role they play in staffing the relatively brief field-based trip, but the God-ordained placement in the totality of the formational approach, by virtue of their parenthood or pastoral leadership. As comprehensive instruction takes place, it can travel in, or be reinforced through, intentional dialog with parents, family, leaders, and other STM participants.

The Church and STM: Formative Processes and Practices
To achieve maximum formational benefit, we must also root the STM approach in formative processes and practices, within the local church. Establishing processes and uniform practices demonstrates a deliberate and focused intention toward growth. This is in keeping with the commands given for Christians to actively advance in sanctification (John 14:23; 15:2, 4, 7; 1 John 1:7; 3:3; Rev 2:25; 3:11). These efforts are inseparable from the positional sanctification that believers maintain, in Christ, because of his imputed righteousness. Christian formation, then, is the Holy Spirit’s work to “bond us to the Son in love.” Because we are being conformed to the image of Christ, an element of the Spirit’s ongoing work is to also train us to be active in wisdom and discernment (Heb 5:14). Formation and Wisdom
Therefore, one of the salient needs for an STM philosophy is that it
lend itself to encouraging those in Christ, through the teaching of parents and leaders, to actively exhibit and intentionally seek humble wisdom (Prov 8:32-36; 11:2; 16:16: 19:8). Simply stated, wisdom is clearly hearing and acting on God’s Word. The pursuit of wisdom is both found in Christ (1 Cor 1:24, 30; 1 Cor 2:7-8), and it is empowered by Jesus, the incarnate wisdom of God (Matt 11:2-4), as Christians are called to: (1) receive wisdom as a divine gift (James 1:5-8; 3:13-18); (2) fear God and trust God’s wise provision (Job 12:13; Prov 9:10; Isa 40:28; Rom 11:33); (3) make decisions wisely, in keeping withbiblically-prescribed ethics (Col 1:9-10; Rom 3:31; 8:3-4; 1 Cor 7:19; 1 Thess 5:21; Gal 6:2-5; Rom 12:2; 14:22-23); and (4) teach, and be taught, wisdom to “from one generation to the next” (Deut 4:5-6). Across all segments of STM preparation, deployment, and the return home, functional wisdom is to be sought and taught, so that maturational hope would be in view (1 Cor 3:1-4).

**Formation and Wisdom through the STM Cycle**

The short-term mission trip is, generally, viewed as consisting of three progressive segments: (1) pre-field preparation; (2) on-field engagement; and (3) post-field reflection. This “linear” manner of looking at STM has been critiqued, because in western thinking, this enables us to see that we have “accomplished something.” This certainly can be an indicator of culture guiding perception; however, distinguishing each of these aspects of STM approach from one another can also be quite helpful. This effort can enable more cogent thinking about the manner in which these segments of STM relate to one another, as well as to the ongoing teaching and praxis of the church.

If we view the pre-field, on-field, and post-field aspects as cyclical, as opposed to linear, the STM process may be harnessed as an essential means of forming disciples. From this perspective, “the stages of STM preparation, deployment, and reentry into our own culture, are part of what God is doing to shape us and those to whom we minister cross-culturally, rather than a rare and isolated vacation from the norm.” This cycle would mean that disciples are always in preparation for their next STM, on the field, or going through the post-trip process, which leads progressively into the next STM experience.

**Pre-Field Process and Practice**
In considering pre-field formational practices, the following common elements may be required: (1) application; (2) fundraising; (3) cultural research; (4) mission book review; (5) team service projects; and (6) training meetings. In each of these areas, the emphasis is placed on the development of the participant, particularly as it is related mission awareness and preparation.

An STM application may include: (1) a written account of their conversion and spiritual journey; (2) reasons for interest in the trip; (3) any health concerns; and (4) personal references. These applications give the leader an initial assessment as to the participant’s maturity, written expression, reputation with others, and fit for the specific STM team. Garnering prayer and financial support for an STM requires guidance, for many participants. There are basic principles of financial stewardship and sacrificial generosity that can be emphasized, in the process of raising funds, just as Paul did with both churches in financial hardship (Phil 4:10-20), and churches in a stronger financial position (2 Cor 8:1-9:15). This practice is part of the reality of mission deployment, for many of those who are engaged in mid and long-term placement. Their agencies, or independent ministry structures, require them to raise financial support. Understanding a little bit about this process gives STM participants a more realistic view of this dynamic, while it also provides an understanding of the ability to partner through praying and giving.

Mid-term and long-term missionaries must, by necessity, study the culture to which they are going, in order to maintain biblical fidelity in their thinking and carefully contextualized practices (1 Cor 9:19-23). This balanced approach is necessary because Participants can perform abbreviated cultural research, along with reviews of mission texts, or missionary biographies, which can begin to inform their thinking about missiology, before the on-field experience.

Finally, the use of service projects and training meetings is vital to gauging, and developing, participant preparedness for STM deployment. These mandatory, shared experiences set expectations, build camaraderie, and provide the best preparation for the team. These meetings should begin several months before mobilizing short-term. Training meetings include some of the aspects above (e.g., presentation of research, tips on raising support),
with the addition of logistical information (e.g., passports, travel, immunizations, etc.), and team Bible study and prayer.

**On-field Process and Practice**

Intentionally shaping the on-field portion of the STM for participant formation can be assisted through several practices. First, although it seems counterintuitive to some pervasive mindsets about STM goals, a significant task for many short-term teams should be to spend time with indigenous peoples, specifically those who are in Christ (assuming that the STM is in an area where a church has been established). Because formationally-oriented short-term experiences are largely focused on learning, and “getting your feet wet,” it is helpful to think through the degree to which participants can “learn from,” or “learn with” nationals.⁵⁸

A second on-field practice is Bible study, which is accompanied by, and informs, prayer. Biblical texts and metanarrative themes, force the thoughts and prayers of participants in a Godward direction. Study topics should scaffold participants to assess the new culture, and any prominent ideas, in light of the biblical material. The hopeful intent would be that the Bible would shape their thoughts, which in turn shapes their prayers, as this a helpful lifelong practice for all believers.⁵⁹

While debriefing is, many times, reserved for the return home from a short-term trip, daily debriefing on-field can provide a real-time barometer of how the team is processing their experience, individually and corporately. The requirement of a daily journal entry can greatly assist in this process, as well as in the post-field debriefing sessions.⁶⁰ The need for daily, focused debriefing is highlighted because the effort to utilize STM in the service of Christian formation, while many times serving in cultures hostile to biblical Christianity itself. This reality will require participants to be learners of the culture, while they are in the culture.⁶¹ This deferential attitude, wisely tempered with instruction on the avoidance of cultural practice that might be ethically or morally compromising, must be emphasized in pre-field training and continue to be reinforced on-field.

While the on-field portion of the STM cycle is the shortest, it will likely be the most emotionally and physically intense. Because of this strain, this time can also be distressing, in muted or more pronounced measures, depending on the participant. Well-prepared
parents and leaders can best support STM participants through the post-field process and practice.

**Post-Field Process and Practice**

Although it is an integral phase in STM, the post-field timeframe is often the most neglected, when it comes to capturing the value of the experience toward formative outcomes. By the time you step off of the plane, the work seems finished, when in fact it has just begun. Several key practices that can maximize the formational impact of these trips are assessment through debriefing, reporting to supporters, and post-trip service projects.

Assessment needs to take place within the relationships participants have with parents, mentors, and leaders. However, the “re-entry” period, needs to include several specific relational venues. First, leaders should schedule “re-entry meetings,” which allow participants to meet with parents, if a child or student, and leaders to reflect on their experience and gain guidance and direction. Second, leaders can hold “debriefing meetings.” These include both individual and team meetings, in which the team leader, or pastoral leader, leads guided discussions about the experience, with the intent to move participants toward the next appropriate developmental step. Finally, “next step meetings” can integrate the participant’s personal observations, team discussion, and leader(s) insight. From this collective information, a next steps plan can be established and executed in concert with all of the influence connections (parents, leaders, team, church). These post-field steps enable the student to continue mission thinking, while pointing them toward the next cross-cultural action or behavior.

Prebriefing (pre-field) and debriefing (on-field and post-field) processes are crucial to the optimization of mission service and outreach as a preferred means of formative development. Quality debriefing can provide a piece of the necessary discipleship scaffolding for participants in STM to develop wisdom. If wisdom, as mentioned already, is a chief indicator of Christian maturation and growth, debriefing provides an environmental practice which allows participants to better move from simple knowledge of their experiences, to understanding why these things are so, and finally to a wise apprehension of how they might act, biblically, in light of these experiences.

Upon their return, participants will also want to communicate with those that supported them. This not
only informs those who have prayed and given, but it can also strengthen the students’ understanding of, and commitment to, mission outcomes. The resultant encouragement that they may receive from some supporters can also help to undergird their commitments.

Along with the ongoing debriefing and recounting of experiences, participants need to also be involved in similar cross-cultural service at home. Mission principles and practice have to live and breathe as they do, where they are, and wherever they may go. The distinction here is that, as was the case in preparing them to go, when they return home, service projects act as a continuation of what has taken place. Ideally, this hands-on exercise, then, becomes another step in their pre-field progression to the next short-term deployment.

In an approach to STM that is rooted in Christian formation and Great Commission understanding, the pre-field, on-field, and post-field movements must be understood in light of, and made subordinate to, a broader formational framework. The off-field elements of short-term mission are crucial to a formational approach, as these are the means to establish true understanding and wisdom, in regard to the STM trip itself.

**CONCLUSION**

Formative, lasting change may happen as a result of isolated short-term mission trips. However, an approach that demands a more robust view of STM, informed by Christian formation through the church and home in philosophy and method, may provide an optimized approach for families and churches alike. If wisdom is granted by God, the STM participant may develop greater gospel understanding of himself, his family, the church, the lost, the world, and how each of these point to the immeasurable worth and glory of God. If that is achieved, then perhaps the doxological criteria that Jonathan Edwards offered to a missionary society gathering more than 200 years ago will, in some sense, have been met: “. . . the glory of God, a regard to his honor and praise in the spread of the gospel, ought to be the governing motive in all missionary exertions and the animating principle in the breast of missionaries.”

**ENDNOTES**

3 Desmond Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *Tyn-
dale Bulletin 48 (1997), 363. For additional discussion on a singular, rather than plural, understanding of “seed” in Genesis 3:15, see also James Hamilton, God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 75-76.


8 Ibid., 502-03.


10 Ibid.


12 Köstenberger and O’Brien, Salvation to the Ends of the Earth, 19.


14 Ibid., 9.

15 Ibid.


17 Lucien Legrand, Unity and Plurality (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 78.


19 Ibid., 355-56.


21 Ibid., 185.


24 DeYoung and Gilbert, What is the Mission of the Church?, 62.

25 For an historical overview of the development of short-term missions philosophy, terminology, and use in relationship to longer-term service personnel see Brian Howell, Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 69-101. Within this discussion, Howell notes that simultaneously advances in air travel technology, global air travel infrastructure, and a spike in disposable income, from the late 1960’s through the 1980’s correlate to the growth in STM.

26 Ibid.


28 Empirical data is mixed in establishing a strong correlation between short-term deployment and long-term engagement in longitudinal studies. For example, see Scott Moreau, “Short-Term Missions in the Context of Missions, Inc.” in Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions, ed. Robert Priest (Pasadena: William Carey, 2008), 1-34.
29 Howell, Short-Term Mission, 20.
32 Ibid.
34 Anthony Hockema, Created in God’s Image (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 216.
35 Michael Wilder and Shane Parker, Transformission: Making Disciples through Short-Term Missions (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 118-19.
36 Gary Parrett and Steve Kang, Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 412. Parrett and Steve Kang emphasize a comprehensive approach to Christian formation, within the context of the church as New Covenant community. The writers note that “three great tasks” of the church, historically and contemporarily, have been worship, formation, and outreach, which are interrelated and overlapping.
37 Although the longitudinal study focuses on “religious continuity” and “faith transmission,” rather than biblically-rooted norms of Christian formation, the findings offered in Vern Bengston, Norella Putney and Susan Harris, Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations (New York: Oxford, 2013) indirectly support the catalog of community norms presented here.
38 Priest, Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions, ii-iv.
41 Merton Strommen and Richard Hardel, Passing on the Faith (Winona: Saint Mary’s, 2000), 81.
43 Greg Ogden, Transforming Discipleship (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 105-17. The author outlines a model of discipleship and formation that is derived from the following Pauline epistolary themes: “imitation” of a model (1 Cor 4:16); “identification” with the mentor (1 Thess 2:7); “exhortation” to live faithfully (2 Tim 4:5); and “participation” in partnership with the disciple (Rom 1:11-12).
44 Tom Telford, All-Star Missions Churches (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 133-34.
45 Wilder and Parker, Transformission, 217-18.
46 See John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 22-27, for a more extensive listing of texts outlining God’s intention that all mission be for His glory, as it is established among the nations.
47 Gregg Allison, Historical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 28-29.
48 Paul Hiebert, Cultural Anthropology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), xvi.
49 David Livermore, Serving with Eyes Wide Open (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 111. Livermore offers his theory of “Cultural Intelligence,” which provides a framework specifically designed to assist STM participants in becoming more adept at navigating cross-cultural experiences with understanding. See also David Livermore, Cultural Intelligence (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
50 Bruce Demarest, The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation (Wheaton: Cross-
Demarest outlines these practices as “abiding in Christ (John 15:4, 7), walking in the light of God’s presence (1 John 1:7), holding fast to their Christian profession (Rev 2:25; 3:11), purifying themselves from sin (1 John 3:3), continuing in Christ’s teaching (John 14:23; 15:7), and submitting to providential discipline (John 15:2).”

55 Wilder and Parker, *Transformission*, 201.
57 Kathy Hicks, *Scaling the Wall* (Waynesboro: Authentic, 2003), 183.
62 Ibid.