Editor’s note: As youth workers, we seldom work in a vacuum. As associate pastor for missions at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis (where John Piper is senior pastor), Erik Hyatt is no exception. What follows flows from the shared learning he has gained at Bethlehem.

“How did this trip impact me?”
“How will I continue to nurture this spiritual growth when I return home?”

These are some of the questions that show up on short-term mission (STM) debrief forms. But the questions themselves are a little disturbing, because they are asked after a ministry activity that is supposed to be outwardly-focused.

Who is the main object in these questions? And what does that imply about the main focus of the STM trip?

Many articles have been written about the dysfunctional and self-absorbed nature of some STM endeavors in recent years. But it seems like many of the remedies offered have been more about the individual STM participant getting personally involved/engaged in missions for the long haul – with little or no mention of the central role of the church.

Please don’t misunderstand; we have a deep appreciation for the role of the missions agency or parachurch organization to help train and mobilize missionaries for various lengths of service. But our challenge to individual short-termers, their youth leaders, and the mission agencies is to remember the central role of the church in God’s design for the advancement of the gospel among all peoples.

This challenge comes from the conviction that the church was, and still is, what Jesus said he would be building upon “this rock” – that is, Peter’s divinely inspired profession of faith in Him as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-19). Missions of any duration – short-term, mid-term, or career - should be part of that church-building process.

In the early church, we see the Holy Spirit spoke to the whole church at Antioch, while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting. He said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work for which I have called them” (Acts 13:1-3). There are several key principles to glean from the Antioch church model:

1. The call to missionary service (short-, mid-, or long-term) follows faithful involvement and service within the local church (Acts 13:1 – Barnabas and Saul were among the prophets and teachers of the church.)

2. The call to missionary service (short-, mid-, or long-term) is not simply an individual sense of calling, made independently of the local church body. On the contrary, it came about “while they were worshiping and fasting together” (13:2). God designed it so that the church would be involved in the selection, sending and supporting of the missionary who would be “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (13:4).

3. The call to missionary service of any length should include a return to the sending church to report “all that God had done with them” (Acts 14:27).

Finally, we don’t believe that all short-term missionaries should feel undue pressure from mission leaders to become longer-term missionaries abroad. The Holy Spirit will do that work in their hearts, and confirm it through the church, if God so wills it.

We believe that a call to be a “sender” is just as valid and vital to the building of God’s kingdom and Christ’s church as a call to be a “goer.” Every goer/missionary needs senders back home, not just check-writers or donors.

The apostle John wrote to those in the “sender” category in 3 John 1:5-8; “You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name… Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.”

So how can youth leaders help STM participants discover their role in missions as either goer or sender after their STM experience?
1. Help them see the “ALL NATIONS” portion of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). Many youth leaders talk about making disciples as the primary task in fulfilling the Christ’s commission. But not many highlight the main object of that disciple-making… “all nations.”

2. Help them see “ALL NATIONS” in their midst. The Greek is clear; “all nations” (panta ta ethne’) means “all ethnic groups.” Are the ethnic groups around your home, school and church the object of your disciple-making? Going to another country on a STM assignment is a great experience. But must we leave the country to continue to obey the Great Commission and enjoy cross-cultural ministry? How can you and your students learn how to cross the cultural barriers and communicate the gospel of Jesus with your ethnic neighbors?

3. Sponsor a local “Crossing Cultures” workshop. Caleb Project started this program several years ago (www.calebproject.org). They led one for us, and now we are continuing to offer it with our own leaders at our church. It’s not hard, and it is a fun way to learn about the various ethnic groups that may exist around your church.

The workshop starts on Friday night with an ethnic meal and some training on language and culture learning skills. Saturday is spent going through the local neighborhoods in teams of two—not to hand out gospel tracts, but to ask language and culture learning questions. The primary goal of this is to gain what David Livermore calls “Cultural Intelligence” within your own hometown.

After several years of doing this workshop many of our church members are making some significant connections with our international neighbors. Each year many participants have shared how they were invited to meet with the international neighbor again. And in the process of learning about their language and culture, our international neighbors begin to think that we might actually care about them as a person, rather than an evangelistic target.

The ultimate goal for us then is to truly learn how to love and communicate with our international neighbors so that the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in the context of relationships. Hmm… isn’t that what missionaries do?


5. Start Barnabas Support Teams. These are basically small groups that have covenanted together to be the primary care source for selected long-term missionaries. This means this group will have the most interaction with the missionary – receiving more personal updates and committing to pray regularly for the missionary and the people group they seek to reach with the gospel.

Some ideas for those sensing God’s call to career missionary service:

1. “Gap year” opportunities. This is something that we are still in the process of developing. This is an
opportunity for graduating high school students and young college students to take a year of service on the mission field in another country. This requires a great deal of coordination to put together. But groups like Serving In Mission (www.sim.co.uk) and Students International (www.stint.org) have programs already in place. In some cases, these opportunities can be arranged with a college for credit. But the main point is that the student gets the opportunity to see how career missionaries live and work beyond the two-week STM blitz.

2. Nurture Program for Missionary Candidates. This is our own training and discovery process for our church members who sense the Lord’s leading into longer-term missionary service. But a church of any size could do it. It is a two-year process which covers the basic knowledge, character, and skills that experienced missionaries and mission agencies require for their missionary candidates. We believe that the church should be able to honestly and confidently commend the candidate to the agency, having been prepared and tested in these categories while he/she worshiped with us. For more info on this, contact us at missions@hopeinGOD.org

So the bottom-line plea is for STM trips to be a part of the process of helping the church be the church. As described in Acts 13:1-3 and 3 John 1:5-8, this means producing, sending, supporting and receiving missionaries. Help your students to see STM as a means (not an end) for the church to develop both senders and goers. Helping STMers to see their vital role as members of the body of Christ, before and after the STM trip, so that every gift and call of the Holy Spirit may fulfill its purpose “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Therefore, youth leaders, help your students to “strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12), which Jesus exalted and embraced. Building His church among every people group on earth should be the fruit of the Great Commission.

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