"There They Go"
Short Term Mission Trips As a Metaphor and Model for Youth Slipping out the Back Door

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Abstract

Millennials slip out the back door of church involvement for a variety of reasons. One currently popular youth ministry activity, Short-Term Mission Trips (STMT), provides a metaphor and a model for this phenomenon. STMT take into account both positive and negative elements as well as a host of factors with intensities that vary from one millennial to another. Utilizing STMT as a metaphor, and the varieties within the model, demonstrate the complexity of the issue rather than providing a singular and simplistic explanation and solution. Inherent in this model is a proactive sending motif rather than a passive clinging for retention.

"Every young person must go on a short term mission trip!" exclaims the recent returnee from a project in Honduras. Although stated with enthusiasm and sincerity, it begs the question, "Really?"

During the past few decades short-term mission trips (STMT) increased exponentially and became a moniker for youth ministries considered successful. But do they truly qualify as "a must"? Could they merely be the latest fad that will soon be stored in digital video vaults like scrapbooks from bygone days?

I've led scores of STMT for literally thousands of people. The majority have been for young people, but some have been multi-generational or multi-grouped or congregational. The youngest participant reached three months during our project, and the oldest I've had was 84. And while most reports of STMT provide glowing stories, I know that much goes unreported, both positive and negative.

While I certainly remain extremely optimistic about STMT, my response to "Every young person must go on a short term mission trip!" is "Not necessarily."

But rather than creating a platform to support or question STMT, I'd like to present STMT as a metaphor and a model for youth slipping out the back door of the church. This relates not only to why some youth leave the church and why others remain, it also highlights a way to do youth ministry. Both positive and negative elements make up the description. Identifying elements of the model will spring-board some to the analogy of youth leaving the church. For others, an explanation of the analogy may be helpful. And for still others, the result might be a rejection of the metaphor or model. Hopefully, it will all lead to helpful dialogue on the topic of youth slipping out the back door of the church.

But before presenting the model, a few foundational statements and questions for awareness should be made. For example, this problem is not limited to young people; adults are leaving, too (Duin, 2008; Cornforth, 1995). Nor is it only a Seventh-day Adventist problem; other denominations face it as well (Miley, 2002). Those who attribute the problem to one specific factor over-simplify the problem. Questions to consider include the following. Is staying in the church the ultimate goal? Is success measured by numbers (Claiborne and Haw, 2008)? Is spirituality something achieved at one point in time, or is it dynamic, fluctuating like the ocean tides? Are we obsessing about a North American problem that accounts for less than eight percent of the Seventh-day Adventists throughout the world? Does our financial muscle demand this attention? Is spirituality more about give (What do you offer at church?) or take (What do you get from church?). And does this change from time to time? Finally, what lens do we look

through when considering this question (Henderson and Casper, 2007); the lens of mission? Theology? Psychology? Sociology? Culture? Business? Emotion?

With these statements and questions tucked into the back of your mind, consider STMT as a metaphor and a model for youth ministry and as it relates to youth slipping out the back door of the church.

Positive Elements of STMT

If you've participated in a STMT, your images of the topic might be colored by that experience. Was it positive or negative? Transformational or "just another trip"? Challenging or merely frustrating? "A one time experience" or something you'd like to repeat? Pricey or priceless?

STMT can't easily be classified into one category. One common type is the evangelistic brand in which participants visit a foreign country and preach evangelistic sermons to the nationals, much like Adventists did throughout North America 50 years ago (or even more recently). A second type focuses on medical missionary work, with skilled medical staff and fledgling assistants providing free clinics in primitive areas that lack medical care. Still another type centers on constructing an urgently needed building like a school or church or housing. In this setting, skilled laborers must navigate a blend of efficiency in construction with unskilled volunteer involvement. Yet another type of STMT utilizes a broad array of community service activities, such as children's ministry (VBS), painting buildings, cleaning up trash, providing potable water or even playing sports or other games with nationals. And some STMT get classified as "observation" mission trips in which participants tour places of need or places where needs have already been met. Photo and video recordings typify these rendezvous with VIPs as well as specially selected commoners. Exposure to heart-wrenching need connects potential donors to opportunities. Ribbon-cutting ceremonies occur during follow up visits. STMT come in a variety of categories.

The potent impact of STMT tops the list of reasons why people participate. While these affect the nationals served, the primary drive has more to do with the volunteers. But few can deny the mutuality and even the synergy that frequently occur. For some, it's only a temporary event, albeit,

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powerful. For others, it creates a watershed experience, complete with paradigm shifts. STMT challenge the status quo immediately. And no two are the same. For young people accustomed to putting off significance until later in life, the need to be needed NOW shocks many. New identities form more easily due to necessity—"We've got to have everyone's help in order to finish this wall before dark!" Such intensity and drawing power provide purpose and direction in lives that have been on moratorium.

It's one thing to memorize vocabulary for a Spanish test. It's quite another thing to dialogue with strangers eager to speak to you in Spanish. It's one thing to get trained in endless paperwork and medical insurance protocol in addition to deferring to the many experts and specialists "above you." It's quite another thing to give injections to those in the long line after just 15 minutes of training from the frantic nurse begging for your assistance at the outdoor clinic. It's one thing to be fenced outside of a construction site due to safety and security concerns. It's quite another thing to put up the walls your first day on the job. It's one thing to sit as a token youth in a church board meeting that spends 20 minutes debating whether a new coat rack should have six hooks or seven hooks. It's quite another thing to preach to 80 believers and 40 visitors for a church service with no place to meet except under a tree, and then the rain begins to fall. On a STMT, you are needed, and you're needed now!

Any prolonged time spent together as a group offers an opportunity for deeper relationships and cohesion—sometimes referred to as "bonding." In retreat settings, get acquainted activities and games and even simulations can draw people together. But STMT demand it based on reality. Leaders can be intentional and actually expedite bonding, but the STMT itself is the catalyst. Faced with so many changes, an unfamiliar environment, the need to pull together to accomplish a goal beyond one's grasp, participants learn to rely on each other in ways never attempted back home (Case, 2004). Difficulties and even conflict must be worked through since escape, diversion, or channel-surfing aren't options. Affirmation comes through service rendered, gestures of appreciation from nationals, worshiping together, and relational depth. It's not always pretty, but both the journey and the destination make it worthwhile.

For many, God becomes real and personal during a STMT. The bonding relationships might prepare the soil or create a climate in which participants attribute new and valued experiences to God. But perhaps the primary conduit for directing participants to God is venturing outside of personal comfort zones in a STMT. Feeling out of control and being out of control foster a new, real, and

sincere dependence on God. Too often this reality seems clouded or even non-existent in the lives of so many Western young people. On most STMT, participants find it to be undeniable. Having a printed and endorsed procedure isn't as worthwhile as a flexibility that enables a person to "go with the flow." In these settings, God is vibrant and alive rather than humanly constrained and contained.

Miracles occur, either because of God's intervention or connecting to supernatural forces or because occurrences take place beyond the understanding of the participants. Whatever the cause, participants find it easy to label this as "God." Such labels often fall into line with explanations by the nationals as well. In the words of Scripture, "These [miraculous signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31, NIV) The prayers for and the evidences of miracles on STMT lead many participants to place their trust in God.

Regardless of whether or not a person follows God, service to others yields personal benefits to the servant. God set it up this way as a law of the universe (White, 1940). STMT inherently include service. Even those lacking a passion for God can experience the flow of God's activity through them as they serve others. The thrill of combining the divine with the human in such endeavors often leads the participant to ask, "What is this wonderful feeling I get from 'working'?" A wise leader can introduce the participant to Jesus Christ by explaining that the participant is living the Christian lifestyle of service. And yes, it is rewarding, now and in the future.

Adults have several roles to play, even in STMT designed specifically for young people. Financing an expensive youth endeavor typically includes adults. Few adults will resist an adolescent's request for funds to be a missionary. The only question is not "will you?" but "how much?" No wonder so many young people can fund their participation in STMT—just send letters to church members, relatives, and friends (Case, 2007).

Adults also function as skilled and wise leaders, as well as support staff. Medical and construction STMT must have at least some personnel with skill, preferably as coaches rather than superstars. Usually adults fill that role. Even evangelistic meetings with youth speakers and musicians will have adults behind the scenes to prepare and debrief those who get up front. Some adults will serve in administrative positions so that the young people get more of a "hands on" experience rather than organizing and administering details and behind-the-scenes minutia.

When it comes to clothing and hair styles, media selection, jargon, and "hanging", most young people look to their peers. But when it comes to spirituality, purpose in life, and tough issues, most youth sense that peers have little to offer in contrast to more experienced life travelers. Approachable adults who can listen (Strommen, 1988) in addition to sharing pertinent wisdom, provide ideal mentors (Borgman, 1997) for youth on STMT. By nurturing personal relationships between adults and youth, cognitive, affective, and communal development occurs (Gillespie, 1988). The spiritual leader takes the lead in debriefing the experiences for participants in the group setting. Other adults fulfill that role in one-to-one interchanges (Case, 1994). Instead of looking for right answers, mentors dialogue and shape the faith of the young person by providing structure and development for new experiences.

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Who participates in STMT? It's not limited to young people. And Seventh-day Adventists are by no means the only denomination involved. Many are "first-timers," while others return, hopefully knowing that no two STMT are the same. Some will go only once, and the reasons vary. Others become STMT junkies or move on to student missionary stints of a year or more. And some continue to the role of career missionaries.

STMT are costly in terms of finances, time, energy, influence, personnel, and planning. There will always be critics who question the investment (Sparks, 2008). The issues raised should be considered, and changes made where appropriate and worthwhile.

But when you send young people out on STMT, when supporters gather and say, "There they go," the young people will have many reasons to return. And those who send them out will have reasons to rejoice when the young people do go, as well as when they return. If asked, "Do your young people leave the church?" we can answer with joy, "Of course; we send them out!"

Positive Analogies of STMT

Considering the previous description of STMT, what would be the analogies to church, young people, and their involvement in contrast to slipping out the back door?

Your involvement in church colors your loyalty to it. Are you a supporter or a critic? Institutional or free-spirited? Is your attendance and participation regular or spotty? Invigorating or boring? Challenging or merely frustrating?

Churches can't easily be classified into one category (Gane, 1997). One common type is evangelistic in which

members seek to bring others to join their congregation (Tutsch, 1992). A second type looks more professional, with high quality productions by paid staff supported by committed members stressed by their busyness in their own professions. Still another type has a "get'er done" attitude that accomplishes tangible results but spends little time on the intangibles. Yet another type of church focuses on the social gospel. And some churches could be classified as "observation" or spectator churches in which members come and sit. Such churches are all some people want. Some take pride if their preacher can be seen or heard by others via the internet, video, or on television.

Perhaps the top reason people are members of a church is the potent holding power of tradition—they grew up in the church, or their affiliation began so long ago that tradition has replaced their original commitment. While the church can affect the community, its primary drive has more to do with the members (McLaren, 2004). Some of the members contact the community, and vice versa. A percentage make this their lifestyle, while the rest do it infrequently. Churches maintain the status quo, and many are quite similar. By promoting niceness, conformity in a few key areas, and not rocking the boat, a model young person will fulfill the church's expectations (Smith and Denton, 2005). Those in charge expect young people to follow the established path. Youth who do so get rewarded with junior positions or token roles in which it takes years to earn the opportunity to count money or read a verse from Scripture in front of a group. Others have to put their spiritual lives on moratorium or face resistance. Many choose to leave quietly.

It's one thing to memorize a text of Scripture. It's quite another thing to preach about it for the church service. It's one thing to hand out brochures that promote adult-created programs. It's quite another thing for young people to be given the authority to create these on their own. It's one thing to be excluded from the power positions in the church. It's quite another thing to be put in charge of a church ministry and be given a budget, too. It's one thing to wait until you have decades of experience watching others lead at church. It's quite another thing to lead while you still have idealism, vision, and energy (Blake, 2007).

Coming together once a week, or once or twice a month, usually late, hardly creates community. The focus of a church service is worship to God; not fellowship among believers. Flitting from one person to another after the worship service allows for pseudo-community at most. Keeping the routine the same ensures predictably muted results. Affirmation remains superficial. It often appears to be pretty but not usually worthwhile.

For many, God is detached and institutional during a church worship program (Gladden, 2003; Knight, 1995).

Going through the motions can be done in one's sleep, and many do sleep during the gathering. By following the routine, even poor preparation doesn't matter. The show will go on whether God shows up or not. The goal seems to be comfort with a limited smile.

Scripture provides examples of miracles, and current examples come from other countries or published writers or itinerant preachers. Listeners find it difficult to label this as "God" and wonder if and where God might be active in their church or in their personal lives today.

The typical church has a minority of members serving to the point of exhaustion with the majority choosing not to serve, at least not through existing means. The few who serve rarely can pause to taste the thrill of combining the divine with the human.

Adults play all the roles, even in activities labeled for young people. If there is a budget for young people, it must be financed by bake sales, car washes, or other fund-raisers. Adults rarely have training in youth ministry. Most adult youth leaders are parents of the current youth—youth who think they already know everything their parents have to share.

Who participates in church? Usually adults. This is the case for most denominations. Once in a while somebody visits. There are those who skip for months and don't seem to miss a thing. Some move, transfer, or graduate. Others find their niche and continue for years.

When churches fail to send their young people out of church to minister to others, the youth have few reasons to return, nor do others look for their return. Adults who have a firm grip on specific roles or church offices don't have to release them to younger people.

Negative Elements of STMT

Although few people will criticize STMT, somebody should. How else can inherent weaknesses be changed, adjustments made, and fallacious expectations prevented? Here are some examples.

By their very nature, STMT are "short-term." While many hope STMT will spark a new, consistent, intensely spiritual lifestyle, STMT simply don't last. Participants find it easy to slip back into the status quo once they return home. An unforgettable experience, effervescent reporting, and maintaining the network of new relationships via current technology may lengthen the glow. But for most participants, in a relatively short time the experience becomes little more than a memory.

Integrating STMT into daily living seems so "foreign." The challenging living conditions, regular routine, simplicity, tangible changes, guided spiritual formation, feeling needed, communal living, increased

awareness from contrasts, and overwhelming affirmation blend to make STMT unforgettable, but also difficult to transfer into life back home. Analysis seems hostile to the wholistic experience. Yet few of the elements that make STMT so potent can be found in the lifestyles of contemporary Western young people. Some seek to make home just like the mission field. Others begin a search for another fix by signing up for additional STMT. But most do nothing (Mack and Stiles, 2000) and quickly fall back into previous lifestyles, demonstrating in statistical terms a "regression to the mean."

For those deadened by sensory overload from simultaneous multiple sources, STMT can be shocking. The simple focus, devoid of so many distractions, leads participants deeper so their engagement enters a realm of intensity previously unfathomed. Positive values ascend to their rightful place as busyness, clutter, and superficiality fall away. Free of the clamoring pulls from their typical lives, participants garner their personal resources for a common goal and reap the benefits. But when they return from their trip to their old world of sensory overload, few feel equipped to maintain the STMT lifestyle. Realizing they cannot live with such focused intensity for one goal, they splinter into a myriad of competing purposes. They seem ill-prepared or unwilling to carry over a singular purpose that requires discernable choice-making in their world of mindless diversity.

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Without doubting that miraculous changes and epiphanies occur on STMT, it doesn't happen every time. Those involved in this relatively new form of missions prefer to go on more STMT rather than quantify a lack of results or conduct research. Leaders would rather trumpet how many new volunteers went on this last trip than follow up on those from the previous year who didn't return for another round. Some might want only a brief taste of STMT. Others become STMT junkies. And some burn out.

The short-term nature of STMT makes it difficult to prepare the participant, teach necessary skills, create an experience, equip for applications following the trip, and give proper attention to the nationals you serve. Many important elements slip through the cracks. Some volunteers absorb neglected factors anyway, but the majority don't do that without clear direction and debriefing. Before you know it, time is up.

STMT participants can hardly be considered the norm. The high adventure label that intrigues some, keeps others away. Cost limits many. Time constraints affect others. And a certain group simply has no interest in STMT. If STMT are the net to catch all young people, you will need to fish in a very small pond or even a bathtub rather than in larger bodies of water. As worthwhile as STMT might be, they are not the "one and only" for youth ministry. And even those you catch in your net might be there against their own volition!

Because the world has become a global neighborhood, sometimes labeled as a return to the flat earth (Friedman, 2005), the possibility of STMT has increased. With information and travel accessible to the masses, STMT can be added to any person's yearly goals. This stands in contrast to making a life-long commitment to being a missionary. The need to learn a new language, develop useful skills, live away from family and other support systems for years, communicate via air mailed letters, and rear a family in a foreign culture no longer create barriers to mission participation, at least when it comes to STMT.

And with an increasing desire for seemingly extreme experiences, a person needs only time and money, and it's theirs. STMT have placed missions into the commodity market for consumers. And those who pay even receive income tax deductions! Praise the Lord! Seventh-day Adventists are by no means the only ones in the business. It's not only established denominations; parachurch organizations have entered the market place. And don't limit this to even religious entities (peace corps mission statement).

Because organizations sell the experience, consumers determine its benefit on a cost to value ratio. If the payback fails to meet or exceed the investment, the consumer will invest elsewhere next time. If the trend flatlines or begins to drop, other options become more attractive. For retention in consumer oriented STMT, each experience must exceed the previous one, or at least exceed the consumer's expectations. The purist who ignores the consumer orientation in the STMT market economy can easily feel isolated. Cynicism, rooted in anger, might brew when isolated in a mixture of self-righteousness and mercenary service. Without some type of positive feedback, few will continue in a positive direction. While STMT usually provide lots of affirmation, that's not always the case.

Although glowing reports about STMT might seem too good to be true, usually they are true. However, few include the negative experiences that also occur or develop during many STMT. Construction projects aren't always able to obtain necessary materials in a timely manner. Conflicts arise between various leaders, whether they are volunteers disagreeing with other volunteers or possibly with the host

leaders and local cultural issues. Complications for evangelistic meetings might be attributed to the devil rather than to poor planning. Outpost clinics don't have quality control, and the guest medical experts depart before negative residuals come back to haunt the hosts. Nationals scheduled to make a good showing don't always comply.

Due to the intensity of many STMT, un-Christlike character qualities easily get exposed and egos clash in a variety of arenas. While these can provide labyrinths for spiritual transformation, the typical response is to ignore, hide, or run from the unpleasant revelations. When we aren't accustomed to handling these in a spiritual manner, it may be awkward to attempt such an approach in the STMT setting.

For each testimony you hear about a young person who made a publicly noticeable contribution, you can estimate that at least ten times as many spent that time in seemingly unimportant roles. Washing dishes, sweeping floors, sifting sand, grading Bible study worksheets, or counting vitamin pills in a back room rarely results in accolades or testimonies.

Although few people would believe that all STMT are only positive and never negative, the lack of balanced reporting has created an unhealthy and unprofitable code of silence. Breaking the silence will be painful, but the viability and vitality of STMT in the near future necessitate this openness that will lead to improved action.

Negative Analogies of STMT

Perhaps you have already made the analogies from the negative elements of STMT to church, young people, and why they slip out the back door or remain in the church. Consider the following analogies.

The adolescent years seem like a short period of time to adults, but they equate to eternity for teens. Hoping young people will just "hold on" and "hang around" for this length of time yields a mirage for adults (Dudley, 2000). On the other hand, a robust and purposeful youth ministry for even a year or two doesn't extend throughout a person's entire adolescence. A spiritual awakening, a baptism on graduation weekend, a unique service project, even preaching a series of evangelistic sermons, should not be considered complete spiritual growth for young people. The process must continue (Dudley, 1978). In basic Greek verb tenses, the "continuous present tense" rather than the "aorist past tense" describes a living faith.

Integrating one's faith into daily life challenges people of all ages, not simply the youth. Seventh-day Adventists need a reorientation to become "Seven Day Adventists." When we act holy on the seventh day and "normal" on the other six days, we have failed to integrate our faith into our lives. Transitioning from a compartmentalized faith to consistent faith demonstrates movement toward maturity (Rice, 2002). Involvement with others from the family of faith outside of church walls and scheduled church events broadens our capability to live for Jesus in the world without succumbing to worldliness. At the same time, it prods the formal congregation to continue to connect God to the world, and vice versa.

Churches that seek to become all things to all people by going into hyperdrive with activities will either burn out or develop a Christian para-lifestyle—living in a Christian bubble, an institutionalized sub-culture that obscures interior realities by utilizing all of its resources to maintain a busy and superficial calendar. Only churches with a clear and simple focus on God will be able to direct others into the depth they crave but often short-circuit because of their fear of missing out on one more thing.

Those involved in the routine of church life or the thrill of evangelistic endeavors with positive results prefer to continue with what works rather than quantify a lack of results or conduct research. Leaders would rather trumpet how many joined the church from the last series than follow up on those from the previous series who no longer attend or have become stale. Some might want only a brief taste of church. Others become church junkies. And some burn out.

Many find it difficult to balance nurture and outreach. Ideally they feed each other, but oftentimes one flourishes while the other languishes. And some have no interest in church, much less the nuances within its structure. If church is the net to catch everyone, God has more boundaries than Jesus did. Equating the visible church with God distorts and limits God. Bringing people to church has value. But it's time to think in terms of taking the church to people (McLaren and Campolo, 2003).

Megachurches, and those that seek to imitate them, illustrate the consumer nature churches can take. "Size matters" might match the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, but it hardly mirrors the crucifixion less than a week later. While religious leaders in the time of Christ continued a theology of being the head rather than the tail, there's no excuse for making that emphasis today. A consumer-oriented church trades Christ for the marketplace and exchanges dependence on God for the praise and support of consumers. In contrast, the self-sacrificing ethos and actions Christ modeled for his followers present a boldly alternative lifestyle by choice. The disciples mirrored it, as recorded in the book of Acts. We have the invitation to do the same today.

Churches with only positive reports have seriously under-reported stories. It's time to admit our heinous need at this time and break the code of silence. It's time to

reveal the hidden stories that so many already know about anyway. Let's be honest and open enough to deal with this. We've ignored it for too long.

What Now?

Fortunately, at this point of crisis, there is a glimmer of hope. Individuals and groups will continue to fight the fight of faith, in their own lives, in the life of the church, and interfacing with those outside of the church. Our dependence on the love and acceptance of God, the gift of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit will all be necessary.

We have come to the point at which we can no longer deny the problem. Our youth have already slipped out the back door, along with many adults. Hope will come only after we suffer the grief of this reality (Brueggemann, 1986). For those who have been left behind, it's time to come together and seek God. Until we have his power afresh, we will simply be rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic. Great ideas or new programs are only that. What we actually need is God! We wring our hands because too many youth have left. What they need and desire is God, not more church activities.

Instead of attempting to hold the youth inside the church or strapping them to the deck of the Titanic, let's send them out to serve the world in Jesus' name. Let's not fall victim to moping or doing "more of the same" or ignoring the departure of young people from the church. Instead, let's become proactive and send them out from our churches in the name of Jesus and the real power of the Holy Spirit to serve the multiple needs of others. Let's proclaim, "There they go!" and then pray for them and welcome them when they return. Let's bandage them where needed, encourage, challenge, and listen to what God has been doing through their lives. Then we can change from mourning to celebration when we say, "There they go!"

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