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### Developing Ethical Training Curriculum for University Short-Term Missions

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# Developing Ethical Training Curriculum for University Short-Term Missions

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A Senior Honors Thesis project submitted to the Honors Program

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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## Introduction

*"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*<sup>1</sup>

Written on the premise that the Christian faith is meant to be shared, the New Testament is filled with examples of service and evangelism throughout the history of the early Church. Christians have been participating in mission work since Christ's death and resurrection, though their approaches have differed greatly over the years. Individuals in modern America live in a society that is always on the go with little time to spare, so it is no surprise that Western Christians have adopted the trend of short-term service as the go-to choice for fulfilling the Great Commission. American evangelicals have been participating in voluntary service opportunities known as short-term missions (STMs) organized by churches, colleges, and local ministries since the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> These trips provide a temporary timeline to fulfill many different purposes, from direct service aimed at poverty alleviation to evangelistic efforts like church planting.

Chairman for the Alliance for Excellence in Short-Term Missions Roger Peterson writes, "If we could point NASA's Hubble Space Telescope back toward planet Earth, we would observe a steady flow of no less than two million people moving around God's globe every year on what has come to be called 'short-term missions' (STMs)."<sup>3</sup> Despite the ever-growing popularity of the STMs movement, which is defined in detail in the chapters to come, STMs have developed a

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 28:19-20

<sup>2</sup> Brian Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Peterson, "Missio Dei or "Missio Me"?: Using Short-Term Missions to Contribute Toward the Fulfillment of God's Global Purpose," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, (Pasadena: Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009) 752.

rather negative reputation over the years because of detrimental consequences that affect impoverished communities long after the departure of outside organizations. As an expert in ethical missions, Peterson reflects this unfortunate sentiment in his research — stating "roughly three-fourths of all STMs are 'done poorly,' leaving just one out of every four 'done well.'"<sup>4</sup> Knowing this negative reputation exists, the first research question addressed throughout this project is, **"Why have STMs been labeled harmful by academics and missionaries alike?"**

Peterson's research continues to explain that, ultimately, the harmful consequences of STM trips occur when teams are not properly prepared for their time of service — lacking prior knowledge of the communities they are serving. As a result, scholars and ministers alike have begun to question the current training curricula available for STM leaders. This thesis will explore existing training materials for STM trips to understand why service work can be so harmful, even though participants may have the best intentions at heart. In light of this, the second question answered throughout this research is as follows: **"Given what we know about harmful STM trips, what preliminary steps can be taken to ensure the highest level of sustainability for the communities served?"**

In summary, this thesis will address common problems associated with domestic STM trips and the gaps in existing training materials for these trips. Based on the two guiding questions identified, the research throughout this project is designed to inspire community-specific training materials for college students participating in domestic STM trips through their universities. The final chapter of this thesis includes the framework for a sample curriculum to promote sustainable STM work — providing cross-cultural communication techniques and relationship-building tools to avoid harming the communities students seek to serve.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter One: Understanding Short-Term Missions

### Defining Short-Term Missions

Though the concept of STMs may seem straightforward, their experiences carry a certain undefinable quality. Simply put, there are too many dependent variables to form an all-encompassing definition for the STMs phenomenon. For this very reason, a simple internet search reveals only a single concise definition: "A short-term mission (STM) is the mobilization of a Christian missionary for a short period of time ranging from days to a year..."<sup>5</sup> Though succinct, this definition lacks important details necessary to establish a frame of reference for research.

In one of the most well-known ministry tools, *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert define STMs as "trips ranging from one week to two years, either to other locations within North America or around the world."<sup>6</sup> This definition thoughtfully provides a timeline for STM experiences, though very broad. Even so, Corbett and Fikkert avoid defining any sort of principle behind STM trips. Conversely focusing more on the motivations behind STMs, Christian scholar and anthropologist Brian Howell notes that STMs can "most simply be described as short travel experiences for Christian purposes such as charity, service, or evangelism."<sup>7</sup> Even this definition is rather broad though, insinuating that the opportunity to go on a STM trip could lead to planting a church, painting a school, providing disaster relief, or anything else that falls under a broad umbrella of ministry and aid. In addition to the sweeping

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<sup>5</sup> "Short-Term Mission," Wikipedia, February 1, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short-term\\_mission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short-term_mission).

<sup>6</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 152.

<sup>7</sup> Howell, *Short-Term Mission*, 20.

generalizations made surrounding STMs objectives, Howell fails to provide any details for length or destination. Corbett, Fikkert, and Howell are all considered experts in the study of ethical mission work, yet even so, their definitions for STMs leave much in question. It seems that STMs are an enigma —differing in their limitations and intentions, as well as their destinations and agendas. Even so, these variables haven't stopped missionaries and academics alike from creating their own definitions for STMs, which must be explored to establish a framework for research. Understanding the different components of the STMs definition is not simply a question of semantics or a debate on insignificant details. Rather, these variables are important to differentiate because they deeply affect the preparation needed to ensure the ethics and sustainability of each STM trip.

To begin, let's return to Howell's definition of STMs. Howell provides three general objectives for most STM trips, including "charity, service, or evangelism."<sup>8</sup> To determine which purpose each STM trip fulfills, researchers must investigate the values of the organization sending participants, as well as any partnering organizations. For example, Lifeway Ministries notes three core tenets for any successful STM experience — "grow the heart of the church for the plight of the lost, support gospel ministers, and engage those who need to hear the gospel."<sup>9</sup> These objectives are primarily evangelical, focusing mainly on bringing the lost to salvation through spreading the gospel.

Many churches and Christian universities follow this pattern, though we see other organizations like Envision shifting the focus from evangelism to education. Claiming "We do

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Logsdon, "Three Objectives for a Short-Term Missions Trip," Lifeway Leadership, June 16, 2019, <https://leadership.lifeway.com/2019/06/26/three-objectives-for-a-short-term-missions-trip/>.

short-term trips differently," Envision seeks to provide a different experience for STM participants — allowing them to "come alongside, partner with, and learn from long-term workers who are invested, building relationships, and leading impactful ministries on the ground."<sup>10</sup> Agencies like Envision are unique because of their dedication to partnering with local churches and nonprofits serving communities year-round — a mission that is rapidly increasing in popularity. Other groups like Praying Pelican Missions have also noted the importance of partnerships in ethical STM trips, stating "healthy short-term mission trips are possible by building upon genuine partnerships, long-term relationships, and sustainable ministry."<sup>11</sup> By supporting the work of existing organizations, STM agencies such as Envision and Praying Pelican Missions provide participants with the opportunity to learn about different approaches to long-term community development and ministry.

Conversely, many STM organizations are devoted to more temporary partnerships and service opportunities, truly emphasizing the shortened timeframe associated with STMs. Take Samaritan's Purse for example. While the organization has long-term partnerships in communities around the world, Samaritan's Purse primarily mobilizes volunteer units as STMs opportunities to provide relief when disasters strike. From ice storms and wildfires to hurricanes and tornadoes, teams are deployed each week to aid and assist individuals and families whose lives have been affected by extreme weather. In short, Samaritan's Purse STMs opportunities exist to "come alongside homeowners to bring relief and compassion in Jesus' Name" when the unimaginable occurs.<sup>12</sup> With disaster relief, groups like Samaritan's Purse send teams to

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<sup>10</sup> "Envision Trips," Envision, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.weareenvision.com/trips>.

<sup>11</sup> "Domestic & International Mission Trips for Groups: Praying Pelican Missions," Praying Pelican Missions, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.prayingpelicanmissions.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Bring Relief When Disaster Hits Home," Samaritan's Purse, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.samaritanspurse.org/our-ministry/nam/>.



communities until the work there is done. Then, they move their monetary resources and volunteers to another city dealing with disaster. Organizations such as Samaritan's Purse were designed to mobilize their assets to maximize their impact across the nation, while groups like Envision were created to invest in specific communities to increase their impact over time. There are benefits to both approaches that could easily be debated, but for now, it is simply important to note that STMs can be organized to accomplish different types of service.

The purpose of each STM trip and the resulting experiences are also heavily dependent on the destination of the trip. The two major classifications for STMs are domestic and international service trips. Many ministries offer STM experiences both domestically and internationally, but each requires different preparations and provides a different experience. Take Adventures in Missions for example, an organization best known for the World Race. The World Race is an internationally renowned STM experience that sends hundreds of participants to 11 different nations over 11 months. From volunteering at existing construction sites and assisting with Vacation Bible Schools organized by local churches to praying for the community and building relationships through different ministries on the ground, every day spent abroad on the World Race provides the opportunity to experience God in new ways.<sup>13</sup> Adventures in Missions also offer a domestic service opportunity. Known as World Race America, participants travel across 37 states in the same 11-month timeframe. This trip is designed to support local ministries across the nation — giving participants the chance to serve everywhere from summer camps and youth development organizations to nonprofits targeting different marginalized communities

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<sup>13</sup> “The World Race: 11-Month Christian Mission Trip,” The World Race | Christian Mission Trips, February 02, 2022, <https://www.worldrace.org/programs/worldrace/#whygo>.

dealing with homelessness, addiction, food insecurity, and material poverty.<sup>14</sup> While both international and domestic STM experiences were developed to pursue education, service, and evangelism, the objectives are executed in varying ways depending on the destination of the race.

Before embarking on either Adventures in Missions trip, World Racers engage in a 10-day intensive training camp, preparing them for a year of cross-cultural experiences across the US and around the world. Though it is impossible to completely explore the depths of cultural competency in a week and a half, the World Race's "training camp" model highlights the significance of preparing for intercultural communication and ministry — building the foundation for successful cross-cultural relationships and ethical service regardless of your destination. Training topics differ between international and domestic programs, though both camps utilize "teaching, prayer, scenarios, and relationship building" to prepare teams for cross-cultural experiences near and far.<sup>15</sup>

Much like the objectives and preparation for every STM trip is subjective depending on the destination, the length of each experience also varies. For example, The Evangelical Alliance Mission, a reputable sending organization known as TEAM Global Missions, suggests that STM trips range from two weeks to eight months, while anywhere from nine months to two years qualifies as mid-term missions.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, the International Mission Board, an organization "dedicated to serving Southern Baptists in carrying out the Great Commission," classifies STM trips as service opportunities that stretch from seven days to eight weeks, while

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<sup>14</sup> "World Race America," The World Race | Christian Mission Trips, March 17, 2020, <https://www.worldrace.org/world-race-america-2020/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Training Camp," The World Race | Christian Mission Trips, October 13, 2021, <https://www.worldrace.org/training-camp/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Mission Trips - Short-Term, Mid-Term and Long-Term Missions," TEAM Global Missions, December 11, 2020, <https://team.org/lengths-of-service/mission-trips>.

the label "mid-term missions" encompasses service lasting nine weeks to three years.<sup>17</sup> To continue, the World Gospel Mission indicates that mid-term missions last anywhere from one month to one year, reserving the label "STM trips" for any opportunity less than 30 days.<sup>18</sup> The list could continue, as there is no concrete time frame used to define STM experiences.

There are countless agencies across the nation organizing domestic and international STM trips with varying timelines and purposes. Simultaneously, churches and colleges across the US are planning and executing their own trips by partnering with existing churches and nonprofits around the world. Among the variables separating these organizations, there lies a common thread — the average age of the STM participant. Teenagers and young adults from universities and student ministries are quickly becoming the primary participants in STM work. A 2012 study by the Gospel Coalition discovered that the majority of STM trips are designed to engage students between the ages of 15 and 22, primarily due to the fluidity of their schedules.<sup>19</sup> This statistic provides an important frame to research surrounding STM trends — lending a central audience to this thesis.

The research and discussion in the chapters that follow are written considering each of the variables noted: purpose, destination, length, and audience. To begin, this research will target college students participating in STM trips through universities across the nation. As the target audience receives seven to ten days on average for breaks in the academic calendar, the time frame for STM experiences within this research will be one to two weeks. To further narrow the

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<sup>17</sup> "Length of Service Options," IMB, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.imb.org/go/options/duration/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Mid-Term Opportunities," World Gospel Mission, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.wgm.org/mid-term>.

<sup>19</sup> Darren Carlson, "Celebrating the Short-Term Missions Boom," The Gospel Coalition, June 10, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/celebrating-the-short-term-missions-boom/>.

scope of the research, the trips in question will be domestic STM experiences. A domestic STM trip still requires cross-cultural sensitivity, but the preparation is nowhere near as extensive as it would be for the same trip organized internationally. Though the STM trips targeted are not international, students will still have the opportunity to learn about cultures and lifestyles different than their own in another part of the country — centering the primary purpose of these trips as educational service. This sentiment from Amy Peterson, Christian author and academic, perfectly establishes the framework for service learning in a STMs context: "Let's be sure we in the West are aware of our cultural power, we use our social capital to help, and we learn about structural injustices instead of just witnessing poverty. Let's make our trips about cross-cultural communication and relationship..."<sup>20</sup> With this purpose in mind, STM participants can invest in true service learning throughout their trip.

In summary, this thesis concerns *STM trips taken within the US for one to two weeks through universities dedicated to service learning*. It is important to note that this definition does not encompass all variables associated with STM experiences, though the excluded variables have their place in the academic sphere. There are certainly benefits associated with international missions or evangelical trips, but those benefits are simply not the focus of this research.

### **A Brief History of Short-Term Missions**

To better understand and ultimately enrich the definition chosen to represent STMs throughout this thesis, context surrounding the origin and development of STM trips is also essential. Beginning in the early 1960s, churches in the U.S. began organizing and participating in STM trips. Travel was becoming more easily accessible and affordable for the average

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<sup>20</sup> Amy Peterson, "Rethinking the Language of Short-Term Missions," Nations Media, February 11, 2020, <https://nationsmedia.org/language-short-term-missions/>.

American, so Christian missions developed a new approach through the phenomena of STM. Thus, the reimagination of Christian mission work in a short-term context is rooted in the success of other organized travel movements of the time. Missiologist Brian Howell writes, "The success of youth movements, manifested in large-scale institutional forms such as the Peace Corps or Operation Mobilization, as well as more informally through college campus organizations, had profound effects on the conceptualization and realization of short-term missions."<sup>21</sup> Churches and ministry organizations witnessing the growing popularity of short-term service among young people in the sixties quickly realized the concept could be applied to missions — a golden opportunity to grow the global church one STM trip at a time.

One of the first and perhaps the most well-known STM organizations to date is Youth with a Mission, often called YWAM by churches across the nation. YWAM was founded in January 1961 by Loren Cunningham, an accomplished author, speaker, scholar, and career missionary dedicated to helping young adults find their place in global missions.<sup>22</sup> Since founding YWAM, Cunningham has "ministered in every sovereign nation and dependent country in the world as well as in scores of territories and islands," demonstrating an unwavering dedication to cross-cultural ministry and service.<sup>23</sup> Cunningham knew from a young age that sharing the gospel would always be a part of his story. This life-long purpose was confirmed at the age of 13 when Cunningham heard the Lord whisper the words of Mark 16:15 amid his prayer: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."<sup>24</sup> Though Cunningham had

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<sup>21</sup> Howell, *Short-Term Mission*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Mark W. Cannister, "Youth Ministry Pioneers of the 20th Century, Part II: Jack Wyrzten, Jim Rayburn, Torrey Johnson, Don McClanen, and Loren Cunningham," *Christian Education Journal* 1, no. 1 (2003): 187, doi:10.1177/073989130300100118.

<sup>23</sup> "About," LorenCunningham.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.lorencunningham.com/about>.

<sup>24</sup> Mark 16:15

no idea what lay ahead, he faithfully answered what he believed to be the Lord's call to STMs throughout his time in college and even during the early years of his career in ministry.

Each STM trip was a valuable experience for Cunningham, but the most influential experience derived from his first opportunity to lead a trip to Honolulu, Hawaii in 1960. On this trip, Cunningham realized, "many of his young people acted more like tourists than evangelists..."<sup>25</sup> This realization reveals concerns surrounding the ethics of STMs from their conceptualization. His concern led to the development of YWAM's Discipleship Training School — a holistic missions training course that incorporates "classroom learning, small group activities, personal reflection, practical service, and community living" for over 6 months to ensure more sustainable service long-term.<sup>26</sup> What began as the dreams of a recent college grad inspired by his STMs experience developed over time into an organization that has "deployed more than four million people on outreach projects in 240 countries (some of which no longer exist as sovereign states)."<sup>27</sup> Cunningham's organization has only continued to grow over the years, creating the need for exponentially more STM trips for eager teenagers, college graduates, and young adults. In 2010, Christianity Today even reported, "Since 1969, the number of YWAM participants has grown at an annual rate of about 13 percent."<sup>28</sup> YWAM's consistent growth points to the increasing popularity of the STM movement.

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<sup>25</sup> Cannister, "Youth Ministry Pioneers of the 20th Century," 186.

<sup>26</sup> "Discipleship Training School (YWAM DTS)," Youth With A Mission, February 7, 2022, <https://ywam.org/dts/?lang=en>.

<sup>27</sup> John W. Kennedy, "Youth with a Passion," *Christianity Today* (Washington) 54, no. 12 (2010): 40, Gale Academic OneFile.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

## A Look Ahead

Organizations like YWAM developed rapidly in the decades following 1960, and by the start of the twenty-first century, over 690 US mission organizations had begun organizing trips and sending STM teams around the world.<sup>29</sup> In a recent study on STMs engagement, renowned sociologist Robert Wuthnow discovered that approximately 2.4 million Americans participated in STM trips in 2004, serving both locally and internationally. In terms of destination, his research revealed that "about 35% of America's short-term mission participants are serving in the U.S., not overseas."<sup>30</sup> This information highlights a surge in the STM movement across the nation over the past 15-20 years, with an increasing percentage of Americans serving locally.

Furthermore, in a recent study of national survey data, Christian Smith estimated that "29 percent of all 13- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. have 'gone on a religious missions team or religious service project,' with 10 percent having gone on such trips three or more times. That is, this data indicates that far more than 2 million 13- to 17-year-olds go on such trips every year."<sup>31</sup> Smith's analytics are important because they suggest the primary age range of participants fueling the STMs movement falls among teenagers and young adults, specifically high school students. As high school students with STMs experiences graduate and embark on their college careers, these same students will likely pursue STM opportunities through their universities as well. This hypothesis can be verified by the Barna Group, a Christian research collective with a network of scholars and sociologists across the nation. In 2008, the Barna Group found that one

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<sup>29</sup> Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, Steve Rasmussen, and C. M. Brown, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology* 34, no. 4 (2006): 431–50, doi:10.1177/009182960603400403.

<sup>30</sup> "Research and Statistics," Short Term Missions, August 27, 2020, <https://www.shorttermmissions.com/articles/mission-trip-research>.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Priest and Kurt Ver Beek, "Are Short-Term Missions Good Stewardship?," Christianity Today, July 5, 2005, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/julyweb-only/22.0.html>.

of the demographics most likely to go on a STM trip was evangelical Christians younger than 25, specifically highlighting college students and recent college graduates.<sup>32</sup>

Though millions of Americans have participated in STM experiences in recent history, Barna's research noted only a small percentage of US citizens have been on a STM trip, as "just 9% of Americans have ever been on one of these brief service trips."<sup>33</sup> While this statistic may seem extremely low, it is important to remember that the STMs movement is a relatively new trend that has experienced exponential growth in recent years. Though data points vary in providing a conclusive total number for STMs participants in the US annually, it is clear that STM trips are increasing in popularity, especially for high school and college students. It is only fitting that the training materials and ministry resources available to trip leaders and participants increase as well. Focused primarily on college students, this research was designed to discover how American STM teams can better prepare to ethically and effectively meet the needs of the communities they serve. To understand how STM participants can improve their quality of service, it is important to first acknowledge the most common problems associated with trips of this nature, which are addressed in the following chapter.

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<sup>32</sup> "Despite Benefits, Few Americans Have Experienced Short-Term Mission Trips," Barna Group, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/despite-benefits-few-americans-have-experienced-short-term-mission-trips/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



## Chapter Two: Uncovering the Dangers of Short-Term Missions

*“Contrary to popular belief, most missions trips and service projects do not: empower those being served, engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, improve quality of life, relieve poverty, change the lives of participants [or] increase support for long-term missions work.”<sup>34</sup>*

### Introducing Helpful v. Hurtful Missions

Money, power, and dependency are three words that should never be associated with ministry, but according to Darren Carlson, president of Training Leaders International, these are all too often the downfall of STM work. It is unfortunately very common for STM participants to give direct financial aid that either creates harmful dependencies or takes an opportunity for profit away from a member of the community. In an article published by *Christianity Today* entitled "Why You Should Consider Canceling Your Short-Term Mission Trips," Carlson expresses the belief that communities experiencing material poverty might not even want the aid, but because of the power hierarchy created by STM participants, they are left with no choice. "It is very difficult to create authentic relationships between people with such disparate power. So if the most powerful Christians (in your mind) say they are coming to help you (even if you don't want them to), how are you supposed to respond?"<sup>35</sup> Just as Carlson explains, it's completely understandable that unbalanced power in conjunction with unnecessary financial aid could weaken a community's already struggling economy and lead to harmful socioeconomic and psychological dependencies that derail generations.

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<sup>34</sup> Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (and How to Reverse It) (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Darren Carlson, "Why You Should Consider Canceling Your Short-Term Mission Trips," The Gospel Coalition, June 18, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-you-should-consider-cancelling-your-short-term-mission-trips/>.

Concerns surrounding STMs are nothing new, as ministers around the world just like Carlson have shared reservations for decades. Consider this early African parable, written and published in 2000 after years of watching STM participants discourage and destroy local efforts in communities of different cultures:

This Elephant and Mouse were best friends. One day Elephant said, "Mouse, let's have a party!" Animals gathered from far and near. They ate, and drank, and sang, and danced. And nobody celebrated more exuberantly than the Elephant. After it was over, Elephant exclaimed, "Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!" But Mouse didn't answer. "Where are you?" Elephant called. Then he shrank back in horror. There at his feet lay the Mouse, his body ground into the dirt — smashed by the exuberance of his friend, the Elephant. "Sometimes that is what it is like to do mission with you North Americans," the African storyteller concluded. "It is like dancing with an Elephant."<sup>36</sup>

This fable brings the threats of STMs to life, relating the economic and emotional detriments to the ultimate demise of vulnerable communities. While this proverb was written concerning international STMs, the underlying message can easily be applied to local US communities of different regional cultures. Much like the exuberant elephant, STM participants can quickly make members of marginalized communities feel very small, particularly if the imbalance of power is supported by a racial divide.

Though STM participants do not travel with the intention of harming a community, this is unfortunately a common result. The efforts of STM participants ultimately become harmful when driven by a desire to save an underprivileged community rather than empower them to be self-reliant. According to author and missionary leader Rebekah Simon-Peter, harmful mission work begins the moment missionaries adopt the attitude that "we will rescue you because we are great and competent and able while you are not."<sup>37</sup> Deeply rooted in a rescuer-victim

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Crocker, "When Elephants Dance," STM Leader, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://stmleader.com/mission-with-elephants/>.

<sup>37</sup> Rebekah Simon-Peter, "It's More Blessed to Receive than to Give," Ministry Matters, May 15, 2019, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9637/its-more-blessed-to-receive-than-to-give>.

relationship, harmful mission work is often characterized by organizations entering the picture as self-proclaimed yet short-term saviors. Just as the elephant dances all over the mouse without even realizing it, STM participants can unknowingly create dependencies that cannot be maintained and may leave communities worse off than before the outside organization arrived.

### **Socioeconomic Detriments to Short-Term Missions**

Beginning with the notion of a rescuer-victim mentality, many problems arise when STM participants believe they hold the answers to a community's deeply rooted socioeconomic struggles. One mistake STM teams often make is providing short-term solutions instead of long-term relief, which only perpetuates the socioeconomic struggles a community facing material poverty experiences. For example, by hosting a homeless shelter for a weekend or distributing lunch one day, STM participants identify a need in the community and take part in an action plan to "solve the problem." While they walk away from the experience feeling like they've made a lasting difference in the lives of many, STM participants often only provide momentary relief for a select few in their immediate vicinity. Katie Delp, Executive Director of Focused Community Strategies in Atlanta, describes temporary solutions best in saying, "People have fuller bellies and a warm place to sleep at night, which are really good, but that does not change the trajectory of anyone's life. Our common charity models have provided comfort to poverty but have not come any closer to ending poverty."<sup>38</sup> Delp explains that STM teams all too often address the symptoms of a deeper issue, rather than using their time, resources, and power to influence change for systemic problems. This gross misuse of assets is comparable to a surgeon prescribing a single bottle of ibuprofen to treat brain cancer, a disease deeply rooted within the

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<sup>38</sup> "Seeking Shalom Participant's Guide," Lupton Center Courses, accessed February 28, 2022, <https://courses.luptoncenter.org/courses/940924/lectures/21543116>.

central nervous system of the body. Even if the cancer was curable through long-term treatments, no amount of short-term relief medication would protect the patient from death without serious systemic action.

In addition to not addressing systemic issues at their core, STM teams that present temporary solutions can cause disinterest in existing community organizations that are targeting long-term solutions. In an article published by Missions Frontier, a pastor from Mexico described a decreased interest in local efforts to alleviate systemic poverty when STM teams bring resources to assist the community temporarily — inspiring a dependency on material goods, especially those that do not come from within their communities. The pastor confirmed that "these groups do stimulate interest amongst the people, but the interest is of a material nature, not spiritual. Actual spiritual interest diminishes as a result of these outreaches."<sup>39</sup> This pastor's frustrations developed because temporary material aid provided by STM teams can easily cause a disconnect between community members and the ministry of a local church. Essentially, community members begin to associate the church and their mission with the revolving door of STM teams coming to provide financial assistance. They then become disillusioned with the focus of the local ministry, causing the community to disengage from the church when there are no teams offering temporary assistance.

Another mistake that greatly affects socioeconomic development is when STM teams provide and distribute resources on their own, rather than partnering with a ministry already engaging in community development. While there's nothing quite like the feeling of helping someone in need, participants may also feel a responsibility associated with the assets they've

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<sup>39</sup> Rick Johnson, "Going South of the Border for a Short-Term? Understanding the Pitfalls and Proposing Healthy Guidelines for Short Term Work in Mexico," *Mission Frontiers*, June 1, 2000, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/going-south-of-the-border-for-a-short-term>.

fundraised or gathered. For these reasons, author Mark Radecke notes that many STM teams insist on distributing the resources themselves, which is a grave mistake because of the outside dependencies this charity fosters. Radecke argues it would be much more beneficial to give the resources to leaders of local churches or nonprofits to organize and distribute, for they know the needs of their communities best. "They may know the people of the community and their degree of need; they may also be familiar with unscrupulous individuals who might attempt to exploit the opportunity... Along with getting the donated materials to the intended recipients, it enhances the local group's ministry."<sup>40</sup> By giving resources to local ministries rather than vulnerable individuals directly, charitable giving has the power to turn a temporary solution into a step toward long-term sustainable economic growth.

While some STM trips are dangerous because they only provide temporary solutions, others are equally concerning because they provide little to no assistance at all, rather giving participants the opportunity to engage in poverty tourism. Otherwise known as volunteer tourism, this phrase was coined to describe STM teams that spend more of their resources and time on travel and sightseeing in desolate destinations than serving the vulnerable community by supporting local initiatives. In an article entitled "Not Just Tourists: Short-term Missionaries and Volontourism," author Laurie Occhipinti writes, "Like many tourists, short-term missionaries seek new experiences, personal transformation, and a broader understanding of the world. They travel to exotic locales, eat unfamiliar foods, and interact with people who are culturally different."<sup>41</sup> In saying this, Occhipinti calls into question the motivations behind STM trips.

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Wm. Radecke, "Misguided Missions," *Christian Century* 127, no. 10 (May 18, 2010): 23, EBSCOhost.

<sup>41</sup> Occhipinti, Laurie. "Not Just Tourists: Short-Term Missionaries and Volontourism." *Human Organization* 75, no. 3 (Fall, 2016): 258-268. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17730/1938-3525-75.3.258>.

Participants are spending hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars to essentially go on a fully funded vacation complete with time spent absorbing an exciting new culture and perhaps a small service project or two that has no real impact but leaves the participant feeling accomplished.

The souvenir of a "voluntourism" STM trip is often a deep sense of pride developed in service of others, regardless of the impact made. Occhipinti says it best in that "short-term mission offers participants a space within which they create themselves as moral actors through a physical demonstration of empathy, even though their actual work on such trips may have little sustainable impact on communities and individuals living in poverty."<sup>42</sup> This quote eloquently encapsulates the misrepresentation of STMs as sustainable poverty alleviation. Essentially, the activities STM participants often complete on these "voluntourism" experiences would not be a problem if they were labeled a vacation rather than a STM. By classifying poverty tourism as STMs, participants run the risk of exploiting individuals experiencing material poverty, all the while fooling themselves and wasting resources.

The loss of monetary assets to fund poverty tourism brings us to one of the most controversial aspects of STM experiences: the price for participants. In an article entitled "The Cost of Short-Term Missions," Jo Ann van Engen brilliantly demonstrates through multiple examples how the thousands of dollars raised for STMs could better be used to sustain long-term community development efforts. While the trips may not seem overly expensive, van Engen encourages her audience to view the cost from the perspective of the community participants are serving.<sup>43</sup> For many families, the \$2,500 raised by a college student to travel to the inner city for a week could be the difference in warm meals on the table and paid utility bills.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Jo Ann Van Engen, "The Cost of Short-Term Missions," *The Other Side* 36, no. 1 (January & February 2000): 21-22, <https://servantsasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The-cost-of-short-term-missions.pdf>

Not only are participants spending money that could have a much greater impact donated, but STM teams are also taking opportunities to make a profit from experienced locals. Van Engen provides this example from overseas, referencing a group of college students who spent their break (and thousands of dollars) serving in a community facing the depths of material poverty. "The spring-break group spent their time and money painting and cleaning the orphanage in Honduras. That money could have paid two Honduran painters who desperately needed the work, with enough left over to hire four new teachers, build a new dormitory, and provide each child with new clothes."<sup>44</sup> This example frames the argument for STMs as a vast misuse of charitable funds —spending money that could make a great difference in an existing organization and haphazardly completing tasks that could have financially sustained an individual in the community who desperately needed the profits.

From spending valuable resources to creating harmful dependencies, there are endless ways STMs can cause socioeconomic problems to increase exponentially for fragile economies. This propensity to perpetuate or even worsen financial plights does not mean that all STMs are bad for the economy of a community served. In a 2013 interview with *Christianity Today*, Brian Howell differentiates between STMs that threaten economic growth in a materially poor community and STMs that support sustainable community development. Howell begins, "I am not for the narrative that has typically driven these trips: 'We are going because there's this tremendous need out there that we have to meet. And there's this burden that we have as the wealthy country to go and do something in another place.'"<sup>45</sup> In saying this, Howell completely obliterates the rescuer-victim mentality that is the driving force behind so many STM trips

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Jeff Haanen, "Better Partners," *Christianity Today* 57, no. 1 (January 2013): 79, EBSCOhost.

organized in modern America. Even within the borders of this nation, STM teams travel to other parts of the country with the agenda to save those in poverty from drowning in their material deficiencies. To Howell, however, there is no physical need that only a STM team can meet. Recognizing that participants are not the sole saviors of a material problem is ultimately the difference between economically harmful and developmentally beneficial STMs — a realization that lies within the core motivations fueling a team's service.

Howell proposes a different attitude toward STMs that won't cause a vulnerable community to stumble economically. He suggests STM participants begin asking questions to invest deeper in the community, such as "How can we connect with what God is doing in other parts of the world? How can we learn to be good partners with Christians already in these places? How can we participate in what the church is already doing in these countries in effective ways?"<sup>46</sup> Asking questions with a genuine interest in learning about and engaging with the community shifts the focus from the tangible relief STM participants provide to the ministries that already exist. This shift in perspective helps teams see how the Lord is already at work in the communities they visit. In light of this, it's important to remember that avoiding socioeconomic harm begins with the attitude and approach STM teams take when they embark on their trips.

### **Emotional Pain Inflicted Through Short-Term Missions**

Perhaps just as dangerous as threats to the economy, STM teams carry a notorious risk of emotional trauma for vulnerable communities. The potential for emotional trauma is primarily rooted in the same savior approach discussed concerning socioeconomics. Continuing with his interview with Christianity Today, Brian Howell explains, "The whole trip should be an experience of learning, growing, and serving God. Listening and learning from people, about

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



people, about places, about what God is doing — this is God's mission, and it should be ours as well."<sup>47</sup> With this, Howell suggests that a service learning approach protects the development already occurring in the community and allows participants to learn from existing organizations — empowering their mission rather than diminishing it.

Approaching a STM trip with humility and a genuine interest in learning about the community is an easy way to protect the emotions of local individuals, all the while protecting the integrity of God's mission. However, STM teams all too often trade in their humility for prideful charity that unintentionally strips vulnerable individuals of their sense of self-worth one gift at a time. In the popular ministry course "Seeking Shalom," Robert Lupton and a team of scholars discovered that there are many methods typically used by STM teams that rob communities of their dignity with each trip taken. To begin, Lupton's course highlights the underlying message conveyed when STM teams bring used items, such as clothing, toys, and shoes, as "gifts" based on the assumption community members could not afford their own. STM participants may see this charitable gift as generosity at its finest, when in reality, community members are left feeling like they are only worth someone else's waste. In a case study incorporated into the course, Lupton's team asked Julia Dismore, a Christian author who grew up in material poverty, about the psychological impact of receiving used gifts. Dismore answered by posing a question herself: "If it isn't good enough for you to use, what makes you think it's good enough for me? That tells me how you feel about me, and it doesn't feel good..."<sup>48</sup> Dismore's response shines a light on the ethics of charitable giving, demonstrating how a well-intended gift of a used item can deeply wound a person's sense of self-worth.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Seeking Shalom Participant's Guide," <https://courses.luptoncenter.org/courses/940924/lectures/21543116>.

The problem runs much deeper than simply giving vulnerable individuals a gift that diminishes their worth. The greater issue lies in the assumptions STM teams often make about what a community needs, leading to insensitive or unnecessary giving. In an article entitled "Misguided Missions" published in *Christian Century*, Radecke notes that one of the biggest mistakes a STM participant can make is presuming to know what specific struggles communities might be facing and making plans to solve those self-identified problems without consulting individuals in the community first. Radecke writes, "When we enter into our hosts' world, we do things their way," though this is sadly not the approach taken by many STM teams.<sup>49</sup>

Stacy Brungardt, Community Development Director of a nonprofit in Georgia, confirmed this unfortunate reality of false assumptions in another case study included in Lupton's "Seeking Shalom." With heartache echoing each word, Brungardt remembers the emotional weight of receiving charity from STM teams, stating, "I have personally experienced when charity hurts by not being invited to the table with an equal voice about things that matter in my community, things that affect me personally in my neighborhood. It's difficult to respect someone who's coming from an outside agency with material goods to throw at the problem..."<sup>50</sup> Though Brungardt is now a successful leader of a local nonprofit, listening to her story makes the lasting emotional weight to unsustainable charity models abundantly clear. She still carries the emotional baggage of having outside agencies enter her life with no regard for her story or input.

Not only does self-identifying problems in another individual's life strip them of their dignity and rob them of their hope, but this approach to STMs also takes away an opportunity for growth personally, spiritually, and financially. As she continues to share her story in the Lupton

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<sup>49</sup> Radecke, "Misguided Missions," 23.

<sup>50</sup> "Seeking Shalom Participant's Guide," <https://courses.luptoncenter.org/courses/940924/lectures/21543116>.

curriculum, Brungardt wisely shares this message of faith centered on an individual's identity in Christ: "What you see as deficient, Christ sees as redeemable. Christ sees as valuable. Christ sees as immeasurable worth. He's given us all gifts, talents, and abilities. By not providing me an opportunity to share mine, you're holding me back from realizing my potential."<sup>51</sup> In sharing this piece of her story, Brungardt elaborates on how STM teams meant to empower communities for Christ actually belittle individuals' God-given knowledge, skills, and assets. Her story highlights the emotional weight inflicted by short-term saviors who shift the focus of STM trips to their gifts and callings rather than those within the community.

The psychological consequences of STM work can be worsened by a posture of white supremacy and western superiority known as ethnocentrism. In an article entitled "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement" published in *Missiology: An International Review*, scholars defined ethnocentrism in the STM context as "individuals internalizing the culturally contingent values of their own social group and developing a preferential loyalty to their own 'in-group' and its culture, along with negative opinions and attitudes towards out-groups — those of other ethnicities."<sup>52</sup> When individuals view themselves as more valuable than the communities they are serving, their STM trip is compromised before it even begins, even if these feelings of superiority are buried deep within one's subconscious. STM participants must actively work to disengage unconscious biases and ethnocentric tendencies to avoid unknowingly belittling vulnerable individuals.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Priest, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," doi:10.1177/009182960603400403.

<sup>53</sup> Darren Carlson, "The White Savior Complex in Missions?," The Gospel Coalition, October 6, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/white-savior-complex-missions/>.

Because many STM teams fail to recognize or acknowledge the problem within themselves, this ethnocentric reputation has historically plagued churches in America. Former president of the American Society of Missiology, Dr. Bonnie Sue Lewis, coined the phrase "white missionary privilege" to describe how racism contributes to the toxic consequences of STM work. Dr. Lewis explained, "Sometimes [white missionary privilege] is simply good-hearted outsiders making decisions about realities they do not understand or that are different than their own. And sometimes it is simply a racist or ethnocentric belief that a culture or a people are inferior to others in the sight of God."<sup>54</sup> Even if individuals don't believe that someone of another culture is inherently less important or valuable in society because of their race or ethnicity, STM teams can still assume a posture of "white missionary privilege" by assuming their socioeconomic status gives them the right to tell those in poverty how to solve their problems. The Gospel Coalition describes this phenomenon as "the attitude and assumption that white Americans can transform impoverished areas due to the privilege of class and citizenship, regardless of any skill they may possess."<sup>55</sup> Essentially, STM participants demonstrate privilege when they ignore the assets of an impoverished community to elevate their own status and skill level. By boosting their own influence, "white missionary privilege" can create a condescending approach to STM trips regardless of intentions.

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<sup>54</sup> Bonnie Sue Lewis, "The Dynamics and Dismantling of White Missionary Privilege," *Missiology* 32, no. 1 (January 2004): 38, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001463897&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>55</sup> Carlson, "The White Savior Complex in Missions?," <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/white-savior-complex-missions/>.

## **Underlying Roots of Harmful Short-Term Mission Work**

One can directly see this condescending posture of privilege and superiority in the severe lack of cross-cultural training for STM trips. Whether traveling abroad or serving locally, STM teams who do not invest in communities through intercultural education before travel run the serious risk of deeply harming a community socioeconomically and psychologically. Author, scholar, and long-time missionary Robert Reese writes, "It is a cultural weakness, however, to be so over-confident of our abilities that we fail to assess the cultural and historical background of a situation before applying our solution."<sup>56</sup> In saying this, Reese places the entirety of the blame for STMs failures on the participants themselves, focusing specifically on STM teams who do not properly prepare for serving specific communities.

The harmful consequences of STM trips are exponentially worsened when participants have not dedicated time before travel to fully learn about and prepare for their cross-cultural experience. Reese has witnessed these consequences firsthand, as he grew up in Zimbabwe with a family of career missionaries. After getting married, Reese and his wife continued to serve on the mission field for two decades, equipping him with years of experience to discuss the trauma and socioeconomic strife caused by unprepared STM teams visiting Africa.<sup>57</sup> In an article on preparing teams for STM work published by the International Mission Board, Debbie Stephens wrote in agreement, "I am often asked what I find to be most lacking in training for churches serving cross-culturally. Sadly, my answer is that they simply aren't doing it [cross-cultural

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<sup>56</sup> Reese, Robert. "Short Term Missions and Dependency." Five Stones Global. Accessed March 1, 2022. <https://fivestonesglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Short-term-Missions-and-Dependency.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> "Robert Reese," Mission Books, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://missionbooks.org/collections/author-robert-reese>.

training]."<sup>58</sup> When missionaries are not equipped to interact with different cultures, their biases can lead to a dangerous posture of superiority, which creates many barriers to service.

While many associate these cultural barriers with international service, a lack of cross-cultural curriculum for STM trips is just as much of a problem for local service and evangelism. Domestic STM trips are often associated with disadvantaged communities facing material poverty. In many cases, these communities are multicultural — facing systemic racial injustices in addition to economic disparity. A 2016 study on the intersections of race and religion published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* reported that "African Americans are more likely than whites to be poor and live within communities of concentrated poverty, to experience unemployment and be outside of the labor force, and to fare worse during economic recessions."<sup>59</sup> Statistically, many communities served by the local church are often rich in the different cultures of racial minorities. Despite this diversity, cross-cultural preparation is often completely neglected in local STM trips because these communities are in US neighborhoods.

### **A Glimmer of Hope for Short-Term Missions**

This chapter presents a very grim perspective on STM teams, painting participants as greedy, prideful monsters with a savior complex deeply intertwined in their character. With participants framed as villains, the chance for socioeconomic misfortunes and emotional trauma insinuates that STMs should fade into history as a gross mistake and ultimately a movement of the past. While these statements can be true in certain situations, a glimmer of hope abounds knowing that the reason behind the concerns has already been identified as a lack of preparation.

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<sup>58</sup> Debbie Stephens, "6 Ways to Prepare Your Church's Short-Term Mission Teams," IMB, November 27, 2017, <https://www.imb.org/2017/11/29/prepare-short-term-mission-teams/>.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald E. Brown, Davin Phoenix, R Khari Brown, and James S. Jackson, "Race, Religion, and Anti-Poverty Policy Attitudes," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 2 (June 2016): 318, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN= ATLAiBCB160926001024&site=ehost-live>.

Knowing that sustainable STM service always goes back to cross-cultural, community-specific training gives STM leaders the chance to better prepare their teams and avoid causing any kind of harm to the communities they visit.

Scholars and ministers began to recognize the importance of preparing for STMs a little over two decades ago, so STM leaders today have some foundational tools to guide their pre-trip preparation and their approach to the trip itself. Scholars now suggest STM leaders "hold training sessions each day to help students learn about culture, the nationals they work with, and God's perspective on race.... When the immersion experience is connected with the right sorts of orientation and coaching, significant change is possible."<sup>60</sup> The following chapter highlights a few of the most well-known STMs resources used to prepare participants to be successful in cross-cultural service learning opportunities over the past 20 years. Digging deeper into these resources will reveal additional research that needs to be completed to give collegiate STM participants a succinct yet comprehensive guide to their STM experience.

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<sup>60</sup> Priest, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," doi:10.1177/009182960603400403.

## Chapter Three: Exploring Existing Short-Term Missions Resources

### Introducing Materials on Short-Term Missions

While the controversy surrounding STM work is relatively new, there are several key sources that are widely praised by pastors, missionaries, and leaders of faith-based nonprofits alike. With a firm grasp on the harmful consequences of STMs established in the previous chapter, a thorough analysis of existing materials will help shine a light on the missing information responsible for these consequences. Essentially, this literature review is designed to take a deep dive into the existing STMs resources to understand where well-intentioned STM participants fall short in preparation. When the missing pieces of information key to sustainable service are identified, only then is it possible to propose a solution for more effective STMs.

### *When Helping Hurts*

When studying ethical and effective short-term mission work in the twenty-first century, the most well-known source is Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert's *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself*. Their wisdom is based on over a decade of first-hand experience leading an international Christian relief and development agency, as well as many years dedicated to the research and development of training materials for international missions. Corbett and Fikkert also serve on the Board of Directors for the Chalmers Center, an American nonprofit founded by Fikkert in 1999 to teach local churches to address the issues at the heart of material poverty in a gospel-driven manner.<sup>61</sup> With this extensive background in international ministries and missiological academia, Corbett and Fikkert's strategies to practically serve the poor are held in high regard by scholars and ministers alike.

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<sup>61</sup> Corbett, *When Helping Hurts*, 26.



While almost all Christians would agree that the Bible places a sense of responsibility on the Church to take care of the poor, Corbett and Fikkert note that the Christian definition of poverty has become deeply distorted since the emergence of the Social Gospel Movement among Protestant Churches of the twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> This movement was established to fight social injustice and poverty across the US in the early 1900s by providing substantial material relief to urban communities in need. By providing such financial aid, Corbett and Fikkert argue that churches lost sight of their ultimate mission during this movement, focusing more on alleviating material poverty through direct financial aid rather than empowering communities to steward their resources and abilities in Christ's name.

Rooted in the historic injustice of the Social Gospel Movement, Corbett and Fikkert believe that this skewed understanding of poverty can lead to a very dangerous approach to STMs that harms both the communities in need and the trip participants in the process. Thus, *When Helping Hurts* seeks to reframe the way the American Church views poverty to shift the way Christians approach STMs at every level. Rather than viewing poverty as a lack of material wealth, Corbett and Fikkert suggest that all humans are equally poor in spirit and must acknowledge the brokenness of humanity to effectively serve one another by relying on Christ alone. From differentiating between relief, rehabilitation, and developmental mission strategies to explaining the different stages of participation and partnership with indigenous communities, the authors provide specific strategies for STMs participants to ensure sustainable service that reflects this view of spiritual poverty. One specific strategy the authors suggest is making sure financial relief is only given out in communities temporarily when there is an immediate critical need preventing individuals from helping themselves. This strategy of "seldom, immediate, and

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<sup>62</sup> Corbett, *When Helping Hurts*, 44.

temporary relief" will ensure that STM teams are not creating a situation where individuals begin to rely on aid an outside organization cannot continue to provide.<sup>63</sup>

In an effort to "not do things for people that they can do for themselves," one of the major strategies presented in this book is avoiding paternalism by looking first at a materially poor community's collective assets rather than their immediate needs.<sup>64</sup> By helping a community realize the skills and resources they already have in place, missionaries can empower the materially poor to utilize their assets to solve locally-identified problems with community-based resources. Impoverished individuals and communities are encouraged to fully participate in this process from start to finish, relying on Christ to sustain their efforts through it all. Known as "asset-based community development," this strategy involves asking different individuals what skills and abilities they have to conduct an inventory of the collective assets of a materially poor community. The authors note that facilitating conversations about God-given gifts and resources among the materially poor can spark solutions that revolutionize the entire community's outlook and collective way of life.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to providing specific strategies to empower communities before and during STM trips, Corbett and Fikkert also describe the importance of continuing the learning process for STM participants after returning home, a part of the process that is rarely discussed in most ministry tools. Corbett and Fikkert suggest, "Have a well-planned, mandated, learning journey *for at least one year following the trip*. Such follow-up uses a discipleship approach to help

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<sup>63</sup> Corbett, *When Helping Hurts*, 104-105.

<sup>64</sup> Corbett, *When Helping Hurts*, 109.

<sup>65</sup> Corbett, *When Helping Hurts*, 126-128.

translate the costly mountaintop experience into an actual life-changing event."<sup>66</sup> In suggesting post-trip STM curriculum, Corbett and Fikkert insinuate that individuals don't have to travel across the nation or around the world to empower individuals experiencing the same spiritual poverty they may have encountered during their STM experience. By continuing to learn about God's mission in communities near and far after the trip draws to a close, STM participants transition to living their lives on mission every day within their circles of influence. Post-trip education encourages participants to invest in their local communities, all the while preparing individuals to participate in future STMs.

### ***Toxic Charity***

Much like *When Helping Hurts*, Robert Lupton's *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* is also frequently included in conversations about sustainable service. In addition to being a renowned Christian author, Lupton is also the founder of Focused Community Strategies, an organization dedicated to serving impoverished communities by investing in local community development initiatives.<sup>67</sup> *Toxic Charity* teaches STM participants to use their resources to develop a community by investing in established local institutions. Supporting pre-existing organizations prevents well-intended participants from attempting to identify problems on the community's behalf and providing solutions that the community might not actually need.

*Toxic Charity* provides a much-needed perspective shift on Western Christianity's approach to STM work through Lupton's "Oath for Compassionate Service," which is compared to the Hippocratic Oath every doctor is required to take upon entering the medical field. To guide

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<sup>66</sup> Corbett, *When Helping Hurts*, 166.

<sup>67</sup> "Who We Are," Focused Community Strategies, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.fcsministries.org/whoweare>.

sustainable STMs, Lupton details six ethical standards that STM participants must follow. These standards include:

Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves. Limit one-way giving to emergency situations. Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements. Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served. Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said—unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service. Above all, do no harm. <sup>68</sup>

In sharing these standards, Lupton is by no means suggesting that all charity is harmful. Rather, he explains how his research and experiences have helped him develop an awareness and deeper understanding of the power associated with privilege, especially in a charitable context.

As the book continues, Lupton expresses that one of his main hesitations surrounding STMs is the "make-work nature" of the trips — "pointing to projects like the wall built on an orphanage soccer field in Brazil that had to be torn down after the visitors left. Or the church in Mexico that was painted six times during one summer by six different mission groups. Or the church in Ecuador built by volunteers that was never used as a church because the community had no need for it."<sup>69</sup> These are powerful examples of the unnecessary tasks many STM participants believe make the greatest impact. Through these examples, Lupton highlights how some STMs harm the community by wasting time and resources on pointless projects that only leave a larger problem for the members of a vulnerable community. Lupton concludes that spending exorbitant amounts of money to travel and complete a project that wasn't requested in the first place can leave struggling individuals or overwhelmed organizations feeling more discouraged than before "help" arrived.

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<sup>68</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 14.

Because of the dangers associated, Lupton reiterates countless times throughout the book that service projects and direct financial assistance should always be coordinated through a local organization, making *Toxic Charity* an incredible resource on the significance of forming partnerships in STMs. When describing the importance of following the lead of partner organizations, Lupton writes, "If outside actors are principally responsible for results, then the community will never change, be strengthened, or advance its capacity to deal with its own problems, solutions, and development... If your goal is to build community capacity, then there needs to be investment in a local community entity."<sup>70</sup> Essentially, outsiders arriving for only a short time have no real control over long-term development of a community if they are working on their own accord. To prevent meaningless efforts, Lupton urges STM participants to seek out leaders from local community government organizations, churches, or nonprofits to invest in existing efforts. This sage wisdom is rooted in years of experience serving alongside and learning from local experts who have shown Lupton what many academic sources simply could not — poverty is not synonymous with incompetence.

Just because a community is under-resourced or struggling financially certainly does not signify the absence of capable community leaders. Rather, Lupton writes that the economic vulnerability likely points to a lack of investment in existing organizations dedicated to community development. Simply put, there are local leaders and existing organizations already in place that could contribute to the betterment of the community over time if these leaders and organizations were continually resourced. Lupton responds to this concern by shining a light on a more long-term solution, stating "If we want to see substantial change in a troubled

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<sup>70</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 116.

neighborhood, we must concentrate energies and resources there over time."<sup>71</sup> Thus, partnering with an existing organization not only allows STM participants to actively invest in the ongoing process of community development while they are on the ground, but also provides the opportunity for long-term financial support to organizations making a difference year-round. The emotional weight of seeing a troubled community facing such immense struggles, all the while getting to experience the empowering work of a local institution assisting vulnerable individuals, is a powerful motivation to continue supporting such organizations over time. Only with this long-term support can real change occur.

Even though change can be developed over time through investment, Lupton notes that it is not always our responsibility to invest in every organization or cause. Lupton writes, "There is no shortage of needs in most communities, especially poor ones, but need does not constitute the call."<sup>72</sup> Well-meaning Christians tend to assume every social responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Church. While Christ called his Church to care for the poor countless times throughout the Bible, these instructions were never meant to suggest every problem the material poor face is meant to be solved by STM groups one trip at a time. With this sentiment in mind, Lupton's entire book can be summarized with one simple word: awareness. Grounded in active listening and intentional partnerships, sustainable service is completely dependent on a STM team's awareness of the community's needs, as well as the resources and abilities they possess. After reading *Toxic Charity*, it seems as though STMs might never be labeled "toxic" if participants were more aware of the boundaries they overstep, the skills and abilities they overlook, the problems they create, and the dignity they steal. To sum up this notion, Lupton concludes by

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<sup>71</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 76.

<sup>72</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 170.

stating STM would be much more effective if guided by wisdom — the ability to discern when to serve and when to take a step back to encourage and empower vulnerable individuals and communities. This wisdom cannot be cultivated without comprehensive tools, much like this book, to prepare for sustainable service.

### *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*

While books like *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity* focus primarily on the ethics of alleviating poverty, David Livermore's *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* shifts the focus from sustainability to cultural sensitivity. Livermore's main premise for the book is the notion that Americans are woefully ignorant of events occurring in the world around them. Globalization is cultivating communities of cultural diversity across the nation and around the world, yet Americans seem to only gain knowledge of westernized cultural norms.<sup>73</sup> Livermore defines this focus on western lifestyles as the McDonaldization of the world, suggesting that the American dream has been westernizing ethnically diverse communities across the nation, as well as other nations around the world.

Aside from pushing western expectations onto communities of different cultures, Livermore explains how globalization forces individuals from western cultures to come face to face with diversity each day, given the interconnected reality of the modern world. These cross-cultural encounters are all too often experiences that many in the US are gravely unprepared to handle appropriately. In reference to the western experience of an ever-connected world, Livermore writes, "Working alongside refugees from Bosnia and Sudan, instant messaging people with similar interests across twenty-four time zones, and working in organizations that

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<sup>73</sup> David Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 21.

assume a global presence are just a few ways we encounter globalization."<sup>74</sup> In saying this, Livermore suggests that encountering other cultures is inevitable in almost every sphere of western life. Therefore, when it comes to STMs, even the most seasoned traveler could use a lesson in cultural intelligence to serve with more sensitivity.

To begin dissecting the complexities of cultural intelligence, Livermore begins by addressing the motivations behind participants seeking intercultural service experiences. Livermore raises the self-reflecting question, "Is my cross-cultural work driven most by my desire to follow Christ or my sense of adventure and wanderlust?"<sup>75</sup> With this single sentence, Livermore pierces the hearts of many STM participants embarking on a trip to experience an exciting new part of the world — a self-seeking approach that creates several barriers to culturally sensitive service because of a lack of interest in preparation. This desire for adventure isn't only driven by the self-seeking tendencies of participants, as the wrong motivations are often fueled by STM sending organizations too. Livermore reflects on an organization called Teen Mania, a STM agency best known for its tagline "Missions should be fun!"<sup>76</sup> When STM organizations focus primarily on adventure, it is not surprising that thousands of participants seeking to experience new cultures spend thousands of dollars for a week of "service." Though participants might not even realize it, their motivations greatly affect their attitudes and actions during their STM trip.

In addition to misplaced motivations, another barrier to culturally appropriate service is the oversimplification of commonalities. In some ways, trying to find similarities is foundational

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<sup>74</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 47.

<sup>76</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 50.



to building relationships, but Livermore warns STM participants of the dangers of oversimplifying cultural differences to build a bigger common ground. Rather than celebrating differences and seeking to learn from one another, Livermore writes that oversimplification of diversity becomes a problem when STM teams latch on to the tiniest similarities to relate — consequently ignoring key elements of the culture and ultimately dishonoring the community's cultural heritage. Writing from the perspective of someone from a minority community, Livermore attempts to depict the emotional weight that comes at the receiving end of oversimplification, noting "I may look like the kids in your neighborhood on the outside, but what's on the inside is totally different."<sup>77</sup> This simple sentence carries a powerful shift in perspective, all the while highlighting the western tendency to stereotype different cultures based on one-off observations.

Stating that someone's story may be entirely different from the similarities that appear on the surface, Livermore references the American inclination to assume that one individual's interpretation of a culture is correct and all-encompassing. Oversimplification of another culture only verifies false pretenses about a different group of people. Many times, Livermore explains that STM teams walk away from an encounter with one individual with the wrong representation of an entire culture because of their tendency to stereotype.<sup>78</sup> In reality, no single encounter can account for the thousands of nuances that accompany each cultural identity, but when STM teams aren't well-versed in cultural sensitivity, judgements like this are often second nature.

Much like the tendency to oversimplify and stereotype, individuals of all cultures, especially the individualistic ones like the US, are prone to view other cultures through their own

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<sup>77</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 67.

<sup>78</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 70.

lens. Livermore notes, "When we're in a cross-cultural context for only a brief period of time, we interpret everything we see through our own cultural framework rather than learning, over time, to identify with another cultural framework."<sup>79</sup> Learning the depths of another culture takes time — much more than can be accomplished during the duration of a STM trip. Hence, Livermore recommends months of preparation for cultural intelligence to prevent misunderstandings and miscommunications. From simple phrases and nonverbal cues to gender roles and relationship norms, a single misinterpretation at any level can unknowingly create tension between STM teams and their partner organizations, hindering the team's ability to serve alongside their host. Even though Livermore's research is geared more toward international service, his research establishes that not trying to learn about a community's cultural backgrounds puts even domestic STM participants at a disadvantage and the communities they are serving at risk.

To avoid these risks, Livermore provides instructions in four key areas of emphasis: cultural intelligence (CQ) drive, CQ knowledge, CQ strategy, and CQ action.<sup>80</sup> Beginning with CQ drive, Livermore discusses the importance of actively engaging in cross-cultural experiences prior to embarking on an intercultural STM trip. One key factor in cultural intelligence is a desire and willingness to seek out different cultural encounters. Wanting to connect with individuals of another culture may not seem like a primary concern for STM teams who are task-oriented, but Livermore writes "Our level of interest in connecting with a culture as a whole directly shapes how well we do our work in subtle but profound ways."<sup>81</sup> With CQ drive carrying such deep connections to sustainable service, it is important to note that one's ability to connect with other

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 111.

<sup>81</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 117.

cultures is not an inherent trait or a quality only some possess. Just like any relationship, intentionality met with humility has the power to cultivate connections across cultural bounds.

The next area of emphasis is CQ knowledge. According to Livermore, CQ knowledge isn't knowing facts and statistics about any one culture. Rather, it is developing a more holistic understanding of how cultures differ at every level — seeking to dig deeper than surface level variations to understand why differences exist and what these differences mean for someone's identity and lifestyle. If you want to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how cultures differ, Livermore suggests asking questions like these: "How does culture affect the way people view the world? How does that relate to the specific culture we're about to visit? How does it explain our own behavior? What's behind the common gesture used?"<sup>82</sup> By asking these questions, STM participants can cultivate a greater appreciation for the culture that will provide a foundation for deeper connections. Increasing CQ knowledge before embarking on a STM trip protects the community from insensitive questions, all the while enhancing the immersion experience and opening the door for more extensive learning on the trip itself.

With a desire to connect and an educational background to do so, Livermore suggests the next step to serving with cultural sensitivity is CQ strategy — where drive and knowledge culminate in real world experiences. Once you've stepped into another cultural setting, Livermore explains CQ strategy as an individual's awareness of the need to adapt in the moment to differences in culture by changing their natural responses. Livermore likens this momentary shift in response to driving a car in manual, meaning STM participants need to know when to switch gears in everyday interactions to ensure cultural sensitivity. "CQ strategy helps us turn off the cruise control we typically use when we interact with people so that we can intentionally

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<sup>82</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 127.

question our assumptions. As we interpret the cues we receive through CQ strategy, we continually adjust our CQ knowledge and plan for how to behave appropriately."<sup>83</sup> With this analogy, Livermore paints a picture of many different facets of our brains working at once to contribute to cultural intelligence. It would be nearly impossible to shift gears in the moment to serve with cultural intelligence without any motivation or background knowledge. Thus, STM participants can only effectively implement CQ strategy after weeks or even months of preparing their hearts and minds for culturally appropriate service.

In conclusion, the final piece of Livermore's puzzle is CQ action — a term Livermore coined to describe the successful implementation of motivation, education, and awareness. Defined as "the extent to which we change our verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting cross-culturally," CQ action has the greatest impact on the communities STM teams visit. While each element of Livermore's cultural intelligence equation is equally important, any preparation is done in vain if STM teams are not willing to change their behaviors in the moment. Livermore explains the danger of serving without CQ action as not serving at all, stating "Short-term mission trips without CQ action look more like a typical tourist experience. The tour group sticks together as a group of outsiders, stays in cushy places, seldom veers into the local cuisine, and views the culture as a sporting event rather than actually playing the game."<sup>84</sup> These actions are inappropriate and offensive because they perpetuate the "us versus them" divide at the heart of harmful missions. By investing in the culture in advance and demonstrating adaptability and humility during the STM, Livermore ensures that teams will effectively serve with a level of

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<sup>83</sup>Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 142.

<sup>84</sup> Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, 155.

cultural intelligence that will revolutionize the way they interact with the world for years to come.

### **"Seeking Shalom" Course**

In addition to written resources, STMs preparation tools exist in many other forms, such as recorded training sessions. One of the most popular online learning platforms for sustainable service is a six-week course entitled "Seeking Shalom," created by the author of *Toxic Charity* and founder of Focused Community Solutions and the Lupton Center, Robert Lupton. Lupton's significance to STMs research is centered around sustainable poverty alleviation through a method he calls "Holistic Neighborhood Development." Before diving into the contents of his curriculum, Lupton explains the context behind his poverty alleviation strategy, noting that "Holistic Neighborhood Development emerged as a set of beliefs and practices that replaced transactional giving with mutuality and partnership. It measured success by impact, not activity. It went beyond meeting the momentary needs of individuals and pursued the long-term flourishing of whole communities."<sup>85</sup> This context sets the stage for Lupton's course, a curriculum centered on holistic community flourishing.

Though it shares many similarities in terms of content with Lupton's seminal work *Toxic Charity*, the lessons shared throughout "Seeking Shalom" are elevated exponentially by the diversity of perspectives incorporated through the different speakers included. In any given session, participants will hear from experts in the field such as Lupton or Corbett, as well as other scholars who have dedicated their lives to studying STMs and community development in both theory and practice. In addition to hearing from academics, participants gain the perspectives of leaders from local nonprofits and pastors organizing local outreach. Perhaps the

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<sup>85</sup> "Our Big Idea," Lupton Center, May 19, 2021, <https://www.luptoncenter.org/the-idea/>.

most unique voices elevated are those of individuals who have been the victims of poorly designed and executed STMs targeted toward poverty alleviation. By creating a space for individuals who have been harmed by well-intentioned ministry teams to share their trauma, "Seeking Shalom" creators effectively establish the reality of harmful service, all the while honoring the stories of individuals who have experienced this very real heartache.

Continuing with the importance of elevating the right voices, one of the most powerful conversations in the series begins with an individual named Maurice Lattimore, a deacon of a local church who has experienced his fair share of detrimental STMs. Maurice begins his story by saying, "I've had a lot of people who have tried to help me along the way, and you love them for the compassionate heart they have in wanting to help. But they supply things that will benefit you at the moment, but in the long run, it didn't continue. It didn't help you to continue you to go forward and prosper."<sup>86</sup> This quote has so many different layers, from the acknowledgment of the STM participants' intentions to the explanation of the barriers created by temporary relief. Lattimore's words would be rich in wisdom on paper, but being able to hear the passion in his voice and notice the heartache reflected in his eyes takes his insight to even greater depths — a level of personal insight that is truly invaluable for research.

With the prioritization of personal storytelling, it is only fitting that "Seeking Shalom" covers the relational dangers of STMs. In many instances, teams approach STMs with the intention of fixing people rather than getting to know them, which can be very detrimental to a vulnerable individual's sense of self-worth. To counter this problem before ever embarking on a STM trip, Pastor Darryl Ford questions the motivations of participants — prompting them to ask

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<sup>86</sup> "Seeking Shalom Participant's Guide," <https://courses.luptoncenter.org/courses/940924/lectures/21543116>.

themselves, "Am I seeing these people as projects or as actual people?"<sup>87</sup> This may seem like a question a participant would ask themselves in the moment, but Pastor Ford brilliantly demonstrates the power of checking intentions before traveling to ensure an attitude of humility. Because STMs are emotionally charged experiences, it's easy to get swept up in the idea of saving a community if participants' intentions are not in check.

When we embrace the relational approach to STMs, "Seeking Shalom" indicates that teams will have a much more meaningful experience because success doesn't have to be measured in terms of tangible results. Even if we aren't measuring success by results, the "Seeking Shalom" speakers suggest that results do increase when relationships are at the forefront of the participants' approach, simply because we can accomplish much more when we are working in collaboration with others, especially those who know the situation best. Professor Melissa Browning speaks to this by saying, "We become better responders to poverty when we get to know the poor — when we decide that we're not going to be givers of charity, but we're just going to live life together."<sup>88</sup> Even if participants are only experiencing life together for seven to ten days at a time, Professor Browning explains that seeking out relationships with the local people will lead to more influential STMs. By investing deeply in the community beyond a surface level, STM participants can better understand the nuances and weight of the problems a community is facing through the first-hand experiences of those they get to know, shaping the way they approach the tasks given to them.

In addition to relationships, another foundational concept emphasized in the "Seeking Shalom" curriculum is the notion of treating the symptoms of poverty through our STMs efforts,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

as opposed to addressing the systems perpetuating the problem. STM teams often approach service with a linear solution rather than a holistic strategy to use their limited time and resources to support systemic change. To explain why this temporary solution is problematic, Sushma Barakoti, the leader of a local community development organization, elaborates, "Poverty is very complicated. It is not the symptom of one thing. It is the manifestation of a lot of different things. So, in eradicating poverty it is not just a straight line; it is a spectrum."<sup>89</sup> To elaborate, Barakoti continues with the example of food insecurity — detailing how a single food distribution, or even the organization of a monthly food pantry, won't solve the complexities of systemic poverty. "Seeking Shalom" maintains this focus on the intricacies of systemic poverty throughout the curriculum, making the course highly beneficial for STM leaders and participants preparing to support long-term growth in impoverished communities.

### **Standards of Excellence (SOE) Principles and Curriculum**

While academic sources can provide such a window of insight into the technicalities of sustainable service, resources from well-known organizations coordinating STMs can be equally as enlightening. Simply put, it is essential to know what information participants are receiving from their sending organizations to know how preparation resources can be improved. One of the most reputable STM organizations is SOE — Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission. Born from one of the first interdenominational STM sending groups known as DELTA Ministries, SOE has grown to become the parent organization for many groups coordinating STM trips, serving as the gold standard for ethical STMs for over 100 accredited partners.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> "About," SOE (Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission), August 11, 2020, <https://soe.org/about/>.



In addition to training and mentoring STM leaders and participants that fall under their umbrella, SOE is best known for its "Seven Standards of Excellence" which serve as the fundamental principles that guide their curriculum and resources. Designed as a "code of best practices for short-term mission practitioners," SOE identifies "God-centeredness, empowering partnerships, mutual design, comprehensive administration, qualified leadership, appropriate training, and thorough follow-through" as the core tenets for ethical STMs.<sup>91</sup> These principles create a helpful measuring tool for other STM resources, making it beneficial to understand each standard of excellence in context.

Beginning with the first principle, SOE identifies that all STMs must be God-centered, leading with the notion that "As short-term mission practitioners, we acknowledge our total dependence on God. We therefore pledge ourselves to regular intercession for all participants throughout the pre-field, on-field, and post-field process of every short-term mission."<sup>92</sup> Many STM participants would agree that their service should be oriented to Christ, but few know what Christ-centered service looks like practically. To shine a light on tangible methods for God-centeredness, SOE suggests STM participants lean into biblical and cultural educational tools that will "produce lasting [spiritual] fruit," in reference to the fruits of the Spirit outlined in Galatians 5:22-23.<sup>93</sup> While the actual information provided surrounding scripture and cultural sensitivity is sparse, SOE does an incredible job providing topics to guide participants in their journeys of Christ-centered preparation. In addition to providing insight into further research,

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<sup>91</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence," SOE (Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission), October 5, 2021, <https://soe.org/7-standards/>.

<sup>92</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," SOE (Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission), October 5, 2021, 4, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

SOE reiterates that all fruit comes from the Lord — ensuring that STM participants understand that they cannot be the heroes for STMs to be considered God-oriented. Intended to ground STMs in faith and reliance on God, this principle lays the foundation for the following six standards of excellence.

Following God-centeredness, SOE's second priority for sustainable service is empowering partnerships. SOE doesn't simply suggest establishing any partnership though, as many well-intended organizations collaborate for the wrong reasons. If STM participants are seeking partnerships for personal spiritual growth or an increased understanding of the world around them, then their motivations are flawed, compromising the partnership, as well as the ethics of the STM trip.<sup>94</sup> This is not to say that discipleship and education aren't important facets of STMs. Personal growth can, and often will, be the natural result of a successful STM partnership; it just shouldn't be the primary goal or reasoning behind forming a partnership.

To highlight the importance of partnering with local ministries for the betterment of the community above any personal desires, SOE writes, "We pledge that the primary purpose of our partnership is for the sake of our intended receptors — and not merely for each other. We acknowledge that anything called 'Christian mission' must involve all its participants in the manner that best serves God's desires for the intended receptors."<sup>95</sup> Simply put, STMs partnerships must be outward reaching rather than self-seeking to be effective by any measure. To solidify the community-oriented focus of the partnership, SOE recommends open communication and space for feedback from the partner organization when needed. By having an

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<sup>94</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 6, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

open line of dialogue that encourages honesty, STM participants can prioritize listening to their partner churches and organizations — honoring the needs of the community and the dignity of their partners, all the while taking a step towards making a tangible difference.

The third principle highlighted by SOE is mutual design, meaning "each outreach will be cooperatively designed to include specific mission opportunities and on-field activities which both partners believe to be aligned with long-term strategies, beneficial to all participants (especially the intended receptors), and appropriate for all participants to accomplish."<sup>96</sup> While this explanation may sound complex, SOE is simply advising that sustainable service should be guided by local leaders within the community and informed by the STM leaders who know the skills and abilities of their participants. While the leaders of partner organizations can best identify the needs of their community, STM leaders are best to discern the strengths of their team members, which provides helpful insight to pave the way for a productive STM trip. When these leaders work together, the results are much more beneficial than if the plan was designed by one leader alone, targeting true needs and maximizing the assets of every individual within the partnership.

With the recommendation of mutual design, SOE intentionally prioritizes the vision of the partnering organization above the goals of the STM group. To ensure trip participants will follow the leadership of the host organization, SOE recommends selecting participants "who will place themselves in a learning, humble, servant, teachable position" from the beginning — making surrender to mutual design a priority that participants are aware of when they choose to embark on the STM trip.<sup>97</sup> Establishing this attitude of adherence to local leaders is key to

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<sup>96</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 7, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

sustainable service that protects the dignity of vulnerable individuals and cultivates lasting partnerships.

The fourth guiding principle identified by SOE is comprehensive administration — an agreement that the sending organization will uphold the highest standards of integrity throughout the entirety of the pre-trip process. From accurate advertising to ethical fundraising, SOE establishes the significance of honesty and honor for both the participants and the partner organizations through the complete registration period. With this guideline, SOE promises, "Our publicity will clearly represent the ethos and vision of the sending organization. It will define the purpose of the program and not reflect negatively on the host culture or ministry."<sup>98</sup> This statement, if properly executed, ensures that vulnerable communities are protected from any negative reputation — preventing participants from signing up to engage in poverty tourism.

In addition to protecting the community, this principle also guarantees that resources are distributed properly from the beginning of the selection process. SOE concludes this principle with the promise that "Our application process will be clear and thorough including timeline, all financial obligations, and use of funds."<sup>99</sup> This statement is key to comprehensive administration because it provides a sense of financial assurance, solidifying that any money raised is an essential cost for the trip and that those resource will be used as promoted. Thus, this clause is included to prevent accredited sending organizations from raising costs for profits or disguising how funds will be used, which prioritizes honesty in every aspect of trip planning and execution.

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<sup>98</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 8, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Following comprehensive administration, the next principle deemed necessary for sustainable service by SOE is qualified leadership. This standard may seem straightforward, but SOE takes great care to elaborate on the qualities that cultivate strong leadership in a STMs context, including both character traits and skills required. To begin with character, SOE prioritizes spiritual values that can be seen in individuals considered for leadership positions, such as "wisdom, discernment, flexibility, sensitivity, spiritual giftedness, and responsiveness to authority."<sup>100</sup> Each of these qualities reflects a different piece of Christ's character and can be seen in the faithfulness of his disciples throughout scripture. As a Christian organization focused on representing Christ in every STMs venture, it goes without saying that spiritual values and qualities should be considered when selecting trip leadership. Equally as important, however, are the skills and abilities potential leaders possess to cultivate community between trip participants and encourage ethical engagements with partner organizations. In addition to spiritual maturity, SOE prioritizes "cross-cultural leadership, organizational ability, accountability, and communication skills" in the selection of leaders.<sup>101</sup> A leader's awareness of cultural differences and their ability to communicate cross-culturally are skills that allow them to establish a stronger connection with their host organization and lead by example. Qualified leaders with excellent organizational skills are also best equipped to contribute to a mutually designed plan of action, which shows how qualified leadership impacts each of the principles highlighted by SOE.

The sixth standard of excellence is appropriate training — a standard that is often brushed over with little regard to the depth needed to effectively prepare STM participants for sustainable

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<sup>100</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 10, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

service. SOE highlights six areas of content that needs to be covered for the highest level of service: "cross-cultural training, personal preparation, logistics training, intended activities preparation, financial preparation, and additional items unique to the given STM."<sup>102</sup> These areas of emphasis are all-inclusive, covering every aspect of the STM trip from start to finish with special consideration for how the participant's actions at each stage of the trip will affect the host community. In addition to the breadth of training subjects, each topic is covered at an excellent depth that leaves no room for ambiguity in the participants' minds. For example, SOE doesn't just state that participants need to be trained in cultural sensitivity. Rather, SOE highlights the following areas of cultural sensitivity that should be encompassed in pre-trip preparation materials and training: "cross-cultural theory, communication, simulation games, simulated settings; host culture/people specifics; language training and rehearsal; and re-entry training."<sup>103</sup> These guidelines help SOE accredited organizations understand which subtopics should be emphasized to best equip STM leaders and participants with a well-rounded education.

Continuing with the idea of balanced preparation, SOE also highlights the importance of providing training for each step of the STM (pre-trip preparation, guidance on the trip itself, and transitions into post-trip life) from experienced trainers with verified backgrounds in sustainable service.<sup>104</sup> By providing training each step along the way from experts with appropriate experiences serving in similar contexts, leaders and participants alike will be better equipped to uphold each standard identified by SOE in unexpected scenarios that arise throughout their STM.

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<sup>102</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 11-12, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>103</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 11, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>104</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 12, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

The final standard of excellence identified is thorough follow-through, focusing primarily on debriefing each STM experience, as well as creating a sustainable post-service plan. In terms of debriefs, SOE suggests sending organizations collaborate with hosts to "provide appropriate and thorough debriefings throughout every stage of the mutually designed outreach to help all participants process the pre-field training, on-field implementation, events throughout each day and any post-field challenges."<sup>105</sup> Participants of STM trips need a space to reflect on each of their experiences to cultivate a desire to seek out new service learning opportunities in their communities upon return. Considering their return, effective debrief techniques include guidelines for post-trip service, strategies to get involved with similar needs in the participants' community, and recommendations for organizations to partner with at home.

Finally, SOE recommends that sending organizations incorporate an honest evaluation of their STM experience to improve trips in the future. SOE recommends each organization "candidly evaluate our mutual efforts among sending and receiving partners for all phases (pre-field, on-field, post-field) of the outreach to enhance future programs."<sup>106</sup> By evaluating each step of the process with total honesty, organizations can create a space for both partners and participants to identify ways to improve future STMs. By consistently evaluating pre-trip preparation materials and trip methods by the SOE standards, sending organizations can continuously evolve the sustainability and ethics of the STMs experience they provide.

In conclusion, SOE's "Seven Standards of Excellence" provide an incredible guide for sending organizations to prepare STM leaders and participants to serve ethically and effectively alongside partnering organizations. Their guidelines highlight the important areas of education

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<sup>105</sup> "Seven Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners," 13, <https://soe.org/wp-content/uploads/SOE-Booklet-2021-Final.pdf>.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

that must be covered for sustainable service, all the while creating a space for sending organizations to make their preparation materials for each topic specific to each trip. Thus, SOE's standards are not meant to be used as training materials on their own, but rather they are meant to guide the creation of resources and development training sessions by each STM organization under their umbrella. It is ultimately up to the leaders of each STM organization to generate their own pre-trip curriculum, trip debrief prompts, post-trip action plans, and other resources needed that might be unique to each experience.

### **Summary and Analysis of Literature Review: Moving Forward**

Because a negative reputation surrounding STMs has already been established and recorded through years of research and personal testimonies from vulnerable individuals negatively impacted from around the world, academics seeking to learn about and improve STM materials for their ministries have a unique advantage. The problems have already been identified, and many of the solutions already exist. While there are resources created to guide STMs, most of these tools do not encompass everything a STM participant needs to know before embarking on a trip prepared to service ethically, effectively, and with integrity. Many of these resources, such as the SOE's "Seven Standards of Excellence," were written to serve as a guide for the creation of trip-specific materials — meaning many topics are mentioned, but few are detailed. Others were developed to cover only a specific area of emphasis with the level of detail necessary for sustainable service, meaning the resource is not an all-encompassing tool that can stand alone when preparing for STMs.

This project was designed to be the missing puzzle piece for sustainable STMs in collegiate ministries through the development of a comprehensive yet succinct preparation guide for domestic service learning. Most of the sources referenced throughout this literature review



are geared towards international service with hints of wisdom that can be applied to service learning within the nation. Therefore, this project is meant to synthesize the most pertinent strategies established in existing STM materials applicable to domestic service to create a comprehensive sample guide for collegiate STMs. By leaning on the research of noteworthy experts in missiology, heading the vast wisdom of those who have witnessed or experienced the trauma of STMs firsthand, and applying key knowledge from other necessary disciplines, this research was designed to change the way collegiate ministries approach service learning at every phase of a domestic STM trip.

## Chapter Four: Sharing my 2022 Short-Term Missions Experience

### *Introduction and Purpose*

Just like each of the STMs resources detailed in the previous chapter, the most beneficial ministry tools are supported through stories — examples that counter harmful practices by painting a picture of the consequences suffered by real individuals. It's easy to ignore dangerous STMs behaviors when the warning is presented in an abstract context. However, when STM participants can connect the consequences of their actions with a real community, their actions seem to carry much greater weight. According to critically acclaimed screenwriter Robert McKee, storytelling is one of the most powerful tools in existence to inspire real change in a person's attitude, which deeply affects their resulting actions. In an interview with the Harvard Business Review, McKee noted that stories are written and shared "to fulfill a profound human need to grasp the patterns of living – not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience."<sup>107</sup> In saying this, McKee beautifully explained the purpose of storytelling in persuasion — to elicit an emotional response that spurs a change in attitude. No matter how much truth they hold, facts often cannot truly change a person's heart. Rather, a shift in perspective is most commonly rooted in emotions elicited through the stories told by individuals who have experienced heartache. Lived experiences carry the greatest weight because they speak to these emotions in a way facts and statistics cannot.

To demonstrate the power of storytelling in STMs resources, let's return to the opening pages of *When Helping Hurts*. Though this book is filled with academic research, each educational element is sustained through real-life examples from the authors' lived STMs experiences. Before any instructions are given, the authors open with a story centered in

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<sup>107</sup> Robert McKee and Bronwyn Fryer, "Storytelling that Moves People," *Harvard Business Review* 81, no. 6 (2003): 51.

Kampala, Uganda. Early in his ministry career, author Brian Fikkert spent five months serving as a STMs participant in the overcrowded slums of the capital city. Recounting his time there, Fikkert remembers the many mistakes he and his family made that violated ethical principles of sustainable STMs. Fikkert even shares a specific example of financial assistance that directly harmed a young lady in the community named Grace.<sup>108</sup> By sharing this personal story with consequences that deeply affected another individual with a name and a story, Corbett and Fikkert successfully showcase why their research is so important. When real lives are contextually at stake, audiences are much more likely to pay attention and apply research-based solutions because they are emotionally invested in the problems at hand.

To bring the dense research of the previous chapter to life, this chapter is dedicated to a thorough explanation of my lived experience with collegiate STMs. Just like Fikkert's introduction narrative, the pages of this chapter tell the story of seven college students from Belmont University who dedicated their spring break to serving communities across the Gulf Coast in partnership with one of the most well-known STMs organizations — Praying Pelican Missions (PPM). As a senior involved with Belmont University's Missional Engagement Council, I had the honor of leading this trip alongside a dear friend and fellow student, as well as two incredible faculty members. This leadership position provided a unique insight to my research on sustainable service, as I was involved in the process from the beginning stages of preparation to the conclusion of the trip.

As I share this story in the pages to come, it is first important to acknowledge that my experiences are nothing revolutionary. Thousands of students have shared experiences similar to my own in decades prior, and thousands more will likely have the opportunity to learn, serve,

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<sup>108</sup> Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 25.

and grow in the same capacity for decades to come. Thus, I do not share these words lightly. They are not meant to boastfully showcase my team's efforts, but rather, they are written to provide an emotional connection to the solutions I will suggest in the following chapter. To best frame my research, this story will focus primarily on the ethics and sustainability of my experience, rather than the details of the experience itself.

### ***Preparation and Planning for the Trip of a Lifetime***

My story begins long before our teams were boarding the plane with anticipation in the BNA airport that brisk Saturday morning. Before the teams were even selected, Belmont's student leaders on the Missional Engagement Council were hard at work preparing for three different STMs experiences, each heading to a different domestic location. While Belmont on Mission leaders were diligently gathering information on the communities they would visit and hosting trainings for student trip leaders, Praying Pelican was also organizing trip partnerships and sending information to different collegiate and church partners across the nation. Both organizations provided preparation materials for ethical and effective service learning, yet even still, necessary information for sustainable service still fell through the cracks, providing a few noteworthy hurdles to sustainable service.

Beginning with Praying Pelican's preparation materials, we received an organization-wide "Pelican Guide" for all 2022 PPM trips. This guide was beneficial because it covered a wide range of topics, from pre- to post-trip resources, group activities, and journal prompts. The Pelican Guide did an excellent job covering the organization's policies and core values, as well as general tips and tricks for cultural sensitivity and awareness with social media and photography. The Pelican Guide also highlighted the significance of building relationships

throughout STM trips, providing strategies such as prayer prompts and conversation starters that could serve as the foundation for a trusting partnership.

Reading through the Pelican Guide for the first time with special consideration given to my academic research for this project, the breadth of topics covered within Praying Pelican's preparation guide was appropriately selected for sustainable service. While the selection of topics covered was effective, the depth of the Pelican Guide did not do the topics justice, especially when it comes to cultural awareness. Included in less than a page of the Pelican Guide, the section on cultural awareness is not specific to any one community — dedicated to protecting the cultures of diverse domestic and international communities alike. The section begins with the reminder, "As you serve alongside local partnerships both in the US and internationally, it's important that you are willing to learn, listen, and adapt to viewpoints that may be different from what you're used to."<sup>109</sup> I love the sentiment behind this statement, highlighting the importance of listening first and learning with an open mind and humble heart from local church partners.

While the organization's values are strongly designed and well-intentioned, Praying Pelican's explanation of its guiding principles was much too generic to cover the complexities of differing cultures. In this single page on cultural sensitivity, Praying Pelican covers flexibility, boundaries, clothing, donations, and asking questions to learn from local partners. These are all important topics to cover, but they are certainly not all-encompassing or community-specific. At the conclusion of the page, Praying Pelican does acknowledge that the Pelican Guide is not inclusive of all necessary information for cultural awareness, but they do not provide any parameters or guidelines for further research as recommended by SOE guidelines. As a Global Studies major, I have an academic background to guide my community-specific research, but

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<sup>109</sup> "Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions (2022), 13.

this isn't the case for every student traveling with the organization. Without specific topics to research or a background in studying other cultures, students may miss important details that are key for sustainable STMs. To solve this problem, Praying Pelican could either elaborate on cultural awareness throughout their pre-trip materials or add guidelines for additional research.

Another way to improve Praying Pelican's pre-trip Pelican Guide would be to make the manual more trip specific. To ensure participants are properly prepared for their STM experience, Praying Pelican should create different manuals for domestic and international STM trips. From logistical requirements like packing and safety to emotional needs concerning cultural sensitivity, each destination entails different details that are essential for a successful STM trip. For example, at the simplest level, STM participants traveling to the suburbs of Chicago and the bustling metropolis of Washington D.C. don't need to "avoid fruits that can't be peeled."<sup>110</sup> To dive deeper with this example, consider building relationships across cultures. The Pelican Guide includes a page on prioritizing community over outcomes, discussing how to best build relationships with the church partner.<sup>111</sup> From communicating effectively to establishing trust, there is so much that goes into building a fruitful relationship. The elements included are equally important for relationships regardless of the destination, but a participant would take varying approaches depending on the culture of the communities they serve, especially when it comes to international versus domestic travel.

In addition to Praying Pelican's pre-trip materials, Belmont's Missional Engagement Council also prepared materials to encourage informed service with a noteworthy focus on cultural education and community-based learning. Rather than using the label "mission trips,"

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<sup>110</sup> Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions, 19.

<sup>111</sup> "Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions, 30.

Belmont on Mission coined the phrase "Immersion trips." To explain the purpose of Immersion, the Belmont ministry team shares, "Belmont's spring break trips are a chance to be immersed in a local culture and to grow in understanding of the cares and concerns of communities here in the US. Students have the opportunity to see what God is doing through local churches and ministries and join them in awareness and mission."<sup>112</sup> In saying this, Belmont frames STMs as a learning experience for students to gain awareness of the different cultures, lifestyles, and realities of communities across the nation.

Just as each community faces different challenges, Belmont puts a heavy emphasis on discovering the varying ways the Lord gifts each area in the US with different skills, abilities, and resources through Immersion trips. "Students have the opportunity to be exposed not just to the needs and the challenges of a community, but also the assets and ways that they might imagine long-term impact for a community."<sup>113</sup> By setting this as a goal for their Immersions, Belmont on Mission seeks to prioritize asset analysis, which is referenced in many reputable STM resources such as *When Helping Hurts* and "Seeking Shalom."

To best implement asset analysis, Belmont on Mission recognizes the importance of learning about the community demographics before immersing students in the culture. Thus, after securing their role in the Praying Pelican STM trip to the Gulf Coast, Belmont on Mission leaders began researching demographics and statistics surrounding the city of Lake Charles, Louisiana. As a student leader for this trip, I received a detailed packet covering insightful demographics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic factors. Belmont on Mission also chose

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<sup>112</sup> "Immersion," Belmont University, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.belmont.edu/missions/mission-opps/immersion.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

to highlight important social issues that would likely affect the individuals and families we would meet, such as incarceration rates, homelessness, and poverty. Finally, Belmont on Mission shined a light on the socioeconomic consequences of the recent storms, sharing resources on the effects of Hurricane Laura and Hurricane Delta. Belmont on Mission made it abundantly clear that their research was not all-encompassing; however, they did provide guidelines for student leaders and Immersion participants to dig deeper on their own.

To further educate and prepare student leaders, Belmont on Mission hosts multiple training days to cover the guiding principles and core values of both Belmont University and Praying Pelican. These student leaders then join forces each year with the Missional Engagement Council to host an Immersion Bash for the STM participants. Belmont on Mission leaders deeply value pre-trip interactions and educational opportunities, promising "Groups will meet before the trip a handful of times not just to get to know one another, but also to begin to understand the community and culture of the immersion destination."<sup>114</sup> Pre-trip meetings and events are designed to build community between the students traveling, as well as prepare the students to establish genuine relationships with the communities they visit.

Through the materials provided by Praying Pelican and Belmont on Mission, as well research done on my own, I believed that I was well equipped for the STM. Contrary to the preparation materials we received, we found out upon arrival that we would be partnering with Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church in Dequincy, LA — a small town about half an hour outside of Lake Charles. While this differentiation may seem insignificant, knowing where you are serving is an essential detail necessary to properly prepare for sustainable service. From logistics like the state of the economy and assets available to circumstantial information like how

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



the area has recovered from the recent storms, there is a major difference between serving a city of 77,000 and a small community of 3,000. After speaking with our Praying Pelican representative, we learned that the groups serving the region had been paired with many smaller communities in and around the Lake Charles region at the last minute to ensure the greatest needs were met with a week of service. While there are benefits to this approach, giving participants a generalized location without communicating the possibility of service outside the city creates a barrier to effective pre-trip preparation processes.

***My Analysis: What Worked (& What Didn't)***

My group of students began our Immersion week by attending church alongside the same congregation we would be serving that week. From the moment we walked in the door, we were greeted with outstretched arms by the incredible members of Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church. The same warmth, hospitality, and love were shown each morning we walked through the door, especially by Pastor James Harris and his wife, Mrs. Linda. As we spent the week helping the older members of the church organize their newly renovated building, it was amazing to see each member of my team develop genuine relationships with the pastor and his congregation. Pastor Harris and the members of the church took time to share their stories with us, teaching us the history of the community and the church. They shared how they've witnessed the Lord working in their lives and the lives of those around them, sprinkling in little bits of wisdom and encouragement with each story shared. Being paired with Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church was the best thing about our partnership with Praying Pelican, as this partnership made the trip unforgettable. From this experience, I learned first-hand the value of partnering with a local church or nonprofit for STM experiences.

Another aspect of Praying Pelican's STMs model that was impactful was the significance placed on debriefs. As a Belmont on Mission student leader, I was trained on the importance of continuously debriefing the STM trip and had prepared discussion questions to unpack each day with my team. Recognizing the significance of this time of reflection, Praying Pelican carves out time in the schedule each evening for personal reflection and group discussion. Praying Pelican even provides questions for groups who are not prepared to lead their own debriefs — showcasing the care they have for the mental, emotional, and spiritual health of the participants that come on their STM trips.

Continuing with the idea of caring for the health and wellbeing of each participant, one thing that Belmont on Mission teaches is the importance of prioritizing rest, as well as personal times of devotion. Though group devotions and discussions are important and have their place on STMs, the University Ministries staff at Belmont continued to reiterate the importance of personal rest and reflection with God from the beginning of their leadership training sessions. Inspired by this, our group chose to do a devotional and time of prayer before breakfast each morning to center our hearts for the day, but we always saved at least a few minutes for personal time with the Lord. Then, after returning from our host church in the afternoon, students were given the option to rest, go on a walk, play games, or do anything within reason that would be restorative for them after a long day of service. Many students were physically and/or emotionally exhausted by the time they returned each afternoon, so this time of rest was essential to continue engaging with their group and their church partners for the rest of the week to the best of their abilities.

After dinner and debrief each evening, many students chose to prioritize their self-care to maximize their impact the next day. This self-care took a variety of different forms, from going

to sleep earlier than usual to taking time to journal or pray through the day. Whether catching up on sleep or talking to loved ones, everyone has different methods to decompress, reflect, and recharge for the next day. Though it can be so tempting to want to spend every moment of an emotionally charged experience like this engaged in community, I quickly discovered that taking time for individual rest was essential to the successful dynamics of my team that week. It was truly a blessing that Praying Pelican had a bit of flexibility already written into their schedules to allow for moments away from the group if needed.

From partnering us with a wonderful church family for the week to creating space in our schedules for group discussions and personal reflections, there was so much about Praying Pelican's approach to STMs that I deeply respect. However, there were a few moments within my experience with the organization that didn't seem ethical to me, violating core values that the organization claimed to always uphold. To begin, when you read the Pelican Guide, it seems as though Praying Pelican truly values empowering existing leadership. They even ask their participants to respect and follow the leaders already in place in both the church and the community, stating "When you commit to supporting and encouraging our partnerships, you are agreeing to come into their communities with a posture of humility, ready to learn and do your best in a way that honors existing leadership."<sup>115</sup> Throughout the week, I watched my team excel in this area — respecting the pastor and his congregation in every interaction and conversation.

The students on my team seized every opportunity to build relationships with Pastor Harris and each individual that walked through the church doors that week. Watching my team engage with the congregation, I witnessed so much respect demonstrated through thoughtful questions and active listening. For example, as we were organizing storage closets, my team

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<sup>115</sup> "Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions, 13.

came across dozens of faded newspaper clippings dating back to the 1960s, as well as many framed photographs covered in dust. With each artifact discovered, the students took advantage of individual opportunities to ask a member of the church about the significance of the item they found. Rather than immediately putting the treasures back in a box or tossing them in the trash without hesitation, the students chose to invest in relationships and inquire about the stories behind every item, leaning into the wisdom that was shared with them and taking every chance to get to know the community on a deeper level.

To learn more about Louisianan culture, many of our students stood in the kitchen as Mrs. Linda stirred her famous sausage and chicken gumbo, asking questions about her family recipe, as well as what it was like growing up in DeQuincy. Because Belmont on Mission places such a high priority on immersing yourself in local culture, students were prepared to seek out opportunities to learn about the church and the community, as well as the individuals that bring the culture to life. When actively searching for opportunities to connect, students found that every moment provided a chance to learn from our church partners, creating a space for them to feel seen, known, and valued in their wisdom and lived experiences. In every debrief and conversation, the team spoke so highly of Pastor Harris and his wife, and it was abundantly clear that the team had cultivated a deep level of respect for the members of the church over the week.

I do not share these stories to highlight the character of my teammates or shine a light on how great Belmont's approach is for sustainable STMs, but rather to highlight an area of growth for STM organizations that might otherwise be brushed over or altogether forgotten. When the leaders of a partner organization create guiding principles or policies, they ask their participants to completely honor and uphold their requests in both word and deed. On their page of PPM policies, the organization places the highest weight on their guiding principles by establishing

consequences, noting that "PPM or a PPM representative, at their sole discretion, may remove me [a trip participant] from the mission trip and send me home at my own expense" at any time for any violation of their core values or beliefs.<sup>116</sup> By creating such a final consequence for any violation of policy, Praying Pelican makes it abundantly clear that they expect each participant to uphold every principle — a sentiment that is great in theory, but only when the organization leads by example.

There were many instances throughout my trip with Praying Pelican where I noticed violations of the organization's policies, each varying in severity. To begin with something less consequential, Praying Pelican provided a dress code to ensure the modesty of participants, which included rules prohibiting leggings and requiring shorts or dresses to be a certain length.<sup>117</sup> When this rule was established, the Belmont University Ministries staff and Belmont on Mission student leaders adopted it immediately. Even though Belmont University does not have a dress code implemented, students participating in the trip were told repeatedly that they needed to pack accordingly to the dress code provided by Praying Pelican. Imagine the dismay our students felt when they arrived to see Praying Pelican student leaders wearing clothing items that were explicitly prohibited in the dress code. All week long, students asked why they were not allowed to wear leggings when the Praying Pelican representatives were continuously breaking the dress code.

While this simple example of breaking the dress code carried no real consequences for a domestic STM trip, a violation of more complex policies often comes at the expense of others, regardless of the destination. Let's return to the example of honoring existing leaders through

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<sup>116</sup> "Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions, 9.

<sup>117</sup> "Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions, 10.

humility. Showing respect to partnering churches is a theme reiterated countless times throughout the Pelican Guide, stating "I am aware that my words and actions are noticed as a guest in the partnership community. Therefore, I agree to act and speak in a manner that glorifies the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>118</sup> Following this notion of glorifying Christ as a respectful guest in the community, Praying Pelican writes, "I will use words that encourage and build up my team members and those in our host community at all times."<sup>119</sup> With the core principles of honor and empowerment reiterated to participants throughout the pre-trip materials, Praying Pelican as an organization clearly values building relationships on the firm foundation that you are a guest in the community you serve, leaving no room for entitlement or arrogance from participants.

Breaking policies such as this have the power to leave a lasting scar on vulnerable populations, especially when broken by an authority figure in a position of power. Unfortunately, my team witnessed a violation of this core value from a member of the Praying Pelican staff during our trip, which is something I did not take lightly then and cannot overlook now. To set the scene, my team spent the week getting to know the members of Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church. Over three days walking alongside them, we had the privilege of hearing their stories — from their childhood experiences to how the most recent storms had affected their congregation. Because we had taken the time to invest in personal relationships and showed a genuine interest in learning about DeQuincy, enough trust was established to ask more difficult questions, such as how the church approached the pandemic and what challenges the community was still facing following the storms and COVID-19. We were even able to hear personal testimonies and stories from Pastor Harris' family, which required a certain level of vulnerability

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<sup>118</sup> "Pelican Guide," Praying Pelican Missions, 9.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

and trust. Our teams understood that we were not entitled to hear these stories, but rather they were undeserved gifts of wisdom from new friends we had the privilege of getting to know. Hearing their stories and choosing to actively listen rather than speak was a simple yet powerful way we could choose to honor the members of the church and community throughout the week.

On our final day of service, the Praying Pelican representative announced that the organization's president would be making a surprise visit to each partnership site. Earlier that morning, the president had boarded a flight with the sole intention to visit the churches where teams had been working throughout the week. There is nothing inherently wrong with the president's decision to visit the Lake Charles area, but his approach to the situation was deeply flawed. To begin, the president arrived over an hour late to meet the pastor and our team. While this tardiness was already a blatant sign of disrespect to the church, it was also upsetting to Pastor Harris, who was forced to cut short his "tour of DeQuincy" for the students he had developed a relationship with over the week. The pastor had wanted nothing more than to give us a true immersive experience of the community he held so dearly, so we loaded up in the church's van that afternoon for the tour of a lifetime. This tour was cut short when we were told to return immediately to the church for a surprise guest, leaving us waiting in the parking lot in anticipation for over an hour.

What was most unsettling about the president's visit wasn't his tardiness though, but rather his words and actions when he arrived. The PPM president strolled in without an ounce of regard for the relationships we had spent all week carefully cultivating. He immediately began asking weighty questions without making any effort to get to know Pastor Harris or considering how the questions might make him feel, especially when discussing the trauma associated with back-to-back hurricanes that devastated a vulnerable community. To make matters worse, the

president continued to interrupt Pastor Harris as he tried to answer the difficult questions to the best of his ability. After questioning the pastor on the circumstances of the church, the president wanted a tour of the building to see what we had accomplished over the week for the church — implying that PPM had made all the difference for a church in need. As each moment unfolded, the president was continuously taking videos and pictures of Pastor Harris and the church without ever asking, as if it was his right to collect these personal memories and moments.

To conclude this visit filled with subtle conceit, the president spoke about how much he loved this local church and asked to pray over the pastor he cared for so dearly. While Christians are called to approach their neighbors with Christ-like love, there was no foundational relationship to warrant the extent of the feelings the president expressed that afternoon. In the fifteen minutes he spent with Pastor Harris and his wife, the president didn't try to honor the existing leadership by getting to know them or encouraging them genuinely. Rather, he spent the time flaunting his position in a way that many members of my group immediately noticed.

The demeaning nature of the president's approach to this visit belittled Pastor Harris and his wife on countless occasions in such a limited timeframe. With each interruption, you could see Pastor Harris' eyes sink as he realized his answers weren't worth finishing. By the end of the visit, the man who never stopped beaming all week seemed dejected, as the face that once radiated so much joy now held only a weak smile. When the president asked to pray, Pastor Harris hesitated for a brief moment — a reluctance that would easily be overlooked with no prior relationship. It wasn't that the pastor didn't want prayer, but rather that he didn't feel like he had a choice. The president was going to pray for what he had decided the church and its pastor needed in the past fifteen minutes, and everyone in the group knew it. Though his prayer was powerfully



worded like a rehearsed poem, it lacked the authenticity to make a genuine impact on those listening.

If the PPM president had approached this situation with an attitude of humility and respect to empower the church, then this would be a different story altogether. However, he instead chose to enter the equation like he deserved explanations and vulnerability from the moment he arrived. By carrying his power into the community, he effectively reversed the roles of host and guest — unknowingly insinuating that he knew more about what the area needed than the partnering church. This attitude goes directly against every relational policy outlined for participants by Praying Pelican, so it was disheartening to see the organization's key leader violating a core value that carries such a great emotional weight for community members.

My team's other concern regarding Praying Pelican was the balance of service to tourism. The STM trip was six days total, ranging from Saturday to Friday, both of which were travel days. Praying Pelican chose to honor Sunday, our first full day in Louisiana, as the Sabbath — dedicating the day to attending our host church, meeting our partners for the first time, and resting after a long day of travel. We then spent the next three days serving alongside our partner ministries until around 4 p.m. each day. Before heading home, our final day was designed for recreational activities that would allow us to gain a more holistic experience of the community and culture. Belmont's team spent the day on a swamp boat tour, and while it was a fun experience, it felt inappropriate to be enjoying the Gulf Coast when there was still more that could be done in DeQuincy.

To put this unsettling feeling in perspective, four full days were dedicated to travel, rest, and recreation while only three partial days were dedicated to service. The immersive experience of the week in its entirety was nothing short of incredible, but multiple members of my team

noticed the imbalance and walked away believing we could have spent more time serving and learning from the community. One remedy for this imbalance would be postponing the recreation time until after lunch, allowing teams to finalize their projects and spend some quality time with their host churches before embarking on a fun afternoon outing. By allotting three and a half days for both service and immersion, Praying Pelican could provide a more holistic experience for participants and better serve communities by making them a greater priority.

### *Applications to Research*

In conclusion, I began this academic research journey in hopes of discovering ways to improve the preparation process for collegiate STMs. By participating in the process through Belmont on Mission in partnership with Praying Pelican, I had the honor of seeing my research come to life. This trip helped me identify gaps in the materials that are typically provided to college students participating in a STM experience. This chapter highlights many things that both organizations did well, as well as areas for improvement to strengthen the preparation process. My experience certainly does not provide the quintessential opinion on all STM organizations, nor does it define Praying Pelican's ministry model or code of ethics in any established way.

Simply put, this chapter was designed to provide a personal context for the academic sources included and the suggestions that follow. To lay a foundation for my final chapter, I had to sufficiently highlight the educational knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about the future of STMs, as well as the lived experiences that qualify me to speak on such a matter. The experiences detailed in this chapter, when combined with the thorough research presented in the previous chapter, lay the foundation for the conclusion of this project — detailing how college ministries can better prepare for domestic STMs.

## Chapter Five: Improving Short-Term Missions Preparation Materials

### *Introduction*

This chapter is a culmination of countless books, weeks of preparation alongside the Belmont on Mission team, and personal experiences that have shaped my understanding of sustainable service. This research has provided a strong foundation of existing theories and strategies that are essential for collegiate STMs, as well as areas of growth that could easily be implemented to vastly improve their preparation materials. While many STM resources already exist, college students need succinct materials detailing cultural sensitivity and relationship-building techniques specific to their community to guide their STM experience. Many of the existing ministry materials were created for an audience serving abroad, and while many of the strategies suggested for international STMs can be applied to a domestic context, students serving local communities need tools that account for the varying cultures across the nation — tools that can easily be created and improved based on the existing materials.

### *Putting Existing Theories into Practice*

As reflected across sources, academics, ministers, and local community leaders alike agree that the most constructive STMs approach is forming partnerships with existing organizations. In an article published by the Evangelical Missiological Society, Danny Hunter notes that flourishing partnerships serve as the foundation of sustainable service — measuring the health of a STM partnership by its ability to "(1) succeed in what they attempt to accomplish, (2) create positive feelings between partners, and (3) shape the local church's understanding of itself and its place in the world."<sup>120</sup> This standard for success is built primarily on relationships, and when paired with the SOE's guiding principle of mutual design, collegiate ministries can

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<sup>120</sup> Danny Hunter, "'Short Time, or Long:' Best Practices to Turn Short-Term Missions into Long-Term Partnerships," *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society* 1, no. 1 (2021): 5.

take a step toward more ethical and effective STM work within the US through fruitful partnerships with local churches and nonprofits, humbly letting them take the lead in determining the needs of the community.

After the needs have been identified by local leaders, another essential approach to STMs is asset analysis. In *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert express that one of the greatest threats to sustainable STMs is not evaluating the resources a community already has before diving into service. They write, "Unfortunately, most STMs take a needs-based approach, loading human and material resources into vans and airplanes, never stopping to ask what abilities and resources may already be present in the communities they are seeking to serve."<sup>121</sup> In saying this, Corbett and Fikkert note that, without assessing the resources the community possesses, STM teams make harmful assumptions that lead to wasted time, energy, and hard-earned resources from both the participants and the community.

The fundamental need for asset-based approaches to STMs underscores the importance of foundational partnerships. Just as leaders within the community know the needs of the people best, it stands to reason those very leaders are also going to best understand the skills and resources organizations and individuals throughout the community hold. Rather than blindly attempting to analyze the assets of the community, STM leaders should be in contact with partner ministries encouraging asset analysis long before stepping foot into the community to serve. Furthermore, it is vital that STM leaders share the significance of their partnership and asset analysis with their participants, emphasizing the team's supporting role and championing the skills and abilities of the community before their own.

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<sup>121</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Leader's Guide* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014).

Research shows that understanding the significance behind partnerships and asset analysis better prepares STM participants for a lifetime of more sustainable service. In an article entitled “Preparing Students for Community-Based Learning Using an Asset-Based Approach,” authors Lisa Garoutte and Kate McCarthy-Gilmore explain that this understanding teaches participants to view vulnerable members of the community as valuable individuals in society — shaping the way they view impoverished communities and the greater world around them. “They [STM participants] view themselves as members of the local community, better understand the assets of a given space, and as a result, are more able to deconstruct issues of inequality, dominate/subordinate groups, and the lack of reciprocity often associated with service learning.”<sup>122</sup> Through the practice of asset analysis, Garoutte and McCarthy-Gilmore showcase the development of empathy within participants as they place themselves within the community, working alongside local leaders and vulnerable individuals rather than above them. Educating participants on asset analysis also cultivates a better understanding of imbalanced power structures within society, which translates to more socially-minded members of the community who can better advocate for long-term systemic solutions.

Research clearly demonstrates that another area crucial to effective STMs is the preparation of debriefing discussion questions for participants to engage individually and collectively during and even after returning home from the trip. In an article published by *Missiology: An International Review*, David Johnstone writes, “The return from any cross-cultural experience is laced with emotions... Relational, political, economic, cultural, theological, and emotional identities can all come under scrutiny. These experiences can be some

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<sup>122</sup> Lisa Garoutte and Kate McCarthy-Gilmore, “Preparing Students for Community-Based Learning Using an Asset-Based Approach,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 14, no. 5 (October 2014):52, <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotlv14i5.5060>.

of the most significant ways in which the worldview of a student is shaped."<sup>123</sup> Acknowledging the emotional weight of STMs, Johnstone suggests that participants will likely need time and space to both internally and verbally process the entirety of their experiences. Debriefs give STM participants the chance to consider everything from life-changing existential or identity-based realizations rooted in the relationships formed throughout the trip down to the smallest sensory variations, such as the food they were served or the worship services they attended. To Johnstone, these moments of debriefing are essential for growth to occur — creating a safe space for the challenging elements of STMs from the "discomfort of cross-cultural experiences [dissonance] to be transformed into new ways of acting and thinking [habituation]."<sup>124</sup> By acknowledging the newness of the experience and comprehending the variety of emotions that may have accompanied the discomfort, STM participants grow more comfortable with the unknowns of service learning in a cross-cultural context.

Establishing a deep level of understanding and comfort then prepares participants to branch out into new areas of service learning once returning to their communities — giving them the desire to visit and serve neighborhoods they might never step foot in otherwise. Included in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, author Karla Ann Koll expresses the significance of debriefing and personal reflection in future service, writing that critical thinking allows "participants to move toward critical knowledge, an understanding of the causes of the inequity and suffering they have seen and experienced during their visit. Critical knowledge then

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<sup>123</sup> David M. Johnstone, "Closing the Loop: Debriefing and the Short-Term College Missions Team." *Missiology: An International Review* Vol. 34, no. 4 (October 2006): 525, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182960603400409>

<sup>124</sup> Johnstone, "Closing the Loop," 527.

leads to action undertaken to address the causes of social injustice."<sup>125</sup> STMs are often criticized for implementing temporary solutions to systemic problems, but as Koll writes, STM experiences can inspire participants to steward their resources towards systemic change once they've returned, if they fully comprehend the magnitude of the issues they witnessed. In short, debriefing can open the door to a holistic understanding that shapes a participant's view on social issues beyond the bounds of STMs.

### ***Areas of Improvement Implemented***

To develop the kind of critical knowledge Koll suggests sparks systemic change, STM participants do need the wisdom of existing preparation materials, but these resources are far from complete. The primary problem with existing STM resources is that they are designed to develop critical knowledge for international missions — written to US audiences with a focus on drastic cultural differences between nations without giving much thought to the equally important variations within American cultures. In a popular book entitled *American Nations*, award-winning author and historian Colin Woodard brilliantly articulates the cultural distinctions within the US, dividing the nation into eleven distinct sub-nations with formative histories and cultural identities. In reference to these regional variations seen throughout the history of the nation, Woodard explains, "You see them outlined in linguists' dialect maps, cultural anthropologists' maps of material culture regions, cultural geographer's maps of religious regions, campaign strategists' maps of political geography, and historians' maps of the pattern of settlement across the continent."<sup>126</sup> From religion and politics to differing dialects and norms

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<sup>125</sup> Karla Ann Koll, "Taking Wolves Among Lambs: Some Thoughts on Training for Short-Term Mission Facilitation," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 34, no. 2 (2010): 94, doi:10.1177/239693931003400208.

<sup>126</sup> Colin Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* (New York: Viking, 2012), 8.

concentrated in different regions across the US, this single sentence highlights numerous cultural distinctions that STM participants need to know to ensure cultural sensitivity in service learning. Though these elements of culture aren't covered in the majority of STM materials, they are vital to the sustainability of domestic service. With such deeply rooted cultural distinctions in mind, collegiate participants need community-specific information geared toward cultural variations and diverse demographics in the US to shape a more accurate foundational view of their domestic STM destination.

Additionally, more attention should be given to cross-cultural communication. The majority of STM materials reviewed for this project were quick to reference Hofstede's international insights — six factors that are key to understanding how different nations communicate based on their cultural background. Included in nearly every conversation on intercultural communications, these dimensions include "power distance, individualism v. collectivism, masculinity v. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation v. short-term orientation, and indulgence v. restraint."<sup>127</sup> While these dimensions provide beneficial information on how different cultures approach communication abroad, Hofstede's insights are rarely broken down past the national level, despite the varying cultures within any given country. Reading about Hofstede's insights in STM materials targeted for international service, domestic STM participants might mistakenly assume that, since they are staying within the US, they are exempt from learning intercultural communication techniques, creating one of the greatest barriers to ethical STMs.

The research on cross-cultural communication strategies within the US is slim, so STM leaders must prepare their own intercultural communication materials to better prepare their

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<sup>127</sup>"National Culture," Hofstede Insights, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture>.



teams for domestic service. While it is difficult to find complete research on this topic in the STM context, leaders can use Hofstede's insights to guide their research on how different cultures communicate. To understand the power distance of the region they are visiting, leaders should research which groups hold the power within the community, diving into demographics such as race, gender, age, and ethnicity. To determine if the community is more individualistic or collectivist, leaders could explore the existence of community organizations dedicated to children and families.<sup>128</sup> If the community is more relationally minded, there will likely be more ministries and nonprofits committed to individual development and community flourishing. These are the kinds of questions STM leaders need to ask to best fill the gap in intercultural communication insights for domestic service learning.

In addition to digging deeper than surface level assumptions based on national stereotypes, STM teams should also try to learn phrases common to the regional dialect to ensure no miscommunications occur. For example, in many parts of the nation saying "yes ma'am" or "no sir" is considered offensive because of an association with age, despite the phrase's deep roots in southern heritage. Though it is now commonly used as a sign of respect towards someone older, the phrase historically had nothing to do with age. At its roots, men who were old enough to join the military were old enough to be considered a "sir" in society — invalidating the modern societal constructs of age limitations through an academic understanding of the phrase.<sup>129</sup> While this may seem like a simple example of linguistic differences, countless words and phrases translate differently across cultural bounds, even within the US, making this a

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Maralee McKee, "Should We Still Say 'Yes, Ma'am!' and 'No, Sir.'," Etiquette School of America, August 22, 2019, <https://www.etiquetteschoolofamerica.com/should-we-still-say-yes-maam-and-no-sir/>.

relevant topic of conversation for individuals preparing for domestic STMs. In addition to the regional dialect, STM leaders would also benefit from determining the linguistic breakdown of the area to prepare for other languages that might be spoken within the community.

In addition to cross-cultural communications, participants must cultivate a richer understanding of community development, encompassing everything from individual demographics to socioeconomic factors to paint a vivid picture of the community beyond just material needs. To begin, the PEW Research Center identified the following three demographic areas as the most influential forces defining the nation in recent history: "growing racial and ethnic diversity, increasing immigration, and rising numbers of older adults."<sup>130</sup> Given these driving forces, STM leaders need to learn about the demographics accounting for race, ethnicity, immigration rates, and age of the community they will encounter, as knowing the cultural backgrounds and ages of community members will guide the creation of the rest of the preparation materials. For example, how collegiate participants engage with a partner ministry composed of elderly individuals should be much different than how they might interact with colleagues similar in age. Furthermore, these areas of emphasis are also significant for STM tools because they encapsulate the increasing cultural diversity teams will likely encounter in the communities they serve without leaving the nation, as many of the existing materials suggest is necessary for a cross-cultural experience. The PEW Research Center continues in this study to say that these driving factors manifest differently in urban, suburban, and rural communities, which adds an additional layer of complexity for STM leaders to research.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, Richard Fry, D'Vera Cohn, and Ruth Igielnik, "Demographic and Economic Trends in Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities," Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/demographic-and-economic-trends-in-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

Comprehensive STM materials should also incorporate demographic factors that influence the socioeconomic stability of a community. In an article published in the *Journal of Development Economics*, authors Norman Loayza and Claudio Raddatz identify "wealth and income inequality, literacy rates, urbanization levels, and morbidity and mortality rates" as key to understanding the potential for economic growth within a community.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, the authors highlight the need to investigate the reach of different industrial sectors in the community when trying to develop a comprehensive understanding of socioeconomic status — assessing the most common industries in the area to understand the distribution of service and wealth, as well as the skills and resources available for internal growth. With industrialization research comes a deeper investigation into the workforce, including human capital factors such as education levels, unemployment rates, homelessness percentages, incarceration rates, and median household income averages.<sup>133</sup> Providing STM participants with this depth of socioeconomic demographics is intended to broaden their perspective on the complexities of poverty and spark empathy for vulnerable individuals facing complicated hardships.

Beyond socioeconomic demographics, STM leaders preparing materials for their teams should research the resources available for individual flourishing. In an article examining community development and satisfaction, sociologist Gene Theodori identifies nine areas of emphasis that lead to long-term community flourishing: "a place to raise a family; medical and health care services; local schools; opportunity to earn an adequate income; senior citizens' programs; youth programs; local shopping facilities; recreation facilities and programs; and

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<sup>132</sup> Norman V. Loayza and Claudio Raddatz, "The Composition of Growth Matters for Poverty Alleviation," *Journal of Development Economics* 93, no. 1 (2010): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2009.03.008>.

<sup>133</sup> Loayza and Raddatz, "The Composition of Growth Matters for Poverty Alleviation," 145.

overall physical appearance of the community."<sup>134</sup> As Theodori highlights through this research, access to community resources can greatly impact individual success and community progression.

Understanding the involvement of community organizations and accessibility of resources provides invaluable insight into the daily realities of the communities participants serve. From meeting physical needs such as food and medical care to developmental needs like opportunities for education and career growth, the presence of community organizations creates the conditions that shape individuals within the community. Thus, to cultivate an understanding of the daily realities of a vulnerable individual, STM teams must take stock of an individual's surroundings. Take access to groceries stores for example. STM participants may not even consider if the community they serve will have a full grocery store because they will only be present for a short time. However, in terms of community development, the absence of stores could indicate individuals living in a food desert with little to no access to fresh foods. Comprehending this specific reality before visiting the community provides STM teams with a greater understanding of the challenges individuals must overcome. Ultimately, this base knowledge is not meant to foster pity or a consequential savior complex. Rather, a holistic understanding of community resources is an essential foundation for fruitful relationships in a service learning context. With a dedication to learning about culture and community, STM teams can exponentially improve their partnerships.

### ***Sample Framework for Short-Term Missions Guide***

After identifying the existing theories that lead to sustainable service, as well as areas of growth for domestic STM resources, the final phase of my research is purely application-based.

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<sup>134</sup> Gene L. Theodori, "Examining the Effects of Community Satisfaction and Attachment on Individual Well-Being," *Rural Sociology* 66, no. 4 (2001): 622.

My goal from the beginning has been to create a sample framework for domestic STMs that would be comprehensive, including all the information needed for sustainable service, yet succinct, making it manageable for a college student balancing hours of coursework and extracurricular experiences. This framework for a STMs curriculum, founded on chapters of research, is now ready to be used as an outline to create materials for university STM trips across the nation.

The first step to any successful STMs experience is developing a key partnership that will guide the group's service. There are several ways to establish a STMs partnership, primarily depending on the service destination. If you are coordinating a local STMs experience within your own city, connect with local churches to walk alongside throughout the STM. Let the church be the guiding force in determining the ministries and nonprofits to serve, for the leaders of the church know the immediate needs of the surrounding neighborhoods best. Partnering with a local church is beneficial in multiple facets — creating a space for long-term investment, giving participants a fresh perspective on the efforts of the local church, providing opportunities to experience worship and the Lord in new ways, all the while supporting the ministries that are most needed throughout the community.

These benefits of partnering with a local church translate to any domestic destination. If you're interested in providing an immersive experience in a community farther from home, it's best to go through an established STM sending organization with a positive reputation for sustainable service. To determine if a STM agency is reputable and a worthwhile vessel of service, ask yourself the following questions based on the SOE guiding principles: Does the organization have a history of partnering with local churches and ministries? Does the organization appear to support existing efforts of community development, rather than

encouraging participants to bring their own solutions? Is the organization transparent about its use of resources — openly showing that its funds are spent as advertised? Does the organization acknowledge culture variations across the nation — providing tips and tricks for cultural awareness while in a new community? Finally, does the organization emphasize the importance of demonstrating humility and flexibility as a guest in another community? If the answer to each of these questions is yes, then partnering with the STM sending organization is likely a safe step towards sustainable service.

If the answer to these questions is primarily yes but you are still hesitant, research the organization beyond its promotional materials. Countless blogs and personalized research projects just like this exist with information on specific sending agencies, founded on personal experiences that can provide invaluable insight into the realities of partnering with the organization in question. As with any personal research though, it is important to weigh the emotional facts against what you know to be true about the organization and sustainable STM work as a practice. If placing a heavy emphasis on personal experience when deciding on who to partner with, be sure to find multiple viewpoints on the organization, specifically from the perspective of collegiate groups if possible to ensure the integrity of your research. Just because a middle school group had a negative experience doesn't necessarily mean a college group visiting the same community would face the same challenges, given the developmental differences that come with age and maturity.

If you choose to partner with a sending organization, you can use their materials as a baseline for preparing your own, maximizing the information that is true to ethical STMs and applicable to your domestic destination. When preparing the materials for your STM participants, be sure to include information specific to the region you are visiting. Consider how

the culture of that region may differ from the culture of your community, and research ways to best communicate in that region. Review the regional culture through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions for additional perspectives you might not consider otherwise. Study words and phrases that may have different meanings in another cultural context, educating yourself and your participants on the connotation of certain phrases in the context of a new dialect. Investigate signs of respect within the regional culture, giving significant thought to norms like dress code or addressing authority figures. By asking these questions in advance, you can prepare your team to demonstrate the utmost respect and compassionate compliance to your sending agency, partner church, and other ministries you may work with throughout the STM. Include all relevant information necessary for cultural intelligence in your participant guide.

In addition to cultural norms, it is equally important to invest in the specific community you intend to come alongside, learning as much as possible before stepping into their reality. Research and include the demographics outlined in the section above, as well as any demographics you identify that will paint a more holistic picture for your participants. For example, if you are participating in a STM experience targeting disaster relief, it may be beneficial to provide participants with statistics from the disaster. Highlight the demographics and geographic areas that sustained the greatest damages or received the least aid to date. Another strategy for understanding a community is researching ministries and nonprofits that exist in the area. Not only will this research serve your team well throughout your partnership with organizations in the area, but investigating local social service groups will establish a better understanding of the greatest needs the community is facing. Though you should always follow the lead of the partner organization through asset-based approaches, any research that will help your participants develop a basic understanding of the complexities of a community is beneficial.

With this information in mind, you are ready to prepare your domestic STM trip guide specific to your university, sending agency, and the community you will visit. It's best to make the guide as engaging as possible — including spaces for pre-trip journaling and asking questions with blank spaces that prompt participants to reflect on the research. In addition to providing participants with the STM guide, schedule pre-trip meetings to cultivate community within your team and facilitate conversations on sustainable service. With classes, internships, student organizations, and part-time jobs, there is never a guarantee that your participants will do their own research or reflection, making pre-trip meetings all the more important. Plan for multiple meetings, which will account for the inevitable absence of one or more team members, all the while maximizing the potential for pre-trip learning and bonding experiences.

During these meetings, find a balance of relational time, guiding instructional conversations focusing specifically on the community, creating space for questions, and allowing for personal and group reflections on differing emotional expectations and hesitations. Create a space for group members to share about past STM experiences and how they're feeling about the upcoming service learning opportunity, but keep the primary focus of the meetings on educating the team about the STM to come and the community they will visit. In terms of education, be prepared for participants to walk into the meetings blind, not having read the participant's guide, and remember there are different types of learners. While reading materials may be helpful for some on your team, be prepared to have group discussions and share audiovisual resources from qualified sources, such as the Lupton Center, for students who learn best in different ways.

Once you embark on your STM trip, your job as a leader is far from over. It is now your responsibility to facilitate group debriefs, which are discussions meant to analyze the day's events from every perspective — unpacking sensory observations, mental and emotional



challenges, areas of spiritual growth or dissonance, and various meaningful interactions that occurred throughout the day. This is a time for both individual and group reflection, so balance questions of personal contemplation with questions aimed at affirming and encouraging teammates. Furthermore, just as participants may learn in different ways, members of your team may process experiences in various ways as well. This is why it is important to also leave space in the schedule for personal rest and reflection — giving students time for whatever they need to best process the day, whether that be a personal time of prayer, going on a contemplative walk, verbally processing with a loved one who is outside the situation, or simply resting in the Lord's presence. There is no right way to process your STM experience, but debriefing and personal reflection are essential practices to develop the critical knowledge needed for a lifetime of service learning.

Once returning home, the final step to sustainable service is opening the door for further opportunities to serve. Prepare a list of nonprofits and ministries serving in your university's community. Provide a brief synopsis of why these organizations exist, service opportunities through the organization, and an organizational contact for students interested in serving. You can also prepare a list of local churches with college ministries if students on your STM team aren't connected to a local church but enjoyed the partnership and community provided on the trip. Beyond just providing information for local churches or nonprofits, invite your STM team to continue investing in the local community together. Schedule service days for your team to make the transition back to university life with a new commitment to service learning as natural as possible. Though the students might not seek out service learning opportunities on their own, they are much more likely to participate in local STM experiences if invited by a trusted leader to serve alongside, especially if this provides a consistent source of community. Service days

scheduled periodically provide much-needed routine, as well as quality relational time, that might incline participants to continue serving once back on campus and even after graduation. This is the ultimate goal of STMs — helping participants understand their role in God's mission in communities near and far, spurring a deep desire for serving others well every day rather than one week each year.

## Conclusion

There is not a single comprehensive STMs guide in existence that covers every area of planning and preparation for college students serving domestically — no single gold standard that can be applied to every service learning adventure across the nation. If you ask me, there never will be either one resource that equips every student to serve in any community across the US, let alone around the world. To be considered effective, a STMs guide needs to dive far beyond surface-level poverty alleviation strategies to engage the complexities of community development and regional culture variations, which simply cannot be encompassed in any one resource. To serve sustainably is to invest wholeheartedly in the community from the moment the trip is scheduled. This kind of service cannot be executed on a whim. Rather, ethical and effective STMs take months of research and preparation from both leaders and participants — committing not only to a week or more of sustainable service but also to the preparation requirements set forth by the university and partnering organizations. By applying the wisdom of decades of missionaries, pastors, leaders of local ministries, and the recipients of harmful service to cultural details and community-specific demographics, domestic STM teams can design their own preparation materials to build a strong foundation for sustainable service in cross-cultural communities across America.

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