

RE-THINKING “CAREER MISSIONS” IN LIGHT OF PAUL THE “SHORT-TERM MISSIONARY”

By

Larry Poston

Chair, Dept. of Missiology and Religion, Professor of Religion, Nyack College, NY

Introduction

The missiological community is currently divided over the issue of “short-term missions.” In this essay I would like to deal with this subject from two complementary perspectives. First, I want to examine the missionary ministry of the apostle Paul, mainly as it is recorded in the book of Acts. Since Paul is considered by nearly all to be the quintessential missionary, I am particularly concerned with the length of time he spent in each of the locations where he labored, as well as the *total* amount of time he devoted to his missions-oriented tasks. Secondly, I would like to re-examine the seminal thinking of Roland Allen, the twentieth century missiologist who ministered with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in North China. In the words of Lesslie Newbigen, who wrote the Foreword to Eerdman’s 1962 edition of Roland Allen’s *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?*, Allen “quietly but insistently ... challenged the accepted assumptions of churches and missions.” Since the purpose of this essay is essentially to do the same, I thought that it would be appropriate to enlist Roland Allen as an ally.

The Focus of This Study is Not “Definition of STM”

Much of today’s debate regarding “short-term missions” centers around one’s definition of “short-term,” but I would rather approach the discussion by dealing with what seem to be the more pertinent questions of *accommodation* and *adaptation*. Simply put, should we as contemporary missions strategists *accommodate* ourselves to the up and coming generation’s propensity for short-lived “experiences” and *adapt* our missions strategies and organizational structures accordingly, or should we dig in our heels and continue to require all newcomers to adopt our “classical” view of what missionary service “should” consist of?

Now a pragmatist would most likely choose the first alternative. “After all,” he would ask, “if we do not accommodate ourselves to the new generation’s worldview and addiction to ‘change,’ from where will we get replacements for the ranks of aging and retiring missionaries? If we must accommodate their short-term mindsets and capriciousness, so be it!”

Others, however, decry such an attitude, holding tightly to their belief that one’s “calling” and/or “giftedness” is for life, and that to treat missions as nothing more than a “short-term, experience-oriented enterprise that may or may not confer lasting benefits” is sub-Biblical, essentially amounting to a betrayal of the spirit of the Great Commission.

Personally, I find it tragic whenever I see members of an older generation judging a younger using standards that were most likely appropriate for an earlier time but which should never have been elevated beyond “temporary” status and which may not be appropriate for a new

day. To give one of the most poignant examples: boarding schools for the children of “career missionaries.” During the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of potential missionary candidates of high quality were lost to certain mission agencies because those agencies required the children of their missionary personnel to be educated at boarding schools. In many cases, children were separated from their parents at age six or so, and were forced to endure a parting that does not usually take place until a child leaves for college—a difference of some twelve years. Members of older generations stoically endured such separations, categorizing them as “sacrifices made for the sake of the Gospel.”

But consider the fact that during this period on the North American homefront, the evangelical subculture was increasingly championing a heightened “focus on the family” in an attempt to forestall growing numbers of family problems and the alarming rise in divorce rates among Christians. Having been raised on a steady diet of such emphases, how would a young couple be expected to view the insistence of a missions organization that one should voluntarily separate oneself from one’s children as soon as they attain school age?

We are essentially facing a similar disjunction between worldviews when it comes to short-term missions. Our North American and European cultures are currently geared to a lifestyle that involves *constant* change. Our market economies inundate us with fashions and gadgetry that become obsolete on what seems to be a yearly or even seasonal basis. Audio-visual media, computer systems, photographic equipment, telecommunications devices and the like undergo a constant evolutionary process that lures young people into a mentality of never-ending “shopping” and “advertisement-watching.” In this sense, the very culture of Western society has become “short-term,” and to expect our young people to have any familiarity at all with what an older generation would call “long-term commitment” is asking too much at this point in history.

Truth be told, however, we should not have been taken off-guard by this trend. If we had paid closer attention to what Roland Allen told us a century ago, the “short-term missions phenomenon” would most likely not have become such a controversial subject. In *Missionary Methods*, Allen made several statements that should have clued us in to the fact that the “short-term trend”—recent cultural changes aside—should never have been considered a product of modern “easy-believism,” but instead a significant aspect of New Testament Christianity.

Certainly Paul’s exploits as recorded in the book of Acts and as glimpsed in his letters reveal a ministry of evangelism, disciple making, and church planting that has rarely been matched. Allen is quick to point out the many differences between the work of the apostle and the activities of missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century. But he did not expect his observations to be well-received: “today if a man ventures to suggest that there may be something in the methods by which Paul attained such wonderful results worthy of our careful attention and perhaps our imitation, he is in danger of being accused of revolutionary tendencies” (p.4). And this may well be the reaction still, for it seems clear that one of these “revolutionary tendencies” of Paul was the fact of his being the epitome of a short-term missionary.

Paul’s Missionary Terms of Service

It is admittedly difficult to determine with precision the amount of time that Paul spent on his missionary journeys. But Allen concludes what nearly all Bible scholars must conclude upon careful study: it was not much. “In little more than ten years, Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Empire ... Before AD 47 there were no churches in these provinces; in AD 57 Paul could speak as if his work there were done ...” And Allen admits his astonishment that the

establishment of viable Christian assemblies had gone so amazingly fast: “that churches should be founded so rapidly, so securely, seems to us today ... almost incredible” (p.3).

Careful study by scholars allows us to determine approximately the amount of time spent in most of the places the apostle visited.

The First Journey (Acts 13:4-14:28—A.D. 44-46, 46-48, or 47-49). This first missionary outing lasted two years and involved visits to twelve locations: Salamis (on the island of Cyprus), Paphos (also on Cyprus), Perga (in Pamphylia), Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (and the surrounding country), back to Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch, and Perga, and finally to Attalia. If we were to divide a 24-month period equally between these towns and cities, this would yield an average of *two months* in each location.

Paul’s ministry on this journey consisted primarily of pioneer evangelism, including paradigmatic sermons to an audience consisting mainly of Jewish persons—(see 13:16-41)—and to an audience of pagans—(see 14:15-17). In 14:21-25, however, we find that “*strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true in the faith*” was also a part of his itinerary, as was “*appointing elders in each church and committing them with prayer and fasting to the Lord.*” Consequently: evangelism, discipling, and church planting—the New Testament model for missions.

The Second Journey (Acts 15:36 - 18:22) (A.D. 49-52 or 50-53). This second period of activity lasted between two and three years, with visits to the provinces of Syria and Cilicia, and with stops specifically in Derbe, Lystra, Phrygia, Galatia, Troas (very briefly), Philippi (“*several days*”), Thessalonica (“*three Sabbath days*”), Berea, Athens, and Corinth (“*one and a half years*”). Significant time was spent in seven cities (mentioned specifically by name). Of this time period, one and a half years were spent in Corinth (Acts 18:11). Only (at most) three weeks were spent at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), and “*several days*” at Philippi (Acts 16:12). The rest of the time (approximately a year) would have been divided between Derbe, Lystra, Berea, Athens and various smaller villages en route to the larger population centers. Thus far, then, the longest we have seen Paul stay at any one place is one and a half years.

The Third Journey (Acts 18:23 - 21:16) (AD 53-57). On the third missionary tour, which lasted a total of four years, Paul spent half that time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10)—the longest he is recorded as having stayed at a single place during his career. The other half of this time period was devoted to ministry endeavors throughout Macedonia, Greece (where he stayed three months—see Acts 20:3), Troas (where he spent seven days—see Acts 20:6), and then to Jerusalem by way of Assos, Mitylene, Kios, Samos, Miletus, Cos, Rhodes, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais, and Caesarea. In none of these latter towns does he appear to have stayed more than a few days.

Observations Regarding Paul’s Missionary Service

The total amount of time that Paul spent directly engaged in what we would call foreign missionary activity was 8 – 9 years; the equivalent of approximately two of the four-year terms of service that have formed the modern missionary’s standard for many decades now. According to tradition, Paul was released after an initial imprisonment in Rome, whereupon he traveled to Spain and then returned to Crete and Asia Minor, during and after which his letters to Timothy and Titus were written. This trip is alleged to have added no more than (and perhaps much less than) an additional two years to his total.

The longest period that Paul spent at any one location was two years (in Ephesus, Acts 19:10). The remainder of his ministry was divided between a large number of locations, where

he spent varying amounts of time. In most cases, however, he spent no more than a few weeks—or even a few days—in each place. Allen believes that this limitation was intentional; Paul was working out a deliberate strategy designed to enhance productivity. There were two elements of this strategy according to Allen’s characterization. The first was designed to produce *decisions for conversion*: “Paul did not establish himself in a place and go on preaching for years to men who refused to act on his teaching. When once he had brought them to a point where decision was clear, he demanded that they should make their choice. If they rejected him, he rejected them” (p. 75).

Secondly, Paul was exercising a form of psychology that contributed to rapid indigenization: “I think that it is quite possible that the shortness of his stay may have conduced in no small measure to Paul’s success. There is something in the presence of a great teacher that sometimes tends to prevent smaller men from realizing themselves ... By leaving them quickly Paul gave the local leaders opportunity to take their proper place, and forced the church to realize that it could not depend on him...” (p. 93).

Despite (or perhaps “because of”?) the short duration of his missionary activities, Paul was able to accomplish an extraordinary amount of work. He planted churches in a number of towns and villages in what was for his time a quite widespread territory. But as Allen notes, “... Paul’s theory of evangelizing a province was not to preach in every place in it himself, but to establish centres of Christian life in two or three important places from which the knowledge might spread into the country around” (p. 12).

It is clear from the biblical record that Paul had a very limited *focus* to his ministry. Evangelism, basic discipling (i.e., education in the foundational principles of Christian belief and practice), and the establishment of a rudimentary church structure were his only objectives. With Paul we do not find the “specialized” or “support” ministries that are so common today. We do not find “relief and development” work. We do not find the establishment of complex educational institutions; nothing beyond the Ephesian “lecture hall of Tyrannus” seen in Acts 19:9-10. As Allen summarizes: “by teaching the simplest elements in the simplest form to the many, and by giving them the means by which they could for themselves gain further knowledge, by leaving them to meditate upon these few fundamental truths, and to teach one another what they could discover, ... Paul ensured that his converts should really master the most important things” (p. 90).

In the midst of his itinerancy, Paul was constantly thinking strategically, planning how best to accomplish the indigenization of his church planting efforts. He “... and his fellow-workers admitted first only a few people of known reputation, who showed unmistakable signs of faith, and thereafter left the duty of accepting or refusing candidates very largely to these men ...” (p.98). Further, “he lived his life amongst his people and dealt with them as though he would have no successor. He remembered that he is the least permanent element in the church ... [if] he disappears, the church remains. The native Christians are the permanent element” (p. 153). And he was “careful not to lose touch with his new converts ... he was in constant communication with them by one means or another” (p. 87). With respect to this latter observation, he was able to lay the foundations for doctrine, practice and polity for the Christian church through the instruction given in his letters, which were recognized even in his own day as “scripture” (see 2 Peter 3:16) and eventually incorporated into the Biblical canon. Consequently: go in, bring the populace as rapidly as possible to a point of decision, appoint leaders from among the new converts, and then withdraw so that indigenization can occur. Keep in touch through regular and, if necessary, detailed correspondence. And “*pray without ceasing...*”

Paul’s “Edge” Over Today’s Apostles

There were two distinct advantages that Paul had over modern-day apostles. According to some, these advantages make it difficult to compare his situation with that of short-termers today. First, and certainly most significantly, *Paul did not need to spend any time at all in language study*. Since all of his ministry experiences were restricted to the Roman Empire, Greek was the only language he needed in order to communicate the Gospel and to educate converts regarding the faith. Whereas modern missionaries often spend two years or more in language study, Paul and his companions were able to minister to a multiplicity of people groups immediately upon contact.

Second, *Paul was not hampered by the need to conform to regulations and restrictions regarding movement between different nation-states*. Again, the fact that he remained within the Roman Empire meant that he had none of the bureaucratic hassles associated with the procurement of passports and visas that are essential today for travel between countries.

Are we unable, then, to make a legitimate comparison between Paul’s ministry and that of contemporary short-termers? Allen was convinced that this was not the case: “...however highly we may estimate Paul’s personal advantages or the assistance which the conditions of his age afforded, they cannot be so great as to rob his example of all value for us.” (p.4). Indeed, to the abovementioned conditions I would offer the following observations. First, with respect to the issue of learning a foreign language, many—if not most—of the other apostles of Paul’s day were certainly forced to do so. According to tradition, other early apostles preached from the Northern and Eastern African coasts to as far eastward as Southern India. Foreign language acquisition does not appear to have hindered their itinerancy at all. Second, English has become something of a global *lingua franca*. While it is certainly true that an enormous percentage of the planet’s population has no command of English at all, still it is true that it is the closest we can speak of as a “universal language.” Native English speakers, then, along with those who have learned English fluently, have a tremendous advantage over missionaries who know no English.

Third, language acquisition in general has made tremendous strides since Paul’s day. There are many high-quality programs currently available that allow a person to acquire the basics of a major language in a relatively short period of time.

Fourth, interest in linguistics coupled with the acquisition programs mentioned above has produced a cadre of translators and interpreters which can be enlisted for short-term enterprises. While communicating through an interpreter is almost always awkward at best, it is a skill which may be acquired and honed to ever-increasing effectiveness.

With respect to the issue of visas, short-term missions may actually be an aid in procuring them. In some countries, permanent or long-term residence visas are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. The reluctance on the part of a host country to issue permits may be due to anything from a generic anti-Americanism to a fear of losing native employment opportunities to foreign workers. In such cases, short-term missionary tours can serve to mitigate the fears of receiving nations: “the Americans (or whoever) won’t be here for very long,” or “they won’t be here long enough to take a job opportunity from one of our own.”

But mission agencies can—and should—become increasingly adept at “working the system” when it comes to obtaining visas for their expatriate personnel. While some of the larger agencies have become experienced at navigating the bureaucratic mazes and exploiting loopholes, others have not yet learned to be “*shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves*.” A case in point: I know of several organizations who refuse on principle to pay what are usually considered “bribes” to government officials to gain certain privileges. It is assumed that such a

practice would be in violation of Biblical precepts of morality. Yet careful study reveals that in some situations, bribery is commended in the Bible as a useful practice. Other verses notwithstanding, Proverbs 21:14 states that “*a gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath.*” It should be obvious that we do not want to be deliberately dishonest or criminal in our dealings—we are bound, after all, by the commands of Romans 13:1-7 and similar passages. But we need not necessarily be restricted by a decidedly *Western* interpretation of what “*submission to governing authorities*” and “*rebellion against authority*” would consist of. Jesus’ indictment of “*the people of light*” for their failure to be as shrewd as “*the people of the world*” (Luke 16:8) is disturbing—and we should do everything possible not to have this indictment apply to us.

Disadvantages of Long-Term or ‘Career’ Missions

There are problematic aspects of contemporary short-term missions—no one denies this fact. But what we are often unwilling to admit are the very significant problems associated with longer missionary terms, many of which are actually mitigated by short-term service. Such problems include the following.

1. *The loss of a sense of “apostolicity.”* In many cases, “career” missionaries become over time more like *immigrants* than temporary residents of a foreign country. As the “unfamiliar” aspects of a culture become “familiar,” as proficiency in the native language increases, as one’s children grow up enculturated into the “foreign” culture, missionary agents can—and often do—lose the sense of purpose that originally kept them on the “cutting edge” of ministry. They accommodate themselves so much to the culture that unless they are extremely careful and intentional, they become indistinguishable from the native population.
2. *The loss of a truly global missionary focus* due to the intensity of one’s concentration on a particular target culture. Ironically, one of the easiest ways to lose a sense of international awareness is to live as an expatriate in a single place for a number of years, particularly if the place of one’s residence does not provide access to the various means through which one can remain in touch with international affairs.
3. *The possible development of psychological maladjustments*, particularly on the part of the children of families who spend significant amounts of time at regular intervals in a culture designated as the “home” culture (but which is actually foreign to the children) and in another culture designated as “foreign” (but which is, in actuality, the childrens’ “home” culture).
4. *The increase in funding* needed to support the various expenses of a growing family (i.e., food and clothing costs, educational expenses, transportation necessities, etc.). Generally speaking, the longer a couple remains in a foreign culture, the more “cumbersome” their living requirements become, and the more difficult their decisions concerning ministry vis-à-vis family are to make.

Short-term mission assignments address each of these problems in turn. With respect to apostolicity, a short-termer is rarely tempted to think of himself as an immigrant. Indeed, cultural discomfort is often so intense that a short-term missionary struggles to remain even for the time allotted. But focusing intently on the ministry at hand—be it preaching the Gospel or engaging in relief and development work—and knowing that one’s commitment is “closed” or “finite” rather than open-ended can often become the means by which one is able to “stay the course.”

A shorter amount of time spent away from the networks and contacts that have endued one with a strong international awareness, and the subsequent return to those contacts and

networks would ensure that one’s missional awareness would remain at a higher level overall. Even if one were to become involved in a series of short-term projects, this awareness would be re-ignited by renewed contacts on a regular basis.

Shorter spans of time abroad, with longer periods in one’s country of origin (similar to Paul’s “furloughs” in Syrian Antioch after his first and second journeys), could perhaps go a long way toward mitigating the negative effects of the “missionary kid” experience. True, not all (and perhaps not even many) MKs experience serious psychological trauma or maladjustments, but the available research is clear enough to warrant the conclusion that at least some families would be better off availing themselves of the short-term option.

With respect to the need for increased funding that is often experienced by career missionaries in the midst of a four-year term and over longer periods, this problem could be assuaged by shorter intervals abroad and longer terms at home. Short-termers would be in much more frequent contact with their supporting churches or individuals during longer periods spent in their native country, and they would therefore find it easier to cultivate new supporting units for their ministries abroad.

Conclusions: Practical Implications for Advocates of Career’ Missions

In what ways could the concept of “short-term missions” be made more palatable to those who are convinced of an ongoing need for “career missionaries?” First, I think that we could conclude that it might be best simply to abandon the concepts of “short-term missions” and “career missions.” It is highly unlikely that the New Testament apostles would have recognized such a distinction in any case. Instead of focusing on the *duration* of a missionary assignment, would it not be more productive in the long run to focus on the *function* or *task* that will be involved with a specific missionary *project*? Instead of distinguishing between “long-term” and “short-term” personnel, I would suggest that mission agencies simply think in terms of specific *projects*, and then concentrate on recruiting personnel who will be able to undertake those projects. I would suggest that a minimal term of service (i.e., six months, one year, or whatever) be required of *anyone* appointed to a particular task, for the sake of efficiency and stewardship with respect to the raising of support and the expenditures of the agency on paperwork, procurement of visas, training, and the like. But beyond such a minimum requirement, the term of service should be on an “as needed” or “as able” basis. When a person has completed his assignment, or is unable (for whatever reason) to continue with an assignment, he should be re-deployed or be accorded the option to return to his homeland.

From a financial standpoint, one could determine a monthly support rate schedule that would be valid for all personnel, irregardless of how many months a person spends in a specific ministry. The basic schedule would, of course, have to be adjusted according to the cost-of-living in specific countries, but I would like to suggest that mission agencies abandon the “years of service” pay increases and instead adopt a “piecemeal” mentality that rewards productivity instead of longevity. Built into such salaries or schedules could be a fund for special ministerial or capital needs. Permanent structures owned by a missionary organization, however, should be kept to an absolute minimum. Rental or leasing agreements should be concluded wherever possible. I realize, of course, that “ministry” cannot be quantified in the same way that, say, a construction project can be, and so varying means of quantification for assignments will need to

be worked out. But I am convinced that this can be done, and that as a result “*bearing much fruit...fruit that will remain*” will become the order of the day.

Secondly, *training* for one’s assigned task—whatever its duration—must become paramount. Such an emphasis could serve to mitigate one of the most criticized aspects of the modern “short-term” trend: the lack of preparedness on the part of individuals sent on overseas assignments. Cross-cultural encounters between nationals and church members who have received little or no information regarding how one’s speech, dress, and general manner of conduct might be perceived by those native to a specific country have often been disastrous. “Longer-term missionaries” constantly run the risk of having their identification as Christians and the ministries they have spent years laying foundations for compromised, damaged or completely ruined by native encounters with “Christians” who exhibit ungodly or inappropriate behavior. But thorough, in-depth training combined with careful supervision during the ministry period can help to reduce to a minimum such negative encounters.

Training programs that are required of individuals before deployment should be designed so that they are *intensive, comprehensive, and appropriate to the assignment that is envisioned*. Intensiveness will be necessary because many have only limited amounts of time to commit, and these persons will want to get to the task at hand. Comprehensiveness, however, will be necessary even in the midst of the intensiveness; candidates should be required to learn a certain minimum of language and cross-cultural adjustment skills, as well as a basic familiarity with the target culture. Such items should be quantifiable, and “examinations” should be designed and required so that only those who “pass” will be allowed to depart on a missionary assignment. Such measures will impress upon candidates the seriousness of the undertaking and will serve to motivate them to study diligently and learn thoroughly.

As part of all training programs, I would highly recommend a thorough discussion of Timothy Tennent’s excellent article entitled “Six Dangerous Questions About Short-Term Missions” that appeared in Vol. 33 of Gordon-Conwell’s publication called *Contact*. These questions include the following: What is the goal/motivation of short-term missions? What is the cost of short-term missions? Where are short-termers going? What is the witness of short-term missionaries? What is the impact on field resources/personnel? What is the impact of short-term missions on long-term missions? The answers that Tennent provides are vital to producing a successful short-term ministry experience.

Thirdly, I believe that while we recognize that contemporary young people indeed comprise a “new” generation, this fact should never be cause for discouragement or criticism. Rather than emphasizing all the alleged “differences” between “them and us,” might it not be better to acknowledge all the ways these young people are just like the “older” generation? Are they really so different? I personally do not believe they are. Note the following.

- *They are technology-oriented and “gadget”-oriented.* But these traits have certainly characterized previous generations of missionaries. Almost every modern-day apostle I have ever known seems to have been enamored of technological advances, whether these are connected with audio electronics (i.e., radio broadcast equipment); visual technology, such as film production and projection, VHS and DVD imaging, etc.; cellular telephone technology; computer hardware and software; automobile and aircraft technology; new medical procedures, and the like. I would like to see a camaraderie develop between the “older geeks” and the “younger geeks,” with the older being able to learn about the use of some of the latest “gadgets” in the process. Let’s use these interests and skills—which can serve as pre-

evangelistic and evangelistic “lures,” discipling and educational aids, and even measures for relaxation and recuperation from the pressures of constant involvement with people.

- *Many are just as devoted to God and focused on the Great Commission* as the members of the previous generations have been. And this should be our expectation, should it not? God is continually raising up new “laborers for the harvest”—this is, after all, *His* mission. Why should we believe that He would raise up workers today who are less committed than in previous generations? Let’s encourage that devotion, and channel it in solid ministerial directions without stifling the fresh creativity of young people and without forcing them to adopt our “older” views of things.
- *Many—perhaps a majority—have a greater interest in Relief and Development types of activities* than they do in the “traditional” missionary activities of evangelism, disciple making and church planting. But rather than criticizing them for having given in to a “social gospel” orientation, let’s understand why they have focused on the areas they have. Let’s remember that they have been raised in an environment of social awareness, hearing school programs and watching television documentaries concerned with world hunger, poverty, modern slavery, human sex trafficking, AIDS epidemics, and the like. In most cases they have simply never been confronted with the issue of New Testament missions versus social gospel activities. Let’s educate them, introducing them to evangelical figures who in the course of the history of Christianity carried the Gospel to millions while simultaneously easing the physiological and psychological burdens of the human race in general. Let’s also recognize that this emphasis often has more to do with an American mindset than with an inappropriate theology. Quite simply, relief and development work is quantifiable in ways that the trio of ministry tasks mentioned above is not. Young people want to see results of their labors. They want to be able to check off small boxes on checklists signifying the measurable and observable completion of tasks. They have in many instances never been shown that such quantification is indeed possible—within limits—with respect to evangelism, discipling, and the establishment of churches.

As a fourth recommendation, let me suggest that at this juncture in the history of the Christian world mission, the wisest course going forward would be to intentionally develop *short-term, “strike force” mentalities* and the concept of “*multiple project*” or “*multiple assignment*” approaches to what were formerly called “career missions.” Rather than continuing to castigate today’s young people for their lack of long-term commitment, we should instead capitalize on their short-term bursts of energy. Such an adaptation could take two forms.

First, I would like to see the development of a “missionary band” or “strike force” mentality that assembles teams that are lightly but strategically equipped and which are highly mobile. Paul operated with a series of such groups. The first was comprised of himself, Barnabas, and (for a time), John Mark, moving through the itinerary of the First Journey. The second “band” began with just Paul and Silas (Acts 15:40), and along the way were added Timothy (16:3) and Luke (16:10 ff). The third “strike force” included at least Paul and Luke (20:5), and it is implied that there were other members as well (see 21:18).

The CoMission cooperative effort of the early 1990s is an example of this concept. When it became apparent that the former Soviet Union was undergoing a rapid dissolution and that a window of opportunity was opening for Christian missionary activity, a number of mission agencies pulled seasoned veterans from various fields where work was well-developed and re-deployed them to Russia and associated nation-states.

Let me suggest that modern pioneer-oriented “strike forces” be comprised of the following:

- At least one proven evangelist;
- Educators with enough knowledge of theology to ground new believers in the basic precepts of New Testament Christianity;
- A mixture of “visionaries” and “strategists” on the one hand, and “nuts and bolts” detail-oriented planners on the other, to provide both a direction and a structure around which a new work can be formed;
- Singles or couples without children, who will be able to give their undivided attention to the work at hand, and who can easily be moved to new locations upon completion of their assignment.

Finally, for those who desire to remain in a more “fixed” location, I would suggest a more intentional and strategic utilization of the current pattern of alternating periods of overseas ministry and “home service.” Each overseas term and home assignment could be cast as completely independent segments of missionaries’ lives and ministries. Each of these time periods would thus become in effect a “short-term” assignment, with clear goals and objectives partitioned off by a starting date and an ending date. Some missionaries might be moved around within a single country or even within a specific geographic area from term to term in order to maintain young missionaries at their peak effectiveness.

If not the geographic location, then perhaps the specific ministry or work assignment could be changed on a regular basis. For a number of the “Baby Buster” generation as well as the “Gen Xers” (or “Millennials”), a variety of experiences is considered necessary to develop one’s “self” to its “full potential.” This is not necessarily a “New Age” concept, as some have categorized it, for the Bible itself indicates that we are all being “*transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory*” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Does this passage not imply a process of development toward maturity? I believe that such means of spiritual growth and self-fulfillment for missionaries can and should be made an integral part of both missional and denominational long range purposes and goals. If young people see their activities leading to internal and personal growth as well as external and institutional development, is it not likely that they will throw themselves much more wholeheartedly into their work?

Some Closing Thoughts

When all is said and done, the “new trend of short-term missions” is not new at all. As we have seen, the precedent for this missiological methodology was set by the apostle Paul himself; indeed, we can easily make the case that “short-term missions” was the original pattern for the spread of the Gospel that was designed and implemented by the Holy Spirit and revealed by Him through the New Testament writers. Consequently, mission agencies adopting short-term philosophies of ministry represent not an innovation but rather a return to a New Testament pattern of mission.

Due to the exponential growth of the population of the planet in general and the revivals being experienced by many of the major world religions, Biblically motivated, properly educated, adequately equipped, and strategically synchronized “missionary strike forces” with a laser-like focus on the tasks at hand are certainly more than ever the “need of the hour.” Let’s do all we can to mobilize the current generation to meet these challenges.