



Episode 22: How to Debrief a Short Term Missions Trip Show Notes

Don and his wife have served with SEND International since 1987, first in Alaska and then in Russia. He has also worked in the Short Term Missions Department at SEND for 10 years. He also works with an organization called Standards of Excellence in Short Term Missions – soe.org. Don has previously visited us on the podcast – you can listen to his first interview [here](#).

Can you give us a quick explanation of what is meant by thorough follow through and why it is important?

- This refers to debriefing short term teams. It is a chance to process what a short termer has experienced in order to understand it and discover how they need to respond to it.
- The follow through goes beyond the debrief and includes helping the short termers to understand what the next steps are and identify how to move forward in ministry or in their spiritual journey.
- Debriefing is just one phase of thorough follow through. Debrief is the tool that you use to determine what the follow through should be for the short termer.

What are some of the benefits of doing a good job of thorough follow through?

- Research on short term missions continues to reveal that follow through is the most critical part of a short term missions trip, but it is also the most neglected part.
- One research claims that if you don't spend time debriefing and doing a thorough follow through, you are being irresponsible and unethical. There can be loss in growth and a poor investment of money.
- Every survey that the SOE has done, each church surveyed has indicated that the standard of thorough follow through is the area that they are the weakest.
- Anyone who spends time cross culturally should be debriefed and mentored in order to re-enter life in North America well.
- This is being found even in the business world as business people are being sent to overseas offices for a short amount of time. They have trouble adjusting back to life in North America and they need to be debriefed and counselled.
- If you have to choose between spending time doing pre-field preparation and post-field debrief and follow through, spend your time and energy on the post-field debrief and follow through. If you don't do a debrief, you're going to leave someone worse off than if they

never went on the trip, or if someone on your team grew and saw God at work, if you don't have someone help them process what they learn, you may lose that growth.

- For example, a young college student went on a trip to Peru and when they returned they didn't receive any debrief. They started to experience sadness and nostalgia about leaving her friends behind. Others come back and struggle with big theological issues – how can these nice people that they meant be condemned to hell? Or how can God allow people to live in slums? Others may discover a gifting they didn't know they had but have no idea how to put it to use.

When should a debrief take place?

- Debriefing is an on-going process. It should happen pre-field, on-field and post-field.
 - *Pre-field* – Talking about support raising, discussing how people feel about sharing their testimony.
 - *On-field* – Asking questions about what they experienced that day
 - *Post-field* – Talking about what they learned on the trip, what their next steps will be.
- It happens in 4 stages:
 1. *On-field* – This should happen before the team returns home, but after they've left the place of ministry.
 2. *Celebrate and Report* – Host a celebration of what God has done and give a report to the senders. People need to hear what you've done but it should also give an opportunity for the short termers to share how the trip impacted their faith.
 3. *Team Debrief* – about a month after the team returns – the honeymoon stage has ended and it should raise some serious questions about what God has shown us.
 4. *Individual Interview* – the team leader talks to each member one-on-one and helps them identify the next steps and then connects them with a mentor who will journey with the team member on a more long-term basis.
- Short term team leaders need training in order to be able to do this process well.
- There is a major investment after a short term trip – we focus on the investment before the trip but the investment doesn't end when the team returns home.
- Most of us are so tired when we get home from a short term trip that it is easy to ignore the post-trip follow through.

Can you give us an example of a debriefing that went well and what the outcome of it was?

- A college team went on a short term trip and one their way back to North America, they came by the SEND offices in Michigan and asked for help with the debriefing.
- The team leader knew that they would scatter when they got home and so he wanted to debrief before they got home.
- I ask each person on the team to encourage each other – I ask them to take 3 people and say something like, 'I saw Jesus shine through you when...' or "I saw the gift of.... in you when...."



- We got to this phase with this particular team and we got to one student who we will call Doug. The first person said, “I saw the gift of pastoring in you when.” All of the following encouragers also had written down and said they had seen the gift of pastoring in Doug. Each of them had a different example of how they had seen this gift in him. Before this, he hadn’t seen this gifting in himself, but he was encouraged and went onto seminary and became a pastor.
- The church gains because of debriefing short term teams. If the team hadn’t taken the time to do this, Doug may never have heard what he needed to hear about what God was calling him to.

What are you favourite questions to ask team members?

- In stage 1, you look back and forward. You might ask your team to answer questions like:
 - “When I think of leaving I feel....”
 - “Things I won’t miss are....”
 - “Things I’m going to miss about where we were are...”
 - “I saw the gift of When...”
 - “When I think of returning home, I feel...”
 - “What is the reception of my church and family going to be like?”
- During Stage 3 you get really serious and you ask people what they are doing with what they learned about God, about yourself, and about missions.
 - What are you struggling with?
 - How are you putting these new skills and gifts to work?
 - What new insights and challenges do you see?
 - What unmet expectations have you encountered?

Are there any recommended resources you have for mission committees, churches and colleges that do want to do a good job?

- [The Next Mile series](#) – has an all-ages and a youth edition
- [Re-Entry Guide for STM Leaders](#)
- [Re-Entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home](#)

How can people learn more from you?

- Email Don at djohnson@send.org

