



043: Short Term Missions: Charity vs. Justice – Gena Thomas

Gena Thomas served as a missionary in northern Mexico alongside her husband, Andrew, where they ran a coffee shop ministry and partnered with the local church. She completed her graduate studies in International Development through Eastern University. She is passionate about the Church being a catalyst for holistic poverty alleviation.

Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to be passionate about missions.

- I went on my first short term missions trip when I was 16. Since then I have done a lot of travel. After college, I moved to Honduras where I taught for a year and a half.
- After marrying my husband, we moved to Mexico where we taught English, worked as youth pastors and started a coffee shop to reach out to rock climbers.

You've recently published a book called, A Smoldering Wick: Igniting Missions Work with Sustainable Practices. In it you say, "My desire for this book is to see STMs go from being a smoldering wick to becoming a strong fire that brings light and heat to a dark and cold world." Can you expand on what you mean when you describe STMs as a smoldering wick?

- The phrase comes from Isaiah 42:1-4 – he's talking about Jesus who will bring justice to the nations. It says:
"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged



till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

- As a long-term missionary, I saw the attitudes of my neighbors when short term teams would come and leave and I saw the damage that was done when they came with an attitude of “this is what we’re going to do regardless of what you need.”
- I did see some short teams come with a posture of humility that really wanted to work alongside a church and this modeled to me that short term mission trips can be done well.

You talk about doing short term missions from a charity standpoint. What do you mean by this?

- Charity, as we know it today, is not actually found in the Bible. I go into details on this in the book, but the idea is that charity is a handout. This concept means that the haves give something to the have-nots and immediately there’s a power play in that transactions.
- Those giving are up on a pedestal saying, “we have what you need.”
- This can also happen in preaching and attitudes, not just in physical gifts.
- Altogether, the message being sent to the local church is that they are not enough – they need the North American church.
- It harms both those who are giving and those who are receiving.

You’ve outlined a few of the pitfalls of doing charity. If this is true, why do you think we continue to do things this way? Why aren’t we changing?

- We have changed some of the terms but we haven’t changed the behaviors behind the terms. I’ve mapped out a typology of participation and it goes through different types of participation in human behavior and have connected it to behaviors in short term missions and how they affect the people we are reaching out to.
- Sometimes it’s a lack of time as well. We feel pressure to lead a short-term trip and we don’t have time to do all the learning and incorporating this into how we do missions.
- There are appendices in my book geared to help those planning short term missions to do them well.

Can you give us an example of a characteristic of participation?

- One of the typologies of participation is manipulative participation – this might look like a North Carolina church sending a team to a Mexican church saying they want to go to paint houses for people in the local church. The North Carolina church asks the Mexican church to make a list of 10 people’s houses that need painting but they never ask if there are other needs that need to be addressed or if painting houses is helpful at all.
- The pretense is that the Mexican church is participating by choosing the 10 houses.



We get an idea of what you mean by the charity standpoint. Can you explain for us what you mean by doing short term missions from a justice standpoint?

- It's easy for us as North Americans to feel that we know what justice is but when we look at how the bible defines justice, it's totally different
- There are two different words meaning justice in the Bible. One means to give something to someone that is owed and the other means living in right relationship with others. When you think about it, it's hard to give someone what they are due without having a relationship with them and so they are very much connected.
- To do short term missions from a justice standpoint, they need to begin and end with relationship. If we can't start there, then we can't really do what we're trying to do – the Great Commission. We cannot fulfil the Great Commission without relationship.
- One of the toughest thing about good intentions, while it might simply look like good intentions from one side, the other side sees and experiences harm.

What are some guidelines you have to offer as advice to a church that wants to do short term missions well?

- As a leader, there needs to be defined boundary lines around what a church wants a short-term mission to be.
- There needs to be an application process for those coming on the short-term trip.
- Those who are going need to understand the goal and what the trip is about.
- A partnership relationship in which the sending and receiving communities are trying to determine if the current relationship they have with each other is mutually beneficial.

How does this fit together with long-term workers? How did you experience this as a long-term worker?

- There were several times when short term teams came at the beginning of June while I was still teaching as the school year goes to late June. I would be pulled away from my classroom to translate and help out.
- If we aren't helping the long-term ministry and vision of the people on the ground, the local church, we aren't helping out.
- We need to be very aware of what the long-term missionaries are doing and how a short-term trip can help them.

Are there particular resources or tools that you'd recommend?

- The last three chapters of my book has a lot of resources and practical helps.

In your book, you talk about bringing integrity to marketing of short term missions. What are the five points you have there?

- Not dehumanize the viewer



- Focus on the whole picture – both positive and negative
- Not focus on quick fixes
- Not oversimplify the problem or our ideal response to the problem
- Point to Christ

You craft a term – ‘integretize.’ Can you talk about what you mean by integretizing marketing of short term missions?

- I think it’s important to give dignity and we need to give dignity to the people we’re going to in short term missions. One of the things that I think is quicksand in marketing is having a picture of a suffering child and saying that you need to come on this missions trip to save this person. This is demeaning in so many ways and we’re perpetuating a God complex in ourselves.
- I ask people to not dehumanize the viewer or the people in the pictures. If you are going to a poverty-stricken area, don’t just show the sad and horrible pictures.
- Focus on the whole picture – both the positive and the negative. If we lean too much on the negative, we don’t introduce the hope of the world. If we lean too much on the positive, we fail to introduce the Savior of the world.
- It’s important that we point to Christ in our marketing strategies and in everything we do.
- Jesus wasn’t into quick fixes and neither should we. Redemption is never quick.
- We need to understand that poverty and people are multi-faceted. Nothing is going to happen overnight. If we’re in the business of relationships, then we’re in there for the long term.

Can you share an example of a short-term trip that worked well?

- A small church in North Carolina came down several times while we were down in Mexico. They were very intentional about asking the pastor about what his vision was for what they were doing, what the needs were and what he was already accomplishing without their help. They then shifted their plans and what they could do to help to line up with his plans and his vision.
- When I asked the pastor what he thought of the short-term team, and he said they had asked him specific things about his church that normally he wouldn’t share with any other church, but he was willing to share with them because it was clear that the church really cared about his church and what he was doing there.

If people wanted to follow up with you and learn more from you, how can they follow you or be in touch with you?

- Visit my website – genathomas.com
- Follow me on Twitter - [@genaLthomas](https://twitter.com/genaLthomas)

