



Episode 068: How to do Short-Term Missions with Excellence - Part 1

Brian Heerwagen is the CEO of [Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission](#). He's been with the organization since 2003 and helped write the [Standards of Excellence \(SOE\)](#). Brian has been on countless short-term missions and is the lead author of [The Next Mile](#) which is a resource designed to help local churches and agencies conduct effective short-term missions.

Brian, tell us a little bit about the Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Missions (SOE) and your role in the organization.

- The Standards of Excellence are about being that best that you can be for short-term missions. There are sub-points, the Key Quality Indicators (KQIs). Our hope is that anybody could be any better with any short-term mission from anywhere to anywhere.

Brian, your organization has helped identify 7 standards that help participants reach for excellence in short-term mission. Why and how did these standards come about?

- Short-term missions is not new. The Bible has some great examples of folks who are involved in short-term missions. In the last 100 years, short-term missions has grown from ideas and renegade individuals who go out, to something a lot more organized.
- There were probably around 26,000 people that went out in 1985, and I think it peaked around 2008 with maybe 4 million going out from the northern continent in one year. Nowadays, probably around 2 million people go on short-term missions each year.
- Many people are going and doing something, but they're doing as much or more harm than they are good, because they don't know how to function best in their short-term mission roles, how to prepare for it, or live it out.
- These standards were generated by a lot of leaders in the late 90s, early 2000s in an effort to try and inspire people with the right information to teach them how to do a much better job in their mission.
- Some estimates suggests a fifth or less are adequately prepared for either the cross-cultural experience, or are not tied into a strategic long-term vision of the field. That means four-fifths of two million people are potentially in a "right-heart-wrong-way" mode. They're doing the best they know how to do, but unfortunately, it is causing some challenges.



Before we started recording, you said that the first 2 standards stand apart a little bit. Would you just take a minute and explain why these first 2 are just a little bit different than the other 5 standards.

- The first 2 are philosophical and theological. They're harder to measure because they don't have quantifiable results. But these 2 are absolutely foundational to whether you do a short-term mission or not, and how you do the short-term mission.

Today we're going to discuss these first two standards, "God-centeredness" and "Empowering Partnerships." Let's begin with God-centeredness. Brian, what does it mean for a short-term mission to be God-centered?

- The best place to start is to ask the Lord, "What do you want us to do?" and "Where do you want us to be?" and "How have you wired us to do mission?" I find churches or schools, even sometimes organizations, are trying to follow through some strategic or faddish plan. I worked with one church who was considering short-term missions as a possible strategy to church growth. That's not necessarily a God-centered motive.
- Do you pray? Do you seek God? Henry Blackaby years ago said, "Look to see where God is at work and come alongside that." We're hoping people will be able to listen to the Lord enough to know what their purpose is. Therefore, that affects how they recruit, the lives of those that they take, and the methods that they choose to use in doing the short-term mission.

What are some of the indicators that a short-term mission is expressing God's centeredness as its purpose?

- There's evidence in a number of ways. One, certainly, is how leadership talks about the short-term mission as they're in early stages.
- I also think that when you're in the center of God's plans, recruiting is entirely blessed. The right people come forward through the right challenges. Provision is there as well when there's a God-centered motive behind doing a mission, as opposed to churches where it can be on off the cuff decision. When God is pleased, he is going to guard, protect and provide.
- I think some great indicators are not that it's easy, but that there's clearly evidence of God's hand in all aspects of it.

In order for a short-term mission to be God-centered, we need to bring together a group of people who need to have a certain character - godly lives. What are some of the elements of godly lives that you see as important in doing a short-term mission?

- When people are super dedicated to Christ and following his ways, there is fruit. There is sometimes an indescribable evidence of a person's faith and their place with the Lord. How do they live their lives? How do they serve in the church and in the community?
- Who you thought might be on your team may be different than what God had in mind. Look for the right people following Christ who are willing to do anything and obey the Lord. They're not always just the ones you would choose.



There are some church leaders and some churches who see that short-term mission is a great opportunity for discipleship of their people. In fact, some suggest that it's a pre-conversion discipleship experience as well. In other words, they're welcoming those who are yet to call Christ their Lord to participate in that short-term mission as well. What's the wisdom and the cautions that you have here?

- I do believe 100% that short-term missions can be effective for discipleship. It can be for those who aren't even saved yet. Everybody is on a journey with the Lord and some people are very mature in Christ. And others are at the beginning of their journey. I think when a church has heard from the Lord about where they're going, that affects who they choose to go. There are teams that you can take a lot of unbelievers and there are other ones you should never take unbelievers on.
- If it's a God-ordained mission and he raises up individuals to be on it, then it's our job as leadership to move those people up that spectrum from wherever they are to some place closer to what God wants them to be like.

You have stated that short-term missions needs to use wise, biblical, culturally appropriate methods which will in turn bear spiritual fruit. Talk to us about these things.

- Most of us who come from developed countries are a lot more addicted to *doing* than we are concerned about *being*. By God's design, we should be focusing more on who we are or how we'd be.
- When we want to partner with a mission field or do a short-term mission, we need to understand the culture, the goals, and the way they get to doing things. There are countries who are far less addicted to doing, and far more careful about being. We have to learn how to just be.
- Understanding what the Bible says about mission, how the culture functions, and making really good choices is a part of that God-centeredness that we talked about.

I wonder if you have advice for missions committee, a church, or individual who's thinking about short-term mission in the near future and would like to be culturally appropriate. What are some of the ways you would encourage them to grow in their cultural sensitivity?

- There are two pathways that I'd recommend. One is to check out the [Standards of Excellence](#) and look at the details that are written underneath each one. When you look at the God-centeredness piece or issues related to cultural sensitivities, you're going to find key quality indicators. They ask you questions that help you think through things.
- Grab on to anything you can that that's related to that culture. But when you do that, remember that there is no way to put one culture in one box. There are so many nuances. Learn all you can in any avenues you want, but nurture that information and cross-check it with those who live there. Then absorb that as a part of how you plan your STM.



I wonder if you could share with us an example of a short-term mission that you really believe was God-centered.

- Following after God's plans in the Old Testament and New Testament is seldom very conventional. We continue to put our plans and our strategies and our short-term missions in the conventional boxes. Being God-centered means that you're super flexible to what the Lord might do instead of what you thought.
- I'm thinking of one group in particular. There were 3 men who went as a part of a team to do a 10-day seminary intensive. But when they got to the country, there were no classes to be had. There were no students to attend. Instead of being frustrated and changing their ticket and going back home, they began to hang out at the coffee shop to see what might God be up to. In so doing, they became very good friends with a handful of men in that coffee shop, two of whom were later saved and became significant cultural and spiritual leaders as Christian men in government and in seminary levels. They became evangelists. The three men who went on the short term mission just said, "Yes, Lord," and there was greater ministry as a result.

The second standard we're going to talk about today is "Empowering Partnerships". What are some of the characteristics of an empowering partnership between a sending partner and a receiving partner?

- Empowered partnership implies that you give power to the other. That can only occur with great communication and a high degree of trust with God-centeredness. God is leading both sides into this ministry, therefore, we ought to trust each other and build a plan together.
- A characteristic would be "giving power" - or trusting the fact that these national leaders know something! They have good strategies, good plans, and ways of doing things and we should defer to those.
- It should be based on *trust* which is another real hallmark of an empowering partnership.

Do you find that North Americans are good at this? Are we good at empowering?

- Not so much. We have a reputation - and it's unfortunately warranted - that we typically come in and tell them "what they need", or "do it for them", or bring money or workers to help accomplish things for them. It's not often the case that we come in with a real humble heart, ears that are eager to just listen, and heads that are able to learn, and then join together in building effective ministry.



Brian, you indicate in your material that the primary focus should in fact be on the intended receptor. Tell us what do you mean by intended receptor, and why is that so important to focus there.

- An intended receptor would be all those on the receiving end of whatever this partnership is going to bring to pass. It could be the people in a city, the folks that live in the garbage dump, farmers who are going to learn how to do strategic annual plans related to their farming. It's anyone on the farthest end of this receiving spectrum. If we keep them as our known priority, then everything continues to feed into how we best benefit those folks for practical things, but ultimately for spiritual things.

What's the risk here? If we slip off of our focus on the intended receptor, what can happen?

- I think I can use an illustration here from my life. When the Haiti earthquake occurred a few years ago, a challenge for Haiti was when the world has showed up in the days that followed. There are so many crazy stories of people who were in “right-heart, wrong-way” mode. They wanted to help but a lot of them were perhaps more “me-centered”. It felt good to do something, but because they didn't understand the intended receptors enough, and all they could do is to clean up, and routine things.
- When I got down there, I spent time with a really trusted leader. I asked him a few questions about his ministry, and his vision, and how that has changed. This leader wept and he said, "In my 32 years of ministry here, no one has ever taken the time to understand our leadership, our vision and the needs of the people. They continue to come to this country to do what they think we need."

We want to acknowledge of course that efforts in short-term mission should benefit a variety of stakeholders. Who are the various participants that we need to keep in mind as we plan for short-term mission?

- To keep things super practical, the Standard of Excellence has divided our participants into three groups: The senders, the goers, and the receivers.
- Organizers tend to focus on the goers, but the SOE is designed to help you make sure that you're taking care of people in all three categories.
- The senders are the churches that are sending their people out, or it could be the organization with whom the people go. The goers are the people that do the going. The receivers are the ones that are receiving the team members in.

You refer to the importance of mutual trust and accountability in a partnership. What are some of the steps that we can take to develop this trust and accountability?

- Trust takes time and communication.
- It takes a real commitment to transparency. At times it means having to forgive when you cross lines or misrepresent something, or missed the mark because of cultural differences.
- It takes communication that occurs before, during, and after the mission.



I hear implied in your comments that maybe sometimes we are too light on this. We think that a few light communications, hurried communications will be adequate. But I'm hearing something else here.

- It's not only that we may not do enough communicating, but we don't do it effectively enough. The two-thirds world (warm culture world) is a non-linear thinking world. They sometimes feel like it may be better to tell perhaps an untruth or partial truth just to make sure you feel good instead of necessarily saying the facts - because they don't want to offend or hurt. To get them to a place where they'll communicate at depth takes time, transparency and the ability to say, "I'm sorry" and to forgive. It's an art.

How can we be better at transparency?

- One of the things that comes to my mind when ask that first is the idea of being servant learners. That means that we have two ears and one mouth. We have twice the listening power than we do with the speaking power.
- Rather than leading conversations and implying things that should be done, start by asking questions. Be honest, casual, and patient.

Please give us an example of a partnership that really was empowering.

- In 1998, we began to work with a missionary in Southern Italy. We thought there was going to be 1 team going and we were building a certain scenario for it. But on the sending side there were many people interested in going. I finally got the nerve to call the missionary and say, "You won't believe what's happening over here." He listened patiently to my story and then said, "Now, let me tell you what's happening over here." Long story short, it went from 1 team of 10 for 8 days, to 5 weeks straight in a row for 40-night campaign with over 160 people. This is where the God-centeredness matters a lot. What is God really calling us to? We got to be brave to go there.
- Empowering partnership was to say to this mission field, "Then, what do you want?" And then for us to be honest and say, "Here's what we can bring to the table." In the beginning, we were about 80% of the program and they were about 20%. Today we celebrate our 20th anniversary in the partnership and so many people have been saved over the years. Today, we're only about 20% of the program and they're 80%. There was transparency and patient communication. This actually is a great segue into the next standard "mutual design."

If our listeners at this point want to learn more about the Standards of Excellence, where can they get started?

- The best place to start is the [Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Missions](#) website. If you're motivated, you can just find everything you need on the website. If you do want to actually contact us and start a conversation, we are absolutely delighted to do that, and you can do that through the website.
- [Overview of the Standards of Excellence](#)
- [The Standards of Excellence Detailed Booklet](#)

