IT IS WORTH IT…

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN RELATION TO SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

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For several years now, I have been fascinated from afar (very afar) by the culture surrounding the climbing of Mount Everest. The first summit of Everest is said to have been May 29, 1953 by Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay from Nepal (www.mounteverest.net). For nearly 40 years after, Everest was only for the elite professionals of the climbing world, surrounded by the challenge of a seemingly unconquerable and often deadly mountain.

Then, in the early 1990's, something very interesting began to happen on Everest. The professional climbers were becoming the guides, leading less-experienced, but willing and well-paying, amateur climbers up the mountain. The peak ridge of Everest separates Nepal and China/Tibet. Almost all of these groups were led up the southern route, stringently controlled by Nepalese government. It is a technically easier route up the mountain and one that these well-trained, expensive, experienced outfitters and guides have been utilizing for the last 15 years. An average trip up the mountain here costs well over $50,000US (Douglas, 2006).

The north route up Everest, however, has now become the more popular route. From a skill level, it is actually a more dangerous and technically challenging route, but much cheaper from a financial perspective. This side is controlled by China. The government is very liberal with climbing permits, and so the mountain is worked by less experienced outfitters and guides. A complete trip can often be found for less than $10,000US. This side is for those who want easy access to Everest – the bargain hunters and independent climbers who exchange their bargain for a longer, riskier, more technical climb (Jenkins, 2006). 2006 was the second deadliest climbing season on record for Mount Everest, with 11 climbers dying and eight of those deaths taking place on the

cheaper north side of the mountain (79). The choice to be made is between a trip up the southern route (more expensive, but better equipped and safer) or a trip up the northern route (cheaper, less equipped, and far more dangerous). The difference is in the ease of access.

The trend on Everest reminds me of the trend in missions. For years, the concept of missions has been that it is for well-trained career missionaries and national leaders. They are the professionals, the "prominent", in the profession. Early on, missions moved from North to South. More recently national leaders, missionaries, and missions are coming from all parts of the world, and going to all parts of the world. The idea has been that these people are answering a call, dedicating their lives and their profession to "missions" as a career or life-long endeavor.

Most recently has emerged the short-term mission movement. I argue that, like Everest, short-term mission work has its' own southern and northern routes. One route is that of the professionals – the national leaders and career missionaries. They are the practitioners who have now become the guides and hosts. Theirs is the "higher-priced route". It involves the utilization of well-trained teams, hosts who are experienced guides, and making use of the team by integrating them into the ongoing work. It is not the easiest way to do short-term missions, but arguably the best way.

Unfortunately, there is also the "cheaper route", the northern route of short-term missions. Search online for the phrase *short-term missions* and prepare to find any number of organizations (I used Google.com and found 14,900,000 results for short-term missions in 0.13 seconds). Some of these organizations will take anyone who is willing to pay, putting all at great risk by taking them to places where no one is there before the

team arrives, no one will be there when the team leaves, and the team will be lucky to have a guide with them during the duration of the trip. It is easier, and maybe financially cheaper, but very costly on all other fronts. Like on Everest, I would argue that the ratio of negative missional experiences is much higher on the cheap and easy side of short-term missions. Here the host country pays the price by trying to entertain and tolerate uneducated, unprepared missio-tourists who can often bring detrimental effects to the ongoing work. Additionally, consideration must be given to the fall-out of these trips as the participants return to their home country with stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and bad theologies intact or reinforced.

The question then emerges: Is it worth it? Is it worth it to send and receive short-term mission teams? Is the risk worth the reward? In this paper I will answer this question solely in the context of the Church of the Nazarene. I believe that short-term missions as a practice, specifically those involving college and university age students, are worth it. But it is a qualified yes to short-term missions. I can say yes because of an understanding of this generation of students. I can say yes because of an appreciation for our denominational structure. I can say yes if we, as both senders and receivers of short-term mission teams, agree that from training through implementation and follow-up, we approach this summit cautiously and intentionally, avoiding the cheap and quick routes that can prove to be costly, if not fatal, in the lives and work of all involved. This paper is structured around these three affirmations: first I will review what the research is saying about this generation of students; then I will move to our denominational context for short-term missions, and finally will close with a discussion of the need for training and preparation of our teams.

THIS GENERATION OF STUDENTS

My background is with traditional undergraduate students attending Christian higher educational institutions in the United States. I have met many of their generational counterparts throughout the world, and my reference in this paper to "students" as those from the United States is not an intentional exclusion of these wonderful young women and men. Many of them have been gracious hosts to my teams, have sacrificed greatly for the sake of their ongoing education, and have significantly contributed to the work of the kingdom. Simply put, my access to research materials and my current research revolve around students from the U.S. In no way do I intend exclusivity, nor do I assume any superiority of U.S. students. On the contrary, I would simply like to use these findings to "introduce" this next generation of students from the U.S. as a hopeful means of furthering our global denominational dialogue.

When I look at this generation of students, I am encouraged to say a continued but qualified yes to short-term missions on their behalf. To my friends on the hosting side of short-term mission teams from the U.S., let me briefly share with you what the research is saying about these students. In U.S. research they have been called the "Millennial Generation" and my analysis surrounding them has me optimistic about their place in world Christianity. I offer here a brief profile of who they are as a means of advocating that they, maybe more so than any recent generation, have great potential in the dialogue of world Christianity. For a multitude of reasons, they are not so naturally the ugly Americans. Their profile and promise gives me hope for short-term missions in the Church of the Nazarene.

Generational research in the United States places the "Millennial Generation" as those born after 1980. Michael D. Coomes and Robert DeBard recently wrote an article entitled "A Generational Approach to Understanding Student*s*". I use their summary here, as a reference for the Millennial Generation's place in the U.S. generational chain of this last century:

The G.I Generation (1900 – 1924): Members of the G.I. generation are high achievers, fearless but not reckless, patriotic, idealistic, and morally conscious. The initials "G.I." stand for "general issue" or "government issue". The G.I. generation learned early on in life how to be good team players putting their trust in government, authority and community. A generation of "doers" and "believers", many achieved a higher standard of living and education than their parents. (http://library.thinkquest.org)

The Silent Generation (1925 – 1942): This generation is referred to as "silent" because of their place between two dominant generations: the G.I.'s and the forthcoming Baby Boomers.

Boomers (1943 – 1960): This well-known generation had college careers that coincided with the civil rights and women's movements in the U.S., as well as the Vietnam War. They are known to have a significant place in the U.S. economy as spenders and savers.

Thirteeners (1961 – 1980): Also known as Generation X, there are now more than 44 million 18- to 29-year-olds in the U.S. They are largely a product of divorce, and considered to be the first generation of latchkey children. Since wealth has shifted from young adults to older Americans (namely the Boomers), they are the first generation whose quality of life is not expected to supersede that of their parents. They are non-ideological and see themselves as America's clean-up crew.

Millenials (1981 -): Millennials see themselves as counterpoints to their preceding Gen X generation. While Gen Xers wanted to operate independently, Millennials prefer to work in teams. Millennials also see the possibility of correcting the excesses of the Baby Boomers. There is an important tie that has been discovered between the Millennial generation and the G.I. generation that I believe is relevant to short-term missions:

> Most importantly to Strauss and Howe's theory of "generational cycles" (1991) is the relationship between the emerging Millennial students and the elderly G.I. generation. Howe and Strauss (2003) contend that 'the most important link this G.I. generation has to today's teens is the void they leave behind: No other peer group possesses anything close to their upbeat, high achieving, team-playing, civic-minded, reputation' (p.22). Perhaps because of this perceived void, adults are encouraging Millennials to adopt the values of the GI generation. For their part, Millennials, in surveys, have responded that they have the highest regard for members of the GI generation, and the lowest for the members of Generation X (Howe and Strauss, 2000). [Coomes and DeBard, 2004].

Then in his article entitled "Millennials Coming to College" Robert Deboard describes the characteristics of Millenial students that have emerged from recent research. I have briefly summarized those characteristics here, adding my own bold italics for emphasis.

***Special*:** Boomer authority figures have told members of the Millenial generation all their lives that they are special.

***Sheltered*:** Protective Boomer parents have gone out of their way to protect these kids, encouraging them to keep the rules.

***Confident*:** Millenials have come to trust authority because it has worked on their behalf.

***Conventional*:** They have accepted social rules, resulting in the respect of cultural differences far more than the Boomer authority figures do.

***Team oriented**:* They like to congregate and be together because they are highly relational and connected. Even though the previous Generation X used technology as an escape, for Millennials technology isn't an escape; it's a means of connectedness. Cellular phones, email, text messaging, internet sites like MySpace and Facebook, shared music and media all point to connectedness.

***Achieving*:** They expect to be held accountable. They have seen their mothers and other women make significant strides, and expect that this will be part of their life as well. They also have a high respect for "heroes" created by the media.

***Pressured*:** They feel pressured to perform, and the result is a reliance on structure. DeBord also surmises that this generation trusts that their elders will

organize a path toward success, as long as they, as the young people, do not divert from it.

"We're all the same."

Beyond a list of characteristics, I am fascinated by their gravitation to "sameness". Anyone familiar with the days and weeks after short-term missions knows the risk of a "we're all the same" mentality. Many times this is no more than coping with culture shock, however, I think that before we categorically reduce it to a coping mechanism, we should explore it. Up until about three or four years ago, as a short-term mission team trainer, I had to emphasize relational ministry. The main motivation behind this was to help students see the value in their relational work and abilities while reducing the risk for offensive behavior on their part. In the last few years, however, I have seen a significant, deepening understanding and desire for relational ministry. They want to be in relational settings. "With the people" is the phrase I hear often. Again, my immediate reaction is to assume that with this desire for relationship, there is an inherent condescending and naïve tendency to oversimplify multicultural ministry. And while this can be true, the reality that is becoming clear to me is that this generation of students is relational – deeply relational. They respond and learn in the context of relationships and they walk through cultural barriers and constructs somewhat easily because they desire to interact genuinely.

Technology is playing an interesting role in our young people's lives as they endeavor to maintain their relationships after short-term trips. It used to be that saying good-bye at the airport meant saying good-bye most likely for a lifetime. Now, it can often mean, "Good-bye and I will email you when we get home." Technology and the

Millennial's technological savvy are strengths in their global relationships and enable, if not validate, their "sameness" thinking. In other words, there certainly is the McWorld syndrome that David Livermore talks about in his book "Serving With Eyes Wide Open", a developing Westernized global culture that shares a taste in language and attitude (Livermore, 2006). However, what I hear in the sameness that some of our students use is a profound insight and rediscovery of our shared story in the Gospel. It's not that they don't see or refuse to see our profound differences across socio-economic and cultural lines; it's that they *can* see and are attracted to our shared ground. Moreover, they want to find and learn about that ground.

Historical shaping of the Millennial worldview

Since short-term missions are many times an intentional challenge to the participants "worldview", I will consider here a few major trends that have shaped the worldview of these U.S. Millennial students. First, there is the idea of political polarization. It has been argued that rarely has the U.S. been more politically polarized than it has been in the last few years.

> A review of data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Project from 1982 to 2002 shows that the political views of college freshmen are becoming more polarized at the expense of the middle….The Millennial generation is being lauded for its conciliatory nature. Whether it will use those skills of reconciliation to bridge the political divide or succumb to the politics of difference remain to be seen [Coomes, 2004, p.22].

Another trend at work with Millennials is what Coomes calls an increased interest in eschatology and spiritualism (22). He cites a 2003 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute found that 'more than two-thirds of third year undergraduate students demonstrate a substantial level of religious engagement and commitment…'(22). Finally, Coomes references the tension between nationalism and globalization as a

significant point of impact on Millennials. He states it as strongly as, "Not since the 1930s has the United States struggled so fitfully with the competing desires to engage with the larger world and turn inward and limit its interaction with others" (23).

I have offered here a summary profile of the typical U.S. student who would be signing up for a short-term mission trip. And there are plenty who want to sign up. As is attested to in Livermore's "*Serving With Eyes Wide Open*", we have a generation of students who are ready, willing, and more able than ever to go. In what will surely become an oft quoted statement, Livermore says, that, "As many as four million Americans take short-term mission trips out of the country annually; and American churches now spend as much on short-term mission trips as on long-term missionaries" (Livermore 12). But, just like Everest, the increased numbers of participants certainly do not necessarily indicate that something positive is consistently taking place. In other words, while the potential embedded within the U.S. Millennial student attending our Nazarene universities has me optimistic about their place in world Christianity, these students cannot stand alone in short-term missions, there has to be an appropriate context within which teams are mobilized and utilized. In this next section I discuss the invaluable but easily overlooked place of our denominational structure that is intrinsically tied to these students participating in short-term missions.

OUR DENOMINATIONAL CONTEXT

Here I explain my second "yes" to short-term missions in the Church of the Nazarene. I think that we can say yes because of the structure, history, and context of our denomination. One of the most dangerous aspects of the short-term mission movement is, blatantly, those organizations who make use of teams in places where there has been

little or no work prior to the team's arrival, and/or there will be little or no work done once the team departs. These trips, designed primarily to scratch the service itch of the participants, are in my opinion on theological, global, communal and ethical thin ice (if they have not already fallen through).

As a denomination, we have a built-in structural strength in that our teams can be hosted by people who are at work long before the teams arrive and will be at work long after the teams leave. This affords the team the opportunity to understand the all-too-often missed concept of their "place" in short-term missions. If seized, teams and individual participants have the opportunity to be in the continuum of a ministry. They can serve a small but important role in the ongoing work.

From my own experience, students of the Millennial generation are actually quite relieved when the come to understand this concept of place. It coincides seamlessly with their intuitive and respectful desire for relationship. They are intelligent, team orientated, and often are hesitant to enter into short-term missions for fear that this kind of work is shallow and self-centered on the part of the participants. They don't want to be destructive missio-tourists; they want to work relationally and hope to contribute to the greater good of the ministry they join. They grasp these crucial concepts of mutuality, dialogue and engagement.

The Global South

Consider that these Millennials are coming onto the world scene at what is a fascinating time for our denomination and for world Christianity in general. I am referring to what has been called *the Global South*.

> We know, thanks to the works of numerous scholars (mostly missiologists and historians of world Christianity) that the Christian faith is no longer the faith of white Western people alone. David Barrett, Dana Robert, Wilber Shenk, Lamin Sannah, Andrew

> Walls, Kwame Bediako, and Phillip Jenkins (to name only a few) have taught us that the center of gravity of world Christianity has shifted to the South [Tiénou, 2006].

Certainly the Church of the Nazarene is dealing with the reality of this shift, and what it means to our structures, infrastructures, theologies, programs…the list goes on. I cannot delve into that discussion here. It is relevant at this point to contemplate the intersection of this U.S. Millennial generation, short-term missions, and the global South. I cannot imagine a generation better suited to stand at this intersection. Consider the profile of the millennial students in the U.S. right now. I see these U.S. students as a generation more likely than many to assume responsibility for and potentially whole-heartedly shun the United States ecclesial-centrism and act in a way that forges new relationships, models and modes, and respect for the global church and her inter-workings. They are capable of going and returning to be solvents of Western ethnocentrism.

While this centrism of power of the global North used to and still can mean a risk of the abuse of power and isolation of the global church, they could lead the U.S. church in coming to the table with the rest of the world. Again I qualify by saying in no way do I intend to propose that they are the "best" suited for this conversation. Such ideology would be neo-Western paternalism and tends to be the main control mechanism in the realm of mission-driven power struggles. I look to the future discussions of missions and fear more than anything that the global North's ideologies will leave those of us in the North so far behind that we'll think we're in front and seemingly in charge. We're probably more at risk for global irrelevance than anything else.

However, I look to these Millennial students, working in this denominational context, and see that Christianity's shifting center of gravity does and multi-faceted

trajectories, and none of it makes them dizzy. They are more malleable to the idea of a global theology and global relationships. For them to adjust policy, structure, and procedure based on the demands of Christianity moving from North to South is surprisingly effortless. Again, they work relationally. Some of the most effective short-term teams I have seen are those that have been cooperative efforts of students from the U.S. and national students of the host country or countries. These cooperative, relational efforts at ministry are a true example of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. I watch as these groups of students from different walks of life and different countries rather easily overcome their immediate differences and are able to serve and learn together. There is a natural propensity for relational ministry like I have not seen before. Assuming the guiding work of the Holy Spirit, the relationships between all of our students, across countries and cultures, will continue to give rise to our denominational strengths, fallibilities, and adaptive challenges. The question becomes one of voice and power for the next generation. Will they be enabled to lead accordingly?

Finally, given the profile of the Millennials combined with the context of our denomination, there is one final qualified yes to short-term missions for me: an implicit need for the training of our participants.

TEAM TRAINING AND DEBRIEFING

I say a qualified yes to short-term missions if we are deeply committed to the training and debriefing of our teams. Another entire paper can be dedicated to the topic of team training. Again, my context is university age teams from the U.S. and I have found through the years that these teams of students want to do well, and they respond to training. Certainly, there are critical components to the pre-trip training that must be

considered. We must prepare our participants to be able to learn, serve, and establish relationships in another context. Enough training materials are on the shelves these days to help trainers prevent most of the ugly American mistakes and classic cultural blunders. The next level is to be contemplated, especially as it pertains to a natural propensity for cross-cultural relationships exhibited by this Millennial generation. They want to be more than sensitive to their hosts and student counterparts and they want to be able to engage them relationally and spiritually. There is a desire to form relationships on the field. Again, I reiterate that while the temptation is there for trainers and hosts (myself included) to easily discount this desire as petty, naïve, and something of an innocent misperception of their place, I am coming to believe that this generation is tapping into our commonalities in the body of Christ, gravitating towards our shared experience of the gospel. As I train, I have begun to introduce this, to embrace their natural sensitivities, and to present old "behavioral standards" in a new light of "acts of worship." In other words, the way one acts in a host home, including respectful interaction, the eating of food, the mindfulness of cultural norms, etc. is talked about not just on the grounds of preventing offensive behavior, but doing and not doing these things as an act of worship. Eating a plate of different food isn't just a culturally sensitive thing to do; it's an act of worship. The point is belabored here a bit because my students respond and react to this; they process this information at a spiritual level.

The value of training and debriefing or re-entry is crucial from the aspect of stewardship of the opportunity as well. For most students I work with, their chance to serve and learn abroad during the university years is typically limited to one or two trips. I am coming to believe, more and more, that as trainers and administrators of these

programs, what we do when these students return is an issue of spiritual stewardship. We must search for ways to help our returning students to process and understand the connection of this global experience with their every day lives. Many of these students who participate in short-term missions discover their connectedness to the world, to their counterparts in the world, and return with questions about what they can do in light of who they have met, and what they have been a part of. It is the "What now?" question.

Process is, of course, a key element to the post-trip time for these young participants. Help in the days immediately after return must be given for those who experience reverse culture shock. Again, thankfully more and more materials on reentry after short-term missions are becoming available. I have found that it is important to talk about re-entry prior to teams ever leaving. The re-entry process, I believe, is a process of helping a student to clarify the work and will of God in his or her life in light of the time spent out-of-context. This process must be one of responsible obedience, something of a razor's edge to walk with them. Pay too much attention to the reactions and thoughts after a trip, and one runs the risk of hyper-reflection that can lead to us pushing them off the deep end and making them into hopeless and lifelong U.S. bashers who never dig in and take responsibility for effecting change; it's an exchange for pining away months and years in a fantasy that the grass is greener on the other side of the passport stamp. Pay too little attention to the reactions and thoughts after a trip, and the time away is eventually relegated into something of an emotional scrap book that is occasionally pulled of the mental shelf and affectionately remembered.

Time that passes after a short-term mission experience is time for patience, critical reflection, and exploration of response. It is a time when negative pre-trip

perceptions and concepts can be further torn down and replaced with more compassionate, Christ-like realities. Or, it can be a time when frustration and dissonance reinforce and further imbed stereotypes and misconceptions. Even a three week trip can be seen as seed planted in the life of a participant that, if tended to after the trip, can produce the fruit of obedient response for a lifetime. But it does require patience to walk that razor's edge. The post-trip processing and programming must be viewed as guiding them off the summit. To leave one's short-term mission team to figure out the re-entry process on their own has analogous consequences to an Everest guide leaving a team on the summit and wishing them good luck on their return trip.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been an attempt to present challenges and opportunities for the Church of the Nazarene in relation to short-term missions. This is a unique window of time for us – a time when young people from the U.S., a country known for arrogance in most arenas, instead could have a humble, relational spirit that desires connectivity with their generational counterparts and predecessors across culture boundaries. Like an ascent of Everest, I think that we, as a denomination, have two choices of our route for short-term missions. We can rely on the experience of missionaries and national leaders to be our guides; choosing a path that is intentionally placing our short-term teams in the context of a greater, ongoing work. This is the more difficult way, certainly the more costly way, but always the best way. Or, we can take the easy way, accommodating all who want to go as quickly as possible. It is a "the more the better" approach to short-term missions. In doing so, I believe that we risk the lives of all involved: participants and hosts. Maybe not literally, though this isn't out of the question. We risk the damage, reinforcements of

stereotypes, disillusionment, irrelevance, and waste that can ensue when we don't strategically collaborate and align our world-wide efforts, these short-term mission teams, and the ongoing work of the Lord.

> *...some of us are going to keep trying to climb the mountain, because we love it, and we're gonna keep trying to work on it because we like introducing people to that environment, because it's good work and good things happen up there.*
>
> Dave Hahn, 44. A long time Everest guide who has been on 14 expeditions

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