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### Special Issue on Short-Term Missions in Latin America

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## Short-Term Missions: Paratrooper Incursion or "Zaccheus Encounter"?

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The Joining Hands Network of Peru is an ecumenical association of four Peruvian Protestant churches and eleven Christian non-profit organizations which works in six Peruvian regions. The Peru Network works in association with twenty Presbyterian congregations in the states of Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Michigan. Since 2000, the Peru and US networks have worked together to identify the causes of poverty in Peru and to respond to them through actions which, working through the relationships between Christians in the Global North and South, have generated powerful impacts in three key areas: economic development, human rights, and the care of God's creation. Specifically, Joining Hands:

- ♦ operates an economic corridor that in 2006 exported \$100,000 worth of quality Peruvian handicrafts created by artisans living in poverty, increasing their income an average 300%;
- ♦ accompanies the widows and orphans left behind in the extreme political violence of Peru's civil war (1981-95); and,
- ♦ helps lead a campaign to defend children's health in the smelting town of La Oroya, one of the most contaminated places in the world: 97.2% of La Oroya's 12,000 children currently have lead poisoning.

Each activity is coordinated with our sister congregations in the United States because we are convinced that both the causes and the solutions to Peru's poverty are found in the relationship between the Global North and South.

## Paratrooper Incursion

Late each night during the North American summer months of June, July, and August, hundreds of t-shirt clad teams of US American Christians arrive in Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima, Peru to begin their short-term missions (STM) experience. Most have paid more than \$1800 (US) for the seven-to-ten day experience and are hopeful that the time will be transformational in their Christian lives. In our experience, almost all come to make what they hope will be a lasting contribution to the community to which they travel. Many seek a deeper sense of purpose in their lives and a connection between their Christian faith and the needs of the world.

Yet if personal transformation and a lasting contribution to the receiving community (generally, through a construction or service project) are the primary objectives of STM, a growing body of missiological literature raises fundamental questions about the real effectiveness of STM to accomplish these goals. Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, and Brown (2006) note that, despite the massive scope of the STM phenomenon (their research indicates that *more than 1.5 million US Christians travel abroad each year on STM*), participation in STM does not increase participants' financial support of missions, does not decrease their materialism, and is as likely to increase participants' ethnocentrism as it is to decrease it.

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Kurt Ver Beek, sociologist and expert on short-term missions, has researched the effects of STM in Honduras.

In a case study on Honduras, Ver Beek (2006) comments on the poor stewardship of North Americans who did jobs Hondurans could do themselves. He notes that the Hondurans who benefited from STM groups who built homes in the wake of Hurricane Mitch appreciated the gesture of support. However, if given a choice, they expressed a clear preference for US American STM workers to have stayed home and sent the money they would have spent on their trips, thus permitting the construction of

more homes and the employment of more Honduran workers.

In 2002 our Joining Hands Network contemplated inviting some of the US congregations with whom we were in relationship to visit us. We spoke with a number of Peruvian churches and Christian NGOs who voiced some serious arguments against the effectiveness of some STM groups. Reverend Urcísimo Mancha, a Presbyterian pastor in Huancavelica, Peru's poorest region, declared, "If they sent us the money they spend on their international travel, we could build more churches, feed more children, train more pastors." Others argued that the planning and hosting that STM groups require distracts the Peruvian church from its true mission. It can degenerate into a kind of "ecclesiastical tourism." Others questioned the mixed message of US Americans who insist on Peruvians cutting costs in their church projects yet appear to spare no expense to care for

STM groups. One national church leader who asked not to be identified stated, "Why do our US American brothers require 'resource stewardship' from us when evaluating projects that we administer, but they say nothing about the stewardship of their STM trips? Isn't this a waste of Kingdom resources?"

Because of these unspoken power relationships, at its worst, STM can deform the relationship between members of the Body of Christ. Without proper preparation in both the STM group and the host community, a "visit of Christian solidarity" can quickly degenerate into fund-raising frenzy with host community members forced to outdo each other in an attempt to win a hearing for needed financial support from visiting North Americans. Over time, the result can be that local Christian leadership is more sensitive to foreign STM group preferences than the will of the local community.

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In summary, our Network was confronted with a troubling image of STM as "Christian paratroopers" ("*paracaidistas*"), in the words of our Network's former President, Rev. Patricia Cuyatti. This mission style is characterized by:

1. Fleeting, short-term interest.
2. A focus on "doing a project" rather than developing relationships with us.
3. STM group initiative and control of STM project.
4. Little follow-up (as evidenced in post-trip e-mail contact and return visits).
5. Scant evidence of the "personal transformation" that would suggest that things learned in Peru are being incorporated into participants' Christian life.

Rev. Rodrigo Maslucán's article (2006) in this volume describes in painful detail a "paratrooper mission" in Iquitos and references Ver Beek's observations on the limitations of the real impact of much STM work. Together, our Network dreamed of a different kind of relationship with the US American congregations with which we work, a relationship characterized by the following:

1. Persevering, long-term, mutual commitments to Christ's mission based on human relationships.
2. A willingness on the part of the STM group to get to know us and the concerns which motivate us in ministry rather than an exclusive focus on accomplishing a task.
3. Local community initiative and control of the STM project with a corresponding strengthening of the community's capacity to respond to its own needs.
4. Extensive follow-up in e-mails, return visits, and the growth of new initiatives.
5. Profound, personal transformation in which the interaction between STM group members and hosts serves as a catalyst which causes participants to live out their Christian faith in new and meaningful ways.

Our Network characterized this model of STM as a "Zaccheus encounter," taking its inspiration from Luke 19's paradigmatic response of the wealthy tax collector to an encounter with Jesus Christ. A "Zaccheus encounter" STM enables US American Christians to meet Jesus in the brokenness of the poor and oppressed communities in which we work. Such an encounter, we concluded, creates horizontal and mutual relationships more characteristic of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), helps the host community

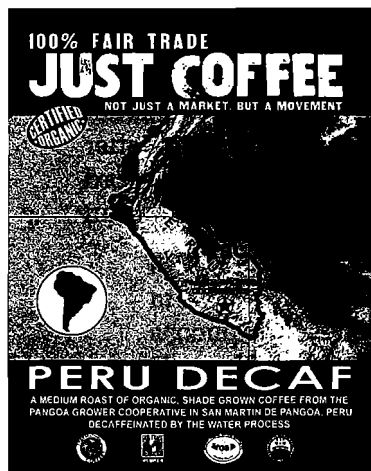
strengthen its capacities and sense of dignity, and provides a powerful witness to the surrounding community. In 2006, a group of Presbyterian high school youth from Alexandria, Virginia teamed up with Protestant youth from Huancayo, Peru to plant trees in a nearby indigenous community. Due to pre-trip preparation and intentional "coaching," the depth of relationship and the cooperation between the Peruvian and US American youth were so clearly visible that, after the group departed, the indigenous community sent word to the church that it wanted the church to open up an extension in their community.

### **Broad Street Presbyterian Church: A Case Study of a Zaccheus Encounter**

If "personal transformation" is the desired outcome that is used to justify the high cost of STM, what does a Zaccheus encounter STM trip look like, and what is its impact on the sending church? As our Network has helped program dozens of STM groups from Joining Hands congregations in the USA, some experiences are illustrative of this kind of encounter. The experience of one Joining Hands congregation, the Broad Street Presbyterian Church (BSPC) of Columbus, Ohio, is recounted by its Mission Committee Chair, Patti Nussle:

Since the initial Peru experience in 1999, the church has sent four large groups of over twenty people each and seven smaller groups invited for specific work projects. It has sparked nothing less than a pentecostal fire: over eighty people and their families living and breathing and thinking and planning on how to improve the quality of life of their Peruvian brothers and sisters—their "new family." Small groups meet regularly to think and plan and pray. Our mission committee has expanded

its role. Peruvian colleagues have been guests in our homes. Our congregation has connected with other



Pangoa grower cooperative in San Martin de Pangoa, Peru. <http://justcoffee.e-beans.net>

Joining Hands congregations in the USA about our Peru projects and relationships. Some people now travel (often at their own expense) and speak with them regularly. At least ten people scan the internet daily for news of Peru, and when a story hits, the e-mail wires start burning up.

As a direct result of our Peruvian STM experiences, our church is selling fair trade coffee and hosts textile fairs of Peruvian artisan goods. One member started a fair trade business to sell more Peruvian crafts. Another is now studying to become a pastor. Three members co-authored scientific articles for publication in support of the Joining Hands' campaign for children's health in La Oroya. Several of our college students altered their course of study. Another is seeking to become a missionary, and 1,100 people have first-hand stories of the love God has for his children in Peru.

### "A Second Family"

In analyzing the Broad Street Church's missional praxis, several noteworthy elements emerge. Church members apply to the Mission Committee which intentionally selects an intergenerational group (generally, ten youth/ten adults). The age mix will shape the missional community during the STM, and more importantly, after their return to "normal life." Young people's idealism and questioning of traditional

values keep the adults reflecting on the experience long after the actual trip. "It is a powerful dynamic, parents learning from their children who will inherit their parents' world," commented Barbara Northrup, one of Broad Street's 2006 Peru STM leaders. For many participants, the deep cross-generational relationships established before and during the trip provide the experience of "a second family" that many find profoundly healing in the increasingly lonely world in which many US Americans live. Frequent post-trip gatherings are so effective in maintaining the growing missional family's focus that care has to be taken not to appear exclusive or unwelcoming of church members who have not participated in the Peru experience.

### Mutuality in Mission

During the orientation, the theme of mutuality in mission is stressed, thus preparing the participants to receive from their Peruvian hosts as much as they are prepared to give. From their arrival in the country, the STM participants are paired with Peruvian counterparts, spending their first days in relationship-building activities, to the exclusion of any "work." It is critical that participants be prepared for this in the pre-departure orientation as it cuts across the grain of the primary US cultural value which is used to justify the time and expense invested in STM: work.

Only after this initial bonding period do the mixed teams begin to minister together, generally to a separate population. As a result of the STM encounter, rather than being a merely passive recipient of US American generosity, the Peruvian host community is enabled to minister to a population in need. Despite the emphasis on mutuality in mission, it is important to recognize that the US American

participants need separate time, generally every day, to process the changes going on in them and to pray together. This time apart prepares them for the harder task of transferring what they have learned back to their daily world.

### Intensive Preparation, Processing, and Follow-up Builds *Communitas*

In the application process, group members covenant together to participate in a challenging eight-month orientation process that identifies the cultural baggage, often ethnocentric and sometimes even racist, that US Americans often unconsciously carry into cross-cultural missional encounters. The orientation curriculum has been developed and refined over the years and enriched with materials and feedback from other Joining Hands congregations. The intense process prepares participants for the rite of passage they will experience together as they "cross over" national borders and cultural lines, many for the first time. Drawing on the work of anthropologists Van Gennep and Turner, Priest, et.al. note the similarities of STM with rites of passage:

Like pilgrimages, these trips are rituals of intensification, where one temporarily leaves the ordinary, compulsory, routine life "at home" and experiences an extraordinary, voluntary, sacred experience "away from home" in a liminal space where sacred goals are pursued, physical and spiritual tests are faced, normal structures are dissolved, *communitas* is experienced, and personal transformation occurs. (2006, 433-34)

Over the years, BSPC has developed a remarkable asset: a "critical mass" of more than eighty STM "returnees" who frequently volunteer to orient, pray for, debrief, and otherwise support the new STM participants. Having lived

through a "liminal" experience together, they maintain strong ties with their "age class" (the group with which they travel to Peru), ties which are then transferred to others who have experienced *communitas*. The intense pre-departure orientation, regular cycle of devotionals and debriefings during the trip, and intentional follow-up program have been essential in growing this mission movement within BSPC. A new BSPC and STM participant Shana Vernon avowed, "Without this continuity and guidance, we know we would have fallen into the trap that so many other Christian-hearted aid organizations do and ended up throwing one-time money at a problem that requires so much more of us than that."

Vernon should know about the real cost of personal and societal change. When the 2005 environmental health study team she and other BSPC members were part of was attacked by a crowd, allegedly stirred up by the heavily polluting local company which did not want the study to take place, her Peruvian hosts told them that the situation had become too dangerous for them and offered to escort them back to the capital to safety. Vernon and the BSPC STM group did not hesitate in their response: "We came to be with you and that commitment hasn't changed." All seventy people in the room embraced and wept, and the following day the team was able to collect all the needed biological and environmental samples which conclusively proved widespread heavy metal contamination

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in the city. "I have never experienced the Body of Christ so intensely as that night," recounts local Catholic parish worker Yolanda Zuritas.

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generally have neither life insurance nor access to quality health care. Due to Peru's tremendous external debt, every Peruvian child is born owing more than \$7,000, a debt which is paid off with funds that should be used for minimal health care, education, housing, and roads. Our Network has discovered that as US American STM participants bounce over Peru's pot-holed roads, if we are silent about the causes of our poverty, our North American visitors will not realize that some of the causes are woven into the very fabric of their economic prosperity. In our silence, we can easily prevent the Zaccheus encounter from happening.

### Sensitivity to Context

A final characteristic of the Zaccheus encounter experienced by BSPC STM teams is its remarkable sensitivity to the local and national context of mission in Peru. Most STM groups are only vaguely aware that they are traveling to a socio-economic context where more than half the population struggles to live on less than \$2 a day and 20% live on less than \$1 a day. US American Christians are separated from their Peruvian hosts not only by the language barrier but also by the economic reality that, on average, they earn more than *sixteen* times more than their hosts, who

Because the BSPC teams intensely study the socio-economic context of mission in Peru before departure, they open the door to a powerful dynamic of Zaccheus transformation when they come into relationship with the poor, those whom Brackley (2000) terms "the victims":

It seems that the victim offers us the privileged place (although not the only place) to encounter the truth which sets us free. The poor usher us into the heart of reality. They bring us up against the world and ourselves all at once. To some extent, we all hold reality at arm's length—fending off intolerable parts of the world with one hand and intolerable parts of ourselves with the other. The two go together. As a rule, our encounters with the world place us in touch with internal reality, as well. In particular, when the world's pain crashes in upon us in the person of the victim, the encounter dredges up from within us the parts of ourselves that we had banished. The outcast outside us calls forth the outcast within us. This is why people avoid the poor. But meeting them can heal us. We will only heal our inner divisions if we are also working to heal our social divisions.

The victims of history—the destitute, abused women, oppressed minorities, all those the Bible calls "the poor"—not only put us in touch with the world and with ourselves, but also with the mercy of God. There is something fathomless about the encounter with the poor, as we have said, like the opening of a chess game with its infinite possibilities. If we let them, the poor will place us before the abyss of the holy Mystery we call God. They are a kind of door that opens before that Mystery and through which God passes to get at us. Clearly we need them more than they need us. Small wonder that people keep returning. Something has happened, a kind of falling in love, I think.

In the experience of our Joining Hands Network, most STM that we have observed in Peru tends to be a rather uncritical "paratrooper incursion" in which US Americans'

ethnocentricity and "rugged individualism" are only strengthened. We have facilitated our share of paratrooper encounters. We are seeing, though, glimpses of another way to open up the possibility of a Zaccheus encounter, a living encounter with Jesus Christ through the poor (Matthew 25) that leads US Americans and Peruvians alike to allow Christ to be Lord of all the aspects of our life—our economic choices, our social relationships, our corporate boardroom decisions. Rev. Judy Hoffhine, the pastor who helped birth the Peru missional family in BSPC, describes the post-trip symptoms of Zaccheus encounters begun during their STM in Peru:

It has to do with the deep rumblings of justice and righteousness that every single person (as far as I know) who has participated has experienced. It exhibits itself in the deep desire and often dissatisfaction that we aren't doing more, that we aren't just quitting our jobs and changing the world. There is that justice thing that we've been a part of, and we don't know how to do it at home. Many of us are still involved in some way, through the three basic programs of Joining Hands. But it's so much deeper, it's the knowledge that Christ's way and the way of the poor are somehow clearer or more faithful. And it's so hard

for us to get there. Nevertheless, we do what we can each day.

Intergenerational teams, an emphasis on mutual mission, intense preparation, coaching and follow-up, and a culture of context sensitivity are some of the factors which have enabled a growing number of Zaccheus encounters with Broad Street Presbyterian Church. In the hope of such encounters our Network continues to invest our limited time and resources in receiving STM groups from our US American sister congregations.

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