
Periodic Paper #3

Short Term, Long Term, on Whose Terms?

Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.

Catholic Theological Union

USCMA Annual Mission Conference

University of Notre Dame

October 1, 2006

Introduction

I am grateful for the invitation to participate in the USCMA's annual conference, especially so because of the theme that has been chosen. The gathering of people at this conference provides a wonderful opportunity to explore the many sides of the question about the term of mission—not only in matters of effectiveness achieved by varying amounts of time in mission, but also what are the theological and missiological implications of different lengths of service in mission. In this address I hope to explore some of them, and look forward to what promises to be an engaging discussion in the coming days.

As a way of getting started on this topic, I will make this presentation in four parts. The first part will be a brief sketch of some of the data that are available on differing lengths of mission. This will set the scene for the second part, which will look at what cultural factors contribute to even considering different lengths of service in mission. Are there factors, unique to this country, that need to be taken into account as we look at varied terms of mission? This will lead into the third part that will explore the theological and missiological ramifications of short- and longer-term mission. A fourth and concluding part will try to draw the various strands of this discussion together and pose some questions that deserve further examination. The phenomenon of short-term mission raises a host of interesting questions. My hope here is to explore a few of them.

The Profile of Missionary Service Today

The last decades of the twentieth century saw a remarkable change in the patterns of missionary service emanating from the United States. On the Catholic side, mission had heretofore largely (but not exclusively) been the province of religious orders. Missionary orders had been founded during the nineteenth and through the first half of the twentieth century whose sole purpose was foreign mission. These joined others who were already in the field. After the Second World War, many religious orders in this country that had not been engaged previously in foreign missionary work at all began to take it up, especially in Latin America at the behest of Pope Pius XII. Beginning in the 1970s, the numbers of missionaries being sent out by all of these religious orders began to plummet dramatically as the number of candidates for those orders declined. By the mid-1970s, another phenomenon began to manifest itself.

Shorter-term missionaries came increasingly on the scene. Most of these were laypeople, although there were also some diocesan priests and religious men and women in their ranks. The numbers of these have continued to increase. The length of service was clearly set in defined terms of time, most of which could be renewed. The scene changed considerably as missionaries were sent out for several months to three years. During this period of time there have emerged missionaries who have consistently renewed their periods of service so that there are now term missionaries who have served more than twenty years.

On the Protestant side, the number of international missionaries coming from the mainline churches has continued to drop. The overwhelming majority of international Protestant missionaries today coming from the conservative end of the spectrum—evangelicals, Pentecostals, and fundamentalists. Most of these are supported by independent mission agencies with no denominational affiliation or are sent by individual congregations.

Just what does the scene look like today? For this I am relying on the most recent survey done by the Catholic Network of Volunteer Service, and presented at their national conference in November of 2005. To be sure this is a survey of those programs that are members of the CNVS, but that organization provides by far, to my knowledge, the most comprehensive picture that is available to us. Moreover, 86% of the member organizations responded to the survey—a surprisingly large number—so it offers us the best snapshot of the current scene available to us.

Let me give some highlights from that report. In 1983 there were 65 volunteer programs affiliated with the CNVS; in 2005, there were 212. That is nearly quadruple the number involved. In 1992, there were about 5,000 lay missionaries/volunteers; by 2004 there were over 10,000. The bulk of these lay missionaries (about 90%) are involved in domestic programs. The CNVS survey reports that the number of international volunteers reported has been dropping since 1999 from a high of a little over 1100 to a little under 900, a drop of nearly 20%.

Regarding term of service, about 75% of these overseas missionaries serve for 12 months or less. Of that 75%, about half of these volunteers served three weeks or less, and about 40% served 9-12 months. A little over 60% of all volunteers are female, with slightly under 40% male. They are overwhelmingly (nearly 85%) Caucasian.

Given that the term of service may run from a week to a year for 75% of the missionaries, it is not surprising that over half are under the age of 20. The

shortest service opportunities are aimed at summer and school break time. A quarter of all volunteers are between the ages of 21-25; this no doubt represents many of the post-college programs that are conducted by religious orders. Indeed young people between the ages of 21 and 25 make up more than half of all long-term (defined as 9 months or more) service. Interesting too is the fact that more than 90% of all long-term missionaries complete their term of service. In 2004, more than 40% of long-term missionaries renewed their term of service.

Seventy percent of all long-term missionaries have at least four years of college. For shorter periods of service, slightly over half have a high school education—again, showing the fact that the short-term missionaries tend to be under 20.

What kind of service do these missionaries provide?

For the short-term missionaries, over half provide social services. For long-term missionaries, the largest single block, provide education (i.e., general, not religious, education).

So what emerges from this picture? Let me sketch out what seem to me to be salient points. I begin with the larger context. According to the 2005-2006 figures from the U.S. Catholic Mission Association, there is a little over 6,500 U.S. missionaries working internationally. Of these, just over 1400—or not quite 20%—are lay missionaries. The women-to-men ratio—roughly 6 to 4—is about the same for both religious and lay

missionaries.

There has been extraordinary growth in short-term missionaries, with half of these under the age of 20. For long-term missionaries, the age group 20-25 makes up half of those serving a year or more. Seventy percent of these have had at least four years of college. So in terms of sheer numbers, both short-term and long-term missionaries are substantially under the age of 25. In one way, this is not surprising: once these missionaries begin families long-term service becomes more complex as decisions have to be made regarding the well-being of children. One hundred sixty-two missionaries working in the short

So in terms of sheer numbers, both short-term and long-term missionaries are substantially under the age of 25.

term reported being married, while 154 married missionaries were working in the long term. Sixty-four short-term missionaries reported have dependent children, while just 18 long-term missionaries reported having dependent children. Thus only about 7% of lay missionaries serving in both short-term and long-term are married.

Cultural and Social Factors Affecting the Term of Service

As we begin to reflect on what are the implications for mission, it could be useful to begin by providing a cultural and social frame for these reflections. Are there things in the cultural and social environment of the United States that help us understand better what is going on in mission? I would like to reflect on three of these.

The first of these is changes in our understanding of the life cycle. At the height of the industrial age in the United States—running roughly from 1880-1970—those who entered the job market outside the home were likely to engage in the same kind of work for most of the rest of their lives. This was partially explained by the level of education; most people had relatively limited education until the end of that period and so could not move around easily in the job market. There was in some trades and professions as well a sense of loyalty to one's employer who in turn would be loyal to the employees. Henry Ford was one of the pioneers in this, raising working class wages in his factory and being repaid by lifelong fidelity of the workforce. This even stretched across generations. In its heyday IBM ("Big Blue") tried to do much of the same.

The volatility of the employment scene that has resulted from globalization and technological advances has changed all that. There are now some who say that those entering the workforce must be prepared to change their professions—not just jobs within professions—three or more times over their working life. As the median age of the population has risen, people no longer think in terms only of work and retirement. The work possibilities become more variegated.

What does this mean for mission service? If one

starts to look at one's life in segments of time, some period can be allotted to work like mission. For the preponderance of young people who participate both in short-term and longer-term service, it can be seen as part of a larger preparation for one's working life. For those in high school, having such service on one's résumé is helpful in seeking admission to elite colleges.

I do not of course want to reduce the motivation of young people to these factors. Their desire to serve is certainly much more complex than that. But these factors cannot be overlooked. That in both of these groups (the short-term missionaries under 20, and the 21-25 age group serving long-term) more than eighty percent of the participants are Caucasian points to the fact that a certain level of privilege gives them the option of thinking in these terms.

A second cultural and social factor that deserves attention is the distinctive feature of the age cohort under 25. These young people have self-designated themselves as "millennials," inasmuch as they began coming of age at the turn of the millennium. The research that has been done on this age group finds them more altruistic, more intellectually curious, and more at home in cross-cultural and interracial settings than the two previous age cohorts (usually known as Generation X and the Baby Boomers). This openness can be partially accounted for by the fact that at least the older members of this age cohort came of age in a time of economic prosperity and relative stability (the years of Bill Clinton's presidency). Annual surveys of college freshmen support this general finding about altruism and ability to live with difference, with the added note that Catholics in this group tend to be especially well represented in these statistics. To be sure altruism, curiosity, and ease with difference do not characterize all Catholic young people, but it certainly is a salient factor. A supporting factor from the CNVS survey shows that among those who go on to graduate school after completing their service, the great majority choose the "helping professions"—education, social work, theology and medical care. Across the country, those involved in graduate theological education have noted in recent years a new group coming to study theology: they typically have spent one or two years in some social service after college, and now want to study theology, at least

through the master's level.

I think that volunteer mission service—both short term and longer term—is providing a wonderful outlet for these aspirations among young people. It provides a forum that not only expands their spiritual horizons, but gives them invaluable experience that will help them shape their adult lives.

The third factor worth considering is the strong tradition of volunteerism in the United States. De Tocqueville noted it already in his travels through the country in the 1830s. The idea that volunteerism may be on the decline was signaled in 2000 by Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone*, where he detected a significant drop in the amount of participation in shared activities, due to the aggressive individualism of U.S. society. The debate that the book ignited ended up presenting a more nuanced picture. Participation in bowling leagues, card clubs and the like has indeed declined. But the principal reason for that decline is the growing complexity of ordinary life. People still do volunteer, but for shorter periods of time and under carefully specified conditions. A postmodern, globalized society puts a great deal of strain on volunteering, but it has by no means disappeared. A somewhat parallel phenomenon can be found in wider circles in the growth of new social movements and non-governmental organizations.

In the United States, the Church is very much seen to be a voluntary agency, in contrast with the state churches still found in Europe. There the Church is often viewed as a department or agency of the state, whereas here one joins a church out of choice. It is precisely that U.S. view that many people see as the reason why secularization is not felt more strongly here as it is now being experienced in Europe. Put another way, the culture and tradition of volunteerism helps create a friendly environment for short-term and long-term mission service, especially when such volunteer opportunities is nested in a voluntary agency itself.

All in all, then, one can identify at least these three factors that contribute to creating a cultural and social environment within which mission service is bound to flourish. Other countries outside the United States send term missionaries as well. It is my guess that these are most likely to catch people's imaginations when at least the first of the two cultural factors—a longer lifecycle with changing employment patterns and a large cohort of millennials—are in place.

Theological and Missiological Factors in Missionary Service

I turn now to the third part—theological and missiological factors that are evidenced or may be in play among those engaging in short-term and long-term missionary service. By theological factors I mean changes in ideas in our Tradition that might impinge upon mission service in some way. I believe that there are at least three key theological factors that deserve our attention here.

Theological Factors

The first is the universal call to holiness that came out of the Second Vatican Council. In this vision of the Church, there is no longer a clerical center with a lay periphery. The most important sacrament vis-à-vis our membership in the Church is not Holy Orders, but Baptism (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 30-31). Laity and clergy are all part of the People of God.

This insight has had far-reaching implications. To some extent, it has erased the boundary between the laity in general and those who join religious institutes. But it has also served to make the spiritual life of lay people more expansive. The associations that have been set up by religious institutes to share their charism and spirituality with others have led more than 50,000 people to enter these associations. Some lay mission programs have been inspired by the same desire to share not only charism and spirituality, but also mission. Engaging in these mission programs becomes part of that quest for holiness, for a deeper participation in the life of Christ and of the Church. Such associations have led to a significant revitalization of religious life, as their membership declines and ages.

A second theological factor that has shaped these developments in mission has been the Church coming to see itself as essentially missionary, and that the whole people of God share in the mission of the Church and in the world. Mission is no longer to be seen as a separate department within the Church. The Church is in its very na-

ture missionary, participating in the mission in the world of the Holy Trinity. Thus, mission can no longer be seen solely as a specialized profession within the Church, but something incumbent upon everyone. Lay missionaries are hearing that call. They participate fully in that missionary character of the entire Church.

A third theological factor has been a rediscovery of the centrality of social justice to the Church's mission. The growing body of Catholic Social Teaching, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum*, through the Council and especially the 1970 Synod of Bishops to the pontificate of John Paul II, Catholic Social Teaching has moved social justice to the center of Catholic consciousness. Nowhere is that clearer than among missionaries. If the Great Commission of Matthew's Gospel (28:19-20) formed the principal biblical call to mission through the nineteenth and into the mid-twentieth century, it has been Jesus' discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19) that has captured the imagination of missionaries since the Vatican Council. Confronting injustice and the struggle for justice provides a sharp "contrast experience" that can suddenly open up the message of Jesus for people. Especially for those who have come out of a comfortable existence and now see the suffering and oppression going on in the world ushers in a call to promote the Reign of God. Inasmuch as a significant amount of short-term and long-term mission service focuses on social service, it provides a natural venue for experiencing the meaning and impact of Catholic Social Teaching.

Missiological Concerns

I would like to turn to some missiological concerns, inasmuch as they can be separated from theological ones. By "missiological" concerns I mean concerns that grow out of the practice or experience of mission that in turn help shape the theory of mis-

sion. There are two that seem especially relevant to our discussion here.

The first grows out of a question that I have heard voiced among missionaries from religious institutes: Are these forms of mission (short-term, fixed long-term) really *mission*? Put some other ways: Are they authentic forms of evangelization? Or are they simply cultural or social exposures of people to a world different from their own? Is calling these short- or fixed-term experiences simply a way of giving these exposures a little more exalted status?

Let me try to separate these out a bit. There has been a continuing debate in missiological circles about just what constitutes mission. There is a feeling that, by saying that the whole Church is missionary, everything gets labeled "mission." There are those who say

Thus, mission can no longer be seen solely as a specialized profession within the Church, but something incumbent upon everyone.

only primary evangelization—preaching the Gospel to those who have never heard it—is the only activity that deserves to be called "mission." Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, voiced similar concerns. Was proclamation narcissism and potentially harmful. Presence of large numbers of short-term missionaries (especially in very short projects) may actually harm the social ecology of the place, adding to oppression or injustice rather than diminishing it. These critiques have also been leveled at those who work a year or two years. These longer-term missionaries reap the benefit of their experience and then take these benefits home with

them. The poor are left with nothing.

It is understandable how such critiques can be made. And there have no doubt been situations where these critiques describe accurately what has happened. So it all bears a little closer analysis.

Anyone who has crossed a cultural boundary as more than a tourist knows that one cannot learn another culture or language instantly. Even staying a year may not be enough to go beyond the "honeymoon" period where the difference experienced in the other culture makes it "exotic." But there can be—and have been—other readings of the short-term

mission experience. The object of evangelization may not be “them”—those whom “we” visit. Perhaps one of the most significant feature of short-term mission—even mission lasting up to two years—is how it can change the lives of those who experience it. Especially when these experiences come in the late teens and into the twenties, it can mark out a course for an entire life. For those who come as missionaries, it may be the first exposure to poverty, or what our governmental policies are doing to others. For the people in those settings themselves, they can find a number of important, if unexpected, benefits. In Latin America, for example, I have seen people there who accept short-term missionaries because it is an opportunity to show them the oppressive results of U.S. foreign policy. Their hope is that the missionaries will indeed undergo conversion—and go back to convert the United States. For others, who had never had a personal encounter with people from the United States, it led to revising some of the stereotypes they had about *yanquis*. In still other ways, those who have been oppressed (I am thinking especially of indigenous peoples here), they come to realize that their own culture is valuable and valued and that they have something very special to share with people who may have many possessions but lack spiritual depth.

What of course becomes important here is how short-term mission is structured and supervised so as not to inflict more suffering on people who have already suffered far too much. But there is also a theological point to be made here. If we are indeed a missionary Church, and are all called to mission, then the lines between sender and recipient are going to become reciprocal. Long-term missionaries often say how mission has changed them, and how returning to the United States becomes increasingly difficult. Evangelization runs in many directions. In a world Church today, it is not simply a matter of sending churches and receiving churches. It needs to run in many different ways.

A second missiological concern related to the first goes something like this: Can there be *real* mission if any term or time limit is put on engagement in mission

at all? Is anything but a lifelong commitment what mission truly requires?

This kind of idea arises out of how mission has been perceived over the last two centuries. Until fairly recently, the expense and duration of travel was such that missionaries going out from their home country were making a commitment for lifetime service. It meant life commitment in another way as well: many lost their lives, especially in equatorial climes, as they fell to diseases against which they had no immunity. The rise of missionary religious institutes, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth century, where profession to the religious institute constituted a commitment to lifelong mission, only strengthened this feeling about the length of term of service.

Such feeling that lifelong mission was the only mission was supported also by the missionary spiritualities that served to foster and sustain the mission vocation. As Angelyn Dries has suggested in her study of U.S. Catholic missionaries, to be a missionary—at least up to the time of the Second Vatican Council—was to live a spirituality of heroism and/or of martyrdom. If viewed from that perspective, no missionary can be a sometime martyr or short-term heroic figure. But what this still pervasive sentiment regarding the missionary calls us to do is to investigate more carefully what underlies the spirituality of missionaries today, who make Luke 4:18-19 or some other biblical

passage the basis of their motivation. Are there distinctive features to a missionary spirituality today? Let me make but one suggestion.

Certainly for the short-term missionary, “bridge builder” might be appropriate. The short-term experience leads to opening up new horizons which the missionary can carry back to his or her home community. The experience may serve as the basis of a call to a deeper kind of vocation. The fact that so many of the young term missionaries choose the helping professions as their life’s work, rather than simply finding a job which leads to acquiring wealth, is indicative that something like this is going on.

If we are indeed a missionary Church, and are all called to mission, then the lines between sender and recipient are going to become reciprocal.

Put perhaps another way, we should look at how term missionaries and their experience may be pointing us to thinking through our missiology in another way rather than trying to fit the short- and longer-term experience into pre-existing categories.

Where Do We Go from Here?

What is the future of short-term and longer-term mission? In this concluding section, let me try to situate our examination of this question within the wider context and in light of what has been presented here. It falls into three sections. The first has to do with sustaining forms of term mission into the future. The second revisits the theological and missiological issues just discussed. And the third and final part addresses the question: on whose terms?

Sustaining Term Mission into the Future

What issues surround sustaining term mission—of the shorter or the longer variety—into the future? Here we have some things to learn from our Protestant counterparts, who have been working with term systems for many years. They have experience with how the issue of terms can change within the lives of the missionaries themselves. When children reach a certain age—especially in secondary school—family issues may come to predominate over the ministry issues.

If we look at the current state of Catholic mission, it is largely (although by no means completely any more) sustained through religious institutes. As numbers decline and members age in those institutes, they themselves are being faced with the question of sustainability. We have seen this happening already with healthcare institutions, with schools, and with parishes. While mission service organizations are already being entrusted to lay people to manage them, the question will be what happens as the religious institute may be no longer able to provide the needed financial support. We can already look to what some institutes have decided to do. The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers have set up their lay missionaries as a separate, canonically recognized body that could be able, in principle, to con-

tinue should the Maryknoll Society reach a point where they can send no more priests and brother missionaries. The Bethlehem Fathers (the national missionary institute of Switzerland) are working with a structure whereby their lay missionaries constitute the overarching institution within which the priests have a separate place. As we look to women's congregations, even more creative models are likely to emerge.

The likely trajectory of the huge spiritual associate movement among religious institutes might serve as a cautionary tale here. Most of these associates are middle-aged or older—the same age as the members of the institutes. When those institutes are gone, will this movement continue? We do not know, but it would seem unlikely. This may be the same fate for those term mission programs that depend on religious institutes, some of which (the institutes) may not survive.

Although the number of U.S. and European missionaries who are religious will continue to decline, the number of life-term missionaries from the Global South continues to grow, both within already existing international religious institutes and in new missionary institutes emerging in Africa and Asia. It is with these people that short- and longer-term missionaries from the United States will have to interact.

Will young people especially, and people of all ages continue to show an interest in mission? That is certainly to be hoped for, even though we have no way of predicting the future in that regard. Certainly in countries where the birthrate is below the level of replacement of the population, more and more young people will find themselves having to enter the workforce sooner. That will have a negative effect on all but the shortest-term mission experience. The United States is not yet to that point, thanks to immigration. But all of Europe already is.

Another feature that may figure into the immediate future is the intense animosity against the United States and the impact this may have on U.S. missionaries operating outside the United States. Skills for dealing with trauma and conflict are increasingly important in the missionary's repertory. The Pew Institute keeps reporting a steadily dropping rate of favor for U.S. citizens, even among our allies.

Given that the percentage of long-term international missionaries is already fairly small, this may come to shrink even further.

The Ongoing Impact of Term Mission on Theology and Missiology

As was already seen above, there have been changes in mission throughout especially the latter part of the twentieth century into these first years of the twenty-first. The context in which mission is done, and the theology of mission that came out of the Second Vatican Council has changed how we imagine mission and how we engage in it. A stronger sense of the Church as essentially missionary, and the universal call to holiness and participation in the mission of the Church has changed the face of mission today. Consequently, we should be careful not to try to squeeze contemporary experiences of mission too quickly into our pre-arranged boxes. That the numbers of short-term missionaries have continued to grow so rapidly may be one of those “signs of the times” to which we should be attending. Our missiological strategies should be informed by a praxis that feeds back into our theology the experiences we are encountering.

Whose Terms?

I wish to conclude with the final part of the title of this conference and this presentation; namely, on whose terms do we engage in mission?

To a great extent, the terms have been set by the Holy See and by the religious institutes. The latter have carried the major part of what had been considered mission work. As their numbers decline

here and in other wealthy countries, they may have no choice but to cede whatever terms they had been able to set forth. To say simply that the terms will be ceded to others engaged in short- or longer-term mission has to take into account that term mission depends upon an infrastructure that sustains it. To the extent that infrastructure is in place, to that extent that handing on of the direction of mission will be able to happen. We will need to do two things at once. If, on the one hand, we say all Christians are to be engaged in mission, then we should try to bring that about. But on the other hand, this will not happen if a wider body is not given the resources and the capacity to make decisions about mission.

In trying to think through these future dimensions, it is important to remember that mission is ultimately on God’s terms. This is not our mission; it is God’s mission, in which we are called to participate. If indeed God is calling people into shorter and long-term mission, then it is up to us to find ways to make that happen.

¹ “2004-2005 Membership Survey Results.” I am grateful to Michael Montoya, MJ, for making this available to me.

² Statistics may be found in the executive summary at: uscatholicmission.org/go/missionersurveystatistics/missionhandbook.

³ Representative of this literature is Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

⁴ These are published annually in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

⁵ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of Human Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁶ The proceedings of this conference may be found in Joseph Lang and Mary Motte (eds.), *Mission and Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

⁷ Angelyn Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

Periodic Papers are published by USCMA.

USCMA

3029 Fourth Street, NE

Washington, DC 20017-1102

Phone: 202-884-9764

Fax: 202-884-9776

E-Mail: uscma@uscatholicmission.org

Web site: www.uscatholicmission.org