

# The shortening of missions

by Justin Long.

The “Dominion Mandate” in Genesis 1:28 fascinates me, although I would perhaps rename it the “Fulfillment Mandate.” Most interesting is the Hebrew word *male’*. Although translated ‘fill’ by most translations, it has another connotation: to *fulfill*—to complete a thing’s destiny. For example, verses like “in the fullness of time” or “the time came for these things to be fulfilled” use *male’*.

I believe God has given every individual and every community of believers the mandate to *fulfill* a place. We are to be a blessing both to the place and to the people in the place. Israel had a place dedicated to them—but so did the sons of Esau. Clearly, God anointed people like Cyrus as well. Unfortunately, through the corruption of sin some places are void of their Kingdom destiny. If these are to be filled, some must leave the place where they are born and go help those who have lost their sense of destiny. This God-inspired migration is *mission*.

In this speeding-up, flattening, globalizing world, missions seems to be changing. And, honestly, I’m not sure that some of these changes are for the better. My friend and mentor Scott Moreau recently shared some presentations he was making on trends. Two things struck me, amidst all of the interesting factors he has documented: first, the increasing “shortening” of our involvement in missions; and second, the increasing divide in our willingness to walk a long road with other people of other cultures.

For some time, we have known the number of committed long-term missionaries from the West is at best stagnant and at worst in decline, while the number of short-term missionaries has exploded. But as I’ve been thinking about Scott’s data, I realize that I see this “short-termining” in many other places too: shorter projects, shorter studies, shorter emails, shorter travel times, the short bursts of SMS messaging. Everything is getting more compressed.

One result Scott points out: the short-termining of our relationships. We focus on the tasks at hand, accomplishing the goal, finishing the project in a timely matter—and then move on to another project of a similar kind but in a wholly different place, with different people. We do not invest in long-term relationships because we know we have only a short project. There is no need for the deep planting of lifetime friendships.

Yes, we can (perhaps) remain connected via e-mail. But although e-mail is spread more widely than ever before (growing moreso every minute), many of the people at

work amongst unreached peoples do not have this kind of connection, or do not have it frequently. Besides, electronic connections are not the same as face-to-face contact. In many Asian and African cultures, body language is far

## Short-term projects have little need for the deep planting of lifetime friendships.

more important than words. Sharing silences can be very meaningful—but cannot be done easily via instant messenger.

There is a difference between collaborating and walking together. Real, deep discipleship cannot be done over the course of seminars and preaching in a week or two. Real discipleship demands personal accountability and encouragement day in and day out.

Ralph Winter has written of the amateurization of missions. I fear something related creeping up on us: this compression—the short-termining—of missions. I wonder what Jesus thinks of this—He who said, “If anyone would follow me, let him pick up his cross and follow me: he who saves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s, the same will save it?”

I think there is a role for short-term missions and short-term projects. But I do not think this role can ever replace the role of long-term inculturation into a different culture which leads to the “cross-pollinization” of the Gospel. In order to achieve this, Christians must be willing to pick up, like Abraham, and migrate to a different place “that the Lord will show them.” They must be willing to settle in that place, and become part of it, and be a blessing to it. That to me, is what being a missionary is all about.

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