

# SHORT-TERM MISSION

An Ethnography of Christian Travel  
Narrative and Experience

 INTERVARSITY PRESS

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## Preface and Acknowledgments



WHEN I FIRST BEGAN TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY as an adjunct professor in St. Louis in 1997, I would often ask students to describe their previous crosscultural experiences. I encouraged them to interpret this broadly, including encounters with ethnic minority neighborhoods in the United States, family or friends who may come from a different cultural background. For those students not in the majority, just being at the university was a new cultural environment. In a few courses at the small private schools where I taught (Christian and secular), some students could not come up with anything. Some had never left St. Louis, ventured beyond their community or befriended someone culturally distinct. One young woman could not even think of a time she had been to a ethnic restaurant.

In 2001, I began teaching at Wheaton College, a nondenominational Christian liberal arts school thirty miles west of Chicago. Asking the same question to my students here, I received very different responses. Admittedly, this relatively selective, academically demanding private school draws from a different demographic than the St. Louis schools, but the responses I received were not connected simply to exotic vacations or elite jet-setting. When I asked the students to share crosscultural experiences, I heard about trips to Northern Ghana, two weeks spent at an orphanage in rural China, a month in the Mexican

state of Oaxaca, teaching summer school and experiences in Romania working at an English-language summer camp.

Despite the seeming randomness of the destinations and even the diversity of activities, it was clear that these were not disconnected events. Few of these students had undertaken these trips alone or with family, but they were linked to churches, parachurch groups, Christian schools and mission organizations. The students recognized the disparate accounts of travel as having a common motivation or purpose. Most significantly, virtually all these trips could be subsumed under one label: short-term missions (STM).

One does not have to be Christian to have knowledge of STM. Secular scholars and members of other faith communities study and participate in these trips. Although this book will focus on an evangelical group, the research summarized in chapters one and two will make clear that STM is a phenomenon widespread throughout Christian communities globally. As I encountered the practice among my students and fellow evangelicals, the ubiquity of the term and apparently well-established understanding of how to do a short-term mission made it a fascinating subject with obvious relevance to my own religious community, but I have learned that it is far from limited to this sphere. It is my hope that this book will find interested readers among members of every religious community, as well as the scholars who study them.

In particular, my desire with this research is to perform a classically anthropological intervention to “[gain] access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them” (Geertz 1973, p. 24). That is, like other cultural phenomena, short-term mission trips possess a history and social context that make them a “thing” apprehended by both those closest to them and those observing from a distance. This research is meant to close the distance of those observing while helping those close to it gain insight into their own actions and understandings. As I discuss later, there are many ways such research could be conducted or framed. My interest, coming from the language of my students, has been on the ways participants enter into a cultural construction they

did not create, even as they recreate, employ, resist and recast the cultural context in which they experience these travels.

The central argument of this book is that we produce narratives—framing discourses—that profoundly shape the experiences of these travels. These narratives have a history and social context that we should understand if we are to understand how individuals encounter themselves and others through STM. I do not present this particular ethnographic study as definitive or even necessarily representative of this wide and diffuse movement. Rather, I argue that to understand how people think about these experiences, we must understand the creation and maintenance of narratives being generated in specific places at specific times.

Although STM has become an enormous movement involving millions of participants every year, the research on this phenomenon is still relatively thin. Robert Priest, an anthropologist at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a frequent interlocutor of mine, has made a concerted effort to draw researchers into this area and has produced more research-based publications on this phenomenon than any other scholar. Several of his students have produced high-quality theses and dissertations on the topic along with his own articles and edited books. Most of his research is cited somewhere in this book as well.

Other than his efforts and a few notable exceptions (e.g., Offutt 2011, Beyerlein, Adler and Trinitapoli 2011; Trinitapoli and Vasey 2009), much of the published research on STM has appeared as one facet of research looking at larger issues of Christian globalization, mission and religious transnationalism (e.g., Wuthnow 2009, pp. 164-75; Ammerman 2005, p. 202ff; Elisha 2011, pp. 214-22; Guthrie 2003, chap. 10). By producing a monograph presenting an historically and ethnographically grounded study of a short-term mission team, I hope to contribute a hitherto missing element to the conversation. Clifford Geertz (1973) popularized the notion of these studies as “thick description,” in which the observable activities of culturally particular groups are unpacked for the layers of meaning, intentions, interactions and practices that can only be understood from the inside. Like Geertz (1973, p. 29), I do not imagine this work to move us toward “a per-

fection of consensus” on what STM is, or even less, what it *should* be. Rather, I hope to push the discussion forward, offer some helpful historical and cultural context, and contribute to the development of a vocabulary that other, far more accomplished scholars than I can use in sharpening our understanding of this complex, global, religious travel practice.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because this research sprang from my community, particularly my work at Wheaton College, it is there that I should begin with my acknowledgements. I used part of my sabbatical leave of 2008–2009 to begin the writing of this book. I also received an Alumni Foundation grant to support my travels to the Dominican Republic in 2006, and a Faculty Missionary Project Tim Phillips Memorial Grant in 2005 to support my entire family traveling to the Dominican Republic for seven weeks of short-term work. I appreciate the support of provost Stanton Jones, the alumni of Wheaton College and the librarians and archivists who aided me in my research. Colleagues at Wheaton and elsewhere have encouraged me in this work, and none more so than Robert Priest and Kersten Priest. Thank you both for your outstanding work on this topic and your personal encouragement to me during some rough going.

My family and I benefited immeasurably from the hospitality of the long-term missionaries in the Dominican Republic, identified by pseudonym in this book. They extended tremendous hospitality and care, and continue to do so to generations of travelers. I suspect some of what I have to say about STM will not be exactly how these faithful workers would say it, and I only hope they will forgive any impressions they feel cast their work in an unfavorable light. It is not my intention to impugn anything being done in the name of Jesus; I only hope to encourage those working with the enormously gifted people of this ministry to listen even more closely to all that is going on there.

Of course, it was not only the long-term missionaries who blessed us with their care, but the many Dominican members of the ministry. While anthropological convention prevents me from mentioning them by name, there were teachers, school staff, directors of the children’s

home, drivers, cooks, construction foremen and many others who took time from their work for the children to extend their care and friendship to my family and me. *Muchisimas gracias por todos. Dios les bendigas en todas sus obras.*

The most important help came from Central Wheaton Church (CWC), the pseudonym for the congregation in Wheaton that afforded me extraordinary access to their STM program, and the Dominican Republic team in particular. Numerous members of the congregation graciously put up with the sometimes intrusive presence of an anthropologist in their midst, but none more than the high school members of the team I joined. I can't express how grateful I am to each one of the students for the patience, authenticity and genuine love they extended to me throughout our training and travels. I also thank their parents for permission to join them and use their stories and insights for understanding this work.

The adult co-leaders on the trip were critical partners in this work, providing their insights and friendship to me as I joined in the work of our team. I regret that I have allowed these relationships to lapse as the research came to an end. Each one of these people, like the students and other STM leaders, were models of faithful service, honest inquiry, Christian love and thoughtful engagement. Even as I read my own research on our trip, I am struck by how little of the richness of character I am able to include in this short account. Please forgive the injustice that a study such as this inevitably does to the profound reality that these trips play in the lives of people.

Relatively little of this work has been published previously, although some sections of chapters five and six appeared in the article "Mission to Nowhere: Putting Short-Term Missions into Context" (Howell 2009). I have presented parts of this material at Hope College and the Interdisciplinary Christianities Workshop at University of California at San Diego. I thank Mark Husbands from Hope College and Joel Robbins and Naomi Haynes of the University of Southern California, San Diego for the invitations and the stimulating conversations these opportunities generated.

A number of friends and colleagues have engaged in conversations

on this work and related topics; they have aided my thinking on many of these issues. Thank you to Rupert Stasch, Omri Elisha, Jon Bialecki, Eric Honenes, Tanya Luhrmann, James Bielo, Edwin Zehner, Ellen Moodie, Kurt Ver Beek, Terry Linhart, Mary Hancock and countless others whose discussion and wisdom have encouraged better thinking on these and many other topics.

I am grateful to my students at Wheaton College for their continued encouragement to get this work out and for their interaction with many of the ideas, which has sharpened my thinking at various points. On a very practical level, I have benefitted from the good work of several teaching assistants who worked on aspects of this project, compiling resources, formatting notes and working on the index. I am particularly indebted to Anna Porter, Josh Walton, Summer Holeman, Matt Jones and Stephen Paff. Thank you for your good work. Pamela Schnake, Rachel Dorr and Naomi Haynes, three former students who did collaborative or independent research on STM while I worked on this project, contributed excellent work to the topic of STM. I owe much thanks to their inspiration.

In the final stages, I have been grateful to the work of Al Hsu, my editor at InterVarsity Press, two “anonymous” reviewers (who revealed their identities to me later, but nonetheless provided blunt and invaluable comments on the entire manuscript) and [**-fill in later with publicity? Typesetting/copy editing>**] Although it goes without saying, it must be said that in spite of the many excellent contributions all these people have made, a topic such as this is bound to elicit disagreement. Moreover, I have no doubt that I got some things wrong. Regardless of the many voices have contributed, I take full responsibility for any errors contained herein.

Begun in 2005, it is obvious that this book has been a slow project, suffering from the fits and starts that afflict any project undertaken in the midst of teaching, committee service and real life. Unfortunately, it is often the members of real life who end up sacrificing the most to see these projects finally finished. My daughter, Hannah, who was ten years old when I began this work, bears the scar of a puncture wound obtained while playing in Linda Vista and then sutured by the phy-

sician missionary in place for just such a moment. My sons, Sam and Ben, went to the Dominican Republic with the family in 2005 as a kindergartener and preschooler respectively. Sam returned with the scars of the egg-sized welts of bullous impetigo (on the bottom of his feet). Only Ben seems to have escaped unscathed from his father's first foray into this research. Since then, they have all been supportive and encouraging as this book has come to light. God willing, we can all return to deliver this finished work ourselves and gain a new perspective on the many wonderful things happening in Linda Vista.

However, I suspect the people of Linda Vista would be most grateful not for my research, but for my wife, Marissa Sabio, to be back among them. As the director of the summer school there in 2005, she was blessed to work with the gifted staff of the school; she thrived in the context of education, service and Christian love we experienced. Since then, she has done more to support the final product of the research than anyone. To her I say thank you. And I love you.

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## Notes on Transcriptions



Throughout my research, I recorded interviews and transcribed passages spoken by various people involved in the trip I studied. When written out, our spoken language often has a quality that makes it appear more vapid, or less thoughtful, than it sounds in person. In cases where I had exact quotations, I have tried to preserve the voice of the speaker by *not* always rendering their language exactly as it came out of their mouths. In the end, I think the written language comes closer to how it sounded in the moment.

This is particularly true for the teenagers in the group with which I spent the most time. Speaking as teenagers, the transcripts of their language contain all the stops and starts, filler words (e.g., “like”) and pauses (“um...”) that are typical of most speakers, but perhaps more pronounced in young people being asked to respond to an adult’s queries. In writing down their words I have edited to avoid making them appear less articulate or confident than I think most people would suggest they are, as well as making it easier for the reader to follow.

Here is an example of what I mean: The following quotation was spoken by Emma, who was a smart, articulate 16-year old at the time.

Like in short-term missions there’s not like a lot you can, like you can impact kids but you can’t really...or like they can decide to become or

they can give their life to Christ while you're there, but it's the time when you're gone that...that the missionaries are still going to be there helping them a lot. And so, for short-term missions it's kind of just, being there, in like affecting, trying to help affect, help the kids.

In the book, where this quotation appears, I render it as:

In short-term missions there's not a lot you can [do]. You can impact kids but you can't really [do much]...or they can decide to become or they can give their life to Christ while you're there, but it's the time when you're gone that the missionaries are still going to be there helping them a lot. And so, for short-term missions it's just being there, in trying to help affect the kids.

The majority of my quotations, where they are noted as direct quotations, are relatively less edited than this, but the intent in every case is to be as faithful to the sense of how an individual spoke, along with accurately conveying what he or she said in a more reader-friendly way. This is an anthropological convention not uncommon in contemporary ethnography, and I trust it will serve both the subject and the reader well (cf. Luhrmann 2012, p. ix).

Part One



INTRODUCING  
NARRATIVES

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## “It Changed My Life”

### SHORT-TERM MISSION AND CHRISTIAN NARRATIVES OF TRAVEL



 MY FIRST EXPOSURE TO SHORT-TERM MISSION came through my participation in such a trip as a high school junior in 1986. Our church had recently purchased a comfortable, fifteen-passenger van, and my youth leader and her husband were anxious to put it to work. After a busy year of fund-raising, our Methodist youth group set out to drive from our town in Washington State to the California-Mexico border town of San Ysidro, where we would work with a Christian children’s ministry called Los Niños.

We stopped at Disneyland and Torrey Pines State Beach on our way down, bonding through youthful hijinks and close proximity. I can’t recall that we had much in the way of preparation as to the cultural and historical context of our destination, a theological rationale for the trip or even a framework through which to understand our travels as part of our faith. Perhaps my former youth-group leader would disagree, and we were offered more in the way of preparation than sunk into my high school mind. What I *can* remember is that as a sixteen-year-old, the trip posed some challenges for me.

I clearly recall an evening when I joined a group of North American missionaries and the Mexican teen residents of a Catholic boys' home on an overnight camping trip to the beach somewhere between Ensenada and Tijuana. For much of the trip, I hung around with the other teenage boys, strolling up and down the beach. I spoke virtually no Spanish. Our "conversation" consisted of greetings and vague references to *chicas*. Eventually we ended up sitting with some bilingual *chicas* who were on a four-hour shore visit from their Los Angeles-based cruise ship. As a good Methodist boy from a small town in rural Washington, watching my Mexican compatriots interact with the girls, displaying their confident sexuality and vastly more mature self-assurance, I was intimidated and intrigued, but mostly confused. What in the world was I, a bumpkin from Walla Walla, Washington, doing on a "mission" to these guys?

Later in that trip, I had some time to talk with one of the adult chaperones, a man who was spending a year in ministry prior to entering the Catholic priesthood. A twenty-something Asian American who had grown up in the United States, he seemed to be someone who might provide some context, perspective or purpose to my trip. From my vantage point, I could not see what good I was doing, unable to communicate with the Mexican teens, feeling utterly disconnected from their experiences, lost in the midst of cultural, social and even spiritual dislocation. I have vague memories of him encouraging me to consider my own growth or to learn from the people around me. I doubt he answered all my questions, and I was likely unable to understand everything he was saying, but I recall it made me feel better at the time.

Approximately one year later, I did find a way to articulate at least part of the experience. I attached a photograph of me giving a piggyback ride to an adorable five-year-old Mexican boy, taken during a morning spent at a different children's home in Tijuana, to an application to Vassar College with a description of how meaningful the whole experience had been to me. For the purpose of self-representation, I assimilated my time with the littlest Mexicans into a narrative of service, personal growth and Christian virtue. The con-

fusing, even disturbing, experience with my vastly more experienced and sophisticated peers on the Mexican beach faded into a less salient part of the adventure.

Today, such travels have become regular features in college applications, particularly for Christian colleges.<sup>1</sup> Unlike me, with my halting efforts to find a narrative for my experience, the Christian college students I have taught for the past ten years seem ready to tell the story of their travel and articulate its effects in their lives. They frame their trips as significant—even life altering—experiences, largely in regard to personal spiritual and emotional growth, and often related through one or two significant relationships, divine revelations or meaningful encounters.

In these retellings, there are often moments of epiphany, if not conversion, in which realizations of unity across cultures, gratitude for a relatively affluent life and self-discovery punctuate a week or ten days of manual labor, sacrifice and service in an unfamiliar cultural context. Those who traveled in middle or high school came to my college classes with well-developed narratives of growth and change, although not without misgivings. They seemed to have received clearer and far more involved preparation and structure for their trips that I ever did.

In particular, as I have interacted with these students over the years, I have been struck by how regularized the language used to describe these experiences has become. The question I began to ask myself was how the narratives of STM had come to take up such a predictable and seemingly powerful form in contemporary Christianity. How was it that students traveling to such diverse places as the Czech Republic, Mexico, Brazil and Kenya all returned with such similar experiences? What was the relationship between these narratives and the experiences themselves? Were students responding to the reality of their encounters, or were the narratives shaping their memories toward a common version of STM? It is toward answering these questions that I have undertaken this study.

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<sup>1</sup>In 2009, Taylor University, a Christian college in Upland, Indiana, featured a short-term mission story on its home page. On its application, it did not ask about STM in particular, but included a space to talk about any “significant summer experience” of a spiritual nature. Parents of high school students at Central Wheaton Church (CWC) and other congregations in Wheaton expressed a widely shared belief that STM would help their children with admission to Christian colleges, if not college generally.

## WHY STUDY SHORT-TERM MISSION?

For those unfamiliar with STM, it can most simply be described as short travel experiences for Christian purposes such as charity, service or evangelism, although such a definition probably obscures as much as it clarifies (see chapter two for a definitional understanding of STM, including a brief discussion of the distinction between *mission* and *missions*). At least within evangelical Christian circles, short-term missions have come to encompass everything from groups of high school students presenting of the gospel through mime on the streets of Rome to major construction projects in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake undertaken by teams of engineers and contractors.

But given recent statistics on the millions of U.S. Americans who have participated in STM travels, as well as the millions more who are exposed by encountering these teams in their own travels or hearing about their trips, I suspect that many of those picking up this book already have a mental image of STM.<sup>2</sup> My goal in this study, like much of anthropology, is to create some ethnographic distance for those who have been close to this phenomenon as participants, supporters or members of communities engaging in such travel, while bringing those at a distance—anthropologists, sociologists or other with little personal connection to the phenomenon—into the cultural world of STM. To do this, I focus in particular on the language—the narratives—of travel that STM participants create and use in making sense of the STM travel experience.

The stories I heard from individuals were quite diverse in many ways; some had powerfully transformative experiences, some had disappointments, some returned critical of what they did, and others were deeply in love with (or deeply disgusted by) the places and people they had encountered. But the similarities of phrases, expectations, disappointments or emotions were striking. From vastly different experiences, students were talking about their experiences within a common narrative framework of STM that helped them to think about these

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<sup>2</sup>See Wuthnow and Offut 2008; Priest, Dischinger and Rasmussen 2006. Later in this chapter, I discuss the rates of STM participation a bit more.

diverse experiences as a single sort of thing, a type of travel they could all understand.

One definition of culture I have always appreciated is Anthony F.C. Wallace's (1970), in which he rejected the idea of culture as the reproduction of uniformity and instead considered it "the organization of diversity." It seemed that the evangelicals among whom I lived had found a guiding narrative—a metanarrative—by which they could organize the diversity of their own motives, experiences and interests. My questions were what that organizing narrative was, where it came from and how it became so influential among those traveling.<sup>3</sup>

To answer my questions, I needed to see how this overarching narrative was produced, consumed and experienced throughout an STM experience. I developed an ethnographic research project to explore the dynamics of narrative and experience at work. As I studied the narratives and experiences of STM travelers firsthand and through presentations in print and PowerPoint, I found a common understanding of what the trip was, or was supposed to be.

Most called these trips "life changing" and "eye opening," radically transforming the ways the travelers "saw the world." For many it was the first time "really seeing" for themselves the conditions of poverty and inequality in the world, affecting deep emotions, including sorrow, anger and compassion, in many of those who traveled. Narratives of connection and relationship—particularly with other Christians—were powerful positive experiences in which North American Christians, some of whom had never been outside the United States, "discovered" that "we're all the same" and "we are one in Christ," despite linguistic, cultural and economic differences.

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<sup>3</sup>Anthropologist of tourism Edward Bruner (2005, p. 21) makes a distinction between *metanarrative* and "the tourist tales told before, during and after the trip." Bruner calls the metanarrative the "largest conceptual frame within which tourism operates. They are not attached to any locality or to any particular tour, and they are usually taken for granted." I would put the missionary narrative into the same category, but I find that the idea of a guiding narrative accomplishes the same purposes for my analysis. I invoke the term *metalinguage* later in this chapter to define what I mean by narrative (which overlaps a great deal with Bruner's term *metanarrative*), but I have chosen to remain with the term *narrative* to reduce the complexity of the prose. Historians have employed the terms *grand narrative* and *master narrative* to distinguish the various social influences of narrative, in which a master narrative is, generally, "a big story that makes smaller stories intelligible" (Cox 2005, p. 3).

In so many ways, STM narratives resonated with, or reinforced, central theological commitments of Christian unity and the importance of service or sacrifice. The disappointments people expressed were often disappointment with their inability to see or experience these very things. I recall one of my students telling me that in her first STM trip, in which her group of high school youth traveled to Mexico, she felt as if the team was not needed. She told me she regretted the money and effort spent on the trip, because she felt the time serving did not make much of a difference. She contrasted this to a later trip she took to Africa (she did not name the country), in which she felt that the local people valued the presence of the team and that she was able to make "a real difference."

As I have spoken with people, particularly other Christians, about these narratives, I have found a great deal of familiarity with these themes, even among those who have not gone on STM trips themselves. Many can quote particular common phrases, almost verbatim, from testimonies I have heard in presentations and interviews I have conducted. These clichés are not simply familiar ways of expressing common experiences, however; they are culturally particular ways of framing those experiences. Anthropologists studying everything from race (Hill 2008) to gender (Schiffrin 1996), to tourism (E. M. Bruner 2005), to nationalism (Mattingly et al. 2002) have pointed out how familiar cultural narratives (or discourses) not only express experience but also shape it. Many setting out on their first STM trip already carry an arsenal of narrative structures through which they can interpret their trip.

This book is the product of my research drawing together narratives from public presentations such as chapels and worship services, personal conversations and a two-year ethnographic experience with a particular STM team at a nondenominational congregation I refer to as Central Wheaton Church, or CWC. This 1,500-plus-member church has made STM trips a regular part of its missions program for more than twenty-five years.<sup>4</sup> STM travels, like other forms of travel, are

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<sup>4</sup>Quotations from students or STM participants are used only with explicit permission or are taken from public presentations in which there was no expectation of privacy. In every instance,

cultural moments created through historical processes and institutions. Although it shares aspects of tourism and pilgrimage, STM can't be reduced to another version of either of these. Guided by theological commitments and embedded in a wider social context, STM is a type of travel unto itself in which particular guiding narratives shape the experiences of participants.

Although my study draws on the experiences of an evangelical congregation, STM is not exclusively an evangelical phenomenon. Orthodox, Catholic and mainline Christians, as well as Jews, Unitarian Universalists and other religious groups have expressions of short-term mission, often looking very similar to the evangelical versions described here (see Hefferan, Adkins and Occhipinti 2009; Wuthnow 2009; McAdoo and Principe 2010). Nancy Ammerman (2005, 143) has noted that virtually every religious group in the United States—conservative Protestants, Orthodox, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, mainline Protestants, LDS, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish congregations—have increased the number of “direct connection” with missionaries through short-term trips. Similarly, in his comprehensive study of the ways religious congregations in the United States have engaged globalization, Robert Wuthnow (2009, 169) notes that while “evangelical churches are the most likely to sponsor mission trips . . . nearly half of mainline Protestants say their congregations do as well, compared with one-third of Catholics and members of historically black denominations.”<sup>5</sup> No doubt, the practices and discourses of STM reflect the different theological and institutional contexts of these groups. Even among conservative Protestants and evangelicals, different congregations have idiosyncratic means of talking about these sorts of travels. What I believe is generalizable from the case of CWC is the process of narrative formation that occurs through the institutional and cultural practices that surround STM travels. Only when we see the cultural dynamics of these trips can we think about what, if

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with the exception of historical and published accounts, names and identities are changed in accordance with anthropological convention.

<sup>5</sup>Wuthnow (2009, 293n29) gives the statistics as 54 percent of evangelical church members, 46 percent of mainline Protestants, 31 percent of Catholics and 29 percent of black Protestants.

anything, we might do in changing or reforming STM experiences.

The question of changing these trips in focus or practice is controversial, of course. For many who participate in these travels, significant change may seem unnecessary. Yet even some of the most ardent proponents of STM have written of the need for care and self-reflection (Morgan and Easterling 2008; Harris 2002). My purpose here is to provide the theoretical framework for understanding the ways we come to frame these trips culturally; my hope is that this will aid those who want these trips to accomplish the highest ideals of social and spiritual transformation, often said to be the trips' reason for existing (e.g., Anthony 1994; Peterson, Aeschliman and Sneed 2003).

In the case at hand, I demonstrate how a narrative of mission, emerging within the specific context of a congregation, reflects a history and social context, while providing the means for travelers to make sense of their experiences. At the same time, while this narrative provides a means to understanding, it also makes some sorts of understanding *more* difficult. I argue that in the case of this group, a personalistic missionary narrative serves a positive function to link these travels to a theological and spiritual understanding that the travelers and their supporters recognize and affirm, while obscuring aspects of the very things many of my team members wanted to understand: poverty, inequality and cultural difference.

By framing the encounter as primarily interpersonal, a service to "the poor," as well as having a theological motive of "sharing the gospel," the guiding narratives through which our team experienced these travels made it *more* difficult to see the structural, historical and cultural forces at work. As I explain in chapter two, narratives generally play a central role in Christian experiences of faith and life, but scholars have not always attended to the social life of these narratives—how they are created or recreated in the practices of faith.<sup>6</sup> For STM trav-

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<sup>6</sup>Notable exceptions in the study of US evangelicals include some of the excellent studies of conversion narratives (Harding 1987; Stromberg 1993), as well as ethnographies of congregational life that explore linguistic conventions and cultural logic in the kinds of stories evangelicals tell themselves about themselves (Elisha 2011, Bialecki 2009, Bielo 2011). Simply taking Christianity seriously as a cultural phenomenon in its own right is a relatively recent development in anthropology (cf. Robbins 2003).

elers, the narrative has cultural resonance that is both pragmatic and inspirational, enabling them to connect their trips and identity to a larger and longer theological narrative that is powerful and meaningful, though not always in ways that travelers and organizers seek.

Naming the experience of STM as a product of narrative does not mean I take these trips as *only* a product of narrative with no reality outside language.<sup>7</sup> In exploring the creation, reproduction and use of narrative in experience, though, I ask how these narratives reflect cultural context, practical action, theological commitments and history: how do they work in tandem with the experiences in the trip itself to shape the experience and rearticulation of the travel experience? Like all discourses, this language and practice is contested at many points, but the stories returned STM travelers tell of faith and mission are not simply reflections of an unmediated encounter in the “mission field,” springing up from the countryside of Bermuda, slums in Mexico, megacities in China or chapels in Ghana. STM travels are cultural events embedded in historic, linguistic and institutional contexts through which we come to anticipate and, in some ways, construct our travel experiences before anyone gets on a plane.

### SHORT-TERM MISSION AS A SCHOLARLY SUBJECT

Although those U.S. Americans who regularly participate in a Christian community of some sort are likely familiar with the concept and practice of STM, nonreligious people, including the majority of my fellow anthropologists, may be less aware of the phenomenon. As frequent travelers, many anthropologists have seen groups in the airport wearing matching T-shirts, preparing to board an international flight. They may have encountered a team surrounded by bags of medical supplies or building materials being loaded onto buses in a Latin American capital. Even those who do not travel frequently or have not encoun-

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<sup>7</sup>Readers familiar with postmodern literary and social theory will see in this my move away from radical versions of linguistic construction. Unlike theorists who privilege language to the point of at least potentially obscuring the material, I lean toward the position of someone like Bourdieu (1990; cf. Ortner 2006,14-16), who argues that experience and the mediation of experience (through language and culture) can't be usefully distinguished, but both contribute to the structuring of social life and the reproduction of cultural practice.

tered these groups personally may have seen reports of the phenomenon in the media.<sup>8</sup> Major news outlets, such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, have published articles about STM, including stories about Southern California megachurch pastor Rick Warren's plans for thousands of short-term volunteers to focus their benevolence on Rwanda in an effort to lift the nation out of poverty and expand the reach of Christianity (Kristof 2002). Partly depending on the perspective of the reader, these sorts of accounts inspire positive views of the phenomenon—medical personnel, dentists or skilled trade workers bringing their time and expertise to impoverished communities—or largely (even wholly) negative images: triumphalist Christians stumbling through vulnerable and remote communities engaged in neocolonialist projects of proselytism. Whatever the view or however it has been garnered, few of us have ever come to understand this phenomenon through scholarly literature, as relatively little research yet exists.<sup>9</sup>

Anthropologists and other social scientists who do study these groups often begin somewhat by chance. They often encounter these groups in their field sites, where few North Americans are typically found, apart from the occasional Peace Corp volunteer. One anthropologist became intrigued when she came across a group of U.S. businesspeople teaching management and entrepreneurship in the small Baptist church in her rural Haitian field site. Another was drawn into translating for a group working among those speaking a minority Mayan language in the highlands of Guatemala. She later wrote a paper about her experience, but her initial motivation to assist the group was to minimize the potential damage she feared this wealthy, culturally naïve team of North American evangelicals might do in the

<sup>8</sup>Mainstream media outlets such as *USA Today* (MacDonald 2006), the *Wall Street Journal* (Sparks 2008) and the *Chicago Tribune* (Roth 2005) have all covered STM.

<sup>9</sup>While there is fairly substantial literature on the practice of short-term missions, debating its relevance or worth from a missiological point of view, there is very little published, research-based work. Notable exceptions include the work of Robert J. Priest, an anthropologist and scholar of missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who has guest edited several theme issues of missiology or theology journals and a book (see Priest, et. al. 2006; also Priest 2008a, Priest & Priest 2008, all of which include several articles or chapters based on ethnographic or statistical research. In addition, there are a handful of articles (Montgomery 1993; Ver Beek 2008) and several brief mentions that appear as part of larger sociological project on religion in the United States (Ammerman 2005; Smith and Denton 2005; Wuthnow and Offutt 2008).

small village where she worked. As I have presented on this phenomenon at professional meetings, many colleagues have approached me with their own stories of encountering STM teams around the world, occasionally with somewhat cringe-worthy accounts. Seen from the anthropological perspective, STM may seem to be the worst combination of religious fundamentalist zeal and touristic superficiality.

Yet just as anthropologists have argued for the relevance of scholarly—particularly ethnographic—attention to be paid to tourists, conservative Christians and missionaries, so too should both secular and Christian scholars turn an ethnographic eye to STM.<sup>10</sup> In the first place, it would be a mistake to believe that this is a marginal phenomenon involving a relatively small number of people. In their recent survey of transnational religious connectivity drawing on adult, church-based populations, Wuthnow and Offut (2008) put the number of U.S. Americans participating in STM at 1.6 million per year. Given that this number came from surveying only those church members over the age of eighteen, there is no question that the overall number is much larger.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, whereas Wuthnow and Offut asked only about STM trips abroad; significant numbers of junior high and high school students take domestic trips to urban areas or to regionally distinct cultural contexts (e.g., Appalachia) that my college students and members of CWC considered to be very much a part of the STM experience.<sup>12</sup> However the numbers are crunched, millions of U.S.

<sup>10</sup>Among many others, Sharon Gmelch (2004) makes the case for tourists; Susan Harding (1991) has written about the importance of studying “fundamentalist Christians”; and Brown Douglas (2001) has made the case for studying missionaries and missionary writing.

<sup>11</sup>Wuthnow, in his book (2009, p #) published after the 2008 article, makes this point himself. Research by anthropologist Robert Priest (2011) provides statistical support for the higher numbers. For example, he reported that just over 50 percent of Christian college and seminary students surveyed in 2005 reported having gone on a short-term trip. With the population of Christian college students being over 300,000, and seminaries representing another 30,000, this alone represents nearly 175,000 travelers. A more precise figure would be dependent on the groups involved and the terms of inclusion. It is easy to suggest the number, including teens and nonchurch-based participants, is over two million per year.

<sup>12</sup>Smith and Denton (2005, 43), using a wide definition of religious mission team or service project, found that 30 percent of religious (Christian and Jewish) teens surveyed had participated in one of these trips. Though this would include everything from serving in a soup kitchen to spending two years as a missionary intern in China, this represents an enormous number of teens participating and likely includes mostly trips of the one- to two-weeks service/mission variety discussed here.

Americans have participated in one or more of these trips, and millions more have heard from travelers through presentations at churches, youth group meetings and Christian colleges.

For many of the travelers, these trips potentially become a key moment for developing interpretations of social conditions such as economic inequality, cultural difference, racial dynamics, gender discrimination, globalization and social injustice. Within an STM encounter, however, these interpretations occur in an explicitly theological framework. Scholars of evangelical Christianity have long noted that while faith motivates charitable action and social engagement among its adherents, in some cultural contexts (e.g., white suburban evangelicalism), this social engagement is often in tension with any recognition of structural inequality, systemic injustice or geopolitical aspects of poverty (Emerson and Smith 2000; Emerson 2003; Elisha 2011; Bi-alecki 2008). Among those participating in STM trips, encountering and addressing poverty, learning about the culture of the place and people being visited and generally gaining a wider perspective on global Christianity are explicit goals of the travelers. Yet, after presenting how the missionary narrative comes to frame an STM trip, I argue that this narrative also *inhibits* these very goals. For this reason I offer, from an explicitly Christian point of view, a possible response to the pervasive narrative in STM.

There are also nonreligious versions of STM, known as "service tourism" or "voluntourism." Increasing numbers of people are paying big money to travel to remote villages and help install water systems, work in sustainable agriculture or learn about local health projects. All these forms of service/mission travel tend to follow similar patterns of activity, often taking place for a similar length of time and executing many of the same sorts of projects. What set the religious, and particularly Christian, version of these travels apart are the narratives created and employed around these trips. It was these narratives—culturally embedded discourses about otherness, mission, blessing and suffering—that drew me as an anthropologist of globalization and religion to want to study this phenomenon.

Mine is not, primarily, a project motivated by a strong support or

critique of STM. I began my work wearing the hat of an anthropologist, a researcher interested in understanding what these trips mean for those who participate, how they reflect or refashion the practices and beliefs of participants and how they contribute to particular understandings of the world beyond those of STM travelers. As I thought more about this, however, I felt called to come also as a fellow Christian who is concerned for those receiving these teams as well as those participating and to think more intentionally about how the church should be framing these travels. I believe the cause of missions is one Christians should support, even if particular methods or modes need to be critiqued, adapted or discarded. I hope this research will be a gift to the church in our efforts to be a more faithful witness to the gospel in local and transnational ways.

### **NARRATIVES, CHRISTIANS AND CULTURE**

Creating narrative is a universal feature of humanity, a process of such significance crossculturally that many anthropologists (along with literary critics, philosophers, historians, novelists and even “narratologists”) have thought deeply about the dynamics of producing and consuming narratives as a common, and essential, human experience (Mitchell 1980; Rosenwald 1992; Ellis and Flaherty 1993; J. Bruner 2003). Arthur Asa Berger (1997, 10), a well-known scholar of popular culture, says narratives “furnish us with both a method for learning about the world and a way to tell others what we have learned.” There are other ways of learning, of course, such as scientific experimentation and metaphoric association, but as Berger points out, narrative includes those forms of knowing as well. (Scientists must explain what they have learned through narratives of question, hypothesis, experiment and conclusion.) In this way, narrative is a kind of metalanguage, a way of using language that makes it possible to make sense of language and experience. Through shared narratives, culturally or individually specific experiences are made intelligible to self and other (see also Barthes and Duisit 1977, 79ff).

Narratives work as metalanguage because they are embedded in larger, shared frames of meaning and culture, what linguistic anthro-

pologists often call "discourse." I considered presenting STM generally as a discourse, as I wanted to understand not simply the ways people talked about STM, but also how this talk forms and reflects relationships, understandings and institutional arrangements in the world at large. I decided to steer away from making discourse the central analytical frame for the study for two reasons: First, unlike *narrative*, *discourse* is a term smacking of anthropological jargon, one that shows up in pretentious philosophical conversations as well as technical linguistic and anthropological studies. I certainly do not want those reading this book to feel they must slog through any more unfamiliar theory than necessary.

Second, and more importantly, the notion of "discourse" has been most famously elaborated by Michel Foucault (1984) and his followers, who interpret discourse as always inextricably linked to power and domination. While I certainly suggest how the narratives/discourse of STM reflects power relationships as well as economic and social position, and even may serve to (re)create social hierarchy, I do not think that is all they do. As I have studied STM, I am convinced they are not always and only built around power and inequality. As I explore in part four, I believe the language of STM can be reformed, if not redeemed, to create bonds of unity, partnership and Christian fellowship in ways that can transcend, or at least make visible, relationships of inequality and social power.

My decision to concentrate on the language of the short-termers themselves as a key to understanding these trips came from ethnographic experiences and theoretical commitments I brought to the research. First, in ethnographic terms, was the high degree of convergence in the narratives and rhetoric of my own students who had gone on STM trips. Even before I was provided with statistical confirmation, it was clear that most of my students had been on at least one such trip.<sup>13</sup> These students used common phrases about how impoverished Christians were much closer to God, how the children "had nothing"

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<sup>13</sup>Robert Priest (pers. comm.) conducted research on Christian college and seminary students generally. Among Wheaton students (n=147), he found that 6 percent reported participating in one or more trip

yet were “so happy.” Students routinely spoke of how the trip helped in “getting outside my comfort zone” and how the experience had “changed my life.” In multiple conversations, I heard phrases like this one from a first-year student who had gone to Mexico to help build houses: “God just totally changed my world. When I saw how the church in Mexico worshipped God even though they had nothing, it just changed the way I see everything. Here we have everything, right? But there, they just trust God. I don’t know, but seeing it for myself . . . it changed my life.”

It was out of these interviews, along with an earlier research project on STM expectations among college students, that I began to believe that these narratives, embedded in themes of travel and return, drawing from the theological and cultural resources, and powerfully connected to evangelical priorities and cultural tools, made STM a unique form of travel.<sup>14</sup> Although they exchanged anecdotes, giving accounts of the unique features of their various trips and the particular dynamics of their countries and cultures, each could say that they had a common experience; all of them had “done a short-term mission.”

The second reason I chose to focus on narratives sprang from the nature of evangelical Christianity itself. As both a scholar of evangelicalism and a Christian who has actively identified and participated in evangelical communities since college, I am acutely aware of the importance and particularity of narratives of faith among my fellow believers. The ways Protestants generally, and evangelicals in particular, think about and use language has become a central concern among anthropologists of Christianity (e.g., Keane 2007; Coleman 2006; Engelke 2007; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006). Susan Harding (2001, xi), in her widely read book on Jerry Falwell and his followers, found that the “very site” of her fieldwork was not the physical locations of Christians, but the language they used to create an understanding of themselves.

This emphasis on language is not without its critics. For example, Harding’s work in particular has been critiqued as overly focused on language at the expense of embodied practices by which Christians

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<sup>14</sup>My earlier project (Howell and Dorr 2007), using the applications of students for the summer mission projects at a Christian college, focused on their expectations and motives for the trips.

come to understand their identity and faith (cf. Luhmann 2004). Similarly, because Harding's work was focused on the language of evangelical elites (e.g., Jerry Falwell), some have argued that we can lose sight of the practices of Christian life that draw on and reshape the language of elites themselves (see Bialecki 2008, 376; Robbins 2006). To understand how the language comes to have an ordering effect on experience and identity, it must be examined *in situ* as it is used, formed, contested and shaped among rank-and-file believers, not simply as a top-down process.

As I show in part two, leaders of churches and nationally known authors writing about STM were part of shaping the travel narratives and nomenclature around the movement from the beginning. However, at many points, they seemed to be responding to the language of average Christians, rather than creating the language itself. It was at the level of congregational life that I thought I should understand how narratives were being produced, practiced and reproduced.

This is not to say that the narratives provided by elites are unimportant, either in the case of STM or in cultural phenomena generally. Anthropologists of travel have demonstrated how the authors of published guides or official spokespeople of cultural "authenticity" often play a particularly important role for travelers' interpretations of unfamiliar places and people. In various kinds of travel, be they pilgrimage to the Holy Land (e.g. Bowman 1991) or tourism in Athens (Travlou 2002), the descriptions and narratives produced by elites and brought to the traveler in text and tradition are powerful mediators of the traveler's experience (see chapter two for more on STM in relation to these other forms of travel). These interpretations, however, are never so powerful as to strictly delimit the range of personal interpretations and contestation made possible as real individuals encounter the world (cf. Eade 2000). To understand the experiences and interpretations of STM travelers, it would not be enough to know the narratives they used and may have internalized; I needed to understand the production and consumption of these narratives in the sites of influence. This sort of understanding is the strength of ethnographic research.

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND SHORT-TERM MISSION

Ethnography is not the only way to study STM. Some studies look for measurable indices to determine the effect of STM trips on either travelers or host communities. For example, Calvin College sociologist Kurt Ver Beek (2006) designed a project to identify whether one particular claim to “transformation,” namely that STM participants give more money to mission work, could be quantifiably substantiated. Using comparative statistical measures of giving rates, Ver Beek looked for evidence that those who participated in a given STM project (building houses in Honduras after hurricane Mitch in 1998) gave more money than those who had not participated or more than they had prior to their trip.<sup>15</sup>

Others have used survey research to test hypotheses that participation in STM makes participants less ethnocentric, increases participation in long-term missions or contributes to a more active prayer life (see, for example, Park 2008). Relying on self-reporting or measurable aspects of social life, these studies have been equivocal in their assessment of the particular effects of STM and silent on the constructed meanings STM is having among participants.

What ethnography contributes to the conversation is an understanding of STM that can't be gained through other methods. Unlike more detached methods of social research, ethnography provides a perspective on how people understand, interact with and construct the world. Attending to the personal, local and everyday interactions in a particular community or group, the ethnographer gains access to processes of subjectivity and the creation of cultural interpretation that are often difficult for people to describe about themselves (see Cerwonka and Malkki 2007).

The ethnographic method also allows for sustained attention to the wider context in which individuals act, speak and think. Sociologist Randall Collins argues that social analysis should always begin with the interactional context rather than with individuals themselves. De-

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<sup>15</sup>Ver Beek found that over five years, there was little to no measurable difference in overall giving between those who had participated in the trip and those who had not (2006). For his exploration of other quantitative studies of STM, see Ver Beek 2008.

veloping what he calls a theory of "interaction ritual," Collins points our attention to the social dynamics of everyday life—the small social rituals—that shape individuals' experiences of their own lives and the lives of others (2004). Thus, throughout my research, though my attention is on the narrative, testimonies and stories individuals use and produce to understand their experiences, I link those to the historical and institutional contexts in which we find ourselves. In the final chapter, where I suggest interventions, my attention turns primarily to those institutional arrangements and interactional contexts in which these narratives are (re)produced. It is in transforming these interactions that the individual narratives will be most affected.

For this reason, it is not necessary that the examples that make up the focus of ethnographic research be "case studies" or representative examples; rather, they are a means of exploring processes and cultural dynamics invisible from other methodological vantage points. For this research, then, I sought a context in which I could engage in long-term fieldwork with an STM team, attending to the processes by which narratives were embraced, created, modified, employed or rejected. By becoming part of the process (what anthropologists call "participant observation"), I hoped to gain some insight into what these participants understood as "transformation," how that was experienced and what that might mean for and about their faith. Therefore, while I was not attempting to find an archetypal STM team, based on what I had heard from my Wheaton students over the years, there were a number of characteristics I sought in finding a "site" for my research.

### SELECTING A SITE

To prepare for my research, I spent the summer of 2005 as a kind of short-term missionary myself, during which my family and I worked in a summer school program with the ministry my Dominican Republic team would visit the next year. During that time I took a one-day side trip with an STM team from Tennessee into a small *batay* (a village of cane field workers) in the middle of the sunbaked sugar cane fields near the North Coast city of Puerto Plata.

I met up with the Tennessee team at a gas station on the side of the

road. I explained my research, and they were warm and accommodating. Not having my informed consent forms on hand to sign, I assured them I would only observe. The team seemed to have been fairly well prepared for their trip. The girls wore modest skirts and the boys long pants, and all respectfully took in everything our North American missionary guide had to say. Before arriving at the mission agency's housing project of modest cement homes, where clean water ran and sanitation was available to all, we stopped at a "company village," a virtually uninhabitable collection of rundown, dirt-floor barracks, where single men and families were squeezed together in cinderblock rooms with little ventilation in the stifling heat. Toilet facilities were virtually nonexistent, and although the residents clearly did all they could to maintain a livable area, fetid trash lay in piles not far from the living quarters.

As we walked between the buildings toward the home of a family our missionary guide knew, the members of the group greeted people along the way and comported themselves carefully. If anyone expressed distaste at the environment or behaved in a way other than friendly, I did not see it. We even came upon a funeral, being conducted according to traditional Haitian religious practices, where the body of the dead man was being prepared for burial. While our group undoubtedly looked a bit odd in the setting (a collection of white people standing around between the houses, occasionally breaking into quiet hymns such as "Amazing Grace" or "How Great Thou Art"), no one expressed anything negative about the religious practices so different from North American evangelicalism. I watched carefully to see if any facial expressions or comments would suggest revulsion, distaste, shock or even pity, and I saw nothing but interest or a kind of respectful awkwardness.

After finishing our tour of the poverty-stricken company village, we reached the mission community in the *batay*. Our truck pulled up to a large church, where we could already hear the lively music of the Dominico-Haitian congregation. We filed into the building to see that two other STM teams were already there. One, a small group of eight to ten adults—medical professionals who had come to work at the

health clinic—sat quietly toward the back of the church. Our group sat across the aisle from that team, behind the men of the congregation, who wore suits or dress shirts, separated from the women of the congregation, who were likewise modestly dressed, many with the head coverings associated with ultraconservative Christianity.

Our group clapped along to the music being played by a band with an electric keyboard, guitar and percussion, and sang along as best we could with the Creole lyrics. I sat with the other members of the Tennessee team, singing along and listening to the preacher, who mixed Haitian Creole and Spanish for his congregation of mostly Haitian cane workers. He greeted our group, which at one point was invited to the front with its adult leaders to sing an English worship song. One of the team leaders played guitar. At the end of the song, the Haitian congregation, which had been nodding and clapping throughout, burst into applause and shouts of "amen." The pastor put his hands on the group leader's shoulders and, in Spanish, thanked her for coming and being part of the service.

A third group, which may have shared a song earlier or perhaps had sat through much of the worship already, was not engaged as the Tennessee team was. Instead they were in the back of the church and outside on the front steps—a group of some thirty to forty white, U.S. teenagers, several wearing bikini tops or shirtless(boys), playing with the Haitian children, who were dressed in Sunday clothes and who had presumably come to church with their parents. A number of the U.S. girls wore their hair in the cornrow style with small braids ending in colorful beads done for tourists by Haitian women, who walk up and down the beach, charging five to ten U.S. dollars for a process that could take several hours.

While the Haitian churchgoers seemed unconcerned by their movement, several members of this team played with kids in the back of the church or walked in and out as laughing children took their hands to lead them into the yard for piggyback rides or games of tag. Perhaps the parents of these children were happy for the distraction the visiting teens provided; I did not ask any at that time. I had a hard time believing, however, that the immodest attire or casual approach to par-

ticipating in the worship service was appropriate for guests.

For me, the defining moment of this team's visit came as they left on an open-sided truck that had brought them to the village. Several of them gave out candy as the truck began the drive back to the all-inclusive resort where they were staying, their bright pink wristbands clearly visible. As someone already thinking about the issues of neocolonialism, patronage and even exploitation potentially involved in these short-term missions, the sight of these beautiful North American teens shouting "Adios" and "Hasta la vista" to the swirl of Haitian children running away from the church in their Sunday clothes, hoping to get a piece of American candy, was a bit disturbing.

The point of this story is to contrast these two images, particularly the latter, with what I would eventually seek out for this project. I had seen or heard accounts of enough variation in these sorts of teams to know that the more egregious examples of North American indulgence or insensitivity were not necessarily more common than respectful, well-prepared teams. As an anthropologist, my first interest is not in constructing a case for or against, but in providing understanding and interpretation. Toward that end, I deliberately sought out a program that, while not necessarily representative in a statistically verifiable way, would not be an obvious outlier or exceptional case, either good or bad. That is, I did not want to focus my study on a church that was doing something remarkably cutting-edge or distinctly different from what I perceived to be the patterns of short-term missions.

I have heard of churches that engage in "bilateral mission," where they bring members of non-Western churches to their U.S. congregations, and others that engage in long-term relationships with particular congregations, developing deep connections with non-Western leaders, learning the local language(s) in the U.S. congregation and working according to some of the best practices of holistic economic development. I have likewise heard of others who routinely send unprepared teenagers into rural villages, where they engage in all sorts of insensitive and culturally inappropriate behavior. For the purposes of this study, I felt neither sort of trip would be helpful.

I also sought a group that was not planning to engage in remarkable

or extraordinary activities while abroad. In terms of the explicit objectives of STM trips, there is a great deal of variety, although among trips not bringing professionals, such as dental or medical missions, particular projects seem favored. Priest's (2010a, p. 99) research among U.S. megachurches confirmed what I heard from the students in my classes: the most popular activity for these trips is construction projects, followed closely by work involving children such as Vacation Bible School (VBS) and "backyard Bible clubs." Evangelism remains an important element of the discourse, but for those going to non-English-speaking countries, which are a majority, direct evangelism remains difficult (see also Priest 2006). Other, more personal, goals also played critical roles in organizing the purpose and expectations of these trips—expectations that I discuss in detail later in this book.

Likewise, in terms of the amount of time distinguishing a short-term trip from a long-term or "mid-length" trip, there is no standard. For some, anything under two years is "short term," while others would see trips lasting more than one month as providing something distinctly different from one-week excursions. My own definition of a short-term mission, which I explain in chapter two, doesn't make time a definitive criterion, but relying on the testimony of my college students and research done by Priest and Priest (2008), trips that were around two weeks long seemed to be common, particularly for high school students.

Finally, although I knew teams traveled to a wide variety of countries, one element of the STM narrative characteristic of many travels concerned language and communication across language barrier. Trips to Spanish-speaking countries are the vast majority of short-term trips, with Mexico being the country receiving the highest number of such teams, the Dominican Republic being in the top five (Priest, Dischinger and Rasmussen 2006; Priest 2010a; see also Gilbert and Hamilton 2009).<sup>16</sup> Thus, finding a team in which language barriers had to be negotiated seemed to be relevant to understanding the narratives so common to these trips. In the end, when I set about selecting a team to

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<sup>16</sup>In Priest's research, the country receiving the most teams *per capita* was, perhaps unexpectedly, the Bahamas.

study, I found myself imagining a ten-day to two-week trip of construction and children's ministry, in which a high school group would travel to a Spanish-speaking country as part of what they and their church explicitly framed as a short-term mission.

As I began to conceive of the project, I learned of a woman who would soon be leaving her job on staff at our college to spend three years with a Christian organization in the Dominican Republic, known here by the pseudonym *Ayuda para Niños*, or Help for the Children. I had heard something about this organization from one of my students, and in talking with the woman preparing to go, discovered that several churches from the Wheaton area regularly sent short-term teams to work in the children's home and the elementary school, and to do construction projects. I approached one of those supporting congregations where I already knew the missions pastor to see if it would agree to allow an "outsider" access to one of its teams for two years of research. A charismatic man in his thirties, this pastor at CWC was a former missionary who had an MA in mission studies. I knew this congregation to be a place with a venerable commitment to long- and short-term missions. Similarly, I knew this pastor had developed a relatively thoughtful and carefully planned short-term missions program. It seemed a great place to start.

I began studying the team before it was a team, during the selection phase when prospective leaders were interviewed and student applicants were vetted and assigned to one of the five teams (Mexico, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Spain and the Dominican Republic). I went through the preparation with the team, including the logistical preparations, cultural training, theological/spiritual discussions and team-building times. I also interviewed each member, usually in groups of two or three, before we traveled. During the trip itself, I spent virtually all my time simply doing what the team did. Except for two afternoons when I visited with Dominican leaders or community members, I worked on the building, helped conduct the VBSs, participated in devotional times and hung out with the team. Upon our return, I joined in the occasions to gather and remember the trip and present our pictures. I also interviewed all member again individually, generally eight

to twelve months after we had returned, to understand how they remembered their experiences.<sup>17</sup>

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

My goal with this book is to demonstrate the ways a particular narrative that has become important to many peoples' religious lives was created and used in understanding the STM travel experience. This narrative began long before any of the individuals presented in this ethnography started thinking about this trip, and it came to each of them in the institutional context of CWC. It is my intention to offer something more than just a study of a particular STM trip, but to present a larger framework for understanding STM generally and the ways narratives are created among Christians to understand themselves and others.

To set the stage for the ethnographic study of the team, chapter two lays out the theoretical framework I used to understand the development of STM travel. I address the definition of "short-term mission," with an extended discussion of how STM represents a particular mode of travel. Reflecting on the anthropological work on related forms of travel—specifically pilgrimage and tourism—I argue that while STM overlaps with both, it is a unique phenomenon referencing a unique social encounter. From there, I present a history of STM in part two, with a focus on the emergence of the term and concept of the "short-term mission." I divide the history as a way to demonstrate a movement from the more adult and mission-agency aspect of the history, then as a youth and teen phenomenon, and finally with its church-based focus. Such a history has not yet been undertaken, and a full history of STM is a project deserving far more attention than I am able to give here.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>There was one student who, due to schedule conflicts, was not able to have the final interview. I did, however, have follow-up interviews with several students in the year after they took a second trip to Linda Vista in the summer following our trip.

<sup>18</sup>Peterson, Aeschliman and Rasmussen (2003, pp. 241-55) give a brief history in which they chronicle a number of initial STM projects undertaken by various organizations. Their focus is on the practice, rather than the language, but is very helpful for establishing the emergence of STM in deed if not word. See also C. M. Brown, "Field Statement on the Short-Term Mission Phenomenon: Contributing Factors and Current Debate" (unpublished paper, Trinity International University, June 9, 2005), online at <[www.tiu.edu/tedsphd/ics\\_research](http://www.tiu.edu/tedsphd/ics_research)>.

In particular, as I looked for the ways the idea of short-term missions, marked as a distinctive activity, appeared in various publications, I track rather closely with the heritage of my ethnographic subjects in the evangelical church. Unfortunately, this means Catholic, Orthodox, Mormon and mainline histories of the movement are neglected. For the discussion to follow, however, it seemed important to trace the genealogy of the language and ideas leading up to the evangelical manifestation I encountered at CWC.

Fortunately, Wheaton College, in addition to being a hotbed of short-term mission activity, is home to an extensive mission archive. Exploring recent records of groups formed to send short-term teams abroad, along with the speeches or presentations of significant mission practitioners and theorists, I use part two to illustrate how the emergence of STM as a practice was accompanied by a shift in the very definition of *missions*. That is, since the earliest years of the Christian movement, there have been those who travel to other places for brief periods to engage in missionary work, but the contemporary short-term mission phenomenon, with its focus on sending average laypeople, and particularly young people, abroad for the length of time generally reserved for a vacation is a contemporary movement indeed. The archival data reveal a fascinating emergence of the language that today contributes to the expectations, and interpretations, of short-term missionaries.

From there I move into the ethnographic study of the team itself. Part three begins with a presentation of the process in which I participated in preparing for our trip to Linda Vista. My purpose in chapter six is both to explore the processes of narrative construction as well as to consider how the wider cultural context of U.S. evangelicalism contribute to the ways team members would interpret the experiences of the trip and process the experience when we came home. From the first church interviews with prospective leaders and students to the writing of support letters and evangelism workshops, and even to the informal rhetoric of our team leaders, each of us was gradually brought to a common discourse of our trip and our purpose in travel.

Chapter seven moves to the trip itself and the ways our narrative was extended to the experiences in the Dominican Republic. At times

members of the team resist the constraints particular narratives provide; at other times they fall comfortably into the themes and tropes laid out by these narrative structures. I focus in particular on ways that members of our trip interpret or construct particular aspects of the experience anticipated in the pretrip phase, specifically difference, community and poverty. I also consider the relationship I observed between times of "mission" and times of "tourism" experienced on the trip. Although, as I explore in chapter six, no one on our team wanted our trip to be confused with tourism, there were several moments in which we understood our activities to be tourist in nature.

Chapter eight focuses directly on the articulation of the trip in the months after our return. I revisit the themes of poverty and community as they emerged in the narrative of "transformation" for our post-trip lives. As I explored the varied personal narratives of our team, as well as my college students and earlier participants or leaders of CWC's short-term missions programs, the shaping and even constricting role of the guiding STM narrative became clearer.

While my goal in this research has never been primarily prescriptive, the more I worked with this material and the more I talked about it with other Christians, the more I came to believe that simply presenting my research was not what I needed to do. As the most vocal critics of STM and its sharpest observers, Christians themselves wanted tools to think about how these narratives could be refashioned, strengthened or otherwise imagined toward the highest goals of Christian life and mission. Thus I use part four to think about how these narratives, in their creation and practice, could be viewed in theological and missiological terms. Thinking about the nature of narrative and travel as anthropological concepts, as well as mission as a theological mandate, I propose a few thoughts on how Christians might think about changing STM as a process of *cultural* change. Following the argument that STM is a particular cultural experience, in chapter nine I consider what it means to talk about cultural change and how (as well as why) this might take place. I draw primarily on the theological language and perspective of my own evangelical context, but I hope these will offer resources for fellow travelers in other Christian traditions in which

STM has also become a significant feature of religious life.

The final chapter lays out some of the directions I hope this book might lead. In terms of continuing research on STM, I suggest that anthropologists, along with other social scientists, theologians and perhaps even some poets, have a great deal more to contribute to our understandings of ourselves. In theological terms, I encourage us to think together about how STM might fit into a larger and more robust understanding of God's work in the world as we join his redemptive work.

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