

# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Based on the doctoral thesis,  
***"The Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions on the Beliefs,  
Attitudes and Behaviours of Young Adults"***  
by Randall Gary Friesen  
for the University of South Africa.



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## **Summary**

This paper is based on a doctoral thesis entitled "*The Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions on the Beliefs, Attitudes and Behaviours of Young Adults*" prepared by Randall Gary Friesen for the University of South Africa.

The study investigated the impact that a number of variables within the short-term mission experience had on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of young adult mission participants in 24 concepts related to their relationship with God, the Church and world around them.

While the positive impact of the short-term mission experience was significant, the post-trip regression in participants' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours one year after returning from the mission experience was also significant. This regression indicates that inadequate attention is being paid to participant re-entry, debrief and follow-up.

Short-term mission agencies, missions participants and local churches need to view the discipleship impact of the short-term mission experience as ongoing. It is counter-intuitive to invest discipleship resources on returning short-term mission participants; however, the data indicates that is where the most significant discipleship challenges are found.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank both JP Hayashida and Tara Bishop for their excellent work in getting this research data into an accessible format for the broader mission community.

I'm also grateful for the support of the Reimer Foundation in making this research effort possible.

The Global Discipleship Training Alliance have supported the vision for this research project and are an example of the excellent mission practices that are emerging within the short-term mission and discipleship movement of the global Church.

The board and staff of MBMS International have been an ongoing inspiration and support throughout this research "journey." We do our best work in community. Thank you.

## **Copyright**

This paper is based on the unpublished doctoral thesis submission entitled "The Long-Term Impacts of Short-Term Missions on the Beliefs, Attitudes and Behaviours of Young Adults" by candidate R.G Friesen for the degree of doctor of theology at the University of South Africa, promoter Dr.J.Reimer.

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# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

## 1. Importance of Short-term Missions

Short-term missions (STM) are a subset of the larger missionary effort. The term “missionary” comes from the Latin word mitto, which means “to send”. Christian missionaries are those who have been sent out to share the gospel of Christ, a gospel which declares that creation can be reconciled to its Creator God through the substitutionary and completed work of Christ on the cross (Peterson, Aeschliman and Sneed 2003:43).

There is nothing short-term about Christ’s call to mission. His “*missio ecclesiato*” (God’s mission for the Church) is that we go into all the world making disciples by living and proclaiming the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20). This mission is the Church’s contribution to the much broader “*missio dei*” (God’s mission) of reconciling His creation back into a relationship with its Creator. Within the broader call to a life of mission, there are many acts of obedience with a particular purpose and time-frame which, when viewed in isolation, appear “short-term”. The methodology of “short-term” must be connected to the long-term “*missio ecclesiato*” and must be seen within the even broader “*missio dei*”.

Jesus’ model of discipleship included a variety of intentional short-term mission assignments for His disciples. The pre-trip preparation for these assignments included communicating a clear goal, a clear message, and practical methodology training. The short-term mission was connected to Jesus’ broader mission and was only possible because He had called, trained and sent these disciples. The impact of this form of intentional pre-trip training as modelled by Jesus was one of the primary focuses of the study.

**There is nothing short term about Christ’s call to mission.**

Short-term mission practitioners today point to the need to get disciples off the beach (or the pew) and in to the water of active ministry. Disciples in churches today have heard sermons about fishing for men, have studied the best techniques of using “nets and boats”, but have never been taught to “fish” through actually fishing. Short-term missions can offer the “hands on” discipleship in missions needed to augment the excellent teaching found in churches and theological classrooms.

### 1.1 The Growing Short-term Missions Phenomenon

Within the past generation, the Western Protestant church has experienced the explosive growth of short-term missions. The most recent version of the Mission Handbook (2004-2006) claims that the number of people going on short-term mission trips, as reported by United States agencies listed in the Handbook, grew from 97,272 in 1998 to 346,270 in 2001 (Welliver and

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Northcutt 2004:13). That figure shows an amazing 256% increase in three years. When combined with declining numbers of long-term missions personnel, some have called this change the most significant in modern missions history (Allen 2001; Barnes 1992). Considerable disposable wealth, inexpensive and efficient air travel, and excellent communication resources have aided short-term missionaries living in the West. In addition to the thousands of churches sending teams, there are now hundreds of specialized short-term mission organizations that facilitate every aspect of the mission experience.

With increasing human and financial resources within the North American Church shifting to short-term missions, it was important to understand the impact of this phenomenon on the participants who were going. This researcher's personal involvement in short-term missions has included training and sending thousands of short-term mission participants over the past fifteen years. Anecdotal accounts of the positive impact of these short-term mission experiences have been well reported; however, very little study has been done through statistical research to measure and analyze the impact of these experiences on participants' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. There has also been very little research comparing the relative merits of various short-term mission strategies and their impact on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of short-term mission participants. Do we understand how the short-term missions experience impacts the participants and if there are lasting changes from this experience? How do we improve the long-term impact of the short-term missions experience?

### **1.2 Compelling Questions for Short-term Missions**

While most acknowledge the short-term mission phenomenon is here to stay, the movement has attracted considerable scrutiny and concern within the broader missions community. Concerns have been raised about the ethnocentrism, relational shallowness, self-serving impact, and overall cost of short-term missions (Slimbach 2000; Van Engen 2000; Atkins 1991). With the groundswell of interest in short-term missions has come many poorly organized and missiologically weak cross-cultural assignments that often do more harm than good. Consequently, questions must be asked such as:

- What is the long-term value of the growing short-term missions phenomenon?
- Does short-term missions experience have a significant and lasting impact on a participant's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours?
- What impact do variables such as length of assignment, level of pre-trip discipleship training, and location of mission assignment have on the degree of positive spiritual change in the lives of short-term mission participants?

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- Does the composition of the team and structure of the team have an impact the participants?
- In what ways are discipleship and the process of growth in spiritual maturity advanced through short-term missions?
- How does the degree of family support or church support influence a participant's short-term mission experience?
- Does the type of mission experience (whether more service or more relationally focused) have a significant impact on the degree of change in a participant's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours?
- What influence does previous short-term mission experience have on a participant?
- Do repeated short-term mission experiences increase participant's interest in serving full-time in missions in the future?

One of the greatest challenges facing mission organizations today is understanding the present generation and mobilizing them into established missions structures. Understanding the impact of these types of factors on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of short-term mission participants was the focus of the study.

### **1.3 Current Short-Term Mission Challenges**

The term "short-term mission" in North America has described everything from poorly planned local church youth group forays into Mexico for a week, to well-planned programs incorporating hundreds and sometimes thousands of young adults all divided into well trained smaller teams and sent around the world.

Perhaps the most serious charge being brought against short-term missions today is that they feed the already prevalent Western tendency toward ethnocentrism and cultural myopia. Ethnocentrism "is defined as the practice of viewing alien customs by applying the concepts and values of one's own culture" (Taylor 1973:64). Ethnocentrism is viewed by some as an extension of the cultural imperialism and benevolent paternalism of the Western modern missions movement of the past century.

The limited time frame and Western need to accomplish something adds further pressure to the meeting of cultures and leads to what some have called the "edifice complex" in which buildings and projects become the focus instead of not people (Jeffery 2001:6). The recipients of mission, who Slimbach calls "culture brokers", interact with their short-term mission guests in a "staged tourist space" marked by disparities of power and levels of stereotyping that would not exist between neighbours or peers (Slimbach 2000:431). These recipients of mission can also be

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treated as unfortunate objects to be rescued, rather than equals to learn from and walk alongside (Van Engen 2000:22). Unequal relationships like these can lead to

**Does short-term missions experience have a significant and lasting impact on a participant's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours?**

“benevolent colonialism” (Allen, 2001:44), or even worse, “disabling help” or “malevolent generosity” (Slimbach, 2000:431).

Most of the missiologists who are cited in this analysis of ethnocentrism are involved in some level of short-term mission training and delivery. Their critique of ethnocentric attitudes and practices is meant to strengthen and improve the overall short-term mission efforts of the church. Their recommendations point to the “Best Practice of Short-term Mission” principles adopted by the various organizations included in the study. One of the purposes of the study was to better understand the factors that minimize the ethnocentric practices of short-term mission efforts.

### **1.4 Importance of this Study**

While some proponents of short-term missions acknowledge the potential dangers inherent in sending young adults into cross-cultural settings for intense service and learning experiences, they also point to the life changing discipleship opportunities that these trips afford for all involved (Barnes 2001, 1992; McDonough & Peterson 1999; Borthwick 1996). The best models of short-term mission have anticipated the various missiological risks inherent in this effort and have sought to avoid them through in-depth discipleship preparation, careful and appropriate service or mission under the leadership of hosting churches, and a thorough hosting ministry and participant debrief.

While some studies have been done with alumni of short-term missions in an attempt to better understand the impact of their experience on their spiritual life as well as interest in long-term missions, very little comprehensive research has been done on the overall impact of short-term missions on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of participants using before, after and follow-up longitudinal studies. Those studies completed either used a limited sample group size or were limited to a single organization (McDonough & Peterson –STEM, 1999; Tuttle, 1998; Beckwith 1991). With an increasing percentage of the Church's overall missions investment moving to short-term missions, it was imperative that a more comprehensive analysis of the overall value and impact of short-term missions be undertaken.

The purpose of the study was to use a longitudinal approach to analyse and compare the resulting change that a number of variables within the short-term mission experience have on the

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beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of young adult mission participants in short-term mission programs.

## **2. Key Findings**

The purpose of the study was to measure and better understand the changes occurring in the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of young adult mission participants serving in related short-term mission (STM) programs. For the purposes of the study, the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours selected for evaluation were related to three relational spheres including participants' relationship with God, the Church and the world around them. For a complete list of concepts, see Appendix 1: Summary of 24 Concepts.

A total of 116 study participants filled out a quantitative questionnaire prior to their short-term mission experience, after they returned from their mission experience and again one year after they returned. The questionnaire, short essay response and interviews all incorporated concepts related to the international and cross-cultural impact of the short-term mission experience that have not been systematically analysed in this kind of study before. The overall data set included over 27,000 pieces of data.

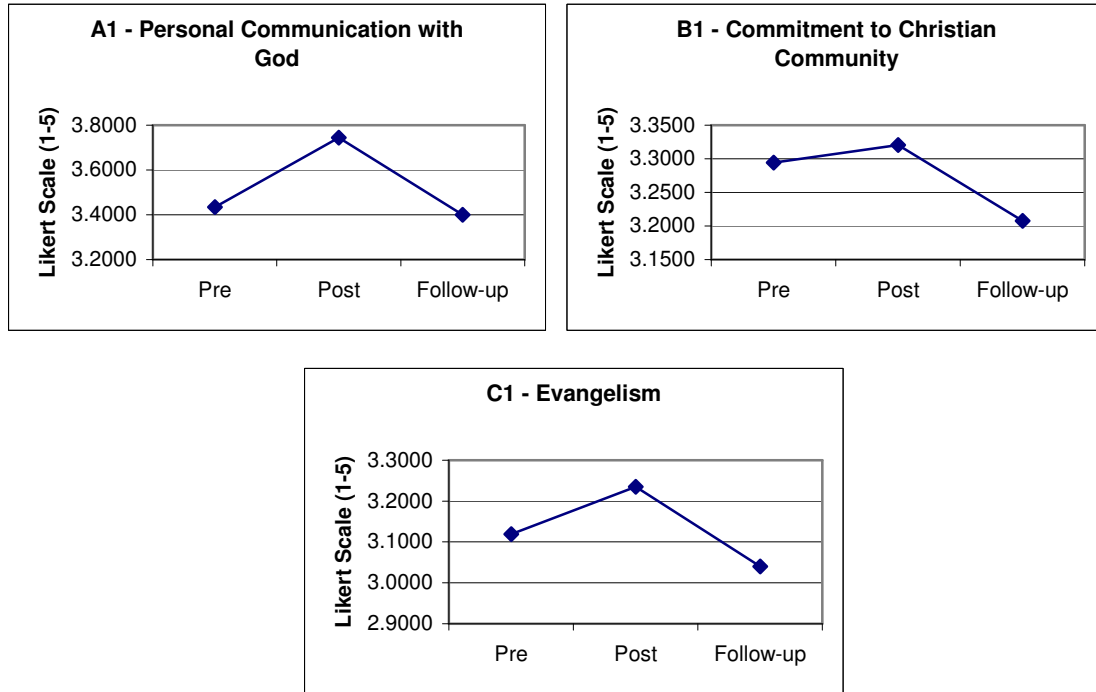
### **2.1 Broad Trends in Data**

When the mean scores of all of the participants in the study were averaged at the pre, post and follow-up stages for each of the 24 concepts, the following trends were noticed:

- The average mean of the participants increased from the pre to post stages in 20 out of 24 concepts. In other words, the average score of all the participants experienced a positive change in 20 of the 24 concepts while they were serving on their mission assignments.
- During the year after participants returned home from their assignments, the average mean of the participants decreased in 20 of 24 concepts from the post to follow-up stages of the study. In fact, in 15 of 24 concepts, the final mean score was lower than the initial score before participants left for the mission experience.

The following graphs show the average mean scores of participants in different concepts of the three relational spheres. In these examples, there is a positive change followed by regression.

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(See Appendix 2: Graphical Summary of Average Means Scores for complete set of results.)

This level of regression in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours a year following the short-term mission experience was stunning. This regression in the average mean of all the participants in the post-follow-up stages should not diminish the individuals and programs that scored much more positively from post to follow-up stages when the data is analyzed in more detail.

## 2.2 Summary of Key Findings

### Discipleship Training

Short-term mission participants with extensive pre-trip discipleship training experienced significantly higher change scores during their assignments in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours related to personal communication with God (prayer), the Bible as a guide for life, the value of Christian community, relationship with the local church and evangelism, when compared with participants who did not receive extensive pre-trip discipleship training.

The only concepts for which pre-trip discipleship training did not seem to have a significant impact were concepts in which all participants had limited previous exposure and concepts which required a personal experience rather than theoretical training. These concepts included the global Church and compassion for human need.

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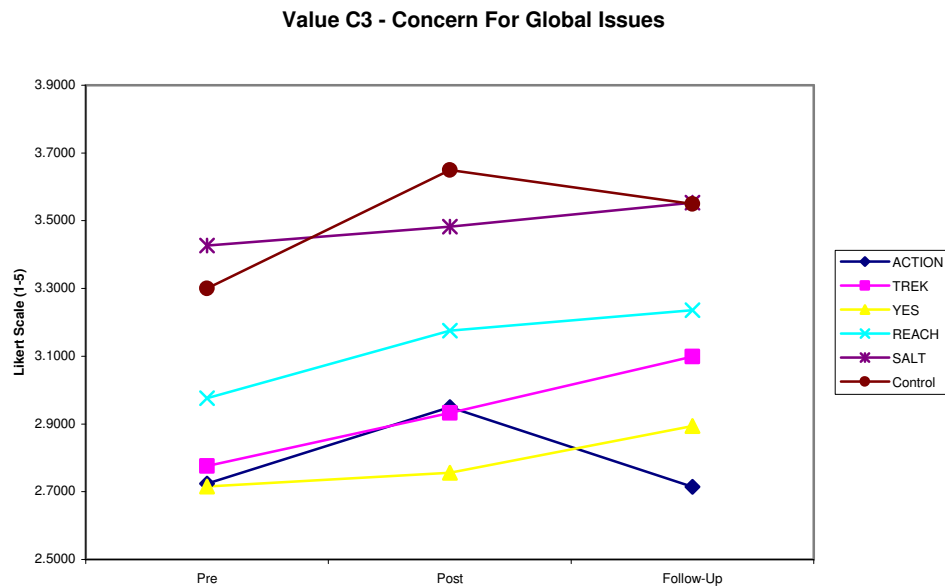
## Multicultural Teams

Multicultural teams do not experience significantly greater positive change than mono cultural teams related to cross cultural concepts such as the global Church, concern for global issues, respect for other cultures and their values and reconciliation between cultures. The cross cultural nature of the mission assignments allowed for participant growth in these concepts regardless of their team's cultural composition.

## Assignment Length

The longer an STM experience, the deeper and more lasting its impact on participants' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

The 10 month TREK program had significantly higher change scores during the assignment phase related to service in the church, teamwork in ministry, and the value of social justice, when compared with the 6 week ACTION program. During the year following participants' return home, TREK participants' change scores were significantly higher than those of ACTION participants related to their concern for global issues.



A longer mission program investing in intentional discipleship, community building and mission experiences can result in broader and longer lasting changes to beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

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## Cross-Cultural Short-Term Mission Assignments

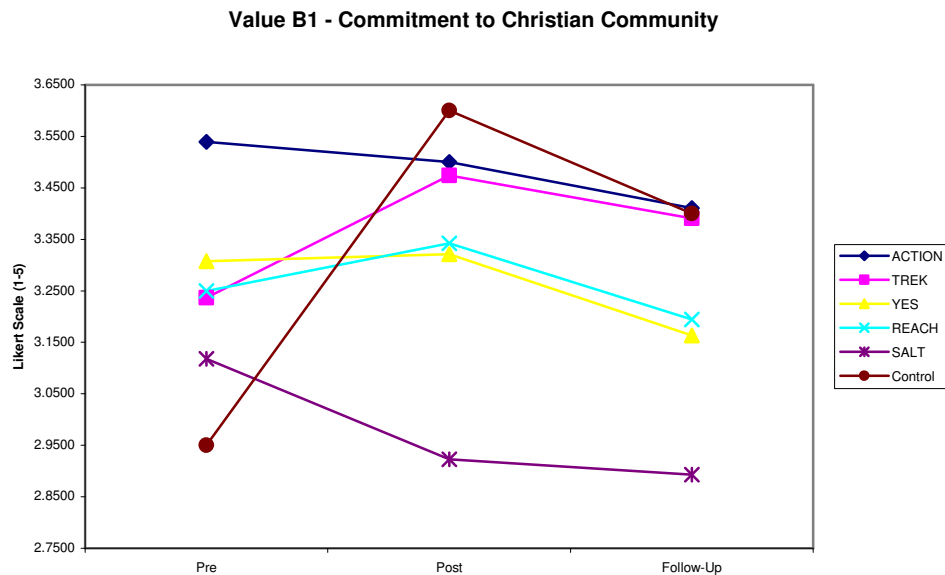
Cross-cultural short-term mission assignments have a significant lasting positive impact on participants' value of the global Church when compared with the impact of domestic assignments.

In the year following their return home from missions, the TREK team serving in a cross-cultural setting had stronger positive change scores in all four cross-cultural concepts (the global Church, concern for global issues, respect for other cultures and their values, and reconciliation between cultures), when compared with the TREK team serving in a domestic assignment.

The value of the global Church seems to be difficult to acquire without the experience of living and serving with Christians in other parts of the world. "World Christians" do not emerge within the North American Church without some level of intentionality focused on discipleship in cross-cultural mission.

## Team Assignments

Short-term mission participants who serve on assignment as teams (rather than as individuals) experience significantly greater growth in their value of Christian community.



Participants who served on teams had an easier time processing their disappointments on their assignments related to the local church, ministry or culture that they were experiencing. SALT participants serving on assignments as individuals learned independence and resilience, but their limited access to settings where they could open up their lives meant that difficulties sometimes resulted in ongoing frustration and unresolved conflict.

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### **First Time Participants**

First time short-term mission participants experienced the broadest positive changes while on assignment, but also the most significant decline in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours a year later, when compared to repeat participants.

Repeat short-term mission participants were better able to retain their positive changes over a wider number of concepts during the year following their return from missions. In the year following their return from missions, repeat alumni had significantly stronger retention of positive change in the concepts of prayer, purity, stewardship of time, teamwork, and the stewardship of creation, when compared with first time mission participants.

### **Family Support**

Supportive families can have a significant positive impact on short-term mission participants' ongoing value of teamwork, evangelism and the global Church in the year following their mission assignments.

Participants who viewed their families as supportive of their short-term mission experience seem to have received the support they needed at home to retain more of the positive changes they experienced while on their mission assignments. It is interesting that all three of the concepts in which there was significant difference between participants who viewed their families as supportive and those who did not, were relational concepts. Supportive families can offer short-term mission participants both support and the relational skills that they need to grow through their mission experiences.

All of the areas of significant difference in participants change scores for the 24 concepts were focused on the post-follow-up stage of the study once participants had returned home. It seems that supportive families have a significant impact on participants' change scores once they return from their assignments, rather than during the assignments.

### **Local Church Support**

Churches that strongly support short-term mission participants can have a significant positive impact on participants' value of purity and respect for other cultures once they return from missions.

Participants who viewed their home church as supportive of their short-term mission experience were less likely to experience a significant decline in their experience of personal purity. The support of a local church for short-term mission participants could indicate a broader interest in their personal development including areas like purity and cross-cultural sensitivity.

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

Participants from churches that were perceived to be offering limited support for their STM experience (group one) had a significantly higher post-follow-up change score ( $P=.024$ ) than participants from churches perceived to be supportive of the STM experience. Once participants from group one returned home, they grew in their experience of a relationship with their home church significantly more than those who felt their home church had been supportive of their STM experience. While this statistic appears to be counterintuitive, it is an indication that, regardless how supportive a local church is of the STM experience, each STM participant (and Christian) has a choice as to how they will relate to their home church.

### **Relational Versus Service Focus**

Relationally focused (as compared to service focused) short-term mission assignments can have a significant positive impact on participants' experience of Christian community, reconciliation and teamwork.

Participants who viewed their assignments as relationally focused experienced higher positive change scores while on assignment as compared to participants who viewed their assignments as service focused, in concepts related to Christian community and reconciliation between cultures. In the year following their return home from missions, those on relational assignments also retained significantly more of the positive change that they had experienced related to teamwork in ministry than those on service focused assignments.

### **Gender of Participants**

Women grew significantly more than men in their identity in Christ and the value of work while they served on missions. In the year following their mission assignment, men's regression was significantly greater than women's in purity and in their value of reconciliation between cultures.

The overall change scores indicated that women experienced positive change in a greater number of belief, attitude and behaviour concepts than men, both during the mission assignment and in the year after their return home. The overall data indicated that women experienced more positive change in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours than men.

### **Interest in Full Time Missions Work**

A strong interest in future full time mission work seems to provide an incentive for ongoing positive change in short-term mission participants, both while on their assignments as well as once they return home.

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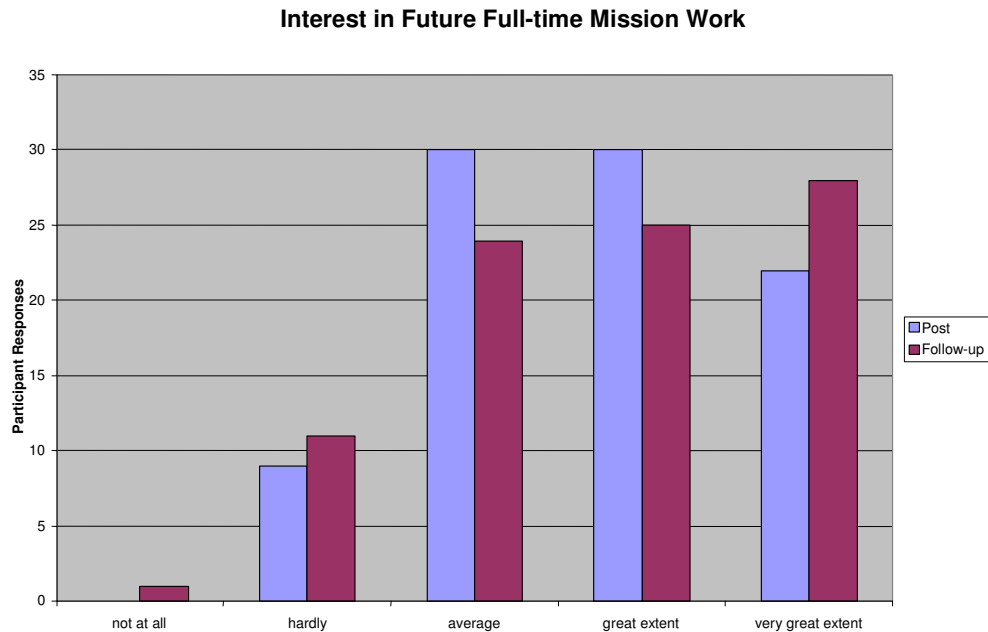
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While on their mission assignments, short-term mission participants strongly interested in future full time mission work experienced significantly higher change scores related to worship, attitude toward family, and teamwork in ministry, as compared with those who indicated limited interest in future full time missions. Once they returned home, those interested in future full time missions had significantly stronger change scores in their identity in Christ, evangelism, compassion for human need and concern for global issues, as compared with participants who were not interested in future full time mission work.

### Interest in Future Missions Work

A year after returning from their mission assignments, short-term mission alumni became more polarized in their interest toward future full time mission work.

A year after their return from short-term missions, alumni's response to future full time mission work was a perfect distribution graph with almost equal numbers moving away from an "average" response to either "great extent" or "hardly."



Discovering and following up with those short-term mission alumni who were moving toward stronger interest in future full time mission work would be a critical task for mission agencies and local churches.

### Number of Assignments and Future Missions Work

The more often participants serve on STM assignments, the more interested they are in future full time mission work.

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The correlation between number of short-term mission experiences and degree of interest in future full time mission work was very strong ( $P=.009$ ). This strong correlation could be either that short-term mission participants interested in future full time mission work keep serving on short-term mission assignments, or that short-term mission assignments are encouraging a growing interest for future full time mission work. There could be elements of both of these explanations at work in this correlation between frequency of short-term assignments and interest in future full time mission work.

### **3. Recommendations**

The increased awareness and preparedness of short-term mission agencies, local churches/schools and participants, for the challenges and potential fallout of short-term mission re-entry, will go a long way to limiting the post-trip regression of positive changes to beliefs, attitudes and behaviours experienced while on missions.

#### **3.1 General Recommendations**

The following general recommendations will assist mission organizations, local churches and missions participants.

##### **Pre-Trip Training**

Discipleship training before and after a short-term mission is critical to the overall impact of the mission experience on the participant. The pre-trip discipleship training can prepare both the heart and the head of a participant to be teachable throughout the mission experience. A teachable attitude gives participants the grace to work through relational conflict, cross-cultural misunderstandings, assignment difficulties and many other challenges which characterize most short-term mission assignments.

Potential short-term mission participants, parents of potential short-term mission participants, local churches and schools should look for short-term mission programs that do discipleship well. Participants in organizations that did not emphasize pre and post trip discipleship training were consistently lower on most positive beliefs, attitudes and behaviours change scores. The anticipation of an STM experience provides a unique teachable window in the life of a participant. To miss this discipleship training window is an irresponsible use of the STM experience.

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### **Program Length**

Short-term mission programs, local churches and colleges are encouraged to develop longer programs beyond the several week varieties which are so common today. The longer programs of several months up to a year allow participants to engage more deeply with the host culture, develop deeper team relationships and understand the heart of the local church. The data indicated that longer assignments (ten months versus six weeks) had a significant positive impact on participants' experience of teamwork, relationship with the local church and value of social justice. Once they returned home, participants who served on a longer program had a growing interest in global issues.

### **Serving in Teams**

Organize short-term mission assignments in small teams when interested in significantly strengthening participants' value of Christian community.

The team provided participants with a place to process their experiences and continue to take positive steps in their walk of discipleship. When these teams were multicultural in composition, the experience of true Christian community was enhanced, despite the obvious challenges of overcoming cultural barriers and communication issues.

### **Family and Church Support**

Cultivating families and home churches that are supportive of short-term mission participants and their experiences is important in participants' retention of positive change in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours once they return home from their assignments. The family and home church need to be an integral part of the whole short-term mission experience. Their discernment, prayer, support, encouragement and counsel are essential to ongoing positive change in the life of a short-term mission participant.

The relational skills that are essential in all cross-cultural mission experiences are learned at home and in a home community. The family and local church have an essential role in nurturing the qualities of a healthy missionary in young adults, long before they consider serving in short-term missions. This nurturing role is far deeper than communicating missionary vision, but incorporates the qualities of a missionary life.

### **Debrief**

Short-term mission programs, local churches and Christian colleges are not doing enough to debrief and follow-up with STM participants. The significant fall off in positive beliefs, attitudes

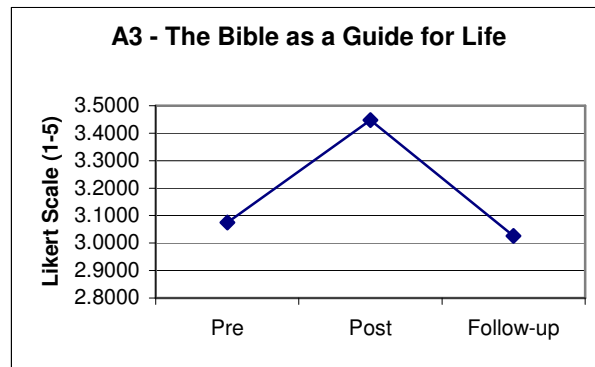
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and behaviours change scores a year following the STM experience is an indication that there is a battle for the hearts of our short-term mission alumni. Insufficient resources are being allocated to coordinate the discipleship follow through at the local church level after the short-term mission experience is over. The discipleship baton is getting dropped on the track as the local church assumes it is the short-term mission agencies responsibility to follow-up with participants, and the agencies believe it is the responsibility of the local churches.

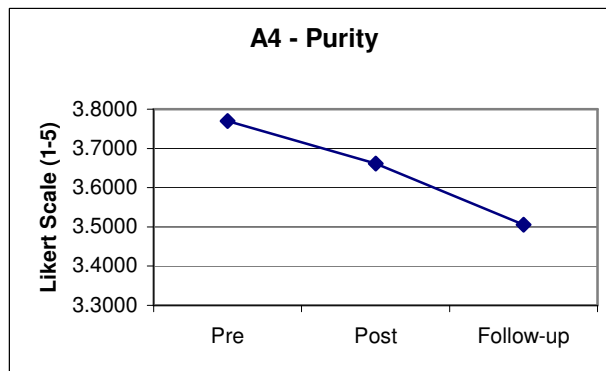
### Ongoing Spiritual Development

In the year following the short-term mission experience, there seems to be a spiritual “crash” related to participants’ personal devotional life including prayer and Bible study. This regression in the experience of a relationship with God must be profiled by mission agencies and prepared for by returning short-term mission participants.



### Battle for Purity

Short-term mission agencies, local churches and Christian colleges are not engaged enough in the battle for purity in the lives of young adult short-term mission participants. The most spiritually committed and gifted young leaders in the Church are struggling with issues of personal purity.



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The experience of focusing on mission and service, often within an intense community experience with other spiritually committed young adults, is somehow not helping the battle. Mission organizations and local churches can be more explicit in outlining the nature of the battle for purity and can provide safe places to talk about it. Additional resources might be needed for those working through significant purity issues.

### **Repeat Assignments**

Encourage short-term mission alumni to continue serving in longer assignments and to continue serving with greater responsibility. Repeat short-term mission participants experience positive change in a wider number of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours and retain these positive changes better than first time participants. Repeat participants are also more interested in future full time mission work.

### **Full Time Missions Work**

Discovering and following up short-term mission alumni who are moving toward deeper interest and involvement in future full time mission work is an essential task for local churches, schools and mission agencies. Staying connected with those alumni whose interest in future full time mission work is growing, is a strategic investment of time toward mobilizing the next generation of full time cross-cultural workers. This connection could be accomplished through effective use of debrief retreats at the end of a short-term mission program where follow-up visits to participants' home communities, alumni parties, and other reconnecting strategies could be planned. Staying connected with alumni in supportive relationships is an obvious and essential way to both support their application of the short-term mission experience into their lives, as well as explore future mission training and service experiences with them.

## **3.2 Recommendations for Missions Organizations**

In addition to the general recommendations, the following recommendations are intended to assist organizations involved in hosting short-term missions programs:

- Most of the present resources of short-term mission organizations are invested in planning quality assignments, preparing participants, and ensuring the assignment experience goes well. Relatively few resources are going into debriefing participants and preparing them for re-entry back home. Virtually no resources are going into following up with these participants and their home churches to ensure that the positive changes that participants are reporting translate into ongoing change. It is counter-intuitive to

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invest discipleship resources on returning short-term mission participants; however, the data indicates that is where the most significant discipleship challenges are found.

- For this ongoing follow-up of short-term mission alumni, there must be a re-thinking of the relationship between short-term mission agencies and sending churches/schools even before participants arrive on the mission program.
- Short-term mission organizations cannot see themselves as the totality of the mission/discipleship effort. They must see themselves as part of a larger discipleship process that includes families, churches and schools.
- Mission agencies must view local churches as essential allies in the discipling process and should build accountability requirements, including obtaining “life-coaches”, into their application process to ensure that participants are investing in local church discipleship and mentoring relationships. Mission organizations could suspend acceptance of short-term mission applicants pending the approval of participant’s home church pastor.
- Many mission organizations have established “well being” directors who ensure that the spiritual and emotional well being of their long-term missionary staff are being looked after. Short-term mission agencies require the same level of follow-up interest in their mission alumni.
- For “lasting fruit” and limited regression of positive changes in participants’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, mission organizations should invest additional resources in the follow-up and coordination of ongoing discipleship of short-term mission alumni. This follow-up coordinator would relate both to participants as well as the pastors, “life coaches” and school staff who have an ongoing relationship with the participant.
- Staying connected with alumni and discerning those who are moving toward deeper interest and involvement in future full time mission work is an essential task.

The data indicates that short-term mission participants are becoming increasingly disconnected from their local churches both during and after the short-term mission experience. Part of this trend could be because the study sample group were all young adults who often move to new communities for further schooling or work opportunities. However, mission organizations can work toward countering this data by intentionally calling short-term mission participants to integrate, serve and participate in the local church.

The investment of resources after the assignment is over is counter-intuitive, but the research data suggests that this is the most critical gap in the present short-term mission strategy.

### 3.3 Recommendations for Local Churches

In addition to the general recommendations, the following recommendations are intended to assist local churches involved in short-term missions:

- Local churches need to hear the message from short-term mission agencies that the church is essential to the spiritual health and ongoing discipleship of short-term mission participants.
- Local churches should take leadership in discerning suitable short-term mission participants, assisting these participants in building a support team and offering “life coaches” or mentors to participants who are serious about mission and discipleship once they return.
- Local churches could define the profile of an equipped “life coach” and offer training so that potential short-term mission applicants have trained coaches on whom to draw.
- Local churches could work with potential short-term mission participants to draw up a “discipleship contract” that defines the relationship and expectations between the participant and the life coach. This discipleship contract could be included in a participants application file so that short-term mission organizations receive a copy and have a contact to follow through.
- Local churches must understand the importance of the role they play in regard to re-entry and follow-up with participants.

**Participants need local church-based life-coaches to help them process their short-term missions discipleship experiences.**

This kind of follow-up of short-term mission participants communicates care. The data indicates that participants are struggling with their relationship with the local church upon their return home. They are also struggling with their devotional lives, personal purity, evangelism and social justice. The period immediately following a participant's return home is a critical time of re-entry and follow-up.

Some short-term mission strategists are recognizing the critical need for follow-up of returning short-term mission participants. They recommend local churches adopt a participant re-entry strategy that includes both private and public debriefing opportunities, counselling for issues which surfaced on the assignment, career-path and educational counselling, practical service opportunities both within the community as well as one's home church, mentoring and personal discipleship, and resourcing opportunities for future mission work as well as mission training (Peterson, Aeschliman, and Sneed 2003:144-145).

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

Many returning short-term mission participants commented on how their view of the local church was positively transformed by personal involvement in a local church while serving on their mission assignments. Their expectations rose in terms of community, vision and impact. They now see the local church through new eyes. Will local churches also seize the opportunity to continue developing these emerging young leaders and harness this enthusiasm and passion for the impact of the local church in the world?

### **3.4 Recommendations for Participants**

In addition to the general recommendations, the following recommendations are intended to assist short-term mission participants:

- Short-term mission participants require a new understanding of the challenges they face following their return from missions.
- Participants need a new awareness of the challenges of re-entry culture stress, temptation and loss of spiritual vitality.
- Participants need to be prepared for a new level of isolation and lack of accountability once they return home.
- Participants need to see the benefits of a life coach who can help them navigate some of the potential re-entry minefields.
- In an experience driven culture, short-term missions can become just another experience to add to the list. Re-entry means more than washing the laundry and repacking for the next assignment. The body, soul and spirit require restoration after challenging cross-cultural and spiritual experiences. Short-term mission participants must hear this message.

The high regression in positive change scores related to personal spiritual disciplines suggests that participants are taking a holiday from the building blocks of a relationship with God once they return home. Without the accountability and support of a daily schedule and team life, many participants are ignoring personal communication with God and Bible study.

The importance of short-term mission participants re-investing in spiritually accountable and supportive relationships in their local churches and schools seems self-evident. Returning mission alumni can be encouraged to take the initiative in helping their local church understand the impact and outcomes of the short-term mission experience. By getting involved in their local church, they have an opportunity to apply some of what they learned in the mission experience.

### **3.5 Concluding Remarks**

After investing the past sixteen years in short-term mission development, participant mobilization, discipleship training and follow-up, it is very helpful to step back and do an extensive analytical study of the short-term mission phenomenon. The impact that short-term mission has on participants is only a part of the overall value of the mission effort, and is secondary when compared to the life changing effects on people around the world who experience the gospel through the love of a short-term mission participant.

There are both encouraging and troubling signals coming out of the research data which will point the short-term mission movement toward better health and “lasting fruit”. Hopefully this research points other researchers and mission leaders to open new doors of discovery that strengthen the long-term impact of short-term missions.

### **4. Summary of Research Data and Analysis**

The purpose of the study was to measure and better understand the changes occurring in the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of young adult mission participants serving on related short-term mission programs. While a number of studies have been done on the impact of a single short-term mission program or assignment, there is limited comparative research on the relative impact of various short-term mission programs on participants’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviours using a longitudinal approach.

#### **4.1 Methodology**

The study used a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test, follow-up design with non-equivalent groups as well as a nonrandomized control group. The study utilized methodological triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to measure the relative impact of short-term missions on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of young adults mission participants. The quantitative data collection method used in the study included administering a Belief, Attitude and Behaviour (BAB) Survey with a “nonrandomized control group pre test - post test and follow up design” (Leedy and Ormrod 2001:241) survey method. Participants were surveyed just prior to joining their mission assignment, immediately after they returned from the assignment, and then again one year after they returned from the mission trip.

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## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

The BAB Survey focused on 24 values and beliefs grouped into three relational spheres including participant's relationship with God, the Church and the world. Each of the three relational spheres contained eight value and belief concepts. Within the sphere of a participant's relationship with God were: personal communication with God (A1), personal worship through music (A2), the Bible as a guide for life (A3), purity (A4), identity in Christ (A5), stewardship of money (A6), stewardship of time (A7), and experiencing the Holy Spirit (A8). Within the sphere of a participant's relationship with the Church were: commitment to Christian community (B1), service in the Church (B2), awareness of spiritual gifts (B3), attitude toward the family (B4), teamwork in ministry (B5), the global Church (B6), experience of spiritual authority (B7), and relationship with the local Church (B8). Within the sphere of a participant's relationship with the world were: evangelism (C1), compassion for human need (C2), concern for global issues (C3), stewardship of creation (C4), respect for other cultures and their values (C5), reconciliation between cultures (C6), value of work (C7), and value of social justice (C8). See Appendix 1: Summary of 24 Concepts for a description of the concepts and related behaviours.

Qualitative data collection included both written essay responses and interviews with participants. While the quantitative questionnaires were administered at the three stages of pre, post and follow-up, only one set of interviews was conducted with a selective sample of 25 participants from the various programs at the post trip stage during their program debrief retreats. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand the perceived changes experienced by participants in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. In particular, the interview questions focused on the reasons for the changes.

Participants also completed essay questions related to perceived changes in their relationship with God, the Church and the world at both the post-trip and one year follow-up stage of the study. These essay answers included personal reflections of the mission experience and its impact on participants' lives. When combined with the quantitative data results, the qualitative data offers specific insights into the reasons for data trends and perceived changes in participants' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. The use of these various data collection methods provided a more complete picture of the impact of the short-term mission experience on the participants.

### **4.2 Data Population and Programs in Study**

The population for the study was all young adult short-term mission participants between age 18-30 who served on the SALT, REACH, ACTION, TREK and YES mission programs between September of 2001 and August of 2002. The external control group was composed of young adults who had inquired about serving with one of the programs but who did not follow through.

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

All 124 participants from the five programs involved in the study were invited to participate in the research study. Of those 124 invited, 116 chose to participate. These included 19 of 27 ACTION participants, 29 YES participants, 21 REACH participants, 17 SALT participants and 11 control group members. Of the 116 study participants, 58.6% were female and 41.4% were male. The average age of participants was 21 years.

Of the five programs in the study, two were based in Canada (ACTION and TREK) and three were based in the United States (YES, REACH and SALT). All of the programs mobilized participants from across North America. Three international participants ( young adults from Ecuador and India serving with REACH and a young adult from Germany serving with TREK) were also included in the study.

- ACTION** ACTION is Actively Claiming Territory In Our Nations, a short-term mission/discipleship training program for young adults. ACTION is a division of Youth Mission International (YMI), offering three to six week short-term mission/discipleship programs. The ACTION program is a member of the Global Disciples Training (GDT) Alliance.
- REACH** REACH is a short-term mission/discipleship program of the Rosedale Mennonite Mission offering both ten and eighteen month assignments. REACH is a member of the GDT Alliance.
- SALT** SALT is the Service and Learning Training Program, a short-term mission ministry operated by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).
- TREK** TREK is a division of YMI, offering both six and ten month short-term mission/discipleship programs. The TREK program is a member of the GDT Alliance.
- YES** YES is the Youth Evangelism Service, a short-term mission/discipleship program of the Eastern Mennonite Conference offering both ten and eighteen month assignments. YES is a member of the GDT Alliance.

### **4.3 Data Analysis Techniques**

All three sets of data were entered into SPSS, a computer database program, producing an overall data set of over 27,000 pieces of data from 116 participants. Out of the 124 young adults invited to participate in the study, 116 responded and completed some or all of the three stages of the study and 96 (or 82.76%) completed all three stages of the study.

The focus of this study was to measure the degree of change in the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of short-term mission participants over time and, in the process, measure the relative influence of a number of variables present in the short-term mission experience on these participants of various short-term mission programs.

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

Measuring significant change in the 24 concepts related to the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours was achieved by computing the average score for each of the 24 concepts for each participant. The average score was calculated by adding up the sum of the various coded statements, based on a Likert Scale from 1 to 5, which related to that particular concept.

The sum of the average scores for all the participants in each program was calculated and then the overall average score for each program related to each concept was calculated. Measuring the degree of change between the pre (called stage “a”), post (called stage “b”) and follow-up (called stage “c”) stages of the study was achieved by subtracting the average score for each group in stage “a” from stage “b” to determine “difference a”. The degree of change between the post and follow-up stages of the study was achieved by subtracting the average score for each group’s stage “b” from stage “c” to determine “difference b”. Comparisons were made among all programs for “difference a” (the post minus pre scores) and “difference b” (the follow-up minus post scores) while testing against a number of variables.

Significance for the purposes of this study was achieved when one group’s difference was greater than another group’s at a significance level of P less than .10.

### **4.4 Limitation of the Study**

First, the study was quasi-experimental in design and therefore did not provide a random sample of the population. The use of a nonrandomized control group pre-test, post-test and follow-up design meant that there was no guarantee that, prior to the experimental treatment of the short-term mission experience, all of the groups in the study were similar in every respect and that any differences among them were due only to chance.

The control group of ten people was selected from individuals who inquired about the various short-term mission programs in the study but did not apply. The smaller sample size of the control group, and the attrition of its members over the three stages of study to five people, limited the usefulness of the control group’s change scores as compared to the other programs.

By limiting the overall study population to the participants of five Mennonite/Anabaptist denominationally related short-term mission programs, caution must be used in extrapolating the results to all of the short-term mission programs in the Western hemisphere. The results of this study provide a snapshot of the impact of short-term mission on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of 116 participants from five denominationally connected mission programs. The study is also limited by the size of the various program subgroups which range from 14 participants from the SALT program to 27 participants from the YES program.

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

While triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative tools was used to describe the changes in short-term mission participants, there is no way to comprehensively capture the impact of the short-term mission experience on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of participants. The complexity of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours cannot be adequately captured by a 1-5 Likert scale. Interviews and essay answers come closer to this goal, but they also are only a snapshot in time and do not provide a comprehensive view.

### **4.5 Other Short-term Missions Research**

A variety of studies have been done in recent years on the impact of the short-term mission experience. The most recent relevant study of short-term missions was conducted in 1999 by David Lee Manitsas, from George Fox University. Manitsas (2000) studied the effects of a short-term mission trip to Mexico on the spiritual well-being and self-concept of 14 youth and young adults as well as a matched control group of 11 non-participating youth. Manitsas' study was helpful in pointing out the need for an alternative measurement scale to avoid the ceiling effect when studying an evangelical population that is growing spiritually.

In 1997, Karen Jones conducted a study of 852 junior and senior high school students involved in one of five urban short-term mission projects in U.S. cities (Jones, 1998). Jones' study was helpful in underlining the need, for not only a pre and post stage of data collection, but also a follow-up stage once the participants have reintegrated into their home environments.

Kathryn Tuttle's research in 1997 involved the impact of a summer missions experience on the spiritual growth of Christian college students. What was significant from Tuttle's results was the clear indication that a quality training and debrief can have a significant positive impact on the spiritual growth of participants. Tuttle's study also highlighted the need for both quantitative and qualitative instruments to be used in researching spiritual growth (Tuttle 2000:286).

Perhaps the most well-known studies of the impact of short-term missions on participants have been done by STEM Ministries in Minneapolis, MN. While the STEM studies primarily focus on the impact of the short-term mission experience on mission related activities and future service, they point to the need for further research into the effect of repeated short-term assignments as well as differences in the length of assignment (Peterson and Peterson 1991:4).

Tommy Purvis (1993) studied the impact of short-term missions on Southern Baptist churches in Kentucky. His research design involved a pre-test, post-test and follow-up survey that was administered to a study group of 79 participants from ages 15 to 80 years. His study pointed to the need for further research into the long-term impact and lasting value of the short-term mission experience.

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## Appendix 1: Summary of 24 Concepts

### Beliefs, Attitudes and Behaviour Questionnaire

#### 24 Concepts Measured in 3 Relational Spheres (God, Church, World)

The discipleship areas of interest for the study include 24 values and beliefs interest areas within the three relational spheres of a participant's relationship with God, with the Church and with the world around them. Beliefs and attitudes are personal convictions which translate into behaviours.

#### A. Relationship with God

##### 1. Personal Communication with God

- Times of prayer are an inspiring experience for me
- I enjoy being alone with God
- I can hear and discern God's voice in my life

Related Behaviour

- Approximately how much time do you spend in private prayer each day?

(Less than 5 minutes, 5-10 minutes, 11-20 minutes, 21-30 minutes, More than 30 minutes)

##### 2. Personal Worship through Music

- Worshipful music fills my mind through the day
- I enjoy worshipping God through my voice and instrument
- I find corporate worship through music to be meaningful

Related Behaviour

- Approximately how often each week do you worship God in song or other forms either personally or corporately?

(Once a week, Two -Three times a week, Once a day, Several times a day, Often throughout the day)

##### 3. The Bible as a Guide for Life

- The word of God is the most important authority in the decisions of my everyday life
- I enjoy meditating on scripture
- I have memorized scripture in the past month

Related Behaviour

- Approximately how much time do you spend each day devotionally reading and meditating on scripture?

(Less than 5 minutes, 5-10 minutes, 11-20 minutes, 21-30 minutes, More than 30 minutes)

##### 4. Purity

- I often find self worth in what I'm able to achieve
- In the last year, I have watched movies/TV, listened to music or seen things on the Internet that would not be pleasing to God
- I practice sexual purity in my relationships with the opposite sex

##### 5. Identity in Christ

- I experience a daily awareness of God's love for me
- My relationship with Christ is the top priority in my life
- I know who I am in Christ and what he's called me to be

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

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### 6. Stewardship of Money

- I often give away money in response to a need
- Within the past month I have not purchased items I wanted because I felt they weren't necessary even though I could afford them
- I am content with the possessions and finances God has provided for me

#### Related Behaviour

- What percentage of your gross income do you give back to God in the form of a church offering or other charitable donations last year?

(Less than 1 per cent, 1-5 per cent, 6-9 per cent, 10 per cent, More than 10 per cent)

### 7. Stewardship of Time

- I regularly evaluate my time use to make sure it lines up with my priorities
- I seek God's direction on how to spend my time
- On average I watch more than one hour of TV/movies per day

### 8. Experiencing the Holy Spirit

- I experience the power of the Holy Spirit in my life
- I am aware of spiritual warfare
- I understand and experience both the fruit and gifts of the Spirit in my life

## **B. Relationship with the Church**

### 1. Commitment to Christian Community

- I am involved in a Christian small group where I can talk about personal issues
- I am accountable to other believers for the way I follow Christ
- I choose to initiate forgiveness in relationships when there is conflict

#### Related Behaviour

- Of your five closest friends how many of them are part of your congregation?

(1 or none, 2, 3, 4, 5)

### 2. Service in the Church

- I enjoy serving in the local church
- It is my experience that God uses my work for building the church
- I know lives are being impacted by my service for God in the church

#### Related Behaviour

- How much time did you spend in an average week serving in some form of ministry connected to your local church or campus ministry within the past 12 months?

(Less than an hour, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, 3-5 hours, More than 5 hours)

### 3. Awareness of Spiritual Gifts

- I am aware of what my spiritual gifts are and use them regularly in serving my church
- I encourage other Christians to discover and use their spiritual gifts
- Other Christians have affirmed my spiritual gifts

### 4. Attitude Toward Family

- Family is a strong priority in my life
- I tell my parents how much I love them
- I enjoy spending time with my family

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

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### 5. Teamwork in Ministry

- I enjoy working on ministry teams
- I chose to work in teams over working alone
- I look for ways to serve together with others

### 6. The Global Church

- I need my brothers and sisters in Christ around the world
- God speaks to me through Christians from other cultures
- My church is incomplete without a relationship with churches in other parts of the world

#### Related Behaviour

- How many Christian friends from countries outside of North America do you connect with at least once a year?

(1 international Christian friend, 2 international Christian friends, 3, 4, 5 or more)

### 7. Experience of Spiritual Authority

- I ask my Christian teachers and pastor for spiritual advice
- I choose to submit to spiritual authority in the church
- I connect with a person I would consider a spiritual mentor at least monthly

### 8. Relationship With the Local Church

- I am actively involved in a local church
- I'm thankful for my home church
- I try to keep in touch with my home church when I'm away for longer than one month

## **C. Relationship With the World**

### 1. Evangelism (11, 63, 49, 73)

- I pray at least weekly for friends, colleagues, relatives who do not know Jesus Christ, that they will come to faith
- I try to deepen my relationships with people who do not yet know Jesus Christ
- I am asking God for creative strategies to share the gospel with people around me

#### Related Behaviour

- How many lasting friendships (for more than one year) do you have with non-Christians?

(None, 1-2, 3-5, 6-10, More than 10)

### 2. Compassion for Human Need

- When I see someone in need I try to respond
- I give to agencies that work in poverty stricken areas of the world (child sponsorship, MCC, etc.)
- I realize how much material goods I have to share with others

### 3. Concern for Global Issues

- I attentively observe world events through the media
- My life is influenced by events in other parts of the world
- I care about events in other parts of the world

## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

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### 4. Stewardship of Creation

- I chose to recycle whenever possible
- God is concerned about pollution
- I choose to conserve natural resources whenever possible

### 5. Respect for Other Cultures and Their Values

- I have friends who live in other countries
- I have learned much from people who live in cultures other than my own
- I approach other cultures from the perspective of one who learns

#### Related Behaviour

- How many friendships do you regularly invest in (connect once a month?) with people from other racial backgrounds?

(Less than one, One friend from another racial background, 2-4 friends from another racial background, 5-7 friends, 8 or more)

### 6. Reconciliation Between Cultures

- My country's enemies are not my enemies
- I've spoken out against racial prejudice
- I would risk facing humiliation to promote racial reconciliation

### 7. Value of Work

- I always complete the responsibilities given to me
- I would work whether I was paid or not
- Whatever I do I work at it with all my heart because God is my boss

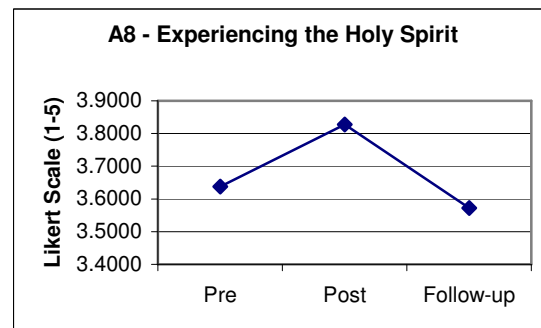
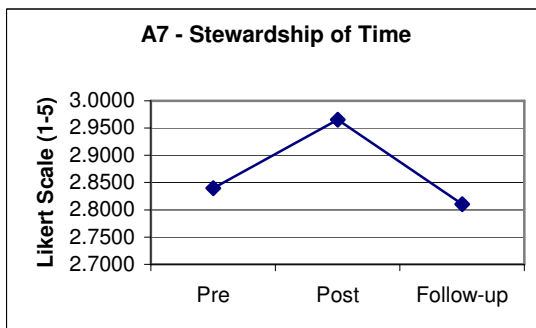
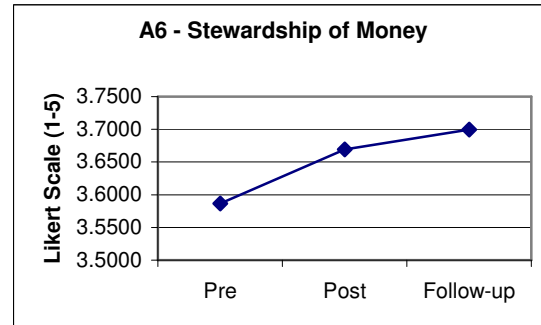
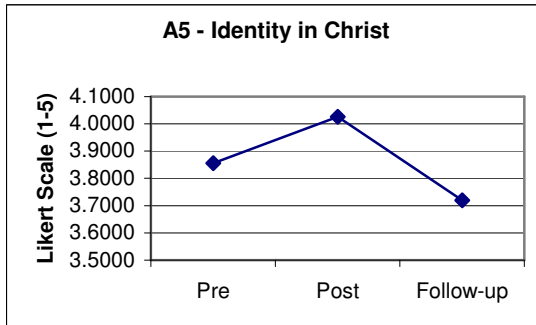
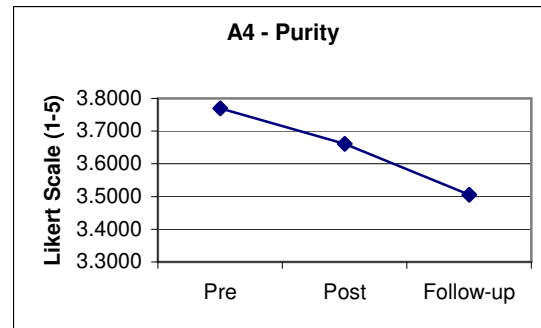
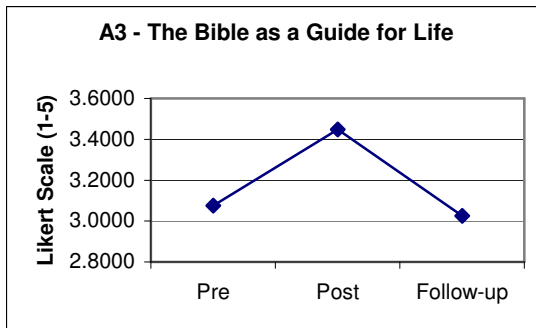
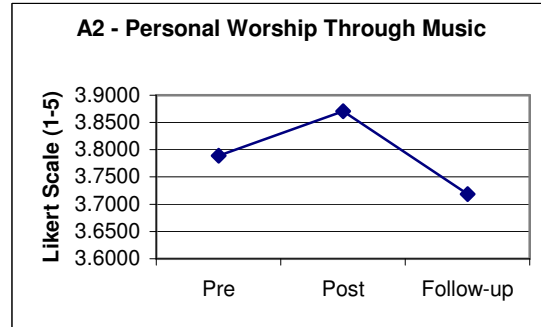
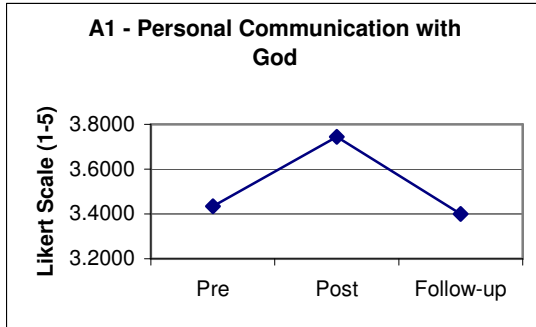
### 8. Value of Social Justice

- When I see someone being treated poorly I respond
- I speak out when I see injustice around me
- I am involved in ministering to the poor in my local community

# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

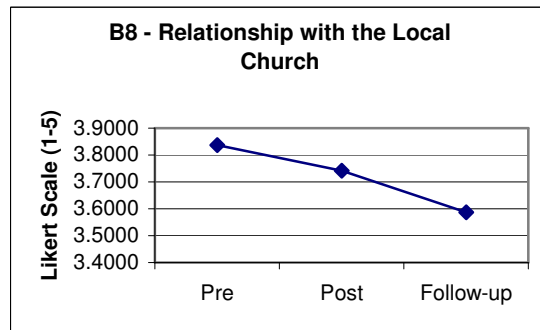
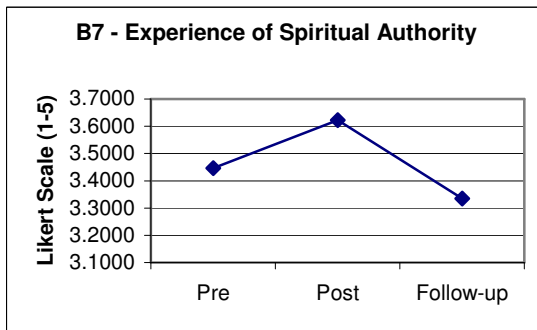
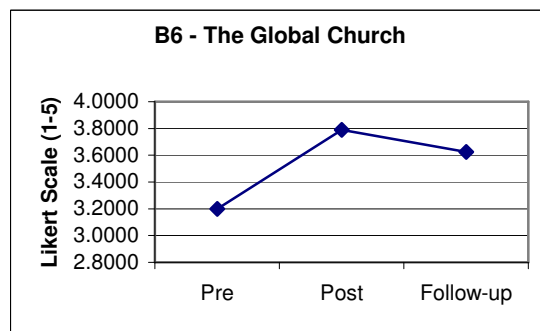
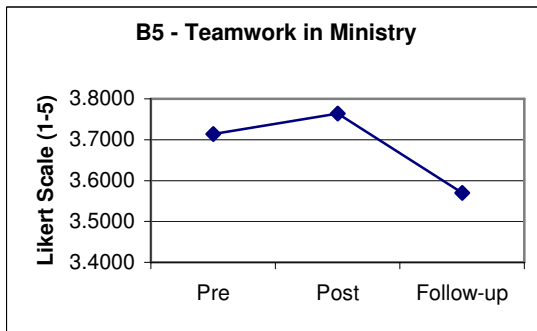
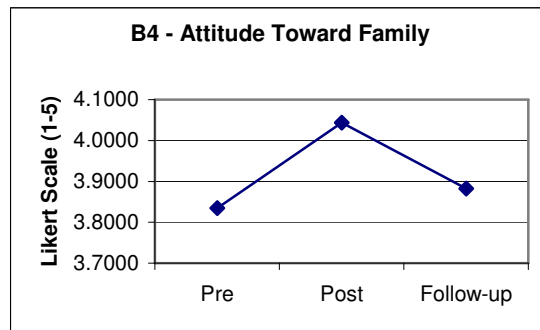
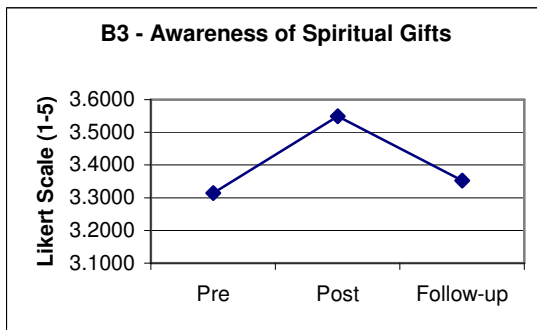
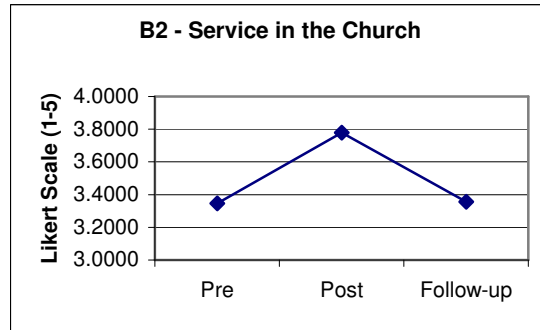
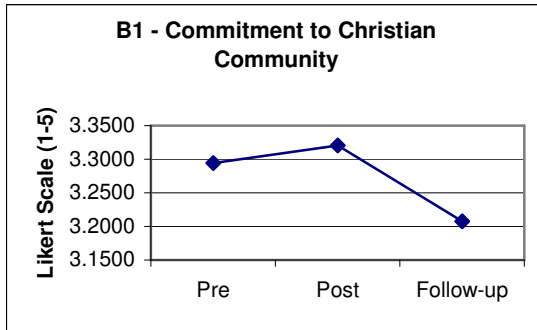
## Appendix 2: Graphical Summary of Average Means Scores

Value A: Relationship with God



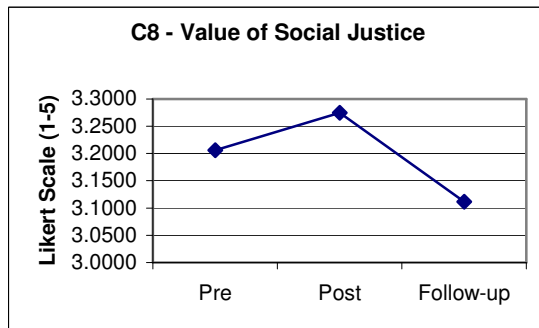
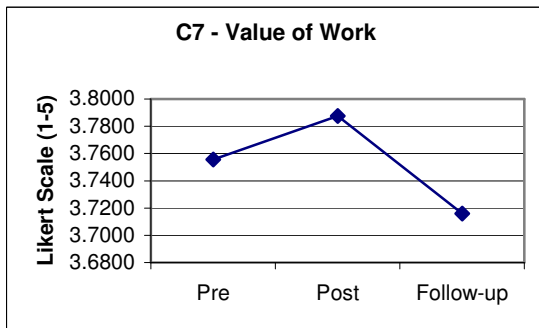
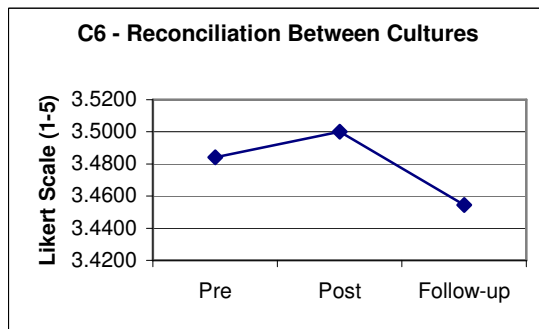
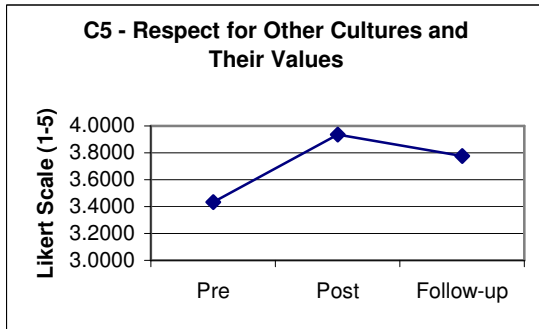
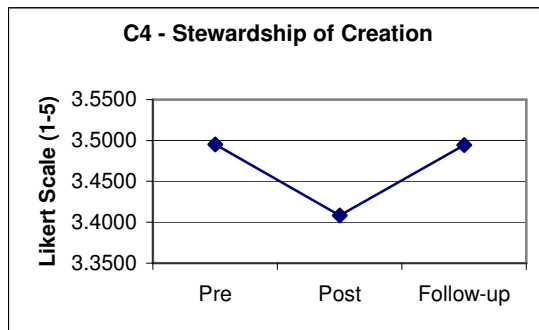
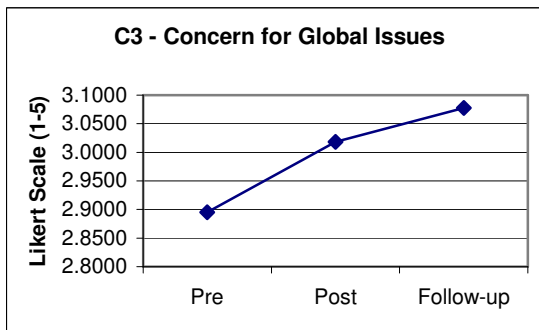
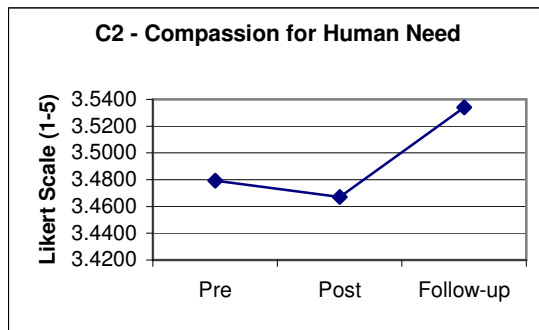
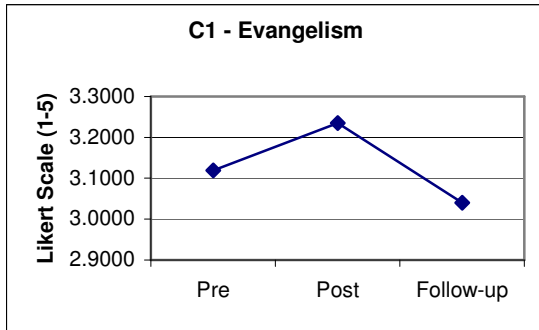
# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value B: Relationship with the Church



# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value C: Relationship with the World

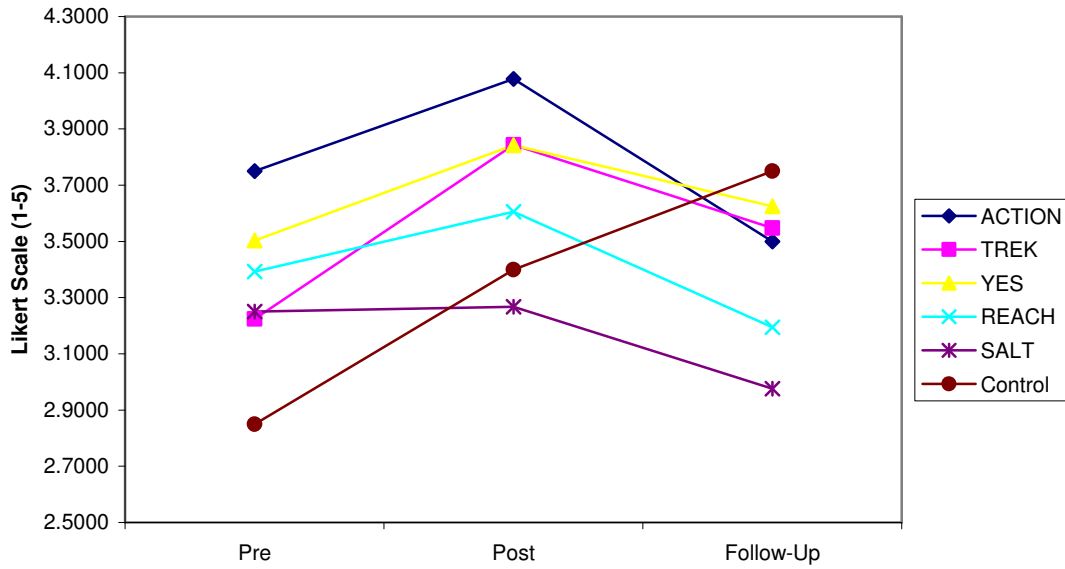


## **Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions**

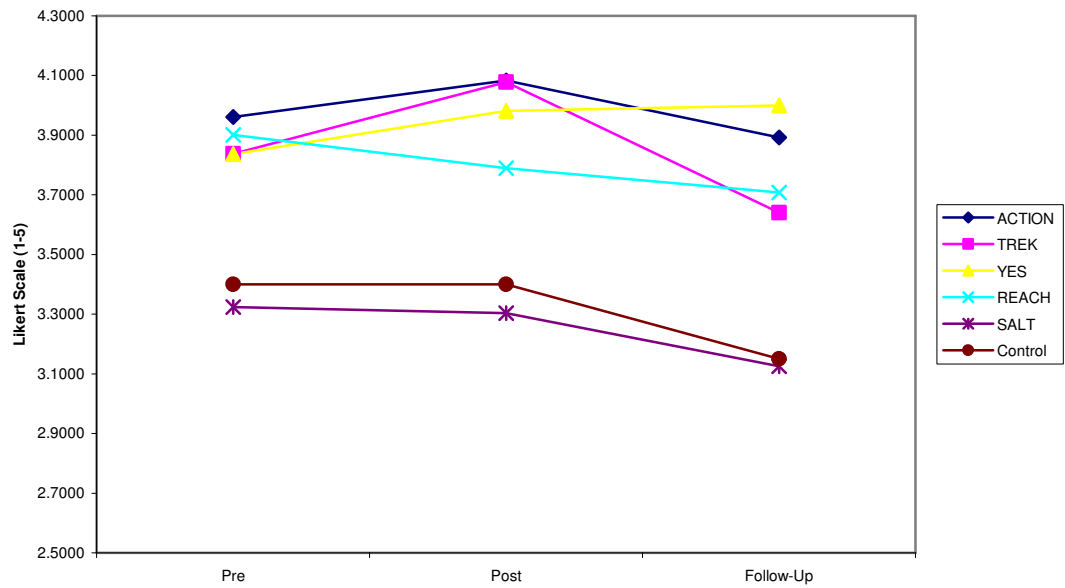
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## Appendix 3: Graphical Summary of Program Data

### Value A1 - Personal Communication with God

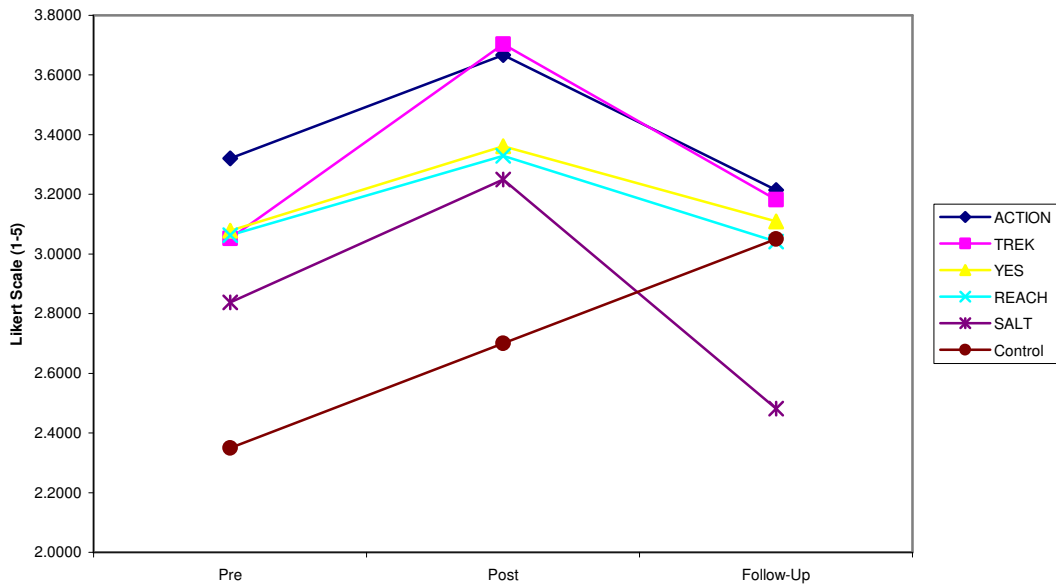


### Value A2 - Personal Worship Through Music

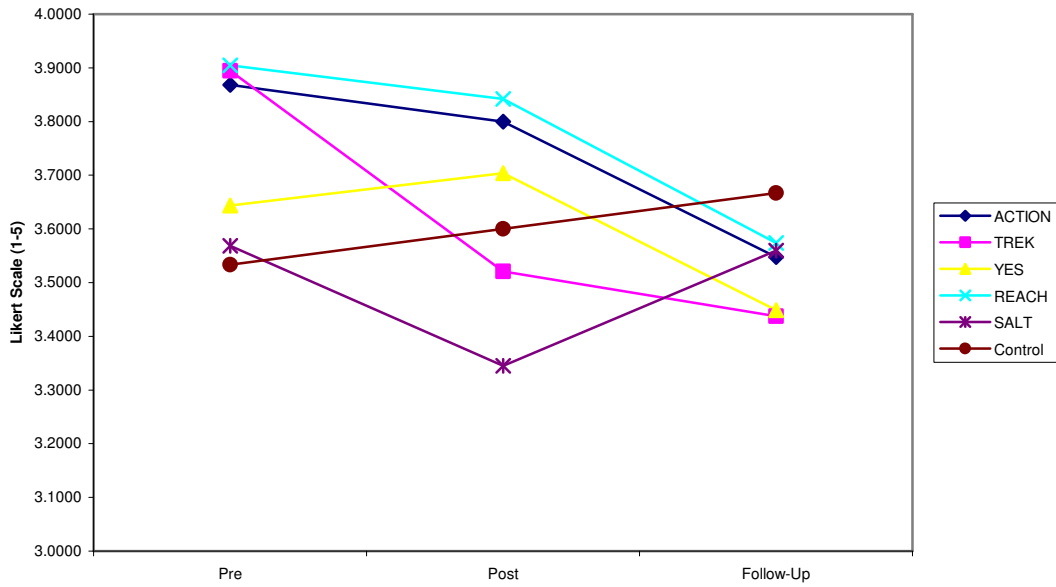


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value A3 - The Bible as a Guide For Life

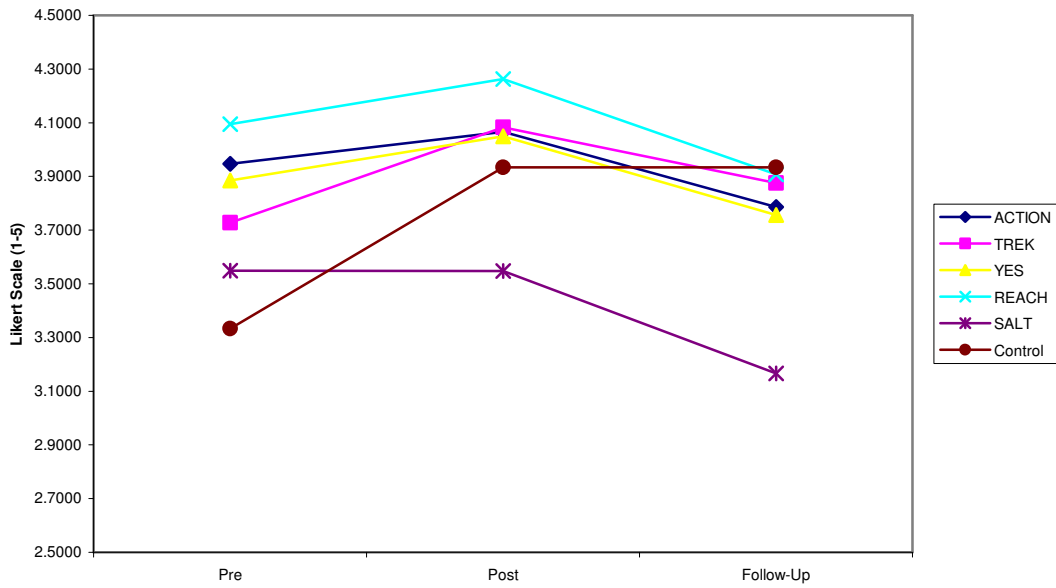


Value A4 - Purity

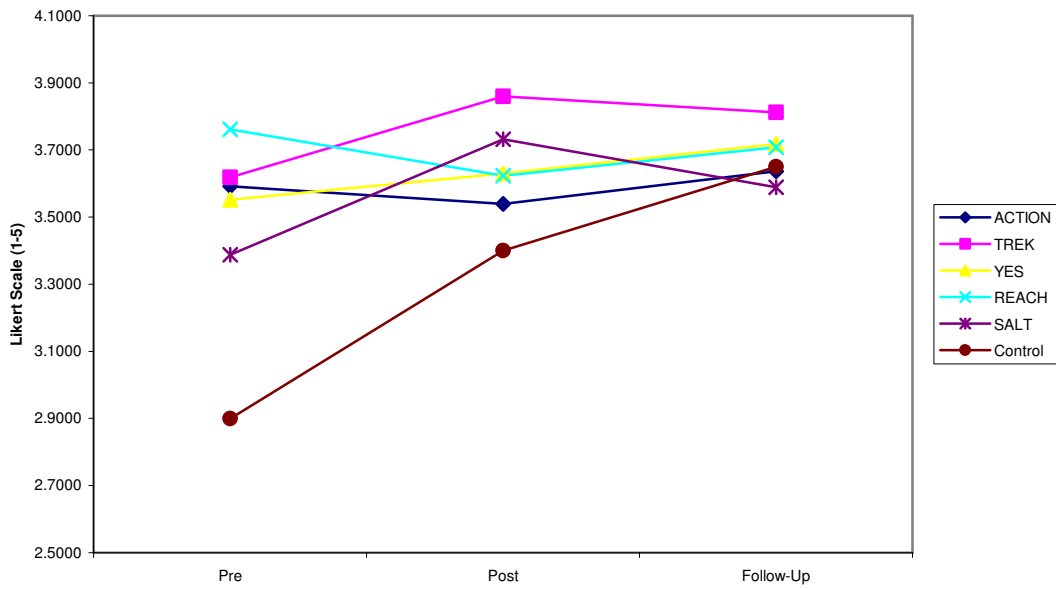


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value A5 - Identity in Christ

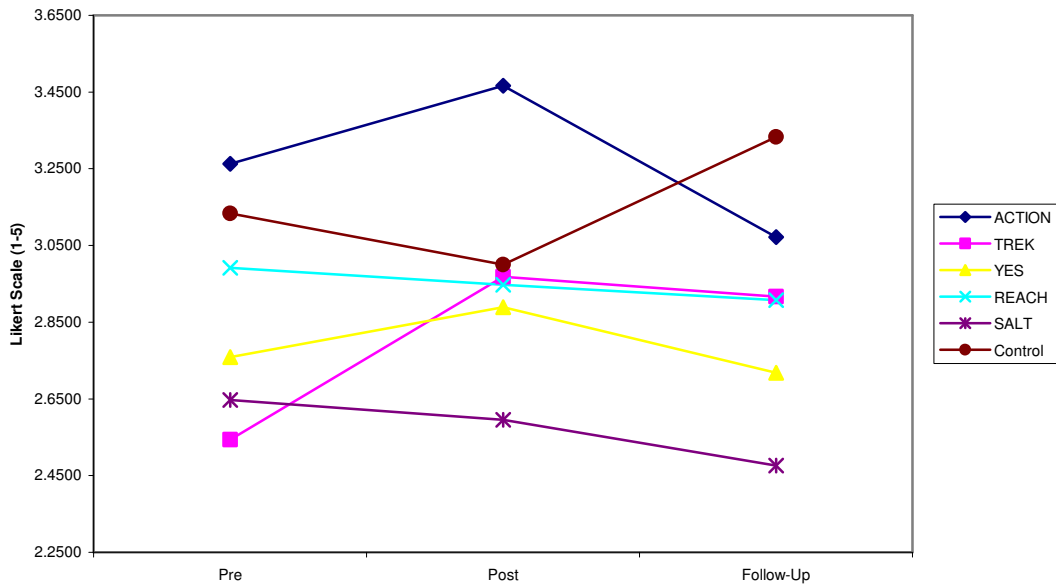


Value A6 - Stewardship of Money

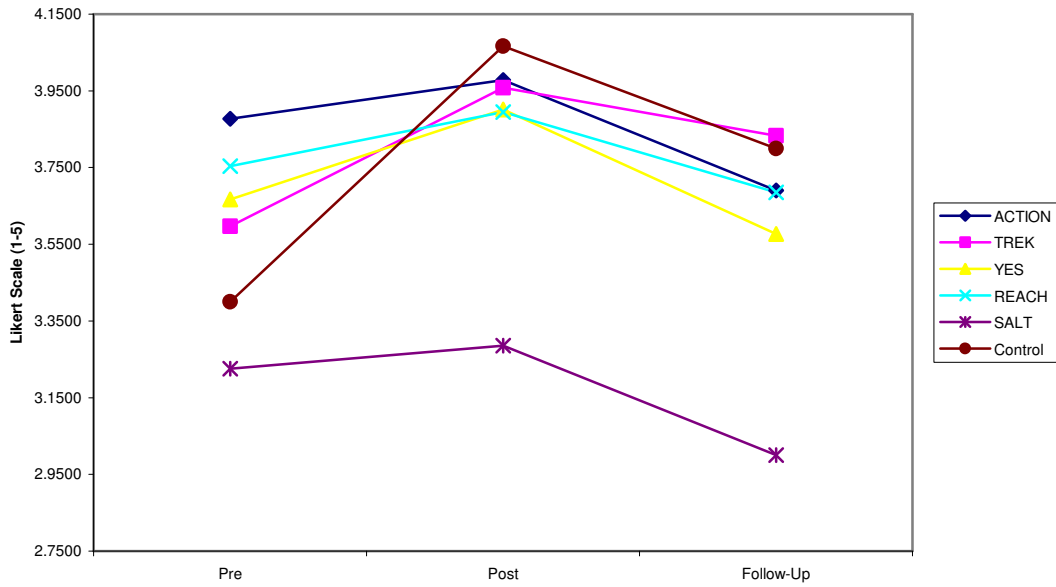


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

### Value A7 - Stewardship of Time

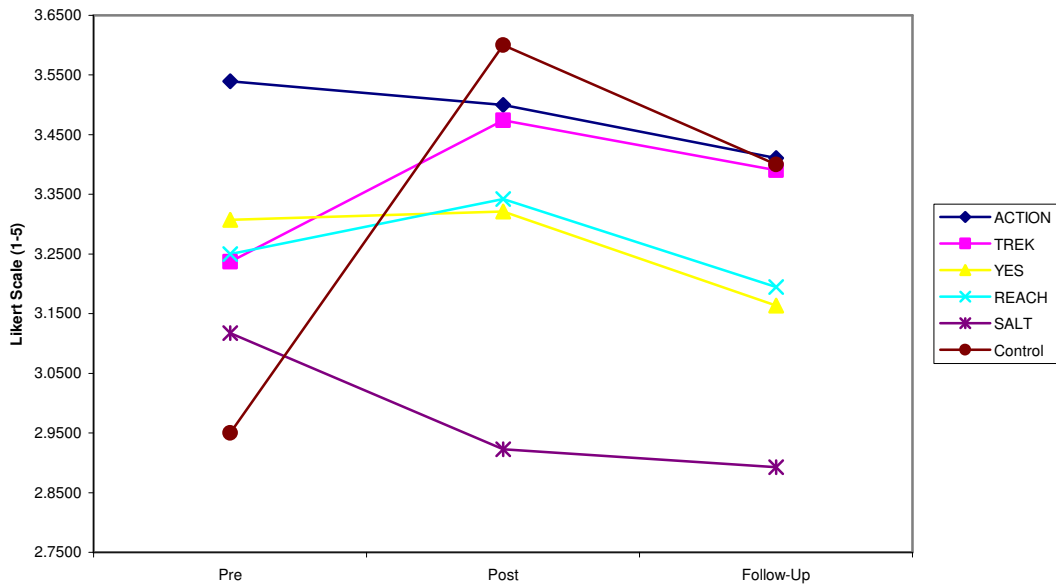


### Value A8 - Experiencing the Holy Spirit

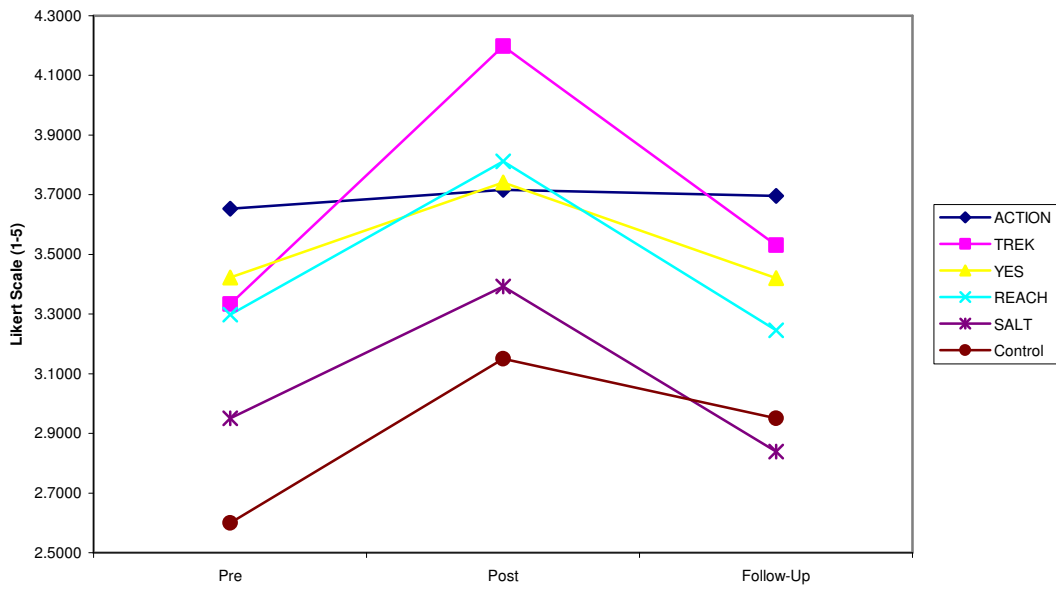


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value B1 - Commitment to Christian Community

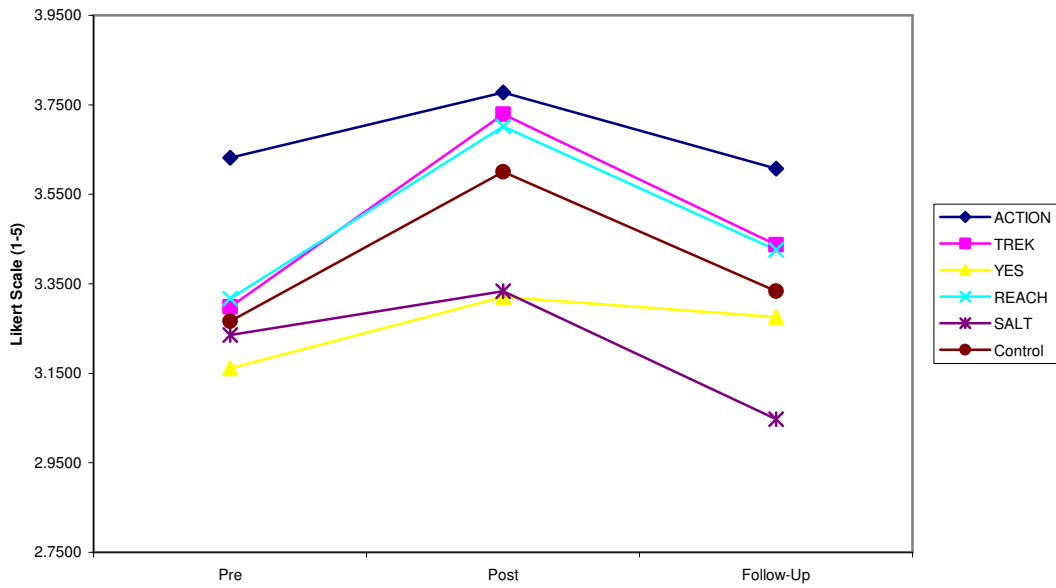


Value B2 - Service in the Church

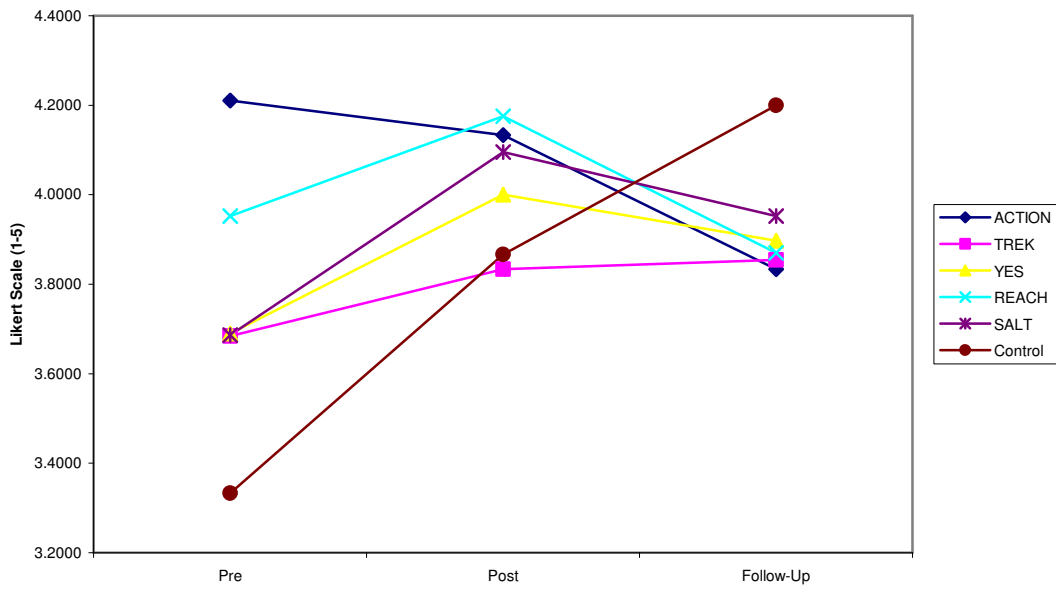


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

### Value B3 - Awareness of Spiritual Gifts

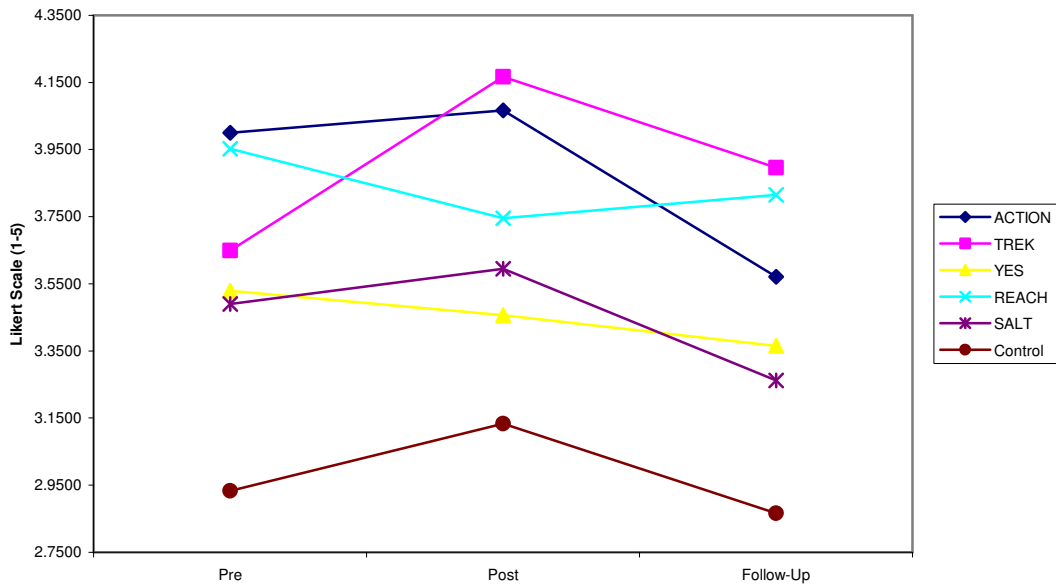


### Value B4 - Attitude Toward Family

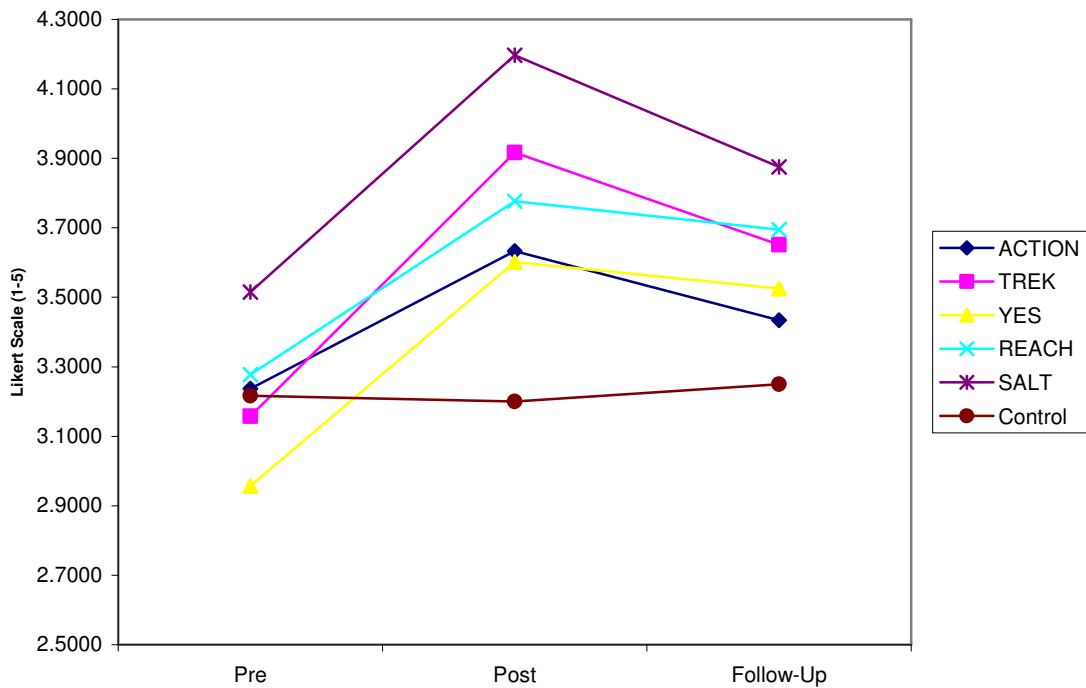


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value B5 - Teamwork in Ministry

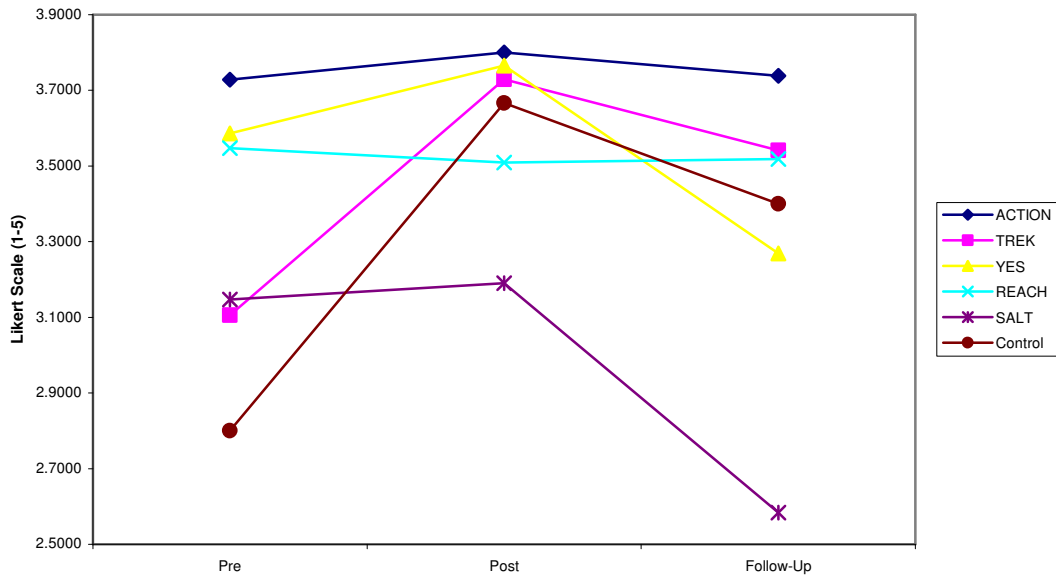


Value B6 - The Global Church

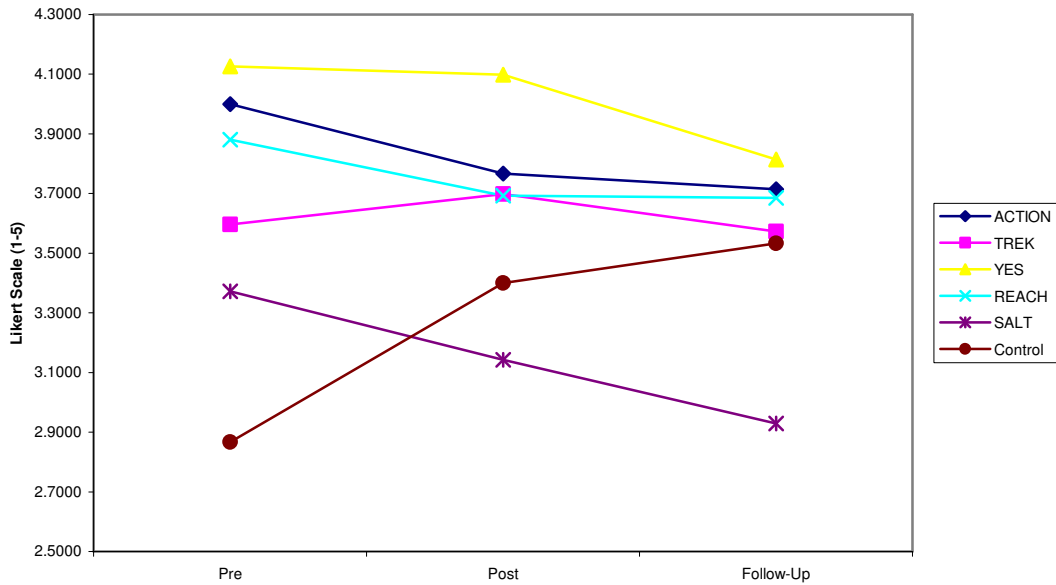


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value B7 - Experience of Spiritual Authority

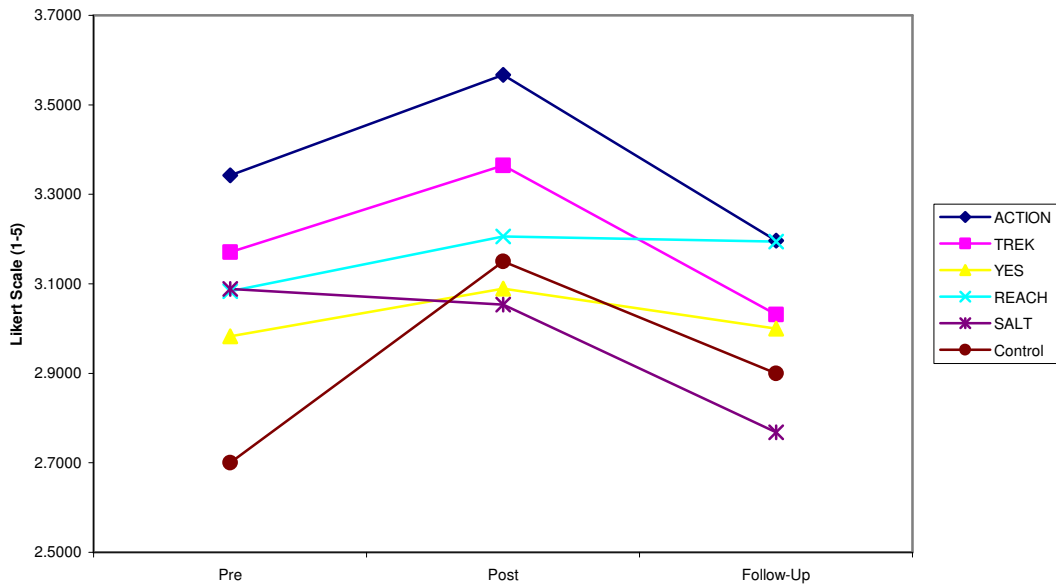


Value B8 - Relationship with the Local Church

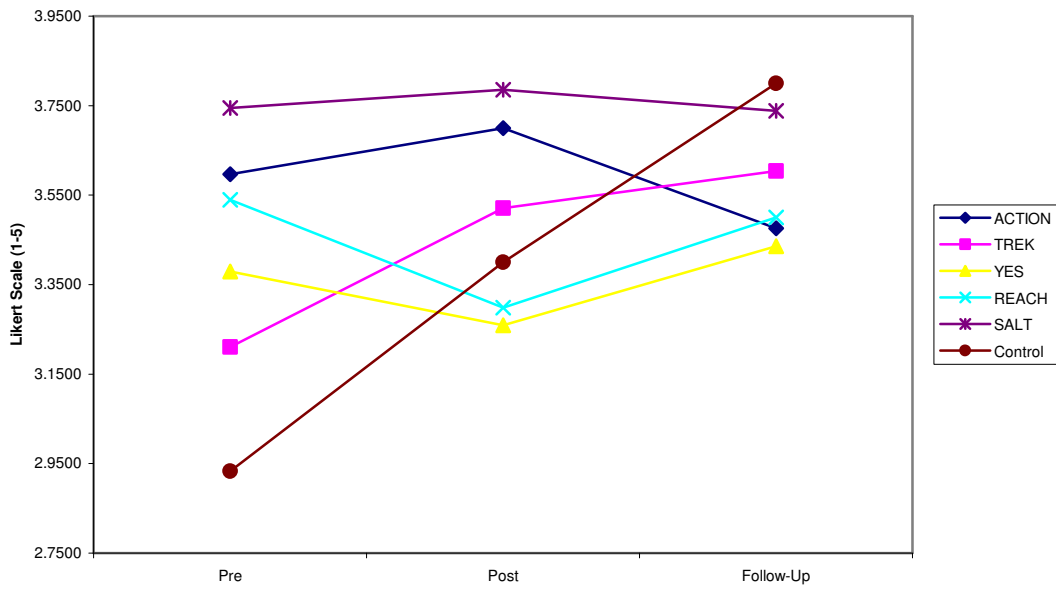


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

### Value C1 - Evangelism

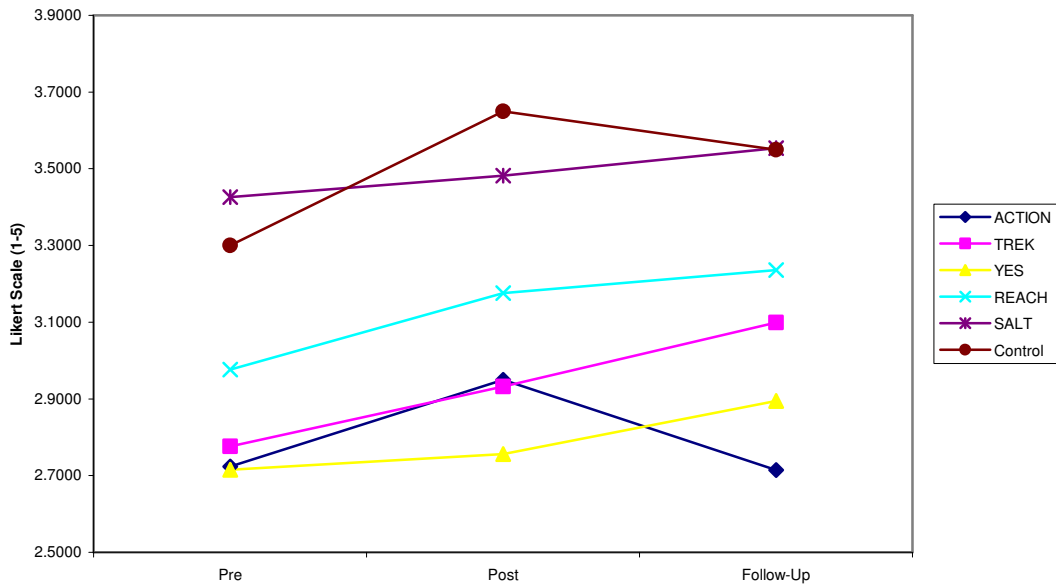


### Value C2 - Compassion for Human Need

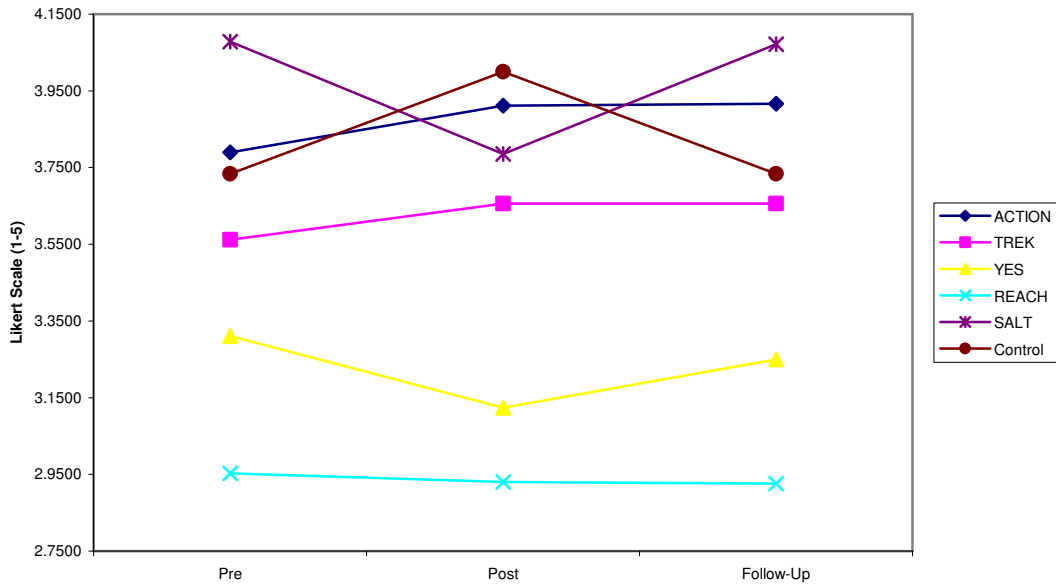


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value C3 - Concern For Global Issues

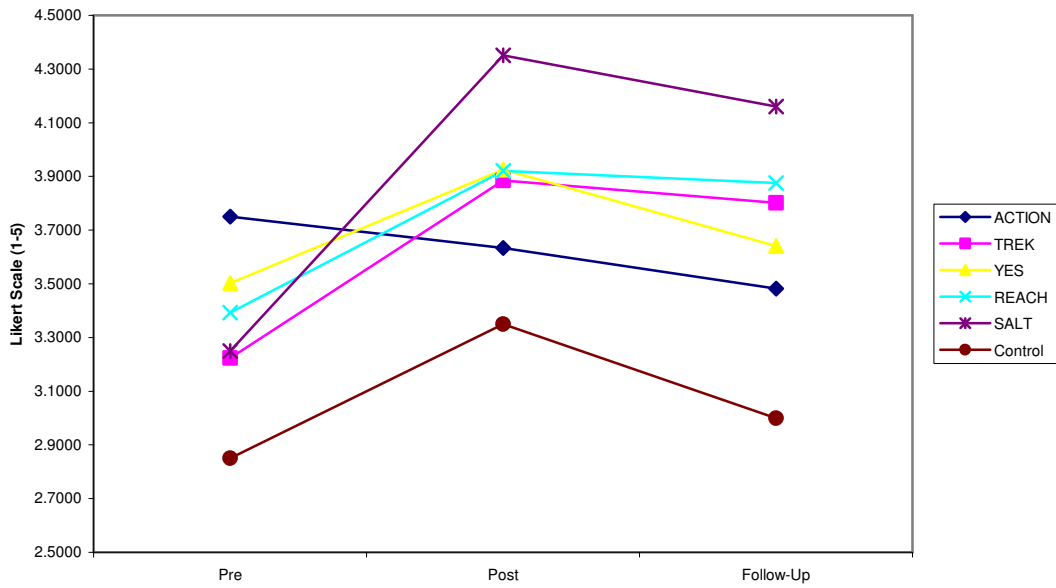


Value C4 - Stewardship of Creation

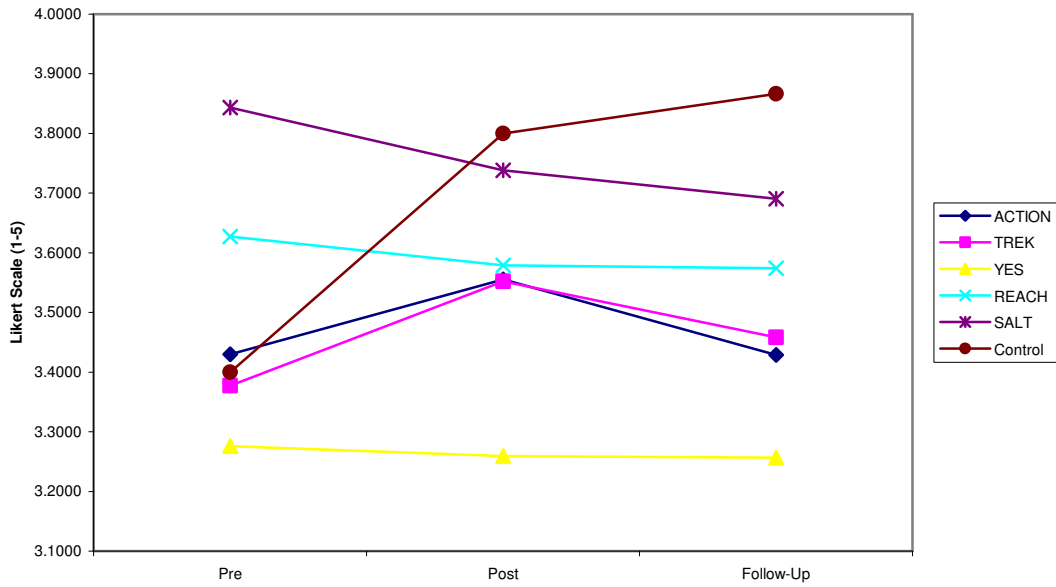


# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value C5 - Respect for Other Cultures and Their Values

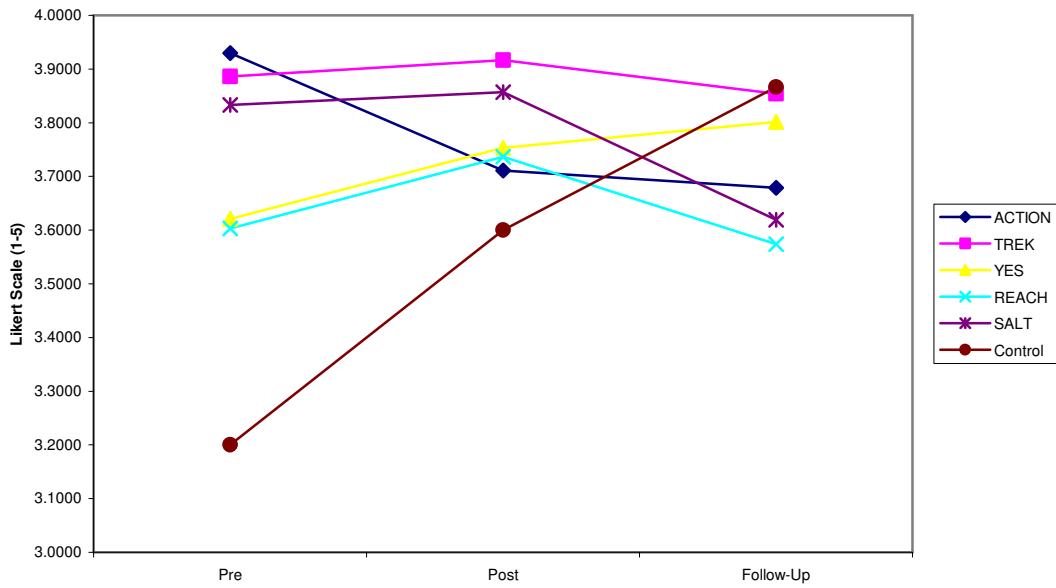


Value C6 - Reconciliation Between Cultures



# Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

Value C7 - Value of Work



Value C8 - Value of Social Justice

