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# Transformative Potential of a Short-term Mission Trip Experience

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With the United Nations World Tourism Organization forecasting 2 billion international tourists by the 2030 there is something to consider. A volume of travel to such a scale means an opportunity to harness the tourism industry to bring people closer to Jesus. This exploratory paper begins an exploration of Christians travel experiences and transformative impacts of those experiences through interactions with other Christians. Using data from a group text messages and a personal journal, this paper presents how one specific trip type - short-term mission - influences the 'exchanged life' first posited by the missionary Hudson Taylor in the 1800s. Further, there is a discussion of the theological connection between experiential tourism and transformation with foci on biblical passages - Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. The paper concludes with consideration of how transformative outcomes, for both individuals and those they interact with during these trips, may draw them closer to God.

**Key Words:** Christian, tourism, short-term mission, transformation

## Introduction

This exploratory paper begins an examination of Christians' travel experiences and transformative impacts of those experiences through interactions with other Christians. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2016) there will be nearly 2 billion international tourists by the year 2030. Cultural tourism (Du Cross & McKercher, 2014), which includes religious travel, is estimated to account for 40 percent of total international tourism (OECD, 2009). A volume of travel to such a scale means an opportunity to harness the tourism industry to bring people closer to Jesus.

Accordingly, this paper first reviews the theoretical connections between tourism and transformation. Next, there is a discussion of the theological connection between experiential tourism and transformation with foci on the biblical passages Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. Then, using data from group text messages and a personal journal, this paper presents how one specific trip type - short-term mission - influences the 'exchanged life' first posited by the missionary Hudson Taylor in the 1800s (Edman, 1960). Last, there are some final concluding thoughts on how exploratory research like this could be broadened with more robust data sets and examination of various Christian tourism experiences and their connections to transformative outcomes.

## Literature review

### *Tourism and transformation*

Modern discourse on transformation is often cited to begin with Mezirow's (1978; 1981) transformative learning theory. The theory focuses on how adults interpret the world, challenge their own assumptions and potentially change their points of view. In other words, how people revise their beliefs based on life experiences until prior beliefs transform into new perspectives. Indeed, it is experiences (or human development) that resolved into Maslow's (1943) self-actualization pinnacle in the hierarchy of needs and led Kolb (1984) to postulate that transformation comes through learning.

These thoughts on transformative learning have been extended to the tourism industry in both positive and critical ways (Bruner, 1991; Wang, 1999). Reisinger (2013) posited that travel as transformation represent an existential journey wherein the tourist engages with unknown places, people and activities due to fundamental motivation for spiritual, emotional and psychological experiences. Lean *et al.* (2014:12) write:

*. . . anyone can be transformed by corporeal travel, a phenomenon influenced by a complex array of processes taking place 'before', 'during' and 'after' any given physical experience.*

Academic interest in transformational tourism includes secular investigations into a number of areas. Matthews (2014), for example, discusses liminality from the viewpoint of young backpackers and their lived experiences that bond them through social, enjoyable and cherished connections. Couchsurfing (Decrop, *et al.*, 2017), the popular social networking (<https://www.couchsurfing.com/>) and ‘locals meet travelers’ platform is an example of collaborative transformative tourism.

Spirituality, travel and transformation have been examined for authenticity (Brown, 1998) and how the sea/seaside provide a tourist with emotional and spiritual frames of mind (Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017). Volunteer tourism (voluntourism) and transformation is written about widely (e.g., Knolleberg *et al.*, 2014; Pan, 2014; Wearing, 2001). Lee & Woosnam (2010) explored cross-cultural adaptation theory and how that might affect personal transformations in voluntourists. Similarly, Zahra & McIntosh (2007) studied catharsis of voluntourism on the individual. Individualism and corporate impacts of yoga tourism were also studied with implications for self-identification (Holladay & Ponder, 2012) and for the cascade effects of transformation from individuals to communities through the development of psychological, emotional and spiritual capitals (Ponder & Holladay, 2013).

### ***Christian tourism and theological considerations***

The Christian travel choice can be empowered by examining theology - *theos*, meaning God and *logos* meaning word (McGrath, 2013) - through scripture and applying it to tourism and transformation. Within the Christian tourism market, for example, there is transformative potential for both the individual and community through encouragement of one another (e.g., 1 Thes. 5:11), discipleship (e.g., Matt. 28:16-20), hearing the Word of Christ (e.g., Rom. 10:17), the indwelling of Christ through teaching and worship (Col. 3:16), prayer (e.g., 1 John 5:14), and readiness for life-changing experiences (e.g., 1 Peter 1:3).

Indeed, research on transformative travel has been conducted on a variety of Christian tourism options. These include the influence of Christian music festivals on ideology (Caton *et al.*, 2013; Pastoor *et al.*, 2016) and leisure as expression of Christian beliefs (Schulz & Auld, 2009). Heintzman (2010) posited that leisure scholarship has an opportunity to present Christian views on spirituality (Heintzman 2010). There is also research on meaning-making (Belhassen, 2009) and lasting experiences in pilgrimage (Lopez 2013),

retreats as a transformative form of tourism (Heintzman, 2013) and travel behavior of young Christian holidaymakers (Li, *et al.*, 2006).

Another theological consideration for transformational Biblical doctrine is the Ordo Salutis, Latin for ‘order of salvation’. There are three parts:

**Justification** - salvation from past sins and reconciliation with God (Meyer, 1988; Schaeffer, 1968); e.g., Romans 5:9 (NIV) ‘Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!’

**Sanctification** - salvation from present sin and lifelong growth (cf. Perkins, 1988) with the help of the Holy Spirit (Evans III, 2016); e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:3 ‘It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid [sin].’

**Glorification** - salvation from sin in the age to come (Meyer, 1988); e.g., Romans 8:17, ‘Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.’

The entirety of the Ordo Salutis is about transformation and Christian transformation from old self to new self and beyond. From a tourism and transformation perspective, it is Sanctification - becoming holy - that is the key concept as it relates to the honing (to include travel experiences) of a life transformed.

This transformation is the ‘exchanged life’ first advanced by the missionary Hudson Taylor in the 1800s (Edman, 1960). To elucidate, two pieces of scripture, Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 are discussed here in context. Perhaps the best-known and widely described scripture on transformation is Romans 12:2:

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Thomas Oden’s exegesis is that Paul’s appeal here is on the repentance of the entire Church community and ‘out of repentance and faith comes a life seeking to glorify God’ (Oden, 1992:99). Meyer (1988) states that this passage expresses discernment of God’s will, understanding of right from wrong and individual culpability to God. Holladay (2005:359) echoes the community dynamic as described by Thomas Oden, as well as interprets the scripture as transformation from

sin of the flesh to the life in the Spirit - harkening back to Romans 8 and Paul's text on the Holy Spirit - which is described as 'cosmic transformation'.

Quite possibly the second most commonly utilized Biblical passage on transformation is 2 Corinthians 3:18:

*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

This text expresses Paul's point that the Christian believer is in a continual life-long process of becoming more like Christ (NIV Quest Study Bible, 2003). Further, this is about self-development and reaching one's full potential in a relationship with Christ (cf., Heintzman, 2015). This scripture reveals that those who live with faith in Jesus (Furnish, 1988) mirror the image of Christ in the new life of an individual. As Holladay (2005:321) writes in reference to the impetus for this scripture, '... authentic ministry occurs when God's Spirit, experienced through Christ, transforms the hearts of those who fix their gaze on God's splendor.'

Finally, to turn these theological considerations back to tourism (or in a broader sense, leisure), Heintzman (2015:197) writes:

*Immense significance is presently given to 'experience' within discussions of leisure and spirituality. However, the focus of Scripture is not so much on spiritual experience but on a lifestyle that leads to spiritual transformation (Rom 12:1-2; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:22-24). It is not sufficient to get in touch with the deep inner self, for the inner self is itself the root of the problem. Only a radical change in one's innermost being, a change that only Jesus Christ can bring about, brings hope of a radical transformation of life."*

### **Short-term mission trips**

Short-term mission trips (STMs) (Lee & Gretzel, 2013; Priest *et al.*, 2006) are generally considered under the umbrella of voluntourism and religious tourism (Sin *et al.*, 2015). STMs may be a type of pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner, 2010) and have been called 'rituals of intensification' (Priest *et al.*, 2006). According to Allen (2001) 29% of all 13-17 year olds in the United States have gone on a STM. In fact, the USA and Korea are the top STM sending nations (Moll, 2006). In a study of US and Korean STM travelers to Cambodia and

Thailand, Lee & Gretzel (2013) examined both pre-trip motivations and transformational experiences produced by the trips. The primary motivations were evangelism and strengthening the local church. During and post-trip, STM participants reported feeling nearer to God, undergoing personal development, appreciation of what they had at home, discovering new self-identity, changed worldviews, and less selfishness. These outcomes are consistent with many other studies (e.g., Beyerlein *et al.*, 2011; Howell, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Stout *et al.*, 2017; Trinitapoli & Vaisey, 2009).

Certainly, there have been some cautionary thoughts written about STMs such as how attempts at poverty alleviation may do more harm than good (Corbett & Fikket, 2014) and how charity can negatively impact those it was meant to help (Lupton, 2011). There are also suggestions for reforms in both STMs in general (Howell, 2012) and in the relationship of STMs to tourism (LeQuire & Du Plessis, 2013). That said, however, the intent of this example is not a critical evaluation of STMs. Rather, the focus is on how an STM may produce self-transformation, which in turn produces new identity / awareness (Linhart, 2006) and the incorporation of these dynamics into life (Van Rheenen, 2014).

### **Study site : The Dream Center**

The Dream Center is a faith-based organization in Los Angeles, CA that was established in 1995 (Dream Center, 2017a). The mission of the Dream Center is to provide community support through free resources and short and long-term services (Dream Center, 2017a). The organization also functions as a resource center for solutions to local homelessness, hunger and lack of education (Dream Center, 2017a). The Dream Center has robust volunteerism, hosts STM groups and provides a variety of options for STM outreach programs as well as housing and cafeteria services for the STM teams (Dream Center, 2017b).

A large church (approximately 2000 members) in the Southeastern United States came alongside the Dream Center to send a nine-member STM team to Los Angeles to serve for five days. The group was comprised of three men and six women ranging in ages from the mid-30's to the mid 60's. The team stayed at the Dream Center and served in Los Angeles neighborhoods of Compton and Watts as well as on the Dream Center campus. The specific activities included sorting donated food, accompanying the food trucks into neighborhoods to provide food donations to community members, general cleaning in public

housing complexes and assisting elementary school children with homework and recreation in the public housing areas.

## Methods

A qualitative approach was undertaken to analyze two text messages and one personal journal to explain them using theological praxis (Holladay, 2008) that was then used in the second analytical stage of exegesis, i.e. a coherent interpretation of Biblical passages in relation to the data (Hayes & Holladay, 2007). An iterative approach to the analysis (Babbie, 2013), along with a systematic review of applicable literature, supports the reliability of analysis (Richards & Morse, 2007). This is also helpful in overcoming bias (Maxwell, 2012).

The second layer of analysis was to connect the text analysis to Biblical Scripture and examine the theological perspectives while engaging imagination, as theology is a matter of faith (Holladay, 2008). This was largely carried out using several interpretations of the Bible (e.g. New International Version, English Standard Version) and theological references (e.g. Harpers Bible Commentary; Strong's Concordance). There was also a requirement for the researcher to use hermeneutics or Biblical interpretation (Ramm, 1999). Interpretation comes through determining the theological purpose of specific Biblical Scripture (Holladay, 2012).

## Discussion

As is typical with STM groups, there was some time for group reflection, as well as general discussion of group members during activities, free time and over meals. The purpose and meaning (i.e., existential discourse) of the trip were often of topic. At the end of one day a team member sent the following text to all the group members. This text is rich with meaning and resonance. The earlier theological considerations for encouragement (1 Thes 5:11), discipleship through action (Matt 28:16-20), and the indwelling of Christ through acts of worship (Col 3:16) and experiences (1 Peter 1:3) are apparent in the voice and character of this message to the group.

*I was speaking to [another group member] tonight and all it became much clearer what purpose God has for me here. I'm not here to fix all the problems at the Dream Center, the projects, and downtown LA. By next week those kids won't remember me and trash will be all over that project again! But I do know because*

*of what we do this week and what people have done before us and those that come after us, these people will have food to eat, mothers can know that their babies can go play at the park for an hour and be safe! To me that's being Jesus, and that's why we are here. Simple things, feed the flock and keep them safe.*

That same evening, shortly after the first text message was sent, a second team member sent this text message to the group. It had a more somber tone but suggests a meaningful interaction with God. It is evident from the tone of this text that the author sought clarification about the mission / purpose of this STM from God, likely through scripture and prayer (e.g., 1 John 5:14).

*This is what I read tonight . . . If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart this person's religion is worthless, James 1:26. Working on that low I was talking about.*

Finally, there is an examination of a third team member's personal journal. There are two excerpts presented here. The first journal entry was written the day before these text messages were received. The second journal entry was written in the evening after the text messages were received. It is apparent that the writer was discouraged during the day but then later felt better after receiving the text messages from the other team members.

### Entry 1.

*I was frustrated by the team complaining. Complaints about the heat, sun, sunscreen and needing pain pills (in front of recovering drug users). [I am] deeply introspective. I am trying hard to find grace for my team. I think not having training was a failure. I think no regular morning devotion is a failure. I continually wonder about the focus (or lack of focus) on this trip but it is morning of Day 2. I hope by the end of Day 5 this [lack of focus] is settled and clear.*

### Entry 2.

*[Team members] sent encouraging texts in the evening. I was encouraged by the texts from [team members]. These [text messages] were good evening reflections.*

Returning to the first text, the writer is adamant that what the STM team had done was good, unselfish, inspired by Jesus Christ and had purpose. Purpose is tied to self-identity and personal development (Warren,

2012). This is turn is connected to existentialism (i.e. meaning), which can be made more manifest through travel experiences (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), a travel-transformation-self interconnection (Holladay & Ponder, 2012; Pritchard, *et al.*, 2011) and outcomes of STM (Van Rheenen, 2014). Last, this purpose is about life in the Spirit, understanding of God's will and accountability to God in thought / action (cf. Romans 12:2). Understanding of the trip's purpose is ultimately about drawing closer to God and is transformative in nature.

The reflection on 'purpose' is followed by (still focused on the first text message) an understanding of the STM's level of limited physical impact on the community. That said, however, this 'limitation' was softened by thoughts about knowing others are cared for and acknowledging that simple help is why the group was there. The care and help here can be considered as acts of worship. In essence, this is part of Sanctification when viewed as an act of worship, such as the text's emphases on feeding others and providing safety. Sanctification is about transformation from an old identity to new identity and these STM activities seemingly have impact on the STM member in such a manner. Further, Sanctification is about being more Christ-like and holy and is a crucial part of how travel experiences from STMs may lead to a new person and transformed life. Finally, these STM activities relate to the image of Christ manifestly expressed in the person of the believer with eyes fixed on God and His purposes (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18).

The second text and the journal author both either seek and / or write of encouragement, which echo Paul's (1 Thes. 5:11) calls for reassurance and virtues of faith, love and hope (Perkins, 1988). Moreover, these team members' need for encouragement seems to have been met (at least in part) by the sender of the first text and the journal writer by both text messages. The author of the first text had a desire to not only speak to what his feelings were but to help the other participants see the answer that God had laid upon his heart. This could be called hope. Reassuringly, there is evidence to support the idea of hope arising from transformational tourism (Pritchard *et al.*, 2011) and of STMs as impactful experiences on the lives of team members (Priest *et al.*, 2006).

## Conclusion

With the unprecedented and exponential growth in international tourism (UNWTO, 2016) this paper explored an idea about how the tourism industry might play a pivotal role in bringing people closer to Jesus Christ through transformative travel experiences. How this fully operates leaves many questions for further research. That said, however, the supply and demand for Christian tourism is high as these travelers use tourism infrastructure and are desirous of Christian themed spaces. Younger people are seeking alternative trips and travel companies are hiring specialists for Christian tourism (Ron & Timothy, 2018). In other words, there is fertile ground now and in the future to conduct research in this tourism-transformation nexus.

The example here was drawn from group text messages and a personal journal written by team members on a short-term mission trip. These artifacts were about unpacking the meaning of the trip, words of encouragement, ideas on God's purpose for the trip and delineation on how the team's specific activities were ultimately acts of worship. This paper attempted to link this short-term mission example.- and tourism and transformation in general.- with theology connected to Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and the *Ordo salutis* with emphasis on Sanctification or becoming holy and Christ-like.

There are limitations to this paper and the short-term mission example. The STM example represents a small sample and only one trip. Another limitation is there is only one context or geography discussed.- that of a STM at the Dream Center in Los Angeles. There may be also those who would not deem text messages a rich source of data. Therefore, the work should not be construed as any sort of global conclusion. This paper is exploratory in nature and represents a starting point for research of this kind. Further research should utilize cases like this one but also seek to analyze data from a variety of Christian tourism options and larger data sets. Finally, this type of research on Christian tourism and transformation can be refined further to find what travel experiences are effective for bringing people closer to Jesus Christ and how these can be enhanced to do so.

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