

Shape Up For Mission

A Personal Fitness Training Program for Short-term Missions

By Steve Hoke

Like high altitude mountain climbing, short-term mission takes careful planning. If you “train” right and “pack” well, you’ll be ready to handle the unexpected and weather the difficulties. Here’s a “personal fitness training” program with three levels – self awareness, sensitivity, and practical skills. Greater self awareness will lead to greater sensitivity which, in turn, will help you develop greater practical skills.

Self Awareness Level

You carry your culture with you – whether you’re conscious of it or not. Self-awareness begins with a clearer understanding of yourself. Until you see yourself as you really are, you’ll see others from a distorted point of view. The first part of your personal fitness training program helps you gain a balanced perspective.

God wants to change you. And He’ll go to extraordinary lengths to transform your life. Teachability means “stretchability.” You must allow the Holy Spirit to stretch the wineskins of your soul, to expand your vision, to enlarge your heart, and to extend your reach beyond yourself – to the whole world.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF?

Take time to know who you are. Let the Holy Spirit form your inner self through worship, corporate and private prayer, learning and applying Scripture, and loving service. Meditation, fasting, reflective writing and reading, and contemplation are helpful too.

Mission leaders have become increasingly concerned about their candidates’ lack of spiritual depth. Character faults and interpersonal problems are the primary source of difficulty on the mission field. Fragmented Christians in spiritual identity crisis have little to offer baby Christians in other cultures. Rather than imparting Christ, they often export their own dysfunctionality.

Master the message of Romans, Philippians, and Colossians. Let the Father overwhelm and refresh you. Accept a heightened sense of your identity as His child – an heir to His promises and power. Take this new identity with you into the spiritual battle ahead.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR HOME CULTURE?

Don’t wait to travel abroad to discover the essential traits and values that characterize your culture to the watching world. Step outside yourself through reading and by talking with others from different cultural backgrounds. Build an ongoing awareness and acceptance of cultural differences and diversities. Check your “cultural baggage” as well as your suitcases before you leave – to see if it passes God’s inspection.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR PASSION FOR MISSION?

How well do you understand your basic call to mission and your motivation for going on a short-term venture? Maximize your personal fitness training by examining your motives in light of the biblical reasons for obedience and evangelism.

Keep a journal to reflect on God’s work in your life and your response to Him. Read current mission articles. Dip into great mission biographies – people like Bruchko, William Carey, Elisabeth Elliot, Jim Elliot, James Fraser, Isobel Kuhn, Helen Roseveare and Hudson Taylor.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR SHORT-TERM MISSION TRIP?

Check out your expectations against any information you can gather on the realities of the situation. What will the experience really demand? What value will it really have? Develop this by reflecting on your expectations, writing them down, and talking them over with others.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT GOD'S PLAN FOR THE NATIONS?

You don't need to be a biblical scholar or an expert on missions to be effective as a short-term missionary. Still, a firm grasp of God's "policy" for reaching people and an appreciation of the Church's responsibility in world evangelism will provide a foundation in mission. Combine your personal study of the Bible with recent studies outlining God's plan for the nations.

Sensitivity Level

Short-term missionaries today must be "world Christians." As a world Christian, you'll be sensitive to people from other cultures – gaining a basic understanding of their values, emotions, and behaviors. You'll seek to learn who they are, what they feel, and how they act.

WHAT ABOUT GENERAL KNOWLEDGE?

No one expects you to know everything. You need some background knowledge, however, to be an effective short-term missionary. You can learn about your host culture through individual study. Books, magazine articles, and television shows are your best source of current information. You'll have to dig a little harder if you're going to an isolated, "unreached peoples" area of the world.

Knowledge about your host church and its history is hard to gather from general sources. Look to the organization that's sponsoring your short-term mission trip for help on this one. Correspondence with missionaries and national Christians can fill in the picture.

WHAT ABOUT VALUES?

It's hard to find a perfect fit between what you say and what you do. But as you strive for values that lead to sensitivity, it's helpful to cover three dimensions.

1. The Kingdom dimension. A missionary today must be a servant from head to foot. Do you know the difference between God's values and those of the "good life?" Have you matched your core values against those Jesus Christ taught in the Gospels?

A missionary today must follow a simple lifestyle, leaving the "good life" behind to minister to those who are struggling for life itself. Immerse yourself in the values of the Sermon on the Mount. Study Christ's life as a model for living and working in all levels of any society. Evaluate your own values by examining your daily lifestyle. Pray that the Holy Spirit will transform your inner person.

2. The cultural dimension. After you've established a Kingdom mentality, you must acclimate yourself to the basic cultural values of your host society. What values do they attach to relationships, family, children, work, wealth, religion, God, the present, the future? The list goes on. Add a "learner mentality" to any information you gain. Remember books can be wrong or out of date. Or you may have filtered the information through the wrong cultural sieve.

Lengthen your cultural "antenna" when you arrive. Ask questions and listen to the answers with an open mind. Get acquainted with your new setting. Notice details. Do young women talk to older men? Do men hold hands with other men while talking or walking? Do people clean their plates when they eat? Cultural rules are broken more often by doing the wrong thing than by saying the wrong thing.

With Kingdom culture in your heart, you must adapt your spirituality to the customs of your host society whenever possible. When missionaries fail to identify spiritually with host people and local cultures, it's difficult for the Gospel to become incarnate.

3. The apprenticeship dimension. You are God's representative, His ambassador. You must follow the "Jesus model" and reject any prestige that may be assigned a "wealthy foreigner." Your ministry must be incarnational as you identify with the people you wish to serve. Training by apprenticeship – something not often found in schools – is the most natural preparation for ministry. Do you have a spiritual mentor? If not, find one before you go abroad. Learn to receive instruction from a person who is further along than you are in the spiritual walk. A "seminary of the streets" would pair new missionaries in mentoring relationships with experienced national or missionary co-workers. Where would Paul or John Mark in the Bible have been without Barnabas as their mentor to lead them into greater ministry?

Practical Skills Level

The last part of your personal fitness training involves the basic communication and ministry skills necessary to build relationships. Eight skills will help you become a successful cross-cultural missionary.

1. COPING SKILLS

Change begins at the moment of birth when you greet the outside world. Some of us resist these changes more than others. What's your response to change? Do you embrace it? Or do you stand back and wish it would go away? Visualize your move to another culture. This time you'll be handling change at every level – and all at once.

But you can adjust. Even if you're one of those who initially resists change, you can fit in. Remember that your coping skills are linked to your "entry posture." Attitudes of openness, acceptance, and trust as you arrive will pave the way for you to be flexible, adaptable, and unflappable. And when you hit the inevitable frustrations of missed cues, nonverbal signals, and unfamiliar customs, remember you're a learner. And this is what learning is all about.

2. LISTENING SKILLS

Jesus always seemed to know when and how to respond to a person's need. As He listened to the woman at the well, He detected nuances of feeling, inner questions, and unspoken concerns. Your listening must be active too – your listening skills finely tuned. It's difficult enough to understand one another without the language barrier. With language in the way, only a listening heart can make the difference.

3. OBSERVING SKILLS

Are you a curious person? How well do you pick up on cues? Use all your senses. How do things look, feel, sound, smell and taste? Use observation games and drills to increase your perceptual skills. As an observing servant, you will grow in your ability to discern the needs of those around you.

4. FRIENDSHIP SKILLS

Build healthy relationships at home. Learn what it means to become a faithful friend. Good relationships will prepare you for the main event on the mission field – building holy relationships that allow you to become a bridge for Christ's love. Don't force the Lord as a topic of every conversation. Let the needs and questions of those you meet become natural doors through which to bring His life.

5. FACILITATING SKILLS

Nowhere is the role of facilitator needed more than in short-term mission. Like Barnabas, you can play a significant role in a brief time by learning to become an encouraging facilitator. A missionary facilitator comes along side national Christians to ease and aid their work – whether it's digging a well, diagnosing a disease, feeding the hungry, or planning a better future.

6. PARTICIPATION SKILLS

Do you remember a time when you were in a group and no one asked your opinion? When you had something to offer, but no one let you participate? This is how local people often feel when visiting “experts” descend with their “help.” No one allows them to join in designing their own future. Learn to elicit participation. Ask questions. Accept suggestions. Follow the Master by learning to operate as part of a team.

7. EMPOWERING SKILLS

People are immobilized by feelings of powerlessness. The hungry half who go to bed without enough food every night. The urban half who have lost hope in the cities. The younger half who can't take care of themselves. Subgroups of every society – women, poor, disabled, sick, unemployed, uneducated, and illiterate – who have been pushed to the margins. Perhaps what they need most of all is someone to encourage them.

They need help to believe in themselves. To value their own history and culture. To become actively involved in seeking a better future for themselves. To hear the Good News and understand God's purpose for their lives. This is what “empowering” does. It shares energy. It builds confidence that a task – once thought impossible – is within reach through Christ.

You can't take an “Empowering 101” class. And you can't learn it from a book. You learn what it is and how to do it by truly loving the people you serve. You empower others as you allow the Lord to breathe His life through you into their hearts and minds. This empowerment rekindles inner dreams and ignites the hope for change.

8. SPIRITUAL WARFARE SKILLS

As a short-term missionary, you'll be joining a fight – sometimes locked in hand to hand combat with the enemy, sometimes battling as part of a group, sometimes pausing to re-arm before the next attack. Make no mistake. You must learn how to fight the spiritual fight.

But how? Study the prayers of the psalmists, the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself. When things got tough, what did David do and to whom did he go? How did Jesus pray in the garden before his encounter with the devil? Your best preparation for spiritual warfare is to learn from your spiritual elders – in the Bible, at home, safety is in being part of a strong spiritual team. Don't be a “Lone Ranger” Christian. Come to the battle as part of an army equipped with the armor of God.

Personalize Your Fitness Training

Personal fitness training before you leave on a short-term mission venture is important, but it's not a substitute for “on site training” once you arrive. You need both. Let your training at home spur you toward on-going instruction when you get there. No amount of “prefield” experience can replace the real classroom. Personalize this “personal fitness training” program. Take these ideas and add your own. Enhance your self-awareness. Focus your sensitivities. Sharpen your basic skills. Begin your short-term missionary venture in the best shape possible and stay healthy throughout your trip.