The Significance of Blackness in Dominican Republic Short-Term Missions Work

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This article explores how race and ethnicity influence intercultural engagement and effectiveness in short-term missions by evaluating the differences between the impact of a predominantly[1] African American short-term mission team and an all-white American short-term mission team in the Dominican Republic.

Recently some American evangelicals have brought attention to the lack of African American Christians involved in the overseas mission work of U.S. evangelical denominations (Roach, 2020).[2] The infinitesimal amount of African American missionaries in the Southern Baptist Convention has been the feature story of various popular Christian magazines including *Christianity Today,* and several predominantly white, U.S. evangelical denominations and mission organizations have made it their goal to increase their number of black missionaries by creating new positions and dedicating resources to this endeavor.[3] The current climate of racial awakening in the United States has intensified their call for more black missionaries in their ranks (Hopkins, 2021).

It is difficult to understand the lack of black participation in missions within these denominations given the rather long history of African Americans in missions. Indeed, America's first missionary, George Liele, was a black American missionary to Jamaica. He is just the beginning of a long and underappreciated history of African American missionaries who despite racial discrimination and injustices in their home country and within the American church, answered the call of the Great Commission (Stevens 2012, 12, 49, 83).

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[1] In this essay I will use the term "predominantly" as an adverb to describe the ethnic feature which is most noticeable in a short-term missions group (Collins, n.d.).

[2] Much attention has been paid to the fact that in 2020, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest sending agency, only had 13 full time African American missionaries out of 3,700 (less than one percent of their missionaries) (Roach, 2020).

[3] In January 2020, the Southern Baptist Convention created the position of full-time African American church mobilization strategist as well as the George Liele Church Planting, Evangelism, and Missions Day (Roach, 2020).

What is clear is that the American brand of missionary work is under heavy scrutiny. According to a recent Barna survey, a growing number of young American Christians believe that past mission work "has been unethical" and today's Christian mission is "tainted by its association with colonialism" (Barna 2020, 79).[4] Critics outside the Church claim American evangelical missionaries are trained agents deputized to promote the cultural and moral superiority of the United States. They hope indigenous people groups "come to 'see the light' and become like them so that they too will "enjoy the many benefits that accrue from Americanization and an Americentric world view" (Ashwill, 2016). Moreover, short-term missions, the popular style of missions practiced by more than a million Americans yearly, is under even greater scrutiny for its excessive financial waste and paternalism (Priest 2008, 36, 506). A report conducted by Barna in 2020, suggests these issues have contributed to the disinterest of young black Christians in North American intercultural mission work (Barna 2020, 78).[5]

One of the main selling points evangelical denominations and mission-sending organizations have used to encourage black churches to send more missionaries is their belief that black missionaries have a distinct advantage when sharing the gospel with many indigenous people groups. They emphasize that black missionaries empathize with oppressed and impoverished people groups better than white missionaries and because African Americans are free from the baggage of colonialism that hinders many indigenous people from receiving the gospel, they can more effectively reach people groups with similar experiences.[6]

These arguments seem persuasive, however, are they true? There is little evidence to support the claim that black missionaries have a special advantage in cross-cultural missions. As a missions pastor of a predominantly African American church who has taken more than 40 short-term mission teams in thirteen years, I must admit my skepticism.

In full transparency, I am caught in the middle. I am both an advocate of short-term missions and a cautious critic. I recognize that when done well short-term mission teams who partner with indigenous communities have the potential to reach countless

[4] One-third of young adult Christians (34%) agrees that "in the past, missions work has been unethical," compared to one in four adults 35 and older (23%). Two in five (42%) agree that "Christian mission is tainted by its association with colonialism" (vs. 29% older adults 35+, 31% teens) (Barna 2020, 79).

[5] Among Americans under the age of 35, black engaged American Christians (61% teens, 62% young adults) are more reluctant than the white majority (74% teens, 73% young adults) to say they value missionaries' work (Barna 2020, 78).

[6] Black and brown missionaries simply bring credibility that's hard to obtain otherwise. On top of this, diverse missionary teams avoid sending the wrong message about our faith. Simply by virtue of being different, they help the world see that the gospel is for all types of people.

lost souls and rebuild communities while encouraging participants to consider long-term mission work (Priest 2008, 35, 64). I also know the damage that a poorly trained and insensitive short-term mission team can do. Admittedly, I have experienced both.

The COVID pandemic has suspended my overseas short-term mission efforts and consequently allowed me to reassess the nature and goal of our short-term mission philosophy. Because my church is a very large, predominantly black, non-denominational, evangelical church, we are heavily influenced by the methodology of white, megachurches. There is a strong tendency to imitate the practices of these churches in hopes of getting similar results in a black context. Many of the ecclesiological practices and theories of church growth have been successfully contextualized for our upper, middle-class, black American context. Consequently, we began our mission ministry by incorporating the short-term mission strategies of these churches as well.

After years of personal experience and study, I have since learned to critically appraise these missiological approaches rather than adopting them wholesale. Yet, like many others, I too desire to see more black involvement in cross-cultural missions. However, before I use the rallying cry of "the gospel is received better when it comes from minority people—that is why we need more African American missionaries!" I want to explore the veracity of these claims. I cannot use this strategy to promulgate the American version of cross-cultural missions to other black churches unless I am confident of these assertions.

It is not the goal of this essay to present quantitative research on this issue (perhaps the subject of a future study). Rather, I want to conduct a preliminary inquiry into the role of race in my short-term mission work in the Dominican Republic. By interviewing the pastor of the local church that we have been working within Barahona, DR, I hope to begin to understand whether there is any perceptible difference between a short-term mission team composed of primarily black Americans and a short-term mission team composed of white Americans.

Over the past six years, I have engaged in mission work in the bateyes of the Dominican Republic. Batey communities are disadvantaged villages of mostly Haitian immigrant workers and their families who harvest (or once harvested) sugarcane. Individuals who live in the bateyes often struggle to receive necessities like healthcare, clean water, food, and education. As Haitian immigrants, their dark skin and inability to speak Spanish make them easy targets of discrimination.

In Barahona, a batey 6 hours west of Santo Domingo, we have worked with mayors, educators, community leaders, and pastors to provide citywide garbage receptacles, water wells, and public restrooms. Our coalition of pastors has also provided meals for the neediest in the community and has renovated houses for the handicapped. We have also hosted a citywide Vacation Bible School, basketball clinics, provided financial support to local churches, and adopted a Christian school for Haitian children. All this was done to unite local churches to reach their community with the gospel.

In my time in the Dominican Republic, I have never stopped to question what effect my race had on our work there. Having been raised in a predominantly white neighborhood, and attending a predominantly white church, I have grown accustomed to being a minority amongst a majority. I have learned to adapt my disposition to fit most situations, so the significance of my blackness is not something that I notice right away. It was not until I began to read about the shortage of African Americans in cross-cultural missions did I begin to question whether the arguments for the unique opportunities of black Americans in missions had any relevance to my work. So, in the spring of 2021, I decided to conduct an interview with Pastor Louis, the leader of the coalition of pastors that we partner with in the Dominican Republic.

It is important to communicate any preconceptions that I had when I approached this interview. I hypothesized that the potential benefit of being black in a cross-cultural mission context was overstated to promote black participation in the North American model of intercultural missions. My cynicism was bolstered by a prior conversation with Marcia, my translator, and the Dominican Republic ministry leader at my church. She was born in the DR but has spent much of her life in Texas and is a citizen of the United States.

When I asked Marcia to translate for me and I told her that the questions were concerning the impact of being black upon our work in the Dominican Republic, she was very skeptical. She wanted to save me the trouble and answer the question for him. She concluded that there really is no difference at all, “but sure, we can ask him.”

We concurred that we had not seen any difference in treatment from our partner churches or the people in the DR. We had not had any intentional or non-intentional conversations about our “blackness” in comparison to white mission teams. Until this point, the idea that we were different from any other mission team working in the area was foreign to us. Marcia had been on other mission trips to Nicaragua and could not recall any differences in how she was treated by the indigenous people there or any noticeable effect on her work there.

I began the interview by asking Pastor Louis a few general questions to gain an understanding of his experience with short-term mission teams. He has worked with over 15 different mission teams in twelve years. All of them were all-white teams from the United States except my team and another team from Puerto Rico.

The short-term mission teams participated in community revitalization projects, food programs, and neighborhood evangelism. When I asked him what were the most meaningful things that these teams did, he said it was the relational work that they accomplished through personal interaction with the people in the community. Initially, I thought that he was talking specifically about the neighborhood evangelism programs but upon clarification, I realized it was more than that. He emphasized that anything that built rapport and fostered authentic relationships had the greatest impact. That is the main reason that he continues to host short-term mission teams.

"When other people come into my community and show concern, it is very impactful," he said. Many of the people in the batey are Haitian immigrants or of Haitian descent and have been marginalized and oppressed all their lives because of their immigrant status. To have Americans reinforce their importance and value to God is transformative. For Pastor Louis, this alone is well worth the many sacrifices, risks, and personal loss of pastoral ministry time with his flock.

Finally, when I asked him if there was a difference between white mission teams and black mission teams, his answer was, "Yes." He said, "My people identify more with black Americans. We have a similar culture. They look like us." He was careful to clarify that the two different types of groups are not treated differently. All teams are welcomed and appreciated. He and his people just feel more comfortable with a team of African American missionaries. "They are a part of us. We are family."

When I asked him if there was a difference between the demands that a black team places upon him as a host and a white team place upon him, he said that there was no difference. Both teams seem to desire the same level of comfort that he tries to accommodate. However, he did say that it is easier to host a black team because his community identifies with African Americans right away. The Dominican Republicans in Barahona bond with a team of black Christians much more readily which makes his job as a host, easier. As far as perceptions go, he candidly admitted that "They feel like white people do not know hard work. Black people do."

I asked Pastor Louis if they use the same terminology to describe black Americans as they do for white Americans. I knew that in many Spanish-speaking countries "gringo"

was the term used for foreigners. I wanted to know if it was a term that was used for all foreigners or just white foreigners. Before I asked him this question, Marcia, my translator, told me that there was no difference. "Gringo" was a term used for black and white foreigners alike. But to her surprise, he said that "gringo" only refers to white foreigners. When I asked if there was a special word for black Americans he said, "No." They are just called black Americans. Marcia stated that in Nicaragua that was not her experience. She recalls being called "gringo". She now wonders if it was because she was the only non-white American in her group of short-term missionaries. Perhaps the term, "gringo" gets applied according to the general ethnic make-up of the group.

I asked Pastor Louis to recall any issues that he had due to cultural misunderstandings with the short-term mission teams. He did not recall any instances, rather he stated most difficulties arise when the team has an established program and schedule they are committed to keeping, not taking into account the constantly changing dynamics they are unaware of because of their inherent cultural blindness. Many danger factors cause him to change course, and this creates conflict when the team wants to keep to the schedule. In a word— "paternalism" (Priest 2008, 508-509).[7]

I cringed as he spoke because I too am guilty of this. As a novice missional pastor trained in the ways of American corporate leadership principles, I did not see my cultural blindness as an issue when there was conflict. I arrogantly believed that most of the conflicts were leadership issues. I subconsciously believed that I was a superior leader and could see and solve issues better than he or the other leaders that I was working with could. Many times, he obliged my arrogance to maintain the relationship trusting that in due time I would recognize the error of my ways. We have had many such reckonings in which I had to sheepishly apologize for my paternalism.

I concluded our conversation that evening by apologizing again for all my transgressions. Pastor Louis enlightened me once again. He confided that he tolerated a lot more things from me than he would a white leader. He would have been more offended by some of the things I have said if it had come from a white person. This made me feel even more terrible. He could sense my conviction and guilt, so he affirmed me by telling me that I am his little brother and there are many things that the older brother must put up with. We are family and he loves me and my family very much. "All is forgiven."

[7] Robert J. Priest defines "paternalism" as the combination of, "benevolence with an assumption of superior knowledge, experience, and skills" (Priest 2008, 508-509).

This conversation was eye-opening for me in several ways. Although by no means conclusive, it begins to help me understand the significance of being black in short-term intercultural mission contexts. It is the starting point for future inquiry, and it stirs many more questions that I hope to investigate. First, it must be pointed out that blackness does not prevent paternalism. It may help African Americans connect better with nationals, but black Americans engaging in short-term mission trips are also susceptible to colonialism and paternalism. This fact points to a deeper problem. Kyeong Sook Park states in, "Researching Short-term Missions and Paternalism" that many have suggested that short-term missions may have built-in paternalistic tendencies because it combines "economic power" with "naive optimism" (Priest 2008, 506). This may seem to be the case regardless of race. It is a question worthy of further exploration.

The interview also seemed to bolster Kyeong Sook Park's conclusion that the best way to decrease paternalism is to have a close relationship with national leaders. My relationship with Pastor Louis has been six years in the making. We have been through a lot together. One time he even had to confront me with the fact that I rarely call him unless there was an impending trip. I repented and now we talk every other week consistently. It has been this relationship that has curbed my paternalistic tendencies. I continue to learn a lot from him and cherish our friendship.

Finally, although I support the effort to engage African Americans in global missions, I do not believe that any positive effects of being black in an inter-cultural context should be used as a "recruiting tool." I believe this is unwise for many reasons. First, I fear an overemphasis on the special opportunities African Americans may have in some intercultural missions contexts discounts the role white missionaries, without these advantages, have historically played and continue to play. It may discourage white American missionaries, and instead of solving a problem, create a new one.[8]

Secondly, this approach fosters the idea that cross-cultural missionary work is best done by those who resemble the phenotype and cultural characteristics of the indigenous people group. The degree of cultural differences between missionaries and those to whom they are called should not be a determining or delimiting factor in where a missionary is sent. Using this as a marketing strategy overstates the advantages of being a black missionary and masks the possible disadvantages. Moreover, the cultural distinctiveness of a missionary has many advantages as well (Pelt 1989, 28-37).

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[8] In fact Barna's survey in 2020 indicates that young white churchgoers are the least eager about engaging in missions (48%) when compared with black (61%), Hispanic (54%) and other ethnic minorities (57%) (Barna 2020, 78).

Lastly, I believe if this tactic were to succeed, it may inadvertently create a movement of black missionaries who would be inclined to serve exclusively in countries where their ethnicity is advantageous. I could easily foresee a new stereotype forming in which black evangelical missionaries are pigeonholed into going exclusively to African countries or ministering exclusively to people of African descent. This has a long historic precedence that we do not want to repeat. I pray we can learn from the history of America's segregated church and not perpetuate the same mistakes in other lands.[9]

[9] I am referring to the AME church's split from the Methodist church in 1816, the Assemblies of God's split from the Church of God in Christ in 1914 and the Southern Baptist split from the Baptist denomination in 1845.

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