

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Re-Entry

You are excited about going “home” to the country and church that sent you to another culture as a missionary. Of course, you will miss the people you have been ministering to while you have been in your host country, but you begin to daydream about what it will be like to be greeted by friends and family when you arrive home.

This is usual for everyone who has been away from home a while. However, many times missionaries’ expectations are so high that they experience high re-entry stress. When you get “home,” you may find yourself feeling lonely, isolated, disillusioned, misunderstood, depressed and irritated with people back home as well as with your own culture. Let us look at how you can prevent some of these feelings by leaving well, entering well, and being aware of some of the pitfalls in going home.

Leaving Well

One of the things that may increase your re-entry stress is not leaving your mission field correctly. The last part of Acts 20 gives us a good example of missionaries leaving well. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus and was headed back to his passport country and headquarters in Jerusalem. Dave Pollock is fond of saying that to leave well you should build a “RAFT,” so let us see how Paul fulfilled that acronym.

- **Reconciliation.** When leaving, you may try to deal with tensions in relationships by ignoring them, hoping they will just disappear. However, they do not. We carry them inside, and they interfere with

new relationships. If we ever spend time with the other party again, the tensions will still be there and even harder to settle. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders how he had lived among them the whole time he was there and that he never even took support from them but was always giving.

- **Affirmation.** Let others know how you respect and appreciate them by telling them how important their friendship has been and how you enjoyed working with them. As you acknowledge how people have blessed you, you will become aware of what you have gained. Paul commits the Ephesians to God’s grace and warns them of potential difficulties.
- **Farewells.** Say good-bye to people, pets, places, and possessions. Take pictures and small reminders of the good things that have happened to you. After Paul was done speaking, they all prayed, wept, embraced, kissed, went to the ship, and tore themselves away.
- **Think destination.** While saying your good-byes, begin thinking realistically about where you are going. Think of it as a visit to the place you used to call home and imagine realistically what it will be like there. Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost, but he also realized that there were hardships facing him there.

One thing that is particularly difficult is being forced to leave the field before you really want to. This can be because of health problems in yourself or family members, difficulty with a teenager, and a host of other things. In such cases you may have feelings of failure, depression, discouragement, resentment, and guilt. In such cases it helps to acknowledge your grief, face present realities,

draw a healthy line on the past, and commit yourself to the present task.

Traveling

Airplanes are wonderful for getting home in a hurry, but they provide little time to “leave” your host country in your thinking. There is little time to grieve your losses and anticipate your arrival as you fly home, and sometimes you are still “traveling” in your thinking even when your body has arrived back home. In one sense many people are still transitioning for several days or weeks after they arrive home. They unpack their suitcases long before they unpack their minds.

Although Paul was in a hurry to leave to get home in time, he had time to think as he traveled. Remember that he was covering more than 600 miles by ship at the mercy of the winds, and he had to make a “connection” (find another ship headed his way) after the first 200 miles. People back home may not understand and think it is extravagant, but a week in Hawaii or in Europe on the way home is a good way to transition more effectively.

Re-Entering Well

Of course, the first steps to re-entering well are to build a good RAFT and give yourself some time to transition on the way home. Now you find out if your expectations are realistic or not. Your expectations form the basis for evaluating everything back home, and everyone has expectations even if they deny them.

Unfortunately expectations may be based on what was true one, two or four years ago. However, during that time everything has changed—you, your friends and family, your church, and your culture.

- **You have changed.** Before you left, you drove your car to the corner store, threw away food, and discarded plastic bags without thinking. Now you walk half a mile, take food home from the restaurant, and hoard bags. Paul had changed, and he told the people in his passport country about persecuting followers of the Way, being struck blind on the road, and then being sent to the Gentiles (Acts 22)
- **Your friends and family have changed.** You used to belong to the group, know where you fit with everyone, and friends confided in you and listened to you. While you were gone, new people came into the group, and your friends are involved in different activities. You now feel like a marginal person, do not understand the jokes others laugh at, and misinterpret some of the things they say and do.
- **Your church has changed.** When you left, it may have seemed to be such a mission-minded church, but now no one seems very interested in missions. When you try to talk about your mission experience, people may listen politely for a few minutes, then launch into an excited conversation about how the local football team is doing. When Paul came home from his first term (Acts 15) of missionary service, people from the church maintained that his converts were not saved. At the end of Paul’s third term (Acts 22) people in his own denomination were excited. However, when he went to the big church in town, the people basically listened politely until he mentioned his missionary call; then they called for his death.
- **Your culture has changed.** Alvin Toffler wrote *Future Shock* to point out that

cultures now change so fast that even the people living in them can barely keep up with the changes. People gone for several years often return to a culture quite different from the one they left. Something as simple as walking into a store and buying something can be overwhelming.

Pitfalls to avoid

You will face many difficult situations. Here are some of the most common.

- Frustration. Things will be different, and some of those differences will be very frustrating. For example, while overseas, your family may have been closer because there was no TV and you home-schooled your children. Back home TV, school activities, many church activities, sporting events, club activities, etc. will separate family members.
- Disillusionment. You return home all excited about what you have been doing, but everyone at home seems so apathetic. As one person put it, "They are comatose and don't even know it."
- Judgmental. It is very easy to become critical, condemning others in the face of their apparent apathy. You may confuse the narrower functions of the mission agency (outreach and training for most) with the very broad functions of your local church.
- Bitterness and Hostility. If you let these things progress far enough, you may become bitter inside and let that express itself in hostility toward the very people who supported you financially and with prayer.

Suggestions for avoiding pitfalls

Pitfalls can be avoided, or at least made less disruptive to your life and witness. Here are some suggestions.

- Grieve your losses. If you have not taken time to grieve during leaving or traveling, take some time to do so after you arrive. Although time will be at a premium, set aside a few minutes each day (perhaps during your devotional time) to fully grieve what you have left behind.
- Be honest. Do not let pride (spirituality?) keep you from sharing your struggle with someone. Find someone (another missionary, a close friend who will keep a confidence, a counselor who understands missionaries, etc.) who will mentor you in adjusting to life back home.
- Adjust to changes in ministry. Most likely you will not be doing the same kind of ministry that you were on the mission field. What you do may seem quite mundane in comparison. However, all avenues of service are pleasing to God, and you can find a way to be a servant in any local church.
- Thank your supporters. Even if you are not given the chance to speak to all the people in your church during a service, find some way to thank those who have helped you. Perhaps you can invite them over for a meal you learned to prepare while in another culture and share what God did in and through you.
- Reach out to people. Whatever you do, continue to reach out to people as you did on the field. As you reach out, people will see how you have changed and perhaps want to experience the same changes in their lives.

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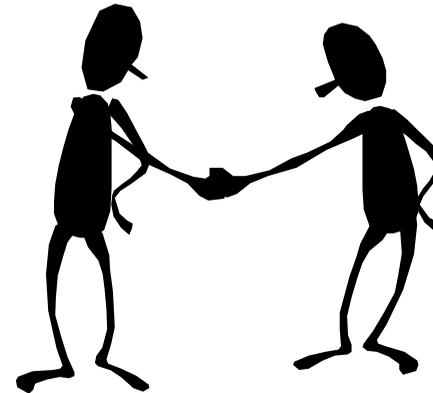
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