



WELCOMING RETURNING MISSIONARIES

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Returning from the field for home assignment doesn't always feel like "coming home" for missionaries. All kinds of changes have occurred since they left, and they have changed, too. Living overseas means they have absorbed a new culture and now see things from a different perspective.

Varying challenges face missionaries on their return. Some are confronted by family situations that are difficult. Others struggle to decide where to live and how to squeeze in a multitude of visits and fundraising efforts in limited time. Some workers wonder if they can honestly reveal ministry discouragements, or they may be anxious about future assignment decisions. Missionary children often are apprehensive about relocating. And many missionaries are unsure of their ability to meet all of the different expectations of supporters, churches, family and friends.

Your church cannot eliminate all of the strains of home assignment, but you can do many things that make the transition easier and provide a warm, welcoming community where your missionaries feel accepted, appreciated and cared for. It is particularly important for a missionary's sending church to reach out with practical help and a warm embrace.

Here are some suggestions that have proven effective as local churches cared for returning missionaries:

1. At least six months before home assignment begins, find out if your missionaries need assistance to locate housing while they are in your area.

If your church does not have a missionary house/apartment, research missionary homes owned by other churches in your area, nearby missionary housing communities, or church members who may have an available in-law apartment or vacation home. Do not assume that missionaries will want to stay with family members; provide options whenever possible. If the workers will be in your area for more than a week or two, try to find them private accommodations rather than living arrangements in someone else's home.

2. Help your missionaries obtain a dependable vehicle.

Several organizations specialize in renting vehicles to missionaries:

- Christian Missionary Technical Services (Pennsylvania, USA) / www.cmtsministries.org
- Ichthus Motor Missions (Great Britain) / www.ichthusmotormission.com
- MATS International, Inc. (Indiana, USA) / www.mats.org

Your missionaries' agency may assist with rental cars, or a car dealer in your community might be willing to provide a reasonable lease. Is there a mechanic in your congregation who could check the vehicle thoroughly to make sure it is road worthy?

3. Provide a quiet transition time.

For most missionaries, the last several weeks or months prior to home assignment are very hectic. They must complete projects, hand responsibilities to coworkers, set up itineraries back home, prepare presentation materials and pack. Encourage them to set aside the first several weeks of their home assignment for physical, spiritual and emotional rest without meetings or other expectations.

4. Hold a food shower.

Stock your missionaries' pantry—and their refrigerator and freezer—before they return. This project could be adopted by one class or small group, or it could involve the entire church, including children. Check to see if your missionaries also need towels and linens or other household items.

5. Provide reentry funds.

Calvary Church of Santa Ana, CA, sets aside money in their budget for special financial gifts to their missionaries when they arrive on home assignment. These additional funds may be needed for such things as moving expenses, household items, school registration or clothing.

6. Treat your missionaries to some special pleasures.

What activities would show your missionaries how much you appreciate them? Consider treating each of your missionary women with a gift certificate and a shopping day with a woman from the church who can guide her to the best place for bargains and give advice on styles. Some churches offer returning missionaries a spa treatment or massage. Guys are invited to attend a sports game or are included in a round of golf or fishing, depending on their interests.

7. Prepare a welcome packet.

Westbrook Church of Hartland, WI, compiles a customized package of information for each missionary when he/she arrives. The packet includes things like (1) the schedule of meetings that have been planned, (2) maps and driving directions, (3) information about special church activities they or their family could participate in, such as VBS or a youth retreat, and (4) conferences and retreats outside the church that might be of interest. The church often underwrites the cost of attendance at conferences such as Women of the Harvest (www.womenoftheharvest.com). If advance registration is needed for an activity (for example, children's camp), the application is forwarded to the missionary on the field well before the deadline.

8. Debrief with your missionaries.

Missionaries need people, especially those in their sending church, to take the time to listen to what they have to say and to seek to understand the feelings that lie behind the words. It is not unusual for missionaries to return from a term of service with some spiritual and emotional pain. Those who serve on the front lines challenging Satan's territory are regularly the target of his attacks. They need to know that the folks back home care deeply enough to try to really understand and offer support. Ask your pastor to schedule at least two to three hours to listen to and encourage them. Take time as a missions team to meet with them and ask questions that get beyond the superficial. Make sure that the members of your missions team are updated ahead of time on basic information about your missionaries' family and ministry. It is discouraging for workers to discover that church leaders don't know where they are working or what their key ministries have been. Pray together with them over the requests they share.

9. Strengthen the triangle relationship.

If your missionaries also serve with a mission agency, your relationship is a triangle that benefits from open communication and strong ties among all three entities. This may be a good time to talk to those in the agency responsible for the area of the world in which your missionaries serve. Are there strategy or assignment issues you would like to understand better? What evaluation does the agency have of the work your missionaries have accomplished? Is there some way in which you could cooperate more effectively to see goals reached?

10. Help the missionary address deeper issues.

Look for evidences that your missionaries may need counsel that goes beyond the informal interaction with your missions team and pastor. Your missionaries may have returned from service with issues that could be resolved more effectively with the help of professional counselors. Because their situations are often very different from those encountered by a person living in his/her home

country, specialized counselors and renewal programs are available that can be a tremendous boon to the missionary's spirit and effectiveness. Resources include:

- Alongside Ministries in Richland, MI / www.alongsidecares.net
- Barnabas International in various US locations as well as satellites in Austria and Senegal / www.barnabas.org
- Emerge Ministries, Inc., in Akron, OH / www.emerge.org
- Heartstream Resources in Liverpool, PA / www.heartstreamresources.org
- InterHealth in London, England / www.interhealth.org.uk
- LinkCare in Fresno, CA / www.linkcare.org
- Mission Training International in Palmer Lake, CO / www.mti.org
- Missionary Resources of Columbia in Columbia, SC / www.mresourcescolumbia.org
- Narramore Christian Foundation in Arcadia, CA, and various other sites around the world / www.ncfliving.org
- Oasis Retreat in Vancouver, BC, Canada / www.crusade.org/oasis

11. Clarify goals for home assignment.

Talk to your missionaries about what they hope to achieve on this home assignment. Ask them whether they need to raise additional support and if so, how much. Discuss various means of extending or updating their skills in a particular area (see next item). Find out if children have special needs (such as exploring college options, improving their written English, testing for educational level, etc.). Concerns related to the extended family may weigh heavily on your missionaries. Most will need to visit a number of supporting churches and individual donors, sometimes involving a significant amount of travel. For some, there will be requirements from their agency to complete, and often there are health-related appointments, not to mention the need for just plain rest. Work with your missionaries to understand how these various demands will be balanced and what you can do to make the time as productive as possible.

12. Help your missionary continue to grow.

Life-long learning is an important aspect of ongoing effectiveness, and missionaries can be encouraged to consider how to invest at least some of their home-assignment time in extending or updating their skills. This could involve formal education, but often it can be achieved by attending a conference, spending time with a high-level practitioner or investing time in personal study. Your missionaries may need your financial support in order to make this possible. Investment in life-long learning multiplies itself in greater effectiveness.

13. Foster small group ties.

If your missionaries will be living in your area for a period of time, ask if they would like to be matched to a small group. Whenever possible, Brandywine Valley Baptist Church in Wilmington, DE, matches their resident missionaries to a small group representing the same life stage. These matches jump-start relationships, even if the missionaries can attend the group's meetings only sporadically.

14. Use your missionaries.

Your cross-cultural workers have experience, expertise and passion that can enrich your local ministry. If they are spending extended time in your area, explore ways in which you can utilize them to expand your church's impact. Discover their gifts and utilize them! A number of churches have used the expertise of their missionaries in an outreach to immigrants in their area.

15. Proactively develop friendships.

Encourage the members of your congregation to really get to know your missionaries as people. This month's Global Outreach Tool published by DualReach (www.dualreach.org/missions/bm~doc/mc-t8-2.doc) suggests ways in which members of your church can provide practical services and fun activities. Whenever possible, use these as vehicles for building one-on-one or family-to-family relationships.

16. Creatively engage your missionaries with the congregation.

More missionaries are now taking summer home assignments when it may be more difficult to connect with them in multiple settings. Grace Point Church in Newtown, PA, holds an annual, old-fashioned potluck picnic on a summer Sunday afternoon so that members of the congregation can get acquainted with their missionaries in the relaxed atmosphere of flipping burgers or tossing a frisbie.

17. Make your missionaries a part of your church staff.

Some congregations provide an office at the church for their missionaries on home assignment and consider them an integral part of the pastoral team. Park Street Church, featured in the March 2005 issue of DualReach's *Synergy Newsletter*, does so and finds that the interaction between pastors and missionaries enriches both. For more information, go to www.dualreach.org/missions/synergy/email/mar05-8.shtml.

18. Facilitate missionary-staff relationships.

Bible Fellowship Church of Ventura, CA, featured in the April 2005 issue of *Synergy Newsletter* (www.dualreach.org/missions/synergy/email/ap05-10.shtml), holds parties that bring together the church staff and recently returned missionaries. In this relaxed setting, home-assignment workers meet or get reacquainted with church leaders, and these casual contacts often develop into friendships that are mutually beneficial.

19. Sponsor a missionary retreat.

The Evangelical Free Church of Hershey (PA) organizes an annual conference just for its missionaries. Held at a relaxing retreat center, the event features ministry by the senior pastor and many opportunities for missionaries to get to know one another and share their needs openly and honestly in a "safe" environment. Other congregations hold a breakfast or luncheon during their missions conference for this type of interaction.

20. Don't forget your missionaries' children.

Bible Fellowship Church in Ventura, CA, held a Princess Tea Party for a recently returned young MK. The hostess invited a group of 6-8-year-old girls including the MK from China. There was a selection of "dress up clothes" the girls could try on and feel like princesses. They drank from real china tea cups, and ate little sandwiches, strawberries, cookies and other sweets. Their moms came, too, so that they could spend time getting to know the missionary mom. The MK developed friendships that resulted in many playtimes and sleepovers.

More ideas related to caring for MKs will be shared in an upcoming issue of *Synergy Newsletter* and *Great Ideas*.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO ENCOURAGE MISSIONARIES ON HOME ASSIGNMENT

- Member Care Resource Database / www.missionarycare.com/database.htm
- MisLinks resources on member care / www.mislinks.org/practical/membcare.htm
- *Re-Entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home* by Peter Jordan / YWAM
- *Serving as Senders* by Neal Pirolo / www.eri.org
- *The Reentry Team: Caring for Your Returning Missionaries* by Neal Pirolo / www.eri.org

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