

# ISSUES FACING RETURNING MISSIONARIES AND HOW SPIRITUAL DIRECTION CAN HELP

by

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## **Preamble**

I have three times returned to New Zealand after spells of 3 - 10 years overseas. Each time I have found the transition to New Zealand life very difficult - and each has been more difficult than the time before. Speaking with others in similar situations has revealed similar difficulties. In fact, I have been distressed to hear about more serious problems - one friend who has given up on church, even perhaps on God; another who has left her husband; several who has experienced severe depression or burnout. I have found that spiritual direction has helped me in my latest re-entry. I undertook this research project in the hope that it would help spiritual directors to better understand and minister to returning missionaries.

## **Research Method**

I explored some of the literature on re-entry and interviewed a number of missionaries and spiritual directors. I also thought quite deeply on my own experiences of re-entry and of directing a missionary as she worked through the decision to remain in New Zealand and the issues that were involved in carrying out that decision.

## **Issues Facing Returning Missionaries.**

“Well, is it good to be home?” This is a question often asked by well meaning friends and relatives. How do you answer? Do you give the answer people want to hear, or do you answer truthfully? “It doesn’t feel like my home. Yes, it’s nice to see you again, but I wish I wasn’t here. I’d give anything to be back where my heart is.”

Very often the process of re-entry into the home culture is difficult for a missionary. This can be true even when the missionary wanted to return, but may be devastating when he or she<sup>1</sup> has had to come home for sickness, family, or other reasons. The extent of the difficulties, and the time it takes to adjust, depend on a number of factors, eg. how long the missionary has been away, how deeply she was involved in the host culture, the circumstances of the return, her personality, how quickly she gets into another occupation, and the effectiveness of her support system. Some of the issues are not exclusive to missionaries, but are experienced by anyone returning to their own culture after working overseas. The pressure that arises has been named ‘re-entry stress’. Marjorie Foyle defines this as “reverse culture shock, enhanced by bereavement reactions and the disappointed expectations of the home country.”<sup>2</sup>

We will look briefly at some of the stressors involved, and the resulting effects on a missionary who is probably already exhausted from finishing off and handing over her work, packing up, and attending a round of farewell functions.

### **1. Loss and Grief**

Heather Cameron Perkins describes the sense of loss as being like an “amputation”. There are physical losses - the adopted culture, familiar surroundings, home, and close friends. There are other, often deeper, losses: a job or ministry, an identity and role, even a sense of *mana*. Missionaries often live in situations where their physical appearance or accent marks them out as different. They often feel that they have a valuable contribution to make and feel valued by the people they work with. This can make them feel quite ‘special.’ But at home they may no longer feel valued - if they stand out at all it’s probably as misfits. A busy, useful lifestyle on

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid the clumsy use of ‘he or she’ throughout this paper I will refer to the missionary as ‘she’ and the spiritual director as ‘he’. Obviously both roles could belong to men or women. I will also refer throughout to the ‘missionary’, when strictly I mean ‘returned missionary’.

<sup>2</sup> Foyle, 1987.

the mission field may have been replaced by a protracted period of seeming uselessness, and with little obvious purpose to everyday life. There may be a real identity crisis. They may look at their counterparts at home and realise that by being away for a protracted time they are behind in professional advancement and expertise, financial security, a home, or marriage. More losses - the 'what might have been.'

As a result of multiple losses, many missionaries exhibit signs of grieving - over emotionalism, loneliness, a sense of homelessness and lostness. They may have trouble sleeping and concentrating, and in extreme cases there may be panic attacks, depression and chronic anxiety. This is accentuated by a sense of isolation. Few people understand, few people want to hear about it, and the missionaries themselves may not understand what is happening.

## **2. Excess Baggage**

I use this term to refer to issues that missionaries bring home with them as a result of their experiences. Some of these come because of the situation they have been working in. For example, trauma from being in a war zone, ill health from being exposed to tropical diseases, the stress from living in overcrowded, unhygienic, noisy or dangerous conditions. Some come home emotionally burnt out through overwork or with unresolved personal conflicts with fellow missionaries or nationals. The experiences on the field may have brought to light buried hurts and scars. Others come home with a deep sense of failure, magnified by people at home who are hungry for success stories. The resulting effects may include depression, exhaustion, spiritual dryness.

## **3. Cultural Disorientation**

This is often a surprise - after all, "I'm going home aren't I?" But often a missionary goes through a reverse culture shock, with a subsequent feeling of not belonging in society, in the church and even sometimes in their own family. The idealistic 'home' they dreamed about was an illusion! Society has changed; so has the home church and the missionary is left unsure of how she should behave, dress, worship and even what words to use! She may be confused and even frightened by changes in technology, and may feel overwhelmed by the range of goods to choose from. On the other hand, a missionary who has come from a culture more advanced than her own, experiences another set of frustrations as she returns to the 'backwaters.' New values creep into all societies and others that were there all the time may be noticed in a fresh way. Racial prejudice, narrow-mindedness, materialism and affluence are often hard to cope with. The missionary has changed too. She has learned new attitudes and values that clash with the home culture. This cultural disorientation may leave the missionary lacking in confidence and feeling inferior. She may be left feeling very vulnerable - an easy prey to temptations of many kinds. Or she may become excessively critical and judgemental, and find it difficult to relate to old friends and make new ones. The pain of frequent farewells to close friends on the mission field may have left her wary of committing herself in friendships. This increases the sense of isolation and loneliness.

#### **4. Relocation Issues**

There are many major decisions to be made on returning to the home country - house, car, job, finances, schooling, where to live, which church to attend etc. Often these have to be made in a hurry while under stress, and with the insecurity of being in what feels like a 'foreign' culture. The result is more stress and more insecurity.

#### **5. Spiritual Struggles**

Many missionaries experience a sense of spiritual dryness both on the field and on returning home. This may have a number of causes - perhaps it is just a stage in their spiritual journey, something allowed by God to nudge them further in their walk with him. Perhaps it is a result of spiritual exhaustion; maybe it comes as a result of overbusyness with a subsequent neglect of the spiritual disciplines; or it may result from a lack of fellowship and spiritual nurture. Missionaries who have been involved in the front of the spiritual battle may continue to face spiritual attack on their return. Often people at home don't have the experience to support the missionary in this.

Many missionaries have grown spiritually through being stretched on the field. They have probably been forced to trust God in new ways, and may have been involved in churches far more spiritually awake and aware than their home church. Involvement in revivals and vibrant ethnic worship can make it hard to fit back into a church which seems apathetic, inward looking and staid. Two of my friends have come home to churches that have closed down! The struggle to find a new spiritual home was then added to their other struggles. Or the opposite situation may arise. The missionary may have been in a formal, ritualistic church on the field and come back to find their church has changed completely - some new experience of the Spirit has brought transformation. Having not been part of the journey towards this change, the missionary may feel confused and find it hard to fit in. Missionaries may struggle to know how to communicate what has happened to them - how to be faithful to their own spiritual growth, yet loyal to a church that may have supported them for many years. One missionary I spoke to found church was just too hard to cope with, and stopped attending for six months. Sadly, nobody in the church stayed in touch with her at that time.

Other missionaries struggle with seemingly darker questions - "Where is God in all that has happened? Why didn't he protect as he promised? How do I fit the events of the past year into my theology of God? I thought I was doing his will, but why was there no fruit for my labour?" There may also be the question "Is it really God's will for me to be here, or is it just the mission keeping me at home?"

#### **6. Emotional Experiences**

It is already clear that each of these areas brings emotional pain. There may also be a sense of disappointment or frustration at having to leave early or not reaching goals; there may be bitterness or resentment at those responsible for the homecoming, or towards those at home who don't understand and do nothing to help. Some missionaries have become emotionally dependent on their work and feel helpless and useless without it. Sometimes there is also a feeling of guilt at leaving a desperately needy situation. As one woman expressed it to me "It's hard being home when you know there's stuff you can do there and nobody is doing it."

Parents may feel guilty at having subjected their children to the challenges of the mission situation, particularly if they have a very sensitive child. They may worry about their children making their own sometimes difficult adjustments. Re-entry may be a period of turbulent emotions.

So there we have a catalogue of possible struggles for returning missionaries. Obviously the intensity and duration of these will vary, but every missionary faces a period of adjustment to the home culture.

### **Spiritual Direction and Returning Missionaries**

One returning missionary who rejected trauma counselling in favour of spiritual direction found the counselling too secular, even when given by a Christian counsellor. "God was part of me going. He needed to be brought into everything happening." She found healing in the quietness and beauty of a retreat and then through ongoing direction.

Spiritual direction cannot solve everything, but there are significant ways in which a spiritual director can help returning missionaries. What can he do?

#### **1. Listen**

A prime need for these people is to tell their stories. Somebody who will listen attentively and sympathetically is a priceless gift.

#### **2. Point Her to God<sup>3</sup>**

Asking the 'God questions' is part of a spiritual director's work. By focusing the missionary on God instead of the difficulties, the director can help her to get things into perspective. Where she may be finding it hard to make friends, the director can point her again to the friendship of Jesus. Where she struggles with loss of identity, he can remind her of her unchanging identity in Christ. Where there is a sense of sin or failure, he can help her receive the love and forgiveness of God. Giving relevant Scriptures to pray and meditate on, helping her see God in each stage of the journey, encouraging dependence on God, encouraging faith in God's purposes for her and God's ability to carry out those purposes - these are vital roles that a spiritual director can fulfil. He may also need to help her develop a new theology - one that includes a God of mystery and question marks. He can encourage her to explore new images of God that fit this new situation. As Pollock points out "A proper perspective of God is a solid foundation for building the healthy self-view so critical for making a good adjustment. And there is a base for evaluating the experience of transition."<sup>4</sup>

#### **3. Wait**

The months and years seem endless as the missionary tries to find a place in the new culture. Sometimes God takes a long time to fulfil his promises, and to bring healing to body, emotions and spirit. "You need people who will wait with you, who will walk the slow journey with you," was one missionary's comment.

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<sup>3</sup> An appendix gives suggestions for Scripture passages and books that have been helpful to missionaries on re-entry.

<sup>4</sup> Pollock 1987 page 187

Walking the journey with people is what spiritual direction is about. Spiritual directors are uniquely fitted to support and help.

#### **4. Encourage Reflection**

It is easy for an ex missionary to feel the losses so deeply that she forgets the gains. A spiritual director can help her to reflect on her experiences and learn from them - to see the growth. Perhaps he may suggest the missionary make lists of losses and gains. He could encourage her to journal her journey, and help her to see the re-entry in context as part of her total life journey with God.

#### **5. Help to Grieve and Bury**

The spiritual director can give the missionary the freedom to grieve her losses. But he can take her further in helping her put the missionary experience to rest so that she is free to move on. This may involve some celebration of the mission work, and appropriate farewells to it. One spiritual director arranged a small service for a directee. Friends were invited and there was an acknowledgment of what had been, a time of thanksgiving and a farewell to the country and the work. This gave a fitting sense of closure to the ministry of this missionary who had been evacuated and unable to properly close her work.

#### **6. Help to Face Present Realities**

A missionary may find it easier to live in the past - with an idealistic memory of the overseas service. The spiritual director can help her look realistically at what God has given for the present. Acceptance of this is as important to moving on as farewell to the past. The spiritual director can help her see that God's work is not limited to any place or ministry. Once she begins to see and utilise the possibilities of the present she can begin to find meaning and fulfilment.

#### **7. Help to Integrate**

The missionary experience is a valuable one. The lessons learned and growth experienced need to be integrated into the whole of the missionary's life, to enrich her personality. Then she will have much to offer in the new life at home. She must guard against slipping back into old roles and ways of behaviour as if the missionary experience had not occurred. The spiritual director can look out for this and challenge it. He can encourage her to find opportunities to use the new cross-cultural skills she has learned overseas. He can help her set new goals and work towards new growth.

#### **8. Help to Discern**

Many decisions face the returned missionary. My experience directing a returned missionary has been that discernment has been an important part of our sessions. An initial decision was whether or not to return to the field. Then there were questions about the children, what kind of house to live in - a myriad of small and large decisions in which she wanted help to listen to God. Making so many decisions while under pressure is certainly easier when you have a companion to help.

## **9. Prayer**

It is a great comfort and encouragement to a struggling missionary to know that a faithful spiritual director is interceding for her. This will certainly be a key role for any spiritual director walking the journey with a missionary returning to the home country.

## **Conclusion**

Loss and grief, excess baggage, cultural disorientation, relocation issues, spiritual struggles and emotional experiences - these are some of the issues a missionary faces through the re-entry process. In a short paper like this it is obviously not possible to explore these issues in depth. I have raised them in the hope that spiritual directors will be able to explore them with their directees. I have also suggested some ways that spiritual direction can help a missionary work through important re-entry issues. Obviously spiritual direction cannot provide all the help a returning missionary needs. Church family, mission staff, family and friends all have important roles to play. But spiritual direction can play an important part in the journey to integration and wholeness.

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## Appendix

### Some helpful resources for directing returning missionaries.<sup>5</sup>

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Scriptures for prayer &amp; meditation</b>	<b>Books</b>
General re-entry	Exodus 13:17-22 - a time of departure, journey, transitions like the Israelites departing from Egypt Genesis 12 - Abraham called to a new and unknown land	Peter Jordan - <i>Re-entry</i>
Loss and grief	Matthew 26: 37f - Jesus' emotional pain. 1 Thess 2:17-3:13 Leaving a Missionary location - Paul's Testimony Acts 18:18-26 - Re-entry is in God's will	Joyce Rupp - <i>Praying Our Goodbyes</i>
Spiritual Warfare	Ephesians 6; 2 Cor 10:2-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Peter 5:8,9; James 4:7	Dean Sherman - <i>Spiritual Warfare</i>
Exhaustion and stress	1 Kings 19:1-15 - Elijah's experience of exhaustion	Kath Donovan - <i>Growing through Stress</i>
Cultural disorientation	Daniel 1; Psalm 137; Joseph	Carole Mayhill - <i>Lord of my Rocking Boat</i>
Settling into a new life	Jeremiah 29 - God is interested in the details of everyday life	
Spiritual dryness	Isaiah 50:10; Isaiah 40:	Joyce Hugget - <i>Formed by the Desert</i> Thomas Green - <i>Drinking from a Dry Well (others by the same author)</i>
Waiting	Habakuk 2:3	Sue Monk Kidd - <i>As the Heart Waits</i>
Identity	Philippians 2:7;	Tilden Edwards - <i>Spiritual Friend</i>
Seeing God	Psalm 138:8; Hebrews 10:23; 2 Corinthians 12:9	Larry Crabb - <i>Finding God</i> Philip Yancey - <i>Where is God When it Hurts?</i> <i>Disappointment with God.</i>
Failure	Micah 7:8; Hebrews 13:5,6.	Marjorie Foyle - <i>Honourably Wounded.</i>
Affluence	1 Timothy 6:17; Ecclesiastes 5:19; Matthew 19:21; Matthew 6:33; Galatians 2:10	Richard Foster - <i>Money, Sex and Power.</i> Marge Jones - <i>The Psychology of Missionary Adjustment</i>

<sup>5</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list - just things I have found helpful or been recommended by those interviewed.