

Furlough or Home Assignment?

Our Language Betrays Us

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A regular part of life for most missionaries is returning to their passport country for furloughs. Time increments vary, but often furloughs are taken every two to three years for a period of two to three months. For many missionaries, furloughs are filled with activity – visiting supporters to report on their work, fundraising, sometimes taking on a temporary role with a sending church, and spending time with family and friends. Furloughs are important. They help missionaries stay in touch with the people who enable them to do their mission and they provide a respite from the stresses and strains of everyday ministry in the field.

But a furlough also comes with its own stressors. It means living out of a suitcase for a couple of months and staying in the homes of other people, some of whom you barely know. It means being on your best behavior as the spotlight is shown on you whenever you arrive at a supporting church to give a report but usually having little opportunity to tell others the stories that give your ministry richness and meaning. A furlough often means many miles spent together in a cramped, borrowed vehicle as your family travels from one location to another. It also means trying to split your time among family members who want to see you – and sometimes getting into the middle of family dynamics you would just as soon avoid. It is no wonder many missionaries refer to furlough as one of the most stressful times in their ministry. Returning to the field is often a welcome relief from a harried time back “home.”

But the experience I have just described does not match the picture most folks in your sponsoring church have when they hear the term “furlough.” The average Joe in the pew doesn’t understand the stressors that come with a furlough – he sees it as a break from your work. Often the reaction missionaries get when they indicate they are on furlough is one tinged with envy. After all, you are getting a two month vacation and wouldn’t we all like one of those?

I believe a big part of this confusion is related to the language we use. *Furlough* is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a leave of absence from duty granted especially to a soldier.” It is a military term that really *does* describe a break. A furlough is designed with a soldier who has been on the front lines for a year or more and who comes home to visit in mind. He is not expected to do work at his home base when he returns. A furlough is a much-needed time of rest, recuperation, and renewing relationships with family and friends. This is what most people think about when they hear the term furlough – returning home for a break from an international location to hang out with people you love. It is a great concept – but it doesn’t fit the experience of most missionaries I know.

I was recently at a conference on missionary care sponsored by an evangelical group in my area. As missionaries and member care specialists talked about temporary returns from the field, I was struck by the absence of the term “furlough.” Instead, they referred to missionaries being on “home assignment.” I thought this captured a more realistic view of what actually happens when missionaries make their bi-annual trek back to see their supporters and family. It is still work, just work of a different kind. Sure, you spend some time seeing your family and going to your favorite restaurants and drinking all the Dr. Pepper you can handle but your ministry is still the primary focus of what you are doing. In some ways, it is more challenging than what you do when you are on the field. It is not a vacation – it is a continuation of your work.

Language is a powerful force. It often becomes reality. I think that is what has happened with temporary returns from the field. By referring to them by a term that means “absence of duty” we have created an expectation that a furlough is an extended vacation. I’d like to encourage all of us – missionaries and those who support them – to change our language. Let’s refer to return trips from the field in a way that describes what they really are. *Home assignment* seems to be a good term unless you can think of a better one. It may take awhile, but over time Joe in the pew will come to understand that returning from the field means a change of venue, not a vacation.

Meanwhile, you may be getting ready for a home assignment. The challenges I have described above are common to all missionary groups I have come across – not just our fellowship. We have been granted permission by *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* to reprint the article ***Missionaries, Churches and Home Assignment***, by Gene Daniels, a missionary who has experienced a few home assignments over his time in the field. You may find this article [here](#). (This article originally appeared in the April 2005 issue of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ). Reposted with permission. www.emqonline.com) I hope you will find some nugget worth keeping in the suggestions he shares about making a home assignment a manageable and beneficial experience.