A Season of Transition for Returned Missionaries

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"To every thing there is a season," wrote the Teacher, "and a time to every purpose under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1, KJV).

As I watch the leaves of autumn change color, I am reminded of the new season of life into which God is leading our family. We have moved from over a decade in cross-cultural missions, through a time of transition, and will soon be in a new season of ministry.

God’s servants have long experienced the seasons of life and ministry. We can divide the life of Moses into three distinct forty year periods, each spent in a different context. God worked in particular ways during each of these life stages. Philip the evangelist conducted his early ministry in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-7), then engaged in an itinerant ministry (Acts 8) before settling down and raising his family in Caesarea (Acts 8:40; 21:8-9). God calls people to different areas of service and ministry at different points in their lives. God’s call to service in cross-cultural missions is not necessarily a life-long call. There may be other seasons of life in which the missionary serves God in different contexts.

Much has been written in recent years concerning missionary reentry – the period of readjustment through which missionaries must pass when they return to their “home” culture. What was once home, does not feel like home anymore. Home has changed, and so has the missionary. Many would say that the severity of culture shock pales in comparison to the shock of cross-cultural reentry.

One area that has not been thoroughly addressed, however, is the career transition of the returning missionary. Because I am going through that transition, I decided that I as well as others could benefit from a study of this aspect of missionary reentry.

In Churches of Christ, our missionaries work as part of the ministries of local churches. In practical terms, this means that local church elderships and missions committees, who may have little or no missions training or experience, make decisions that deeply impact returning missionaries and their families.

Degrees of Difficulty in Missionary Career Transition

Because there is no uniform policy, returning missionaries may have widely varying experiences. Some missionary career transitions are smooth; others are extremely difficult, while still others are more moderate. Here is one former missionary’s description of what I would call a relatively smooth experience:

Although the decision to return from the field was made by our sponsoring church, our return from the field was a smooth process for at least two reasons: 1. Our sponsoring church agreed to support us for 18 months after our return from the field. They did not specify how we should use the time. They simply wanted us to use it as ‘turnaround time’ in preparation for our next phase in life. 2. We were able to settle back into my hometown where we had an instant support network made up of my parents, my two sisters and their husbands and children, and the our sponsoring church, which also happened to be the church I had grown up in.

The following example, on the other hand, is typical of a highly difficult transition.

My missions experience was disappointing due to lack of receptivity that caused us to lose most of our support and health problems of our child which also greatly contributed to our return to the US. Due to those highly stressful events I did not feel emotionally or spiritually capable of serving in a ministry position. The desire to stay close to extended family to help with the child's
needs made it more difficult to find good employment. My advanced degree made it very difficult to find low paying employment, as employers were certain I would not stay in those positions (over qualified). My lack of education and experience in other fields made it difficult for me to find good paying jobs (under qualified.) The search for employment was very stressful, depressing, and frustrating. I finally decided to go back to school to get a job in education. I recently completed it after 2 years in the US and depleting a huge amount of savings. I enjoy being a teacher but I cannot support my family on a teacher's salary without my wife's income.

In the following account, which borders on severe difficulty, the missionary was able to successfully navigate the challenges, so I am considering in an example of a moderately difficult transition.

I studied full-time and my wife became the bread-winner. I was comfortable studying; my wife went through a severe depression. We had hoped to return to the field, but decided to stay because of family concerns. We have not felt at home stateside since, and often talk of perhaps returning overseas when our last child leaves home. My success in my current ministry position is due to an eldership that respects and appreciates my "missionary mindset" and its contributions to our congregation.

Those Who Returned and Told About It
These are the stories of three of the sixty-seven respondents to an on-line survey, conducted in September 2006, of returned Church of Christ missionaries. The missionaries who responded had typically served in foreign missions for around ten years. Most were men, but about a fifth of the respondents were women. Most had returned fairly recently, about three years ago. They were, on the whole, well-educated. Over seventy percent held bachelor’s degrees and almost sixty percent held masters’ degrees. Twenty held doctoral degrees. Over eighty percent were married with dependent children when they returned to the U.S.

Well over half of the participants in the survey indicated that career decisions were a significant source of stress upon leaving the mission field. This may be surprising to those who think that, once missionaries return “home,” they can easily reestablish their lives in their native culture.

The missionaries who took part in the survey understood the importance of advance planning before reentering American culture. They were usually able to plan for the departure between one to one and a half years in advance. Over three quarters left the mission field voluntarily. When they returned, their decision of where to relocate was influenced mostly by proximity to extended family and the location of their employment or continuing education.

Returning Missionaries and their Sending Churches
These returning missionaries were seldom left “high and dry” upon their return. The majority received some ongoing financial support, but most often this extended only up to three months after their return. More than one in ten, however, received no continued funding. One in five received ongoing support for more than one year. Often, these missionaries were employed by their sending churches as church staff or supported in para-church positions. The survey revealed that the difficulty of missionary’s career transition decreased significantly as ongoing financial support was extended.

Overall, returning missionaries felt that their overseeing churches were supportive of them upon reentry, both financially (70%) as well as emotionally and spiritually (60%). Almost a quarter, however, felt that their churches had not been spiritually and emotionally supportive, while one-fifth did not believe that they had received adequate financial support after their return. Emotional and spiritual support, especially, went hand-in-hand with a healthy career adjustment.
Moving on to New Careers

Over seventy percent of returning missionaries were able to eventually secure employment in their desired field after reentry. This does not mean that the path was always a smooth one. The following chart compares the career paths that returning missionaries intended to enter with those that they eventually followed.

Comparison of Intended and Eventual Career Paths (as Percentage)

Some career paths were more difficult to adjust to than others. Based on their responses to the survey, each participant was assigned an Adjustment Difficulty Level, or ADL, to measure the difficulty of their career transition. The ADL fell on a scale of one to five, with five being the most difficult. Those who pursued university-level teaching reported the lowest ADL (2.46). This was significantly lower than those who were self-employed (3.97) and those engaged in employment that was not directly related to ministry (4.2).

The survey also looked at the question of career satisfaction, both in meeting financial needs and in personal fulfillment. While most participants felt that their financial needs were adequately met both on and off the mission field, they had an easier time of making ends meet on the mission field. Similarly, returned missionaries experience fulfillment both in their careers on and off the mission field, but career satisfaction is much higher on the mission field. For the most part, missionaries love what they do and have difficulty finding roles that are as fulfilling after their return.

On average, respondents experienced a moderate level of difficulty in adjusting to new careers. Female respondents found the adjustment significantly more difficult than did male respondents. The average ADL for females was 3.66 whereas for males it was 2.91. Women’s responses to several items in the survey showed that they had greater difficulty in adjusting to career change. These items included, “Finding fulfilling employment was difficult for me,” “I am fulfilled in my current career,” and “Adjusting to a new career was difficult.”

Listening to their Stories

The stories that the returning missionaries told can help us identify differences between transitions with low, high, or moderate difficulty. Two elements stood out among those whose transitions I would characterize as smooth. The first is the support of the sending church, and the second is the ability to establish continuity between previous experiences and the post-mission field career. These previous experiences may involve the missionary’s pre-field career or relationships established while on the mission field.

Missionaries who had experienced smooth transitions praised their sending churches. One wrote, “We were fortunate and blessed in our transition with an overseeing congregation that was supportive and patient. We felt no pressure except from ourselves.” Yet another said, “The transition was not really difficult from a ‘professional’ point of view – things had been
spelled out and agreed upon at least a couple of years in advance with our eldership/missions committee. We found a willingness to listen and help when we encountered problems of any kind upon our return.” Several missionaries who experienced smooth transitions continued to be employed by their sending churches, either on the staff of the church or in para-church ministries.

Smooth career transitions were also marked by continuity with previous experiences. Several missionaries with smooth transitions worked cooperatively with Christian universities or schools of preaching while on the field, and were able to find stateside employment with these institutions upon return. At least four returned missionaries who experienced smooth career transitions mentioned their ability to maintain an involvement with the mission field where they previously served. One missionary wrote, “Transition to stateside activity was very normal and easy, since I am continuing to do what I began during the last two years of my tenure on the mission field.”

Though some missionaries experience smooth transitions to new careers, others encounter great difficulty. One returned missionary who has become an educator and leader in a para-church ministry wrote,

[Reentry] was the most difficult part of the missionary career. It took us 3 years to feel like we could make it living in the States and probably 10 years until I felt I had a life mission that was invigorating again, like I felt on the mission field.

Common characteristics among those with difficult career transitions include a perception of insensitivity or lack of awareness of transitional difficulties on the part of sending churches, feelings of pressure to quickly enter the American work force, lack of suitable credentials for stateside employment, a failure to receive counsel, financial and business difficulties, and transitioning to dual-career family life.

Survey participants who faced difficult career transitions often reported that their sending churches were unaware of or insensitive toward the difficulties of cross-cultural reentry. One wrote, “Our supporting church was great at sending and providing while we were on the field, but failed miserably to address many of our needs upon return.”

Lack of adequate financial resources meant that some returning missionaries felt forced to quickly find employment without an adequate period of readjustment. Even when alternative employment was immediately available, the lack of a readjustment period greatly augmented transition difficulties. “I stepped from church planter to [an academic/administrative position] without a deflation opportunity and found myself swept into a whirlpool that came close to breaking me financially, emotionally, and spiritually.”

Repatriated missionaries often felt that their career options were limited because of a lack of suitable credentials. Some professional credentials became outdated while on the mission field. Returning missionaries are sometimes they are over qualified for certain positions. As one wrote, “In a way, missionaries can do just about any job but are not qualified to do any job.”

Perhaps because of limited career options, some who pursued self-employment opportunities faced near financial ruin. “It has been a very humbling experience,” confessed one respondent, “to go through . . . . The transition from being a leader, well-respected, financially secure, home owner, creditworthy, and a fulfilled career missionary to a struggling, bankrupt, failed business owner, foreclosed property owner, and living with a zero net worth position has been very difficult, to put it mildly.”

Having highlighted all of these difficulties, it is also important to note the resilience of this group. A woman, who found the transition to the role of working mom to be very
difficult, concluded her remarks with this statement: “It affected everything, but fortunately the Lord brought me out of it and my husband was wonderful.” One sixty-five year old veteran of a difficult transition concluded, “Thank God my family has survived beautifully and our finances and retirement are close to ‘healthy.’”

A third group of repatriated missionaries fell into a group with moderately difficult experiences. These missionaries shared experiences with those who had undergone both smooth and very difficult transitions. A theme that emerged among these missionaries was their ability to demonstrate flexibility through less than ideal circumstances. Many found it necessary to adjust to their career plans in order to adapt to life in the U.S. Several remarked how they had grown through a greater understanding of themselves as they adjusted to reentry. One wrote, “Only when I began to understand the grief process did I ‘settle into’ my new work.” Another observed, “I discovered upon my transition that my personal identity was connected to my employment. It defined me… (sic) being a missionary defined me and being without employment also defined me. I walked around looking for a job approximately 6 months with the feeling of a rain cloud over my head. The Lord was faithful and the ‘son’ broke through.” These former missionaries manage to function well and bring their gifts to the American church, even though they may not be fully adjusted. One college professor said, “Even after six years back in the U.S., I do not feel fully integrated back into ‘the American way’ and have a different perspective than many of my fellow instructors.”

Listening to their Advice
Missionaries who have already experienced reentry can offer valuable advice to those who are planning for the process. They urged returning missionaries to plan in advance for career change, to solicit help from others, to arrange for a transitional period by pursuing continued financial support upon return from the mission field, and to seek a career that would allow them to continue to be engaged in ministry. This response summarizes well the advice of many returned missionaries:

Do your best to start early to plan your transition. Ask for help; it is going to be difficult. Insist on continued support to give yourself time to find a new job or make the transition. Communicate your needs and be humble; rather humble yourself and ask than to try and fail to do it yourself. Trust God and trust your brethren and admit that you need help; you need help, even though you may not (and probably don’t) realize it. Don’t get caught in a debt trap. Don’t decide anything too quickly, especially when it comes to making financial commitments. Do be willing to continue being supported as you do what you are passionate about; ‘the ox that is treading out the grain is worthy to be fed.’

Former missionaries advised those currently serving to plan ahead for reentry through pre-field education, vocational training, continuing education while on the mission field, beginning their employment search early, and reaching agreement with their sponsors concerning reentry commitments prior to return, or even prior to departure for the mission field. They told returning missionaries to seek help and advice from their colleagues on the mission field, returned missionaries, mentors, business contacts in the U.S., and professionals in the field of missionary reentry as well as financial and career counselors. They urged returning missionaries to seek continued support that would allow for a transitional period in which to seek further employment, update their credentials or train for a different career, adjust to changes in the American church, and work through emotional and family adjustments. One respondent considered this so important that he encouraged upcoming returnees to “Beg your sponsoring church to continue support one month for every year spent on the field for readjustment.” Several returned missionaries felt strongly that new returnees should pursue career options which they could be passionate about, and not be guided only by financial considerations. As one veteran missionary put it, “Stay connected with the greatest work on earth.”
So What Have We Learned?
Missionaries and their sponsors should anticipate and plan for reentry as early in the process as possible—ideally, before departure for the mission field, honoring longer terms of service with more generous reentry provisions. Churches should allow missionaries a transitional period without pressure to secure new employment; even those with pre-arranged employment need time to readjust to America before beginning their new jobs. Six months would be a minimal transition period. Churches should realize that the cost of living in the U.S. may be significantly more (or less) than on the mission field. If sending churches experience staff openings at or near the time of the missionary’s return, they should give serious consideration to the missionary’s suitability to the role. Churches should pay particular attention to the unique career challenges of returning missionary women. Emotional and spiritual support upon reentry should coincide with financial support. Missions committees should educate themselves and their churches regarding the challenges of cross-cultural reentry and be sensitive to the challenges their returning missionaries are facing.

Returning missionaries should attempt to minimize difficulties of career transition, but should also be prepared to experience stress during this time. They need to educate themselves concerning these challenges and point their missions committees and elderships to appropriate information. While on the field, they should nurture professional relationships that can continue after reentry. Those with professional credentials should, to the extent possible, keep them current while on the mission field. Missionaries should pursue continuing education through correspondence, online, or during furloughs.

Returning missionaries should solicit advice from many sources as they prepare for and experience reentry. Co-workers, former professors, church leaders, business professionals, and professional counselors can all be excellent sources of counsel. They should seek some sort of professional career counseling, and sponsoring churches should support this financially. Many Christian universities offer such services at very reasonable cost. They should educate their sending churches concerning the realities of reentry, and ask for financial, emotional, and spiritual support. The survey data supports the recommendation of veteran missionaries that returning missionaries pursue careers in which they can continue to minister to others and remain connected to God’s global mission, whether that is through teaching, local church, or para-church ministry.

While financial considerations should never be paramount, returning missionaries who plan to live in the United States need to be aware of the financial realities of insurance, mortgage payments, education costs, and the need for retirement income. Like Philip, who did not find the lifestyle of an itinerant evangelist conducive to rearing children, missionaries should plan wisely for fruitful and God-honoring careers if and when they choose to leave the foreign mission field.

Service in foreign missions can be followed by other seasons of effective ministry in God’s kingdom. Sending churches and returning missionaries must work together to insure that these are seasons of fruitful labor, as we await the great harvest.
Appendix

Missionary Career Transition Facts

- Over half reported that career transition was a significant source of stress upon reentry.
- The majority received ongoing support for 1-3 months after return; 10% received no ongoing support; 20% received continuing support for 1 year or more (often working for their overseeing church or being supported by them in stateside ministry). Extended financial support is linked to lower transition difficulty.
- 70% reported that their churches were financially supportive; 60% said their sending congregations were emotionally & spiritually supportive.
- Emotional and spiritual support went hand-in-hand with healthy career adjustment.
- Least career adjustment difficulty – university teaching; most difficulty – self-employment or non church-related employment.
- Most former missionaries report being fulfilled in their post-field careers, but even more report having been fulfilled, and to a great degree, on the mission field.
- Women reported a higher degree of difficulty in adjusting to career change than did men.
- Elements of a low-difficulty transition:
  - Highly supportive sending churches.
  - Post-mission field career stems from continuity with previous relationships.
  - Continued connectedness to mission work
- Elements of a high-difficulty transition
  - Perceived insensitivity on the part of sending churches
  - Perceived expectations to quickly enter the American work force
  - Lack of suitable credentials for stateside employment
  - A failure to receive counsel
  - Financial and business difficulties
  - Difficult transition to dual-career family life
- Elements of moderate-difficulty transitions
  - Flexibility in less-than-ideal circumstances
  - A willingness to learn about themselves through their experience
  - Functioning effectively while never completely adjusted
- Career transition advice from former missionaries to those planning for reentry
  - Plan in advance for career change
  - Solicit help from others
    - Colleagues and returned missionaries
    - Mentors
    - Leaders and members of supporting church(es)
    - Business contacts
    - Counselors – missionary reentry, financial, career
  - Arrange for a transitional period by pursuing continued financial support upon return from the mission field; ideally, one month for every year six months on the field.
  - Seek a ministry/missions-related career
- Recommendations for sending churches
  - Make reentry provisions more generous for those with longer terms of service
  - Allow a six-month no-pressure transition period
  - Provide a livable income based on American economic realities
  - Pay particular attention to the unique career challenges facing returning women
  - Consider returning missionaries for local church staff openings
  - Educate missions leadership and church regarding reentry challenges
- Recommendations for missionaries anticipating reentry
  - Nurture professional relationships that can continue off the field
  - Keep professional credentials current
  - Pursue continuing education
  - Get sound advice and counseling
  - Educate sending churches
  - Stay involved in God’s mission