Missionary Reentry

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In The Emigrants, John Bojer poignantly stated, “If you came back, you wanted to leave again; if you went away, you longed to come back. Wherever you were, you could hear the call of the homeland, like the note of a herdsman’s horn far away in the hills. You had one home out there, and one over here, and yet you were an alien in both places. Your true abiding-place was the vision of something very far off, and your soul was like the waves, always restless, forever in motion.”

As a missionary returns to the United States, the question arises, “Where is my home?” During the absence, “home” has changed, the missionary’s friends have changed, and the missionary has changed. A substantial number of missionaries find the homecoming process to be more difficult than the initial adjustment to the field.

Reentry, however, can be a growth process for the missionary and for the sponsoring church. The important question is will your church members be good receivers of the homecomers? What are the vital issues in the reentry process for missionaries and church leaders?

Major Issues for Missionaries

• Changes in Self-concept
  On the eve of reentry the question “Who am I?” may perplex a missionary. To question self is appropriate in any major transition in life. Reentry is no exception, for a new identity emerges from the sojourn experience.

  The major problem for the missionary teenager seems to be the management of social identity. Many expatriate children, not only missionary children, experience a late adolescence. Whereas the normal period of adolescence is 14-18, overseas children may experience an adolescence that ranges from 18-28. Therefore, one might expect a later period of adolescent rebellion.

• Value Change and Choice
  Clashes in inner values may occur between homecomers and receivers in bewildering arenas: material possessions, family life, racial prejudice, national priorities in politics and ecology, and Christian community conflicts. Interviews with returning missionaries, as well as formal studies, indicate that missionaries experience the United States as possessing “an embarrassment of riches.” This wealthy society is often the opposite of what they have experienced on the field.

  Judgmental attitudes might be exhibited toward the United States church in comparison to the foreign church. Some returnees feel marginalized by a lack of connectedness in the congregation. Serious generational differences in a receiving congregation may affect the “fit” of returning missionaries.

  Even in the best reentry circumstances, the missionary will note the absence of foreign national Christians who love and care.

• Expectations
  When missionaries enter the mission field, they expect to have difficulty with language, religions of the host culture, attitudes of national Christians, nostalgia for their home culture, and maintaining their own spiritual adjustment. Who would ever expect to feel like a stranger in his own country?
One major expectation of most returnees is that people will be interested in their experiences. An unusually capable missionary related, "We were invited to a large family reunion shortly after our return. We discovered that most people were not interested in hearing the stories we were most anxious to tell. Oh, they listened about five minutes! Then they continued to talk about the Dallas Cowboys."

• **A Sense of Loss**
  Another prevailing theme of reentry is a sense of loss. In a study of 288 returned church of Christ missionaries, L. A. Moore (1981) discovered that the second most difficult problem listed was “nostalgia and homesickness” for the mission field. R. Useem (personal communication, Nov. 9, 1981) affirmed, “The loss of an elite status is very difficult for parents.” The skills of some missionaries may be underutilized and there may be a loss of some degree of independence.

**What is the Role of the Receiving Church?**

The following suggestions are based on our personal study, prayer, and work with hundreds of missionaries:

1. The sponsoring church should initiate reentry discussions with their missionaries about one year prior to their return. (Hopefully, the church and the missionary developed a resettlement agreement prior to departure.)

2. An on-the-field debriefing should be held by a member(s) of the sponsoring church and/or by a mental health professional who is acquainted with the missionary cycle. Details of the resettlement agreement between the sponsoring church and the missionary should be thoughtfully reviewed at that time.

3. The mission committee, with the approval of the elders, should develop a timetable for the missionary’s reentry. Included in this timetable would be prayer commitments, classes and sermons about the missionary’s work, special arrival plans, and financial arrangements.

4. After reentry, these steps should be considered:
   - Debriefing of the missionary family and/or single.
   - Debriefing of the elders and missions committee.
   - Psychological evaluation of the missionaries—family and/or single.
   - Medical and dental examinations.
   - Interviews with professionals such as a Certified Financial Planner, attorney, CPA, realtor, and insurance agent.

5. A job description should be developed for a position with the supporting church or time and funds should be provided for an appropriate job search with another congregation.

6. The elders and missions committee should revise their missions philosophy and policies in keeping with insights developed by this missions endeavor.

The formidable challenge confronting the missionary and the sending church is to keep the missionary whole throughout the missionary cycle. The key elements of the cycle are recruitment, training, adjustment to the new assignment, continuing rigors of service, debriefing for reentry, and reentry. Clague (1980) accurately said, "Expatriation (sending) and repatriation (receiving) should be examined as parts of an integrated whole—not as unrelated events in a person’s life" (p. 11). Missionary care needs to be a seamless process.