

Code of Best Practice in Short-Term Mission

This document takes as its starting point section four of the Global Connections Code of Best Practice in Short-Term Mission, together with research into the issues that affect those returning from short-term service.

The Global Connections Code of Best Practice is designed to apply to all visits, experiences, teams and placements of up to two years duration, organised by UK mission agencies, churches and other organisations. Though written initially with cross-cultural contexts in mind, it can apply to the return from both UK and overseas situations, both same-culture and cross-cultural.



Below is section 4 of the Code of Best Practice in Short-Term Mission:

- 4.1 Debriefing and support for the participant will be seen as an integral part of the short-term 'package' (in addition to orientation, task supervision and pastoral care), and the process will involve all partners
- 4.2 Re-entry preparation, including placement appraisal, will begin prior to return
- 4.3 The senders will assist the participant through post-assignment readjustment
- 4.4 Advice and guidance will be offered to participants to find the next step in their Christian life following the programme. Where appropriate, this will be done in liaison with the participant's home church
- 4.5 An evaluation of aims, responsibilities and procedures will be undertaken, inviting comment from all partners. Culturally-appropriate ways of feedback will be sought
- 4.6 The results of evaluations will be communicated to relevant managers, for the improvement of future projects

Re-entry support

The full Global Connections' Code of Best Practice in Short-Term Mission, and a list of adopting organisations, can be found at www.globalconnections.co.uk/code

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Re-entry

Helping those returning from
short-term mission



This document has been produced by Global Connections, the UK network for world mission, based on the experiences of member agencies and churches



Introduction

The number of people going on short-term mission service overseas has increased enormously in recent years. The benefits to those serving in such a way can be great, including the deepening of an individual's walk with God, understanding of issues facing people in other countries and the opportunity to share existing skills as well as learning new ones.

This booklet is primarily intended as an aid to anyone in a local church who is in the position of welcoming back such participants who have worked in another culture. Returning to the home country after a period of service overseas, even a short one, can be a surprisingly difficult experience. The understanding care and support of a home church can make a big difference to the life of the returning short-term mission participant. Generally these participants will have been away for 6-24 months although many of the issues raised may also be relevant to those serving overseas on shorter term placements.

For some, re-entry is a straightforward process of readjustment - moving on into the next stage of life and settling back easily into long-established relationships. For others, the transition is not so smooth. Both the sending agency/church and the home church need to have considered their role in assisting the participant through re-entry, including facing any unresolved personal issues and looking at future opportunities and directions for discipleship and service. It is important that all key groups and people are involved in appropriate ways, including:

- a) The sending church or agency
- b) The home church – or the church to which the person returns if different
- c) The family and wider circle of friends



Additional helpful information

Many people returning from a developing country are worried about their health. If you are worried or any of the following applies, you should have a check-up when you come home:

- Anyone who is ill, has a fever, or any abnormal symptoms
- Anyone who has been in a developing country for more than 12 months
- Anyone who develops an illness or undue tiredness within days or weeks of returning home

Anyone who develops a fever within 3 months of returning from an area where malaria is common should arrange for a malarial blood slide at their nearest A&E department without delay.

Health checks can be done by GPs if they have a special interest in travel medicine. Alternatively, the following organisations can help with further issues:

England and Wales

Interhealth, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 7HR
T: 020 7902 9000 W: www.interhealth.org.uk

Scotland

HealthLink360, Edinburgh International Health Centre,
Elphinstone Wing, Carberry, Musselburgh, EH21 8PW
T: 0131 653 6767 E: admin@healthlink360.org W: www.healthlink360.org

Books and resources

The Travellers Good Health Guide (Ted Lankester, 2nd edition Sheldon Press).. An excellent book covering health issues both before travel and on return.

Serving as Senders (N. Pirolo, OM Publishing, Carlisle). This book gives some good pointers towards issues which need to be considered by the sending church, before, during, and after the period overseas. The issues considered are relevant to any sending church.

Stop, Check, Go (D. Townsend, 1996, OM Publishing Carlisle). This is general preparation book, specifically aimed at those going on short-term overseas projects. Contains useful check-lists for the individuals involved as well as sending and receiving organisations.

Honourably Wounded (M. Foyle, 2001, Monarch, London). A classic book dealing with the subject of stress among Christian workers. Now revised and updated in a second edition.

Burn-up or Splash Down (M. Knell, 2007, Authentic). An excellent new resource about the re-entry experience and adapting to life back home.

Asking the right questions

The questions listed below may help provide a framework for discussion with returnee. They are designed to raise issues from which more in-depth probing questions may follow.

The Work

- How did you feel about the work going on in the project or town/city before you arrived?
- In what ways did you have a sense of fulfilment through your involvement?

The Experience

- What value could you see personally in your experience? For others on the team? For the church or group you joined?
- What were the highlights and lowlights of the experience?

The Team

- How did the team get on with each other? The locals? Within the Christian fellowship overseas?

The Lessons

- What were your original expectations? In what ways were these fulfilled?
- What was the highlight of your experience? What was the most unpleasant aspect?
- How did God show you areas in yourself that need change?
- What is the most significant lesson you learned?
- What is the biggest challenge you face now you are at home?

The future

It is also important that the returnee, with the support of their home church, spend time reflecting on the experience and how it may benefit them in the long term. To maximise the benefit of a short-term experience, the participant would be strongly advised to consider the following issues:

- Keep informed about the work you have been involved with
- Ask God about how you should respond to what you have learned
- Don't keep what you've learned to yourself – talk to friends, family, the youth group, whole church about your mission
- Go deeper into mission - go again, but for longer or possibly to a harder location
- Should you be thinking about longer-term Christian service?



Exploring the important issues

Returning home after time away can be a joyful experience for the participant and home church alike. It may also be a time of mixed feelings and unexpected difficulties. There are a number of issues and feelings commonly experienced by those returning from a short-term mission experience, some of which also apply if the service was in the UK. The initial delight to be back on familiar territory with friends and family nearby can quickly be replaced by feelings of disorientation. Some people experience feelings of depression and insecurity, finding it difficult to adjust and fit in again. Many express feelings of loss and long to return to their short-term placement. Others may be frustrated by the attitudes and lifestyle that they encounter in the home culture. Many are simply very tired from an intense period of work and much change. Feelings can be intensified if returning from situations of extreme poverty or deprivation.

From research, the main issues that may be encountered in the initial days, weeks and even months after return are:

- **Loss:** missing friends, the place where they worked, their role within a team or organisation.
- **Isolation:** feeling estranged from friends and family because everyone has changed during the time away. Changes in priorities and perspectives, a lack of understanding of the situation in the mission context and lack of interest from those at home can make communication difficult.
- **Reverse culture shock:** often more difficult to deal with than culture shock, perhaps not least because it is unexpected. Readjusting to the pace of life, the level of choice, the prosperity of life and prevailing attitudes in the home culture can take several weeks, if not months.
- **Practical issues:** finding work, accommodation and some form of transport can be big issues for some people if they were given up in order to go overseas. Money may be short if they have been self-financing during the period of short-term service.
- **The home church:** having lived, worked, prayed and worshipped daily with Christians in the mission context, the church back home may seem apathetic, complacent, disinterested in issues beyond the local area or even beyond the church itself.
- **Health:** there may be ongoing health issues from a period overseas. In the first few weeks, tiredness can be extreme due to the pressures of work while away, combined with the changes encountered on return.

This time of change may bring to the surface unresolved issues from the time overseas. The participant may need help in working through these issues. Be aware that issues and feelings change over time. As in bereavement some issues may remain or surface weeks or months after return. It is good to watch out for this and to be aware that 're-entry' may be having its effect even after a long time 'back home'. Those helping an individual 're-enter' their home culture therefore need to see their role potentially extending for a longer period beyond the initial days and weeks after return.

Identifying the respective roles

The individual: there are obviously issues that the individual will have to deal with for him/herself. It takes time to adjust to change and some of the processes of grief and readjustment can only be worked through by the person affected. It is important to have some accountability with others, such as a mature Christian friend so that issues can be resolved positively with adequate support. The sending body should encourage such accountability within the home church or wider Christian community once they cease to have an active role.

The sending agency or church: the sending body has certain key responsibilities in re-entry support such as organising and facilitating debriefing (often on issues related to the work and the organisation) and encouraging the participant to arrange a medical if necessary. They may also be best placed to provide further people for the participant to talk to, if required. It will be the sending body's responsibility to define how contact may be maintained with the participant and to arrange for some way of bringing closure to the experience. A review and debriefing weekend or perhaps a time of prayer or special service within an event could be used to help bring about closure. Following the debrief, the sending body will usually indicate to the home church that the primary source of pastoral care and accountability now resides with the church.

The home church: it is in the local church context that many of the issues associated with returning home will be worked through. There are various practical and prayerful ways in which churches can help support their members through this type of transition. It is helpful to name one individual to be responsible for ensuring that relevant support is given. This should be done in agreement with the person who is returning and someone else, perhaps a church leader, should be responsible for checking the arrangement is working. This is a particular issue if the participant has moved church on return due to a new job or house move.

Family and friends: family and friends are an important part of helping in the re-entry process. Feeling a sense of interest and encouragement from those close by can make all the difference. It is helpful if the church contact can encourage this support if the people are known to them.



Giving the relevant support

The home church

1. Be prayerful: your church member may have returned home, but is no less in need of your prayers now than when away. Creating opportunities to pray with them as well as for them can facilitate meaningful support.

2. Be attentive: you may not know what questions to ask, but one thing you can be sure of – your returning church member will want to talk about their experiences, about the people they have left behind, about their hopes and fears for the future. Use open questions: How does it feel to be back? What did you value most about being there? What do you miss? What were you glad/sad to say goodbye to? What was it like to live there? Were there any things which particularly surprised us about life there? How did you see God at work while you were away? What did you learn about yourself? If you ask questions, take time to listen to the answer. Make sure that your returning church member is given time to share all that they need to talk about – on a one-to-one basis to start with and later, when they are ready, in small groups or in front of the church congregations.

3. Be practical: if your church member does not have close family living near to the location they return to, the church will have added responsibilities. If they had to give up their accommodation prior to a period overseas, make sure you check that adequate living arrangements are in place for them in advance. Who will be meeting them at the airport? Do they have enough money? Do they need a holiday? It can take time to adjust and be ready to find new work, so ongoing support for the first few weeks/ months can be a considerable help. Assistance in finding somewhere to live, a car to borrow, advice on how to sign on for benefits, etc., can all make a big difference. Consider writing to them before they return to check about practical issues. If a need is expressed, you will then have time to look at how the church may be able to help.

4. Be friendly: it can be difficult for the returnee to interact socially at first; people's priorities may seem all wrong; the church may now feel alien compared with the forms of worship and close fellowship of the time overseas. Allow time for adjustment, but also keep a watch for reactions of alienation or condemnation. Encourage people to talk through their feelings and be willing to take seriously what they say. It is only by being really heard that they will be able to work through these feelings and integrate their overseas experiences with their life back home.

5. Be thoughtful: what has changed in the time that they have been away? Is there yet another technological fad? Or a talking point from TV that has been missed? Change is so rapid in our society that it can be a great help just to have someone to share with about what has happening in recent months.

6. Be positive: enjoy having your church member back and make the most of the new insights and experiences that they have to share. Ongoing learning should be a two-way process as the returnee re-adjusts and looks forward and as the church gains insight into the life of the church in another part of the world. Don't be afraid to gently challenge them. Often a returnee comes back and perceives that the church isn't reaching out to their locality as the church overseas has been. Perhaps they are right, but remind them to deal with their frustrations lovingly as Christ did (and does). Equally the church shouldn't miss the opportunity to be challenged by any new-found priorities being shared.