



## How to Help Missionaries Plan Healthy Furloughs

By Larry McCrary

*This resource equips church leaders and advocate teams to walk proactively with missionaries in planning and experiencing a healthy, restorative furlough. It outlines key steps—beginning months in advance—to discern needs, encourage rest and boundaries, and prepare for re-entry and relaunch. It also includes a list of recommended tools and reading to deepen your church's understanding and partnership throughout every stage of re-entry care.*



My wife, Susan, and I, along with our two children, have lived abroad for much of the last twenty years. We've done some things well when it comes to taking furloughs, and we've made some mistakes. My hope is that this resource will help you come alongside your missionaries to craft an ideal furlough of their own.

We had the benefit of a wonderful sending church in Knoxville, Tennessee, that helped make our furloughs successful. When we were first sent out in 2001, our sending church had a full-time missions pastor and a layperson who served as our advocate. She gathered a small team of committed friends who cared for us deeply. I believe our early furloughs were the best because of that advocate team.

Furloughs are intended to provide space to:

- Rest
- Renew contact between the church and family
- Raise support
- Recruit co-workers
- Report to the ministry
- Reintroduce children to their homeland
- Refresh training<sup>1</sup>

But even the best-planned furloughs can bring challenges. Re-entry culture shock often catches missionaries off guard, and churches can play a vital role in helping them navigate it well.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hale, *On Being a Missionary* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012), 392

So what does hospitality look like for the sending church when missionaries are on furlough, and how can you prepare for it? The following pages offer several considerations as you receive your missionaries back, whether they are returning for two months, six months, or a year.

## *Reverse Culture Shock and Stress*

In most cases, missionaries will have some reverse culture shock when they re-enter. It can be much like the culture shock and stress they experienced when they moved overseas and learned a new language, culture, and way of life. They come back, and “home” feels anything but normal.

For example, in most foreign contexts, there are not a lot of choices when missionaries shop. Even in Europe, missionaries mostly shop at smaller stores and may have the choice of a few items, but not many. Then they come back home and go to a large grocery store where there is *an entire aisle* devoted just to breakfast cereal. It can be overwhelming.

Joe and his wife, Sarah, describe how difficult re-entry was for them when they came back from Africa:

Joe: Reverse culture shock always hit me hard. As soon as I arrived back in the States, I faced the problem of choices: restaurants, grocery stores, TV channels, dog food, cars. American life is marked by multiple, multiple choices. When you come from a country with one or no choices, it's difficult to suddenly be overwhelmed with too many choices.

Sarah: I didn't even know what I was experiencing at the time because I was so busy with children. Now I understand it in retrospect. My first trip to the grocery store would always leave me in tears. Back in Africa, we celebrated when there was one can of green beans, but here in the U.S., there were tons. It made me feel tense and inadequate.

Another example of significant change is with transportation. In most contexts around the globe, missionaries walk or take public transportation, but then they come back home where it's often dangerous or impractical to travel on foot. It seems most everything you do involves driving.

Even worship can be challenging. Missionaries miss the familiar music and dynamic preaching while they're overseas, but when they return to the services in their culture of origin, they may be overwhelmed by the size of it all. It can be overstimulating.

## *The Work and the Worker*

In Philippians 2, Paul writes to the church to tell them about the return of Timothy and Epaphroditus. We know a lot about Timothy, but not as much about Epaphroditus, other than here in Philippians. Epaphroditus had delivered to Paul a gift from the church. Paul receives it gladly, but he says he thinks it best to send Epaphroditus back to them. He is his fellow brother, fellow worker, and soldier for the Lord. He is also the church's messenger, and Paul tells them to receive him well.

Paul was reminding them: *don't forget your missionary*. This passage sends the same message to the church today.

No one would argue against receiving missionaries back warmly. Church members usually care deeply about them. But it's easy to forget about the work they are doing, the work they moved overseas to do. They love it when people ask them about their work. So ask open-ended questions. Let them tell you about their work, what it was like, the challenges, the fruit. Don't just care about the worker, but also the work.

Over the course of Joe and Sarah's twenty-six years in Africa (stretched over forty years of coming and going), they survived multiple furloughs. Though these breaks were necessary for rest, they also brought on significant challenges.

Joe: The major issue we always faced on each furlough was this: no one was that interested in our lives and ministry—even family. There was the thirty-second presentation, the two-minute presentation, and, rarely, the dialogue. But we, like any missionary, wanted and needed to share.

Sarah: It was really hard to have so much apparently useless information—all these things you learned and experienced that no one seemed to care about. However, God was always gracious to give us people to share our experiences with, often where we least expected it.

Joe: Over time, we learned to be treated as normal people, not as superheroes. We worked our way into contexts where we were sharing our lives in normal ways. Intimate relationships were key to survival.

As Joe and Sarah's experience reminds us, caring for missionaries well requires attention not only to their stories but also to the realities they face during furlough. Understanding those responsibilities helps churches offer the kind of partnership and support that truly refreshes.

## *Responsibilities During Furlough*

What are missionaries doing during a furlough that the church should be aware of? How should that shape the church's role during that time? Here are five categories to consider:

### *1) Extended Family*

Most of the missionaries who have gone out from your church have left moms, dads, siblings, cousins, and close friends behind while on mission. In some cases, their family has experienced illness or even death while they've been gone. They have also missed weddings, births, and anniversaries. Recognize that, in most cases, they will need to spend some quality time visiting their family and reconnecting with them. Their loved ones may not be in your city, so they will likely need to travel some.

### *2) Children*

When families come back on furlough with school-age children, they often have educational needs to meet. Their children may also have special medical needs. These can take time and resources to address, but they must be addressed if the family is to return overseas in a healthy way. One thing to remember is that the insurance policies that cover the family while they are living internationally often have different plans for when they are in the States. Medical costs in the States can be extremely high compared to those overseas. The family will most likely have more out-of-pocket medical expenses while still receiving a fixed field income.

### *3) Rest*

Life overseas often includes 24/7 demands. Sure, missionaries can take vacations on the field (and they should), but they are often doing so in a foreign context,

which means they never really unplug cross-culturally. This can cause fatigue over several years on the field. Some serve in very difficult areas where they are not able to relax with the freedom they can in the States. Back home, they need to have fun times as a family and also with friends from the church who will help renew, refresh, and reset them for another several years of work on the field.

#### *4) Church Relationships*

A couple years ago, I asked a missionary named Nora what her concerns were about reintegrating into her local church. Here's how she responded:

The biggest worry for me was reintegrating into a church that had grown from 100 people that I knew before I left to over 500 people at the time of my return, the majority of whom I didn't know. I didn't know how I would fit in or the expectations for how much time I would need to adjust before serving again.

There are many practical insights churches can glean from this conversation with Nora, as well as from the earlier dialogue with Joe and Sarah. First and foremost, offer grace. Give returning missionaries a safe place to blend in and hide when they need it. Be prepared to empathetically process with them when they are overwhelmed with choices. Don't rush them. They're not being indecisive; they're feeling the tension of worlds colliding. Remember that the church they left is not the church to which they're returning. Whether they've been away two years or twenty years, the church will have changed as much as they have. Be sensitive, and be careful to welcome them well. Make sure the people who have been close to them throughout the sending process are very involved in welcoming them home.

Give them time and opportunity to meet new people. Although they love the church, they will need to get reacquainted. Help them explore avenues for service within the church, the local community, and missions mobilization, but do not force them to engage too quickly. They will be asking weighty, existential questions, and they will need listening ears and patient, understanding hearts to walk through those questions with them. This is where debriefing and re-entry counseling are not only helpful, but necessary.

When their negative responses to re-entry culture shock have slowed down, seek their reproof and correction regarding ways you may have let them down while they were overseas. Don't wait for them to initiate. Give them a trusted, open door for sharpening the church in love.

Also, learn from them. Ask them questions and listen actively to their answers. Their experiences have likely yielded growth in personal faith and understanding of God's mission. Give them opportunities to share with the church and encourage all believers to participate in that mission. Especially give them opportunities to share with and serve others who will be sent out from your church in the future.

Finally, remember that those returning from the field haven't just been on a trip, so don't ask them, "How was your trip?" They've experienced something that has, quite literally, changed who they are—and that is a good thing. Pray with them, and then ask them more questions when you see them again.

## *5) Donor Relationships*

Returning missionaries need some time to reconnect with those who have supported their ministry. In some cases, those supporters may not be from your church. In fact, they may be spread out across the country. Be sure to remember that, and have grace as they may need to travel, especially on Sundays.

## *Steps in Helping to Plan a Healthy Furlough*

A truly restorative furlough doesn't happen by accident—it takes thoughtful partnership between the missionary, sending church, and missions organization. Rather than waiting until a missionary returns home to figure out needs and logistics, churches can walk with them in the planning process months in advance.

If your church has an advocate team, this is where they can shine. While their role is to respond to needs as they arise, they can also help prepare for what will make furlough life-giving. Missionaries often don't know exactly what they'll need until they've begun to rest, so the church's approach (whether through the missions leader, advocate, or others) should be both proactive and flexible.

Ideally, conversations should begin at least six months before the missionary's return. Below are some key steps to help shape those conversations and preparations.

### *1) Determine the Church's Role in Planning*

Determine how much the missionary wants the church to be involved in their furlough planning. Some prefer to take the lead themselves; others appreciate the help of a church leader or advocate to coordinate details. Respect their preference while offering availability and encouragement.

## *2) Discuss Timing and Duration*

Talk together about the “when” and “how long” of the furlough. Consider the missionary’s personal rhythms, family needs, agency requirements, and your church calendar. Flexibility is key, as timing will sometimes need to adjust based on health, schooling, or global realities.

## *3) Process Needs and Priorities*

Help the missionary reflect on what they most need this furlough to accomplish: rest, reconnection, medical care, counseling, spiritual renewal, discernment, logistical transitions, children’s needs, etc. Recognize that they might not know all of this up front—needs often become clearer after arrival and rest. Keep communication open throughout.

## *4) Encourage Rest and Boundaries*

Every missionary’s definition of rest is different. For some, it’s long stretches of quiet; for others, it’s reconnecting socially or traveling as a family. Encourage them to create healthy boundaries around rest—by saying no to excessive speaking requests or busyness—and affirm that true rest is not laziness.

## *5) Identify How the Church Can Support Practically*

Once needs are identified, consider how your church can meet or contribute to them. Use Upstream’s [“Checklist to Prepare for Returning Missionaries”](#) to think through logistics like:

- Housing and transportation
- Counseling or debriefing options
- Gift cards or grocery help
- Hospitality and family recreation
- Church re-entry and communication

If your church has an advocate team, they can coordinate in these areas and help anticipate needs before the missionary even asks.

## *6) Craft a Re-entry Plan Together*

As the missionary's return approaches, work together to create a simple written plan. Include expectations, rhythms of rest, touchpoints for care, and clear communication between the missionary, the advocate team, and church leaders. Upstream's "[Examples of Missionary Re-entry Plans](#)" provides helpful models to adapt for your context.

### *7) Revisit the Plan and Prepare for Relaunch*

Furlough needs often change over time. As rest deepens, new emotions and realities surface, like spiritual weariness, questions about calling, or logistical concerns about returning to the field. A good plan leaves room for those discoveries. Plan to check in periodically—perhaps monthly—by simply asking, “How is the plan serving you? Is there anything new we can do to help?” These gentle check-ins communicate care without pressure and allow you to adapt support as needs evolve.

As the missionary begins to prepare for relaunch, come alongside them again in prayer, logistics, and encouragement. Celebrate the ways God has refreshed and refocused them. Offer practical help for packing, financial updates, or communicating next steps to supporters.

### *Strengthening the Sent and the Senders*

As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, “encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” Helping a missionary plan and experience a healthy furlough is one of the most tangible ways a church can live out that command.

When you walk with your missionaries by listening to their needs, planning thoughtfully, creating space for rest, and revisiting their plan as they prepare to relaunch, you do more than organize logistics—you embody partnership in the gospel and love in the family of God.

A well-crafted furlough provides a season of renewal for the missionary and a reminder to the church of its shared calling to the nations. With your church's help, these sacred pauses in ministry can strengthen both the sent and the senders, building one another up for the ongoing work of God's global mission.

### *Recommended Resources*

## From Upstream

- Shonna Ingram, [Navigating the Re-entry Journey: Trauma-Informed Care for Global Workers in Transition](#)
- Zach Bradley, Susan McCrary, Rodney Calfee, and Andy Jansen, [Receiving Sent Ones During Reentry: The Challenges of Returning “Home” and How Churches Can Help](#)
- [“Checklist to Prepare for Returning Missionaries”](#)
- [“Examples of Missionary Re-entry Plans”](#)

## Understanding Missionary Experience

- Thomas Hale and Gene Daniels, *On Being a Missionary*
- William Taylor, *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*
- David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*
- Sue Eenigenburg and Robynn Bliss, *Expectations and Burnout: Women Surviving the Great Commission*
- Robert J. Suderman, *Calloused Hands, Courageous Souls: Holistic Spirituality of Development and Mission*
- John Piper, *David Brainerd: May I Never Loiter on My Heavenly Journey!*
- Marge Jones, *Psychology of Missionary Adjustment*
- Carrie Sydnor Coffman, *Weary Warriors: Lessons from Christian Workers Who Burned Out*

## Caring for Returning Missionaries

- Neal Pirolo, *The Reentry Team: Caring for Your Returning Missionaries*
- Peter Jordan, *Re-Entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home*
- Marion Knell, *Burn-Up or Splash Down: Surviving the Culture Shock of ReEntry*
- Craig Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*
- Clyde N. Austin, *Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings*
- Melissa Chaplin, *Returning Well: Your Guide to Thriving Back “Home” After Serving Cross-Culturally*

## Bibliographies and Organizations

- Kelly O'Donnell, [“100+ Books for Member Care”](#) (PDF)
- Barnabas International, [“Member Care Downloads”](#) (PDF)

- Catalyst Services, “[Chronological List of Postings Articles](#)”
- Global Member Care Network
- Missions Training International (especially their debriefing and renewal retreats)
- Re-Entry Experts
- TCK Training
- Docs Joining Hands
- A Life Overseas



## Next Steps

The journey toward sending well happens one step at a time. Here are three ways you can continue moving upstream:

1. Reach out to your missionaries and create a calendar of when they are coming back on furlough. This will allow you to start the preparations well for a missionary’s return.
2. For a deeper dive into re-entry care—especially in cases of burnout and trauma—see Upstream’s book [Navigating the Re-entry Journey: Trauma-Informed Care for Global Workers in Transition](#).
3. Watch the Upstream training “[Caring for Returning Sent Ones](#)” for more ideas on helping missionaries during furlough.



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