

GUIDE FOR LOCAL CHURCHES ON



Caring for Missionaries Settling in Australia: Re-Entry



THE BIG IDEA

Many missionaries¹ returning after cross-cultural service (“returnees”) say the adjustment to life back in Australia proved more difficult than their previous adjustment to life in another culture. They often do not expect this, and neither does their sending church.ⁱ

Understanding what returnees go through during this significant transition period enables local churches to be more effective in caring for their emotional, spiritual and physical needs.

Factors that contribute to re-entry stress:

1. **Practical resettlement details:** accommodation, transport, finding a job, and learning all the mechanics of living in a community they are out of touch with
2. Re-entry Shockⁱⁱ
 - Australian culture changes and missionaries change during their time away, so they can feel like “**misfits**.”
 - Returnees have learnt new ways of doing things in their host culture and get confused when the **social cues** that worked there do not work in Australia.
 - Returnees have gained new perspectives and absorbed new values, so can be surprised by **value clashes**.
 - They might also have a reaction to the **comparative affluence** of Australians and the abundance of goods in light of the poverty they have seen in their host culture.
3. **Emotional crises:**
 - Returnees experience considerable **grief** over the loss of their host country,ⁱⁱⁱ national and expatriate colleagues who have become life family, the ministry they have put their lives into. They say they need ‘a listening ear’.

¹ **Missionary/missionaries** - a person/family who has been commissioned by their sending church(es) and/or mission agency to be explicitly dedicated to the work of cross-cultural ministry. It indicates someone who is gifted, set apart and trained/prepared for cross-cultural service, and so serves a particular role in the global Body of Christ. While every follower of Jesus is called to be His witness wherever they are, some are specifically lead to cross cultural and geographical boundaries to share the gospel with those who could otherwise not comprehend its message.

- Returnees can experience an **identity crisis** – they are not sure who they are, now they are no longer “missionaries,” and wonder where they can fit in society and ministry.

4. Depleted personal resources

- Too many pressures, internal and external, hit them all at once.
- Returnees’ physical and emotional energy is very likely at an all-time low.
- Returnees may not understand why they suddenly feel they cannot cope, and may be too embarrassed to admit to it.



TIPS & EXAMPLES

1. Learn more about re-entry

- Ask former missionaries in your church about their re-entry experiences
- Read materials on the subject (see below)
- Assign research on the issue to a member of the [missions committee](#), church leadership or pastoral team
- Ask [Missions Interlink](#) to run a workshop on re-entry for local churches in your area

2. Prepare for the arrival of returnees

- In consultation with sending **agencies**, organise for someone who understands re-entry and debriefing to meet with missionaries planning to return to Australia, in order to **help them prepare for and process the transition**
- Understand that for many children of missionaries (Third Culture Kids/TCKs/Missionary Kids/MKs), Australia is not their “home” country, but a new and foreign country. **Consider ways to help these TCK/MKs transition** into life in Australia and into fellowship in the local church.
- Ahead of time, help returnees to **organise some relocation details**. e.g. house, transport, career counselling, low cost financial advice, school and tertiary education enrolments, budgeting (i.e. understanding the cost of living in Australia,), help with Centrelink processes and forms.
- **Liaise with mission agencies for “time out”** between leaving their host culture and arriving in Australia. They need time to review their overseas experience; face the losses; begin grieving; and renew physical and emotional resources before the onslaught of arrival busyness.

- **Give returnees an enthusiastic welcome and prepare their residence** so they can move straight in – food in the cupboard and fridge; beds made up; toys for the children; flowers; welcome signs/cards; mow the lawn and tend the gardens; tips on routines e.g. “rubbish collection on Tuesdays”; helpful phone numbers. Note: singles need this too – do not presume they will want to live with relatives.

3. Assisting returnees with transition into life in Australia

- **Liaise with family/friends and mission agencies** to ensure needs are identified and covered
- **Provide a “translator”** of Australian culture (and language/slang) whom they can ask “dumb” questions like ‘What is pay wave?’
- **Do not take over** – just be there when they need help or information. Consider a list of numbers to call and helpful tips e.g. bin day
- **Encourage and facilitate spiritual/intellectual enrichment** to overcome feelings of being stale and empty. Consider sending them for a spiritual retreat or to a stimulating conference.
- **Help them to grieve** – Help them laugh, and let them cry for what they have left behind– most say they just want ‘someone to listen’
- **Recognise their cross-cultural service**, as an extension of the church’s ministry, through a special ceremony, a letter of commendation, or a service certificate – this encourages them that it was all worthwhile when doubts threaten. It also helps them close that period of service.
- **Value their skills, experience and knowledge**, especially their cross-cultural skills, and encourage them to see how they might use these in multicultural Australia
 - Show them they are appreciated for themselves, not only for what they can contribute
 - Ask them to take on responsibilities at their own pace – do not rush them
 - Re-brief them on what ministries are available to them in the Australian context– both secular and Christian
 - Consider a “recommissioning” to service in Australia. Encourage them that their call to mission is not cancelled by their return – they are not exiting service, but entering the next phase, enriched by what they have learnt overseas.
- **Help them to express negative feelings** about Australia and their transition process without responding with shock or condemnation– just listen.
- **Provide assistance in job applications** and career counselling
- **Provide advice** on where to buy household items, clothes, groceries etc., and offer to have someone go shopping with them

- Provide advice on the **location of services** e.g. doctors, dentists, hair dressers, counsellors, mechanics, electricians, plumbers, Centrelink, Post Office etc.
- In consultation with their mission agency, organise **debriefing^{iv}** sessions for them a few months after their arrival in Australia – while some of the initial practical challenges of re-entry may have been resolved in the initial time, other deeper emotional issues may have risen to the surface as they start to feel their losses.
- **Be aware of specific factors that may compounding re-entry stress** (e.g. sudden/unexpected return from cross-cultural ministry, sickness, political upheaval or personal trauma prior to return, a death in the family), and assist returnees to access professional counselling, extra health care, increased emotional and practical support as needed.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

1. Neal Pirollo. *Serving as Senders – Today*. Emmaus Road, 2012. <http://www.omfbooks.com.au/temp/?wpsc-product=serving-as-senders-today>
2. <http://www.missionarycare.com/reentry.htm> - e-books and resources on re-entry
3. “**Missionary Care Services**: How specialized coaches and counselors supplement church and agency care.” Catalyst Services Postings, Vol. 7, Iss. 10, 2012. <http://catalystservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Miss-Care.pdf>
4. www.membercare.org
5. www.globalmembercare.com
6. www.membercareradio.com
7. www.rockyreentry.com/
8. www.thecultureblend.com/

ⁱ **Sending/supporting church(es)** – the church or churches who have commissioned and sent out a missionary/family to serve as their representatives in another culture/location. Generally, a missionary/family will have one main sending church, which is often (but not always) the one they were fellowshiping with before leaving to begin their cross-cultural ministry. Supporting churches are other churches who have agreed to support the missionary/family financially and prayerfully. These churches are often visited by missionaries/families on home assignment.

ii **Re-entry shock**—Sometimes termed “reverse culture shock.” These include the shocks associated with returning to one’s home culture, but also the pressures of relocating and emotional pressures, such as grief caused by the many losses involved in the re-entry transition.

iii **Host country** – The country in which a cross-cultural missionary is/has been serving. The culture of this country is different to the country in which the missionary has been raised, and so, while missionaries/families may adapt and eventually feel their host country is more “home” than their passport country, they will always be viewed as foreigners by the local people.

iv **Debriefing** - directed conversation(s) whereby a skilled person to guides the cross-cultural worker/missionary through reflection on past events, looking at what is happening in the present, and helping them gain perspective for the future. This can be at points of change or crisis through their cross-cultural service, just before they leave their cross-cultural work/assignment, and/or on return to their passport country.