

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Premature Departure from the Field

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Dave and Mary arrived back in their passport country with a sigh of relief. The political turmoil and threat of violence were over, and their children were safely back in school. They had planned to stay in their host country four years, but their agency required them to come home after only a year because of the danger.

Unfortunately, within a few weeks different stresses were plaguing Dave and Mary. They felt unneeded, sad, and guilty. Other people did not understand, and they really did not fit well back in their home community. Such a premature departure from the field is often much more difficult than a return at the end of a person's commitment.

Premature departures have been occurring for thousands of years, so let us consider some in the Bible. What are reasons for leaving, who is affected, what emotions may arise, and what can people do?

## Did this happen in Bible times?

This happened several times for different reasons during the first term of cross-cultural service in the book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to serve, and

before they sailed John Mark joined to help. They served across Cyprus and then traveled to Perga, a city in what is now Turkey (Acts 13:1-13). Then the premature departures began.

**From Perga.** John Mark left Perga to return to Jerusalem, the headquarters (Acts 13:13). The Bible does not say why he left, and today the official explanation would be given as “personal reasons.” He may have been homesick, tired, or any of many reasons.

**From Antioch.** People from their passport country stirred up some nationals in Antioch to expel Paul and Barnabas, so they left the region because they were asked to leave (Acts 13:50-51).

**From Iconium.** Again people from their passport country and nationals from Iconium were plotting to harm Paul and Barnabas, so they fled from the potential harm (Acts 14:5-6).

**From Lystra.** The same two groups actually stoned Paul and left him for dead. Paul survived. He and Barnabas left Lystra the next day in the face of proven danger (Acts 14:19-20).

Cross-cultural workers have probably always had to leave their host country from time to time. They are not citizens there, so they know their time may be limited.

### **Why do missionaries have to leave?**

In these two chapters of Acts people departed prematurely from their fields because of personal reasons, because they were expelled, because they needed to flee from potential harm or to escape a proven danger. People may leave for many other reasons, and here are some of the most frequent ones.

- Physical illness which makes them ineffective or requires treatment at home
- Psychological problems ranging from anxiety to mental illness
- Problems with children or adolescents who are unable to function in the host culture
- Political turmoil in the host country
- Financial needs which require raising funds in their passport country
- Stress and exhaustion which make staying in the host culture impossible

- Problems with aging parents unable to care for themselves or property needs
- Moral failure which prohibits effective work in the host culture
- Conflict with other cross-cultural workers which cannot be resolved

This is just a sample of the reasons people leave their host countries. The list is almost endless, but the reason for leaving has an effect on how people feel about their own leaving and how others react as well. For example, if people leave because they have illnesses that need treatment at home, they may feel quite different about it, and others may react differently than if they are caught embezzling agency funds.

### **What emotions occur?**

The range of emotions is as varied as the reasons for leaving. Some may be very positive, at least at first. For example, if one has just returned from a stressful, dangerous, or conflict filled situation, the primary emotion is likely to be a feeling of relief. However, negative emotions are likely to occur as well. Here are some of the most common.

- Grief because of the loss of so many things such as home, friends, work, and social position
- Anger because of having so many things taken from you through no fault of your own
- Fear and anxiety because of the unexpected trauma and not knowing what will happen next
- Concern for the plight of those left behind
- Guilt because you are no longer helping the people you felt called to serve
- Shock because everything was so sudden and you have still not had time to process it all in your mind
- Shame because what you did was morally wrong and it hurt so many people among your family and friends
- Depression and discouragement because you should have known better and things seem so bleak now
- Resentment because people you believed were your friends turned on you

The list can go on and on, but, in general, people tend to have low self-esteem, believe they are misunderstood or forgotten, and feel useless.

## **Who is involved?**

Individuals tend to feel alone and forgotten when having to leave; however, the premature departure has an effect on many other people as well.

- Families, including both the immediate family and the extended family. Spouses and children usually have to depart as well, so their lives are also disrupted. The extended family back “home” is often involved as this part of the family returns.
- Colleagues who are left on the field and have to take on new responsibilities may resent what has happened.
- Nationals with whom the missionary has been working may not be ready to fulfill their roles alone.
- Agencies which have to scramble to try to find someone to take over projects on short notice may be under severe stress.
- People back “home” who do not fully understand what has happened may feel like you have abandoned your calling

## **What can missionaries do?**

Missionaries who are immediately transferred to a different field face challenges because they are usually entering a new culture even if the language is the same. This is even more difficult than most times when missionaries go to new fields because they have had little time for orientation before going, and often no one is prepared to give them an on-field orientation where they go.

Missionaries who return to their passport cultures also face challenges. Reentry is often a major transition even when it is a scheduled return. Changing cultures is difficult for most people even when expected. A premature reentry is even more difficult for two reasons.

First, it is often unexpected and sudden so little time is available to prepare. Second, since it is premature, other people tend to expect an “explanation.” Some are relatively easy, such as when there is obvious physical illness or dangerous political upheaval. Other explanations are difficult, such as conflict with a colleague or moral failure.

Though transfer to a different field or reentry into one’s

passport culture after premature departure is more difficult, the steps are basically the same as after a scheduled one. If it was a sudden, unexpected departure, the order of the steps may have to be changed slightly.

- **Face the Present.** As soon as possible do whatever is necessary to bring a relatively “normal” structure to your life and the life of your family. For example, you need to immediately get temporary housing, transportation, and anything else necessary for living. If you have children, get them in school or begin home schooling to bring structure to their lives.
- **Acknowledge your loss.** Leaving early means that you have more losses and less time to grieve than people departing at scheduled times. Take time to grieve these losses whether this means doing it with others who have also had to leave or do it alone if you find yourself apart from others who left. Remember that you lost your role, your ministry, your plans for the future there, and so forth.
- **Close the past.** Although you may be able to return after your illness is over, after the political situation is resolved, and so forth, do not count on it. You served God there as he led, and you are not able to continue at this time. You may be able to return as Paul and Barnabas did (Acts 14:21-24), or you may never be able to go back. Have someone debrief you and help you see how your premature departure fits into your life story. Then let the past go—but be ready to return if the opportunity comes again and you feel led to go.
- **Move into the future.** After you are functioning in the present and have closed the past, you are ready to begin planning and moving into the future. This may be anything from taking a similar position in another country, to starting a new ministry in your passport country, to returning to your host country, to pursuing higher education, to taking an entirely new course that you believe is God’s plan for you and your family.