

Why Do Missionaries Go on Furlough?

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After mentioning our up-coming home assignment (furlough) in our last prayer letter, we received a curious email. “I didn't know missionary work also has furlough. In our education sector in the States, furloughs are mandatory for schools due to budget cuts. Is your furlough due to a budget cut or do you just need a break?” This email reminded us that outside of missionary circles, there is some confusion about why missionaries go on home assignment. Is home

assignment just a code word for a funding raising trip? Is home assignment just a big long missionary vacation? Is home assignment like a sabbatical? Do missionaries go on home assignment when they get fed up with their host culture and just need a break? There is a bit of truth in all of the above. But there is also a lot of misunderstanding. In this post, I'd like to look at some reasons that missionaries go on home assignment in hopes of creating greater understanding between missionaries and their supporters back home.

What is Home Assignment?

The old word for home assignment (or Home Ministry Assignment) is “furlough”. Back in the day, missionaries went on furlough. Now they go on home assignment. I am not sure why there has been this change in terminology. Perhaps the word “furlough” has too much of a connotation of “vacation” or “rest”. There is a lot of work and ministry done on home assignment, so using a word that makes people think of vacation may not be the best word to explain why missionaries are home from the mission field.

I suspect that the term “home assignment” is currently in vogue because missionaries and their organizations want to emphasize that missionaries who are temporarily back in their home countries are still working and doing ministry. They are not on vacation. Instead of a ministry assignment on the field, they have been assigned to do ministry in their home country for a while.

Rest & Renewal

The word “furlough” gives the idea of rest. Taking time to rest and recuperate is a very valid reason for a home assignment. Beyond the initial culture shock of being in a foreign country, there is a certain level of culture stress that never goes away. Living day in and day out in a culture with different values, beliefs, and language than your own can create a certain amount of stress. You can never fully identify or understand the people around you, nor they you. Other countries may be different but in Thailand being a foreigner is like living in a fishbowl. People are always watching you, and are happy to give advice on what you should and should not do in areas such dress, house keeping, and family planning. It can be really helpful for missionaries to completely remove themselves from their host culture once in a while. Going home for a while can also help correct any overly positive ideas about how good it is “back home” and cause the missionary to remember the good things that they appreciate about their host country.

Education

Sometimes it is helpful for missionaries to return home for awhile to do further studies. Issues have come up on the field and it would be beneficial to their ministry to take some time out to do some further studies. Sometimes the peace and quiet afforded by time away can provide the right atmosphere to reflect upon what they saw and experienced on the field. The daily pressure of ministering to people in their normal ministry often doesn't allow missionaries time to reflect on what's happening because there is so much that needs to be done. This is one of the same reasons that pastors and university lecturers take sabbaticals.

Reconnect with Family & Friends

One of the most difficult parts of being a missionary is separation from family. Besides the language and culture differences, this is the major factor that makes missionaries different from pastors and other full time Christian workers living in their own countries. Everyone's family situation is different but for those with children, the absence of grandparents and aunts and uncles is significant. Children grow up really fast so four years overseas at a time is a long time for children to not see grandparents and other relatives face to face. Going on home assignment can afford that opportunity to reconnect with family members in a way that is just not possible via email and telephone. Even video conferencing on Skype falls far short of actually being there. And the opportunity to catch up with a good friend that you know from "back then" can be refreshing to the soul, especially if you have been in a lonely and isolated ministry location.

Report to Sending Churches & Supporters

Missionaries are primarily responsible to their home churches and those who have sent them out, not to their mission organizations (even though they are important too). It is essential to have face-to-face time with those churches and people who support you every once in a while in order to renew those relationships. In order to be effective partners in the Gospel, there needs to be trust and mutual understanding. Not everything that needs to be communicated can be communicated in a monthly prayer letter or the occasional email update. Sometimes you just need to spend time together face-to-face to know what is really going on - both for the folks at home to hear from the missionary, and the missionary to hear from the folks at home. When you actually see each other, questions come up that may not otherwise. "So tell me why you are doing what you are in doing in your ministry over there? I don't get it" or "Okay, so what really happened in the church split? I couldn't sort it out from the bits and pieces that I heard through the grapevine."

Besides renewing relationships, missionary visits to churches and other supporters on home assignment are great opportunities to encourage the folks back home with stories of what God is doing on the mission field. There is nothing like hearing directly from the person involved. Or, alternatively, people at home need to hear about the difficulties and challenges that the missionary faces so that they can intelligently pray for them and support them.

Recruitment

The term that is currently en vogue is "mobilization" but I rather like "recruitment". As the term "mobilization" is currently used, it is bit broader than recruitment in that it includes encouraging people to pray for, give to, & recruit for missions, as well as reaching out to international

students & other immigrants in local area. Those are all great ministries that I myself participate in, but I want to focus in specifically on recruiting new missionaries. The term “recruitment” conjures up the image of a military recruiter trying to persuade young men to forgo the comforts of home to live in strict discipline under unpleasant conditions for a greater cause, possibly losing their life in the process. Missions is a spiritual battle and there is a desperate need for humble, serious-minded godly people to enter the battle. Many mission fields in the world today could use tons of new workers. Some mission organizations urge Westerners to just send money to support “local missionaries” instead of sending out their own people. This is based on the assumption that there are tons of local Christians on the mission field ready to go, but just lack funds. That is simply not true. At least not in Thailand. And not in the countries of many missionaries whom I know.

Missionaries go on home assignment to find people to come back and join them on the mission field. Missionaries should not be shy about this. There is some truth to the statement, “We are all missionaries” but it is over used. Every Christian should be sharing the Gospel right where they live but God is calling some Christians to leave the comforts of home and go share the Gospel someplace very different and very difficult. Missionaries go on home assignment to find such people and to assist those interested in missions to get to the mission field. I would love to find more people to come work with me in Thailand but I also want to be a resource for prospective missionaries who may end up in Africa, Central Asia, France, or someplace else. And who knows? Maybe there is some missionary in Africa giving advice and counsel to a young person who will end up in Thailand.

Financial Support

For those of you who have been waiting for the other shoe to drop, here it is. Missionaries often go on home assignment, at least in part, because they need more money. Missionaries need more support for many different reasons. Sometimes the economy is bad and giving goes down. Sometimes faithful elderly supporters go home to be with the Lord. Sometimes missionary needs go up when there is a change of ministry or another child is added to the family. And sometimes churches decide that long-term missionaries not cost effective or strategic, and they drop you altogether. For all these reasons and more, a missionary’s support level can become low and they need to get it back up again. If support is really low, missionaries may come home early but if support is only somewhat low they will likely finish their term on the mission field with the understanding that they need to get their support back up before returning to the mission field.

There is the unfortunate idea out there that missionaries only show up to speak at churches back home because they need money. While many missionaries do need money, this is a rather uncharitable way to view the missionary speakers who come to your church. My own perspective on the money issue is that God will provide how He wants, when He wants, and from whom He wants. And He often does this in ways that I don’t expect, at times I don’t expect, and from people whom I don’t expect. Since that is the case, I take the opportunities that He provides to speak about His work in the world and to challenge people to consider God’s call to missions from the Scriptures. I take these opportunities based on what relationships and connections I have already and where I think I might have something to contribute, not based on how much money I think a church or individual might give. My wife and I have accepted

invitations and followed up leads from churches that seemed really interested in our ministry or in learning about sharing the Gospel with Buddhists. But no financial support or partnership ever developed out of those connections. On the other hand, there are some churches and families who support us even though we barely know them, if at all.

So yes, missionaries often go on home assignment because they need money. But with a proper kingdom perspective and a reliance on God to provide, missionaries can be free from the people pleasing pandering and high pressure sales tactics that would otherwise be needed to get support. The bottom line is that “God’s work, done in God’s way, will not lack God’s provision” (Hudson Taylor)

Summary

Missionaries go on home assignment for all of the above reasons. On any given home assignment one or a few of these reasons may be primary in the missionary’s mind while the others have lower priority. It will all depend on their ministry situation on the field and their own stage of life. Far from being a really long vacation or just an appeal for funds, home assignment is a time for work and for ministry. It is a time for renewing relationships and re-equipping oneself to head back out there and keep plodding in the difficult places of the world. A home assignment well used is extremely helpful in keeping missionaries and their supporting churches engaged in missions ministry over the long haul. And for greatest effectiveness, a long-term commitment is needed.

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