

Receiving Returned Missionaries Well

Receiving by the church (not merely returning by the missionary) is the culmination of sending. The church is responsible for her sent ones from the time they express interest in missions until they have returned and *have BOTH been fully reintegrated into the life of their church AND re-established sustainable life rhythms*. The returning and receiving stage of sending is often the most neglected, because it is the easiest to neglect, part of the process.

Extra care and intentionality have to be put forth in order to help ensure that missionaries leaving the field start a new stage of life stateside in the most healthy way possible.

Although *executed* in an organic way, the receiving process should be a *planned and detailed* process. Once a missionary has been away for one or more years and those who know-love them haven't seen them, then what is not planned will likely not occur organically.

The leader of the receiving and returning process is the advocate.¹ At The Summit Church, the advocate is the person who is primarily responsible for supporting the missionary while they are on the field, and ensuring that other church members are supporting the missionary as well. This makes the advocate the liaison between the missionary and the church while the missionary is on the field, and so the advocate should play a similar role in the missionary's returning process.

In this process, the advocate's main role is to lead the care team (which is compiled of 4-8 people) who are taking primary responsibility for caring for the returned missionary. The care team is the group of people within the church that is acting on behalf of the church to care for the missionary within this process. Every stage of this process will be primarily carried out by the advocate and the care team.

But how? We have created a "process document" that corresponds with every care activity that needs to occur. This is what the advocate uses to communicate with and synchronize the efforts of the care team. *The process document is a master document that should contain updates from everyone involved on how the missionary is doing in key areas.* We suggest using a platform like Google Docs that allows different people to update the document so that everyone can see the changes and no single person is responsible for receiving info, editing a Word doc, and sending the updates back to everyone. [Here](#) is a template master document. With this document you need to:

1. Read the remainder of this "receiving process" overview to understand why it is constructed the way that it is.
2. Copy and paste this material into a separate Google Doc (200 care team, caring for 200 missionaries cannot use the same document).
3. Include the name, email address, and phone number of each person on the care team in the opening section.
4. Give editing rights and forward a link to this document to each member of the care team. Include a PDF copy of this "receiving process" overview with that email.

¹ If your church does not have an advocacy structure, the role of the advocate could be played by an associate pastor, close friend of the missionary, missions coordinator, counseling pastor, or even lead pastor if necessary.

This document should give you – whether you’re a pastor or a lay advocate – a step-by-step process for receiving a returning missionary by (a) helping them debrief their experiences, (b) handle life struggles associated with their transition back to the states, (c) start a new stage of life, and (d) be reintegrated into the life of your church.

There will be certain aspects that need to be added to this or taken out of it based the unique situation of each individual or family, but you can use this process as a grid. If you’re a missionary, you can use this document to be proactive in your own returning process by initiating these things and asking your sending church to do these things for you.

The Process

The process of returning begins at least four to six weeks prior to the missionary getting on an airplane headed towards America. The preparation for receiving needs to begin by the care team during this same time period.

30-45 Days from Return Date

Preparing to receive a missionary well is only possible if the advocate has been supporting the missionary well during their time on the field. Monthly communication should be the standard for supporting a missionary.

If monthly communication is happening, and there is an adequate depth to those conversations, the advocate should know when the missionary plans to return home and whether or not that return is permanent. *This is the first step in the returning process: knowing when the missionary plans to return home.*

When the missionary decides to return home, the advocate should begin the receiving and returning process. **Action Step One (Advocate Led): Create your own copy of the Google Document** linked above, send a copy to each care team member (who should already be in place and supporting the missionary), and begin filling in key information for a comprehensive receiving plan.

Action Step Two (Advocate Led): The next action step is to **help your missionary friend plan well for their transition on both sides:** transitioning out of their role overseas well and transitioning into the next phase of life in America well.

Email your missionary friend about the following tasks. *In the weeks ahead let them know you are praying over these conversations and details.* These can be emotionally weighty tasks marked by a mixture of grief and excitement.

- a. Communicate a firm date to you team lead and stateside pastor for when you are returning.
- b. That date is:
- c. Make a list of team members and national friends and leaders with whom you want to say an intentional goodbye.

- d. Make a list of key transitions you anticipate as you engage life in the United States again. [These are points that the advocate wants to communicate with the care team in order to begin brainstorming how to best assist with these transitions.]
 - i. Residence
 - ii. Work
 - iii. School for children
 - iv. Other
- e. Talk with my international team lead to discern how to best delegate my current responsibilities and transition out of my role well.

Action Step Three (Advocate Led): Prepare for the day your missionary friend is returning and their immediate needs that will happen upon their initial arrival.

- a. Find the exact date, time, and flight numbers
- b. Work with the care team to secure immediate housing and transportation for the missionary.
- c. Work with the care team to plan an airport welcome (including as many church members as possible) for the returning missionary.
- d. Make a care package for the returning missionary for either the airport welcome or to be left at their residence.
- e. Plan a returning celebration party to help church members celebrate what God has done in the missionary life and work. The size and tone of this celebration should be planned with the personality and season of life of the returning missionary in mind.
- f. Plan to celebrate their returning during corporate worship. **Principle:** *You will replicate what you celebrate.* The return of a missionary is a discipleship and spiritual formation opportunity for your entire congregation.

First 30 Days after Returning

Action Step Four (Advocate Coordinated): After the missionary gets settled, the next step for **the advocate and care team is to meet with the missionary.** The meeting should consist of the advocate, several members of the care team, and at least one pastor. The meeting can be held at the church or not, but the environment should be conducive for honest and private conversation. The main thrust of this initial meeting is to care for them through *hearing their story*. This will primarily be a time of listening and asking questions for the care team.

- For guidance on good questions see: bradhambrick.com/5missiondebriefs

For every meeting the advocate or care team has with the missionary, there should be some set-aside time of prayer. Nothing that the advocate or care team does by itself can fight the spiritual warfare that the missionary will be enduring.

Intentional, Informal Engagement (Document Planned): This is not a “step” per say but is vitally important to receiving a missionary well – **each care team member should intentionally seek out face-to-face time** with their missionary friend in the month after their return.

A member of the care team should see the missionary in person at least once a week. Every member of the care team should see the missionary at least once in person (outside of corporate worship) during this first month.

The advocate must ensure that every care team member has the mindset of *hearing the story* of the missionary during these times (see: bradhambrick.com/5missiondebriefs).

Each care team member should update the care team about their conversations so that (a) these conversations are not overly redundant, and (b) the missionary has an increasing sense of being known during their first month at home.

Action Step Five (Pastor Planned): During the first month the missionary is stateside **the church should host a celebration/reception** for members of the church to reconnect with the missionary. This should have been planned before the missionary returns, but can happen within 2-4 weeks of the missionary’s return.

The details of this celebration can fit the personality of the missionary and your church, but the main goals are to make the missionary feel loved and celebrated, create an environment where church members and staff can reconnect with the missionary, and emphasize the importance of your sent ones to the church.

Action Step Six (Pastor Planned): Within the first month, the missionary should be **welcomed and celebrated from stage during corporate worship** on the weekend. This accomplishes three things:

1. Make the missionary feel significantly remembered for what they did.
2. Helps the congregation remember the missionary.
3. Reinforces that you replicate what you celebrate. A church member’s journey to joining the mission of God could start with seeing what someone else has done for the mission.

Additional Care Available (Pastor Communicated; Team Aware): Counseling Availability – Prior your missionary friend’s return the church’s policy regarding the availability and potential scholarship for formal counseling should be communicated. As the care team has deeper conversations with the missionary the need for this counseling resource may emerge.

Possible topics could include: grief related to former role and distance from international friends, conflict emerging from transitions in major life systems and culture, depression, emergence of post traumatic symptoms from significant painful or dangerous events while overseas, a sense that their role is God’s mission is less significant now that they’re not overseas, etc...

In their mild forms, you may be able to walk with the missionary as they grow out of these struggles (topically arranged Christian counseling resource can be found at: bradhambrick.com). There may come a time when your ability to help them grow in these areas ceases, however.

When you sense that you're getting beyond your ability to help (bradhambrick.com/faq6), you should have a Christian counselor or Christian counseling center that you trust to be able to refer them to.

If you do not know a trusted Christian counselor here is guidance on finding one:

- bradhambrick.com/findacounselor

If possible, you should cover at least some of the cost for counseling out of the church missions budget. A good rule of thumb is to cover the first 4 sessions of counseling and then meet to evaluate if more sessions are needed.

30-60 Days After Return

Action Step Seven (Advocate Coordinated): Around 60 days after the missionary family has returned, the advocate and care team should have **another collective face-to-face meeting**. This meeting can be less formal, but should still intentionally cover at least four question clusters (the order of question should be arranged for what best honors the needs of the returned missionary):

First Question Cluster – Spiritual Life: How's your devotional and prayer life been recently? How have you been able to re-engage into the life of our church? Have you returned to your small group or visited a new one? Have you began serving anywhere? Do you see yourself being able to grow and thrive here long-term?

A returned missionary family is an incredible asset to our church, so we should encourage them to begin coaching other future missionaries, supporting current missionaries, or being involved in local outreach.

Second Question Cluster – Life Direction: What's next? Are you considering going back to the mission field in some way? Are you considering going back to school? Have you decided on another career path? Have you taken any steps for any of these options?

Third Question Cluster – Church Assessment: What can we do better? The returned missionary family can give an honest and helpful assessment of how we, as a church, are supporting our missionaries.

You can ask how the training they received did or did not prepare them well, if they felt supported and frequently contacted during their time, and if there was another part of the sending process that was helpful or harmful.

Fourth Question Cluster – Personal Flourishing: How are you doing? (A) Personal Health - Have you been struggling with any negative emotions since having returned? How has your sleep patterns, exercising, eating, etc. been?

(B) Purposeful Progress - Do you feel like you're stuck? Do you feel like you're growing? Do you have a plan to continue to grow in this season?

(C) Journey Evaluation - What have been some hard things about this season? What have been some encouraging things about this season?

- **Note:** This meeting should create the agenda for the care team moving forward. If a consistent and healthy level of interaction has been occurring between the care team and the returned missionary, then there should be few surprises in this meeting.

Ongoing Informal Care (Document Planned): Every care team member should have a face-to-face meeting with the missionary during this time. The advocate should ensure that the team members are planning these meetings and have intentional questions prepared.

Each care team member should continue to send a weekly email to care team giving a summary of interactions and conversations between care team members and the missionary.

60-90 Days After Return

Action Step Eight (Advocate Coordinated): In the third month after the missionary has returned, the advocate and every member of the care team should have **another check-in with the missionary**. The nature of this check-in will depend on how the missionary has been doing.

If the missionary has been struggling in several areas, this check-in should be face-to-face and intentional based around their pressing need(s).

If the missionary has been thriving and doing great, either a face-to-face meeting or phone call could work.

The goal of this stage is to make sure the missionary has been reintegrated into the life of your church and is healthy and growing.

Questions to ask at this stage are: How have you been able to re-engage in the life of our church? Have you been able to rebuild significant community around you? Have you taken a next step toward whatever God has for you next in terms of career, education, and residence? Is there anything else our church can do for you?

At this point, if the advocate and church staff think the missionary is healthy and growing, the formal process of receiving the missionary can end. This process can and should be prolonged based on significant issues that the missionary needs more help in continuing to walk through.

Formally ending the receiving process with the care team should include encouraging them to continue to walk with the missionary as friends and fellow church members.