

# Reentry Guide for Mennonite Voluntary Service:

A tool for helping volunteers process the end of their service terms

## About Re-entry

Now that you are nearing the end of your service term, it is time to start thinking about re-entering life outside of MVS. This time may bring anxiety for some, relief and excitement for others. For many it will be a time for all of those emotions. Re-entry will be a unique experience for each person, therefore, each person will walk their journey in their own unique way. However, there are similarities in the process that volunteers find themselves in as they end their terms and begin life after MVS.

Whether you are returning to your previous community, beginning again in a new one or remaining in the community in which you have been serving, you will likely be faced with a myriad of emotions and choices to make. The time you spend in service will likely change you forever in some way, and re-entry is the first step if figuring out how to go on from here.

We've put together some information that will hopefully be helpful as you walk through this time of re-entry. Read through the information and see what is helpful to you; you may find different parts of it to be helpful at different times. The point is not whether you go through each exercise listed here, but rather for you to have these resources available when you need them.

If you already keep a **journal**, continue to use that tool during this time. It would be a great place to work through some of these exercises. If you do not yet have a journal, think about finding one to use during this time.

The point of these exercises is: 1. to help you work through some of the emotional, social and spiritual challenges that come with these transitions. 2. to help you make some choices about integrating your experience into the next chapter of your life.

## Before You Leave

Take some time to think about the upcoming changes and how they might go for you. Social psychologists say that when people prepare for an unpleasant or aversive event that may occur, the impact of such an event is less severe than if they had not prepared at all.

Take some time to review your service experience. You could do this all at once or over a period of time. Here are some questions to think about:

1. In what ways would you like to prepare to say goodbye to your community, unit, church?
2. What are you going to be glad to leave behind when you leave?
3. What will be difficult to leave behind?
4. What relationships have been important to you during your term of service?

5. What scripture verses, songs, stories, or images have been important?
6. What have been the biggest challenges that you have faced during your term? In your placement? In your unit? In your church?
7. What successes did you feel good about during your term of service?

### A Good Good-bye

An important part of preparing for new beginnings in life is to have good endings.

#### Things that are helpful for closure:

- say goodbye (ie a farewell party)
- resolve conflict that may be lingering – ask for and grant forgiveness
- settle any obligations that you may feel (debts, borrowed items)
- say “thank you” to those who have been appreciated, in whatever way is appropriate
- souvenirs – photos, gifts, t-shirts, locally made products – keep the link alive

### New Things

What are some of your thoughts and feelings about how you want to live after this assignment? List some of the new habits or changes that are a part of you as a result of your time in service. (for example: new language skills, independence, tolerance...)

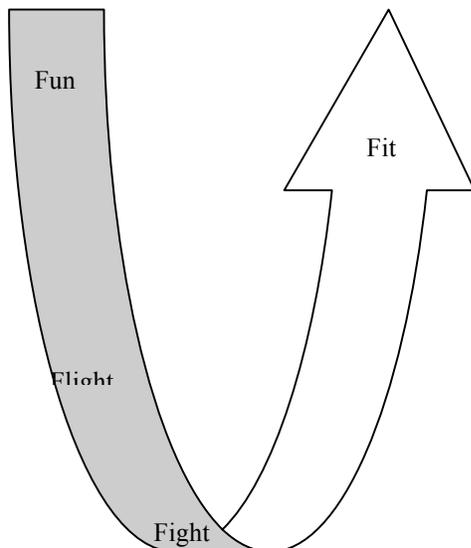
What are some of the new values, understandings or insights that you do not want to forget? What are some things you can do to remind yourself of these values or goals?

What are some of the things that you do not want to take along with you and make a part of your life after service? What things are best left behind?

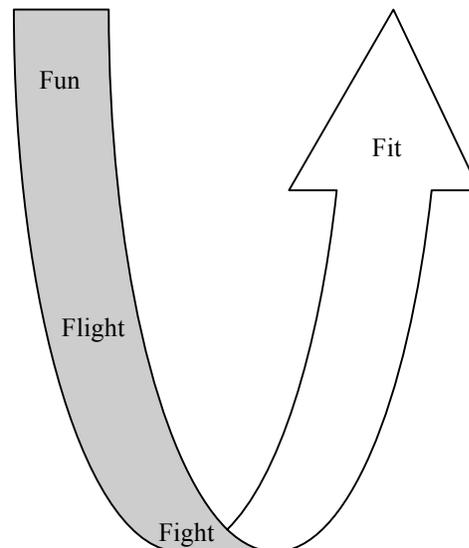
### 4 Stages of Reentry

Research shows that most people go through 4 basic stages as they enter a new culture and also as they return to their home culture. These stages look roughly like this:

Enter new culture



Return to home culture



**Reentry Fun Stage:**

Enjoying the things you missed from home. Everyone is happy to have you back, you tell your stories, share pictures/videos, give talks at church, etc... People are initially interested but eventually they are all back to live as usual. They may ask sincere questions, but they seldom linger to hear the whole story.

**Reentry Flight Stage:**

The realities of life in home culture hit: the affluence and self-centeredness perhaps of the home community becomes apparent. People don't feel the same passion about the same injustices or issues that the volunteer experienced in their time of service. Life back home may be viewed as too ordinary or too complacent. Reverse culture shock.

**Reentry Fight Stage:**

Returnees often feel angry towards the affluence and apathy of the home culture as a whole. They may have acquired a more tender conscience, a broader world view, a more compassionate and open heart, a renewed commitment to build God's kingdom. But at home they see indifference (at least to their passions) and selfishness. It's tempting in this stage to feel superior, more enlightened or more educated. Overwhelmed by their own high expectations or discouraged by people's responses or lack of interest, they can experience depression.

**Reentry Fit Stage:**

Over time the emotional high wanes and returnees are left to make some choices. What changes or commitments, values or passions do they want to keep? What things are impossible to change in this setting? Find ways to express their new found love, faith, passions in manageable ways. Find people that you can connect with who might have shared similar experiences. They must find ways to keep their own passions alive, but also relate to those around them comfortably.

**Re-entering - being "back home"**

Remember that things have changed since you left "home". The book of Ruth begins with Naomi's returning home from a foreign country. During her absence, many changes took place, both in Moab and in Israel. This is true for you as you return; many things have changed, you have changed, and the people at home have changed. Nothing remained the same while you were away.

What are some really good things about being back or in your new location? (your own space, your own transportation?)

What do you miss about the people or culture you left behind?

What new values are you bringing home with you?

What are the changes that you see that occurred while you were away? What ones will be harder for you to adjust to?

Now that you have returned "home", what experience or change in your own heart attitude has most affected how you speak or what you say to others?

**Thinking Back - Remembering Gifts and Treasures**

Recall some of the gifts you received - actual gifts, relationships, experiences, new thoughts and values, new world view. Remember, letting go does not mean losing the gift or the goals and values.

What are some of the gifts and treasures you received?

How can you show gratitude for these gifts?

How can you give evidence of some of the internal treasures and gifts?

What are some of your feelings as you remember these things? (helpless, joy, warm, sad, pain)  
What part of leaving was most significant? (sadness, joy, "good riddance")

You may feel some sadness and loss after finishing a service assignment. Sadness and loss are a part of grief. Grief is a normal response to loss, leaving and transitions and is often a part of the re-entry experience.

In times of grief or stress, you may notice some of the following symptoms:

**health** - fatigue, headaches, sleep problems, stomach and digestive upsets;

**behavior** - nervousness, moods, taking more risks, changes in eating and sexual activities;

**emotions** - "going crazy," fears, resentments, sadness, can't concentrate or make decisions;

**relationships** - increased conflict, mistrust, critical attitude, separation or clinging;

**attitude** - inadequacy, brooding, boredom, self-condemnation;

**spiritual** - loss of faith, blaming God, sudden changes in belief, loss of hope.

When you notice new relationships, new strengths and hope, you are probably mostly through a period of grief. When you feel you are able to think more clearly and when you begin to make plans again, these are signs of new life. Recognize these steps, claim them, build on them. Times of grief or waves of tears may come around again but probably the intensity of the feelings will diminish.

### **Common Reentry Coping Responses:**

1. **Isolation:** a natural response to new or threatening situations. Returnees return to an environment that doesn't value the same feelings or involvements which were experienced during their time of service. They may find themselves:
  - a. Pulling away from being in a stressful situation by being alone or only with like-minded people
  - b. Relating to the home culture but for the most part having negative attitudes and reactions to it.
  - c. Expressing a strong judgmental posture towards the values and lifestyle of the home culture (church, family, friends, national and foreign policies)
  - d. Feeling a strong guilt or anger over home culture's materialism and affluence.
  - e. Daydreaming a lot about the short-term experience; holding onto memories.
  - f. Immobilized and unaware of alternative ways to relate to home culture.
  - g. Needing someone who has been through reentry stress to help in understanding the transition process and exploring options.
  
2. **Imitation:** may be the easiest response to a new situation or setting. There is a considerable amount of imitation necessary to fit in, but it should be done without loss of personal values or newly acquired convictions. However, it may include:
  - a. "going native" – imitating the local folks in dress, talk, etc... For returnees, it means quickly reverting back to old ways of doing things.
  - b. Resuming life as if nothing happened.
  - c. Unable to translate the impact of the short-term experience to the rest of life.
  - d. Having a very high need for acceptance by the home culture
  - e. Fearful of the repercussions of being different or of standing on their convictions.
  - f. Needing to be with compassionate and mission-minded people who can assist in sorting out the experience and help integrate.

3. **Integration:** allows for the balanced blending of the present circumstances with the past experiences. What needs to be retained from the experience? What needs to be released? Integration is successful if facilitated when returnees:
- Accept the reality of transitioning between two cultures
  - Relate back with the home culture in a way that does not compromise or negate new personal values.
  - Recognize that changes in themselves have occurred through the short-term experience.
  - Continue to learn, while creating a new different lifestyle incorporating things learned while away from home.
  - Courageously and joyfully live out newly acquired values and practices.

All 3 of these responses are needed in some degree in order to:

- maintain some amount of equilibrium and sanity, appropriate **isolation** is necessary.
- learn a new culture or relearn one's home culture, a good dose of **imitation** is a must.
- be effective in the new culture or back home **integration** is indispensable.

### **Avoiding a critical heart:**

Matt 7:1 Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

“Your ministry experience may be the most influential event that has ever taken place in your life. As you return home, you desire to communicate this to others in a meaningful way. Perhaps you even feel a deep spiritual commitment to inform and challenge others to change and get involved. Sometimes, however, you sense only superficial interest from others. There can be a great temptation to find fault and to criticize those who lack understanding. On your return, you may face other people's apathy, indifference, and lack of commitment”.

Matt 7: 1-5 – What attitude should we have?

John 1:43-46 – in what ways does Philip instruct us when we feel negative about someone?

Romans 2:1-2 – what is true of those who are critical of others?

Romans 15:5-7 – list the phrases that encourage you to have a Godly heart.

Colossians 3:13-15 – more insight into the proper heart attitude we should have toward others.

What did you criticize during your cross-cultural experience?

Now that you are home, of what do you find yourself critical? Why?

What is the difference between a discerning heart and a critical heart?

### **Readjusting to your home culture:**

How has your cross-cultural experience affected your desire to be involved in service?

Are any of your life goals changing?

The Bible often speaks of the value of listening to a “multitude of counselors.” Who are you looking to for counsel if you are considering new options for your life?

Do you think God could use you or your new perspectives to make a difference in your home church and/or family relationships? How?

What would need to change in your life to make you more effective in your family, school, or church situation?

## **Needs, Fears, Hopes**

What are some things you **need** right now? (physical, emotional, social, spiritual) Choose from the following or use your own words: new friends, jobs, connecting with others with similar experiences, meaning and direction, a good cry, affirmation, and "thank you", to be patient with family and friends, to deal with my anger, to talk with a friend (names (s)) back on assignment, to share my failures, time alone, a feeling of "normal."

What are some things that bring anxiety or **fear**? This list could include concerns for your children, fitting in, materialism, affluence, wastefulness, speed, church, martial or family concerns, pressure to conform, financial needs and decisions.

How have you dealt with anxieties and fears in the past (good ways and bad ways)?

What are things you might do now about some of your anxieties and fears? (Get a realistic perspective, talk with a friend, make a plan, . . .)

List some **hopes** or visions for yourself or for your family for the next few months or for a year from now.

## **Looking Ahead**

### **Goals**

Take some time to write out some of your hopes, visions and goals. These might include to maintain contact with friends from your work, to get involved in advocacy work, to affirm family and friends or to take some specific steps in relations to change. You might have education, vocation, location or family goals. You may want to use one large sheet or several sheets for these exercises.

For each need or vision/goal, include some possible immediate and intermediate steps that would get you started in reaching those goals. What might be some hindrances and some helps in moving toward these goals? Include some "small" specific steps you can take or life-style changes you can make.

## **Relating to Your Church**

As you return to your home community or begin in a new community, you will need to decide how to become involved in a church. Hopefully you will find a support group in your faith community as you return home.

Do not expect that everyone in your congregation will be interested in hearing you talk about your service experience. Many have no idea of how profoundly your experience may have affected you. It is important to share of your experience with respect for others and what they have experienced.

There are many ways one can be a resource in a congregation - - teaching Sunday School, preaching a sermon, telling children's stories or contributing books to the library. Making a commitment to become involved in the congregation of your choice is one way to bring home some of the learnings you gained while in service.

How might you become involved in your church? When would you be ready for such involvements?

Who are the ones you might ask to listen to you tell your story?

Who are the people who might share some of your understandings and goals? Could you invite them over and start a conversation about some of these things?

## **Reentry Stress**

(Dale H. Schumm)

Common symptoms and effects of reentry stress:

1. Disorientation – a feeling that you are out of place, do not fit in, feeling like a guest in a foreign land
2. Uncertainty in interpersonal relationships – unsure of proper mannerisms, greeting, social etiquette, dress, etc.
3. Feelings of loneliness or isolation (lost in the crowd)
4. Restlessness – a desire to “get away” or to return as soon as possible to the host country
5. Feeling that nobody understands your experience. . .nobody cares
6. Feeling tired, immobile
7. Critical attitude toward home community – waste, extravagance, wrong way of doing things, etc.
8. Loss of identity – just “another cog in a big wheel”
9. Out of ordinary emotional responses – weeping, etc.
10. Frustration over inability to get things done, to get around, to keep up with the pace
11. Inability to communicate new ideas, concepts freely
12. Feeling of superiority – standing aloof from others because of service experience
13. Feeling of dissatisfaction
14. Defensive in responses
15. Retreat, withdrawal, lack of concern
16. Unnatural responses to “ordinary” situations
17. Confusion over inwardly conflicting attitudes and responses
18. Rejection of overseas experience, desire to forget or not talk about it

## **Some Suggestions for Reentry Readjustment**

(Dale H. Schumm)

1. Grieve your losses, particularly the loss of relationships with the significant people you have learned to love and appreciate. But do not prolong the grief.

2. Acknowledge the pain. Reentry with all of its intense feelings, of reverse culture shock, of separation and loss, will always be a painful time. We cannot escape the pain, but we can learn to move with it and to find meaning in it--to become aware of the loving presence of God moving us to discover, even in the midst of pain, the potential for life and growth.
3. Seek God's guidance for the life in front of you now! God's Spirit will lead you in finding your next niche. New beginnings can be invigorating.
4. Maintain a regular time for prayer and meditation. Many find journaling helpful.
5. Forgive yourself for what you may or may not have done while overseas. It is in forgiving that we really let go, entrusting the past to God's loving mercy and freeing ourselves in order to receive the gift of the present.
6. Become involved in a congregation. Be willing to seek counsel from those in the church.
7. Determine to live fully in the present wherever you are. Begin to network with others of like mind and experience.
8. Be as sensitive and committed to adjusting to this cultural context as you were to the previous one. Listen and learn. Most of the "natives" in your community are good people and have a lot of "tribal" wisdom.
9. Be open and honest as a multicultural person. Retain the right to be different. Accept the challenge to be an ambassador for both cultures.
10. Own the fear of saying goodbye. Part of the fear of letting go is the fear of losing what we have received by being overseas.
11. Share what you have learned selectively. Not everyone will be interested in your stories. Find those that are interested and engage in active exchange.
12. Accept the changed you. One of the gifts of having lived in another culture is viewing things differently than those around us. Our overseas experience leads us to raise different questions, to offer different perspectives on the work, the church, and on our faith.
13. Do not delight in laying guilt trips on people. Remember most important issues in the world do not have easy answers. Take every opportunity to build authentic bridges of friendship and understanding between the two cultures and communities.
14. Challenge your new community, but do it sensitively. Choose your battles selectively. Choose those worth fighting, but don't take on the whole world or the whole church. Remember not all is wrong. Even if it were, it could not all be righted at once.
15. Maintain a sense of humor. Learn to laugh at yourself.
16. Do not hesitate to talk to your pastor or a professional counselor if in protracted stress.
17. Celebrate what you have received! At the end of the term of service I often hear people say "I have received more than I could ever have given." Celebrate those gifts, internalize them, cherish your enrichment, and carry them into your new situation. This is the new you!!!

**Here are some questions you may choose to reflect upon.**

1. Who am I? What have I learned about myself?
2. Who is God? How can my understanding of God grow?
3. Who are we? What have I learned about community and the church?
4. What is the impact of culture on faith? How can I see life and the gospel differently because of what I've experienced?
5. What is God's mission in the world? What have I learned about justice, poverty and the cause of suffering? What does it mean to love?
6. What does it mean to be a follower of Christ? What have I learned about discipleship?
7. What has value for me? What have I learned about my lifestyle?
8. Where am I going? What might God call me to be and to do as a result of this experience? What can I learn about my vocation and choices of career?

"Short-term missions workbook" Tim Dearborn

**Some scripture passages that may be helpful:**

**Some transitions in the Bible**

Abram leaving his homeland	Genesis 12:1-9
Moses, fleeing to the desert, returning to Egypt	Exodus 2,3
The spies report to the people of Israel	Numbers 13:25-33
A new country, new families	Ruth 1-4
Peter, a new calling	Luke 5:1-11
The disciples on the Emmaus Road	Luke 24:13-35
Philip and the Ethiopian	Acts 8:26-39
Saul/Paul, an abrupt change in life	Acts 9:1-19
Peter, new values meet traditions	Acts 11:1-18 (10:1-48)
Paul and the Ephesians	Acts 20:36-38
Transformations	Romans 12:1,2

**Stories, values, visions and suggestions for living**

Genesis 1,2 - the wonders of God and creation  
Job 38-41 - the powers of God in creation  
Isaiah 40 - the greatness of God; a special promise (v31)  
Psalms 95-100, 103, 104, 121, 122  
Isaiah 6:1-13; 25; 35  
the Gospels  
Colossians 1:15-20 - reconciliation through the supreme Christ  
Colossians 2:15 - disarming the powers  
Jude 24, 25 - praise to the powerful God  
Revelation 5:9-14; 7:11-17; 21:1-8; 22:1-7 - praise and visions of shalom

**Psalms and Proverbs**

1. For general readings or as an occasional discipline, try to read five Psalms and one chapter of Proverbs every day. You can read all the Psalms and the book of Proverbs in one month.

2. Some specific suggestions

The LORD is my rock                      Psalm 18  
The LORD is my shepherd                Psalm 23

The LORD is King                      Psalm 24  
The LORD is my light                Psalm 27

About the poor

Proverbs 14:21, 31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:22,23; 23:10,11; 29:7, 14.

About "Enough"

Proverbs 30:7-9

## **Read and reread the Gospels**

### **More suggestions for study and encouragement**

#### **Justice and peace**

Deuteronomy 6:1-15 (8:7-20) - do not forget God amid abundance; 30:15-20 - choose life

Deuteronomy 15; Isaiah 10:1-11 - do not rob the poor

Psalm 85:8-13; 146 - worship and peace and justice

Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 5:23,24 - worship and justice

Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4 - learn war no more

Isaiah 58 - a true fast, restoring the streets

Jeremiah 6: 13-15; 8:8-12 - only superficial peace

Ezekiel 3:17-21; 33:1-9 - be a watchman;

Ezekiel 34 - true shepherds of God

Micah 6:6-8 - do justice

1Thessalonians 5:11,13,15 - live at peace

1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 3:16; Romans 15:33 - - the God of peace

Ephesians 2:11-22 - Christ is our peace, breaking down walls

#### **Prayers, discussion with God**

Genesis 18:16-33 - Abraham, justice and prayer

Exodus 32,33 - Moses, a friend of God

2 Kings 19:14-19 (Isaiah 37:14-20) - Hezekiah with a letter in the temple

Psalm 130 - out of the depths

Jeremiah 12 - talking with God about "where is justice?"

Habakkuk - talking with God about "where is justice?" (note 3:17-19)

#### **Wisdom - "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom"**

Psalm 111; Proverbs 9:10

Proverbs 8 - wisdom speaks

Proverbs 3:5-8 - acknowledge the LORD

James 3:17,18 - the wisdom from above

#### **Hope and Visions**

Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-9; 65:24,25

Lamentations 3:19-23

Matthew 5-7

Romans 14:17-19; 15:13

Galatians 6:1-10

Philippians 4:6-8,11, 13

Hebrews 5:13-6:3; 10:19-25

1 John 3:1-3,16-18

Jeremiah 31:1-6, 27-34; 33:16

Ezekiel 37

Mark 10:17-52

2 Corinthians 1:2-4

Ephesians 3:8-10; 5:7-11

Colossians 3:1-17

1 Peter 5:6,7

#### **The Servant of the Lord**

Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 53:1-12

The information in this packet has been gathered from several sources:

MCC's Reentry Workbook for Overseas Mission Workers

"Fishers of Men" by Howard and Bonnie Kisech,

"Reentry Guide for Short Term Mission Leaders" by Lisa Espinelli Chinn

Mennonite Board of Missions' Reentry Guide