

# Survey of Returning Overseas Workers

## September 2011

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## **Introduction:**

Anecdotal reports suggest that the transition back into one's home culture from a period of time spent overseas may be every bit as difficult as the initial adaptation to the overseas culture. However, despite this being accepted as a major challenge, many returners have experienced difficulty and felt somewhat unsupported during this transition.

## **Aim:**

- 1) To quantify the responses of a spectrum of individuals returning to their home country following a period of overseas work.
- 2) To determine which are the greatest challenges
- 3) To determine ways in which the process may be improved for returners.

## **Method:**

Individuals who had returned from a period of overseas work during the previous five years were identified from the CMF database and personal contacts. A 'snowball' method of recruitment was used, whereby respondents were able to identify further contacts who may have been willing to take part. A 10 point survey, containing both quantitative and qualitative elements was constructed using Survey Monkey, and responses collected over a three month period between June and August 2011. Questions asked were:

1. How long were you overseas (options: Less than 1 year; 1-2 years; 2-4 years; 4-6 years; 6-10 years; and more than 10 years)
2. In what country?
3. What categories best described the type of work you were involved in? Up to three responses could be given and the options were: Mission/ church hospital; government medical; engineering; teaching; church-based work; other professional; other NGO; and non-working spouse
4. Did you go overseas through a mission organisation or with the support of a church? 'Support' includes helpful practical or spiritual input. Please select the best reply. Options were: sent via mission organisation; independent, but affiliated to mission organisation; independent, but some support from church; supported by church; and neither church nor mission organisation support.
5. On a scale of 1-10, how easy did you find the transition back to your home culture? (1=no problems at all; 10= severe difficulties encountered)
6. What were the three most positive things (personal or professional) about your return to your home country
7. What were the three most difficult things (personal or professional) about the transition?
8. What advice would you give a Christian overseas worker who is due to return?
9. How did your church/ supporting organisation help you to re-adjust?

10. How do you think supporting churches/ mission organisations/ Christian Medical Fellowship could help more with this process?

### **Data Analysis:**

Numerical data (regarding time spent overseas and the subjective difficulty score) were plotted as histograms to show the distribution of responses. Analysis of potential associations between length of time overseas, primary capacity of work and support structure with the difficulty scale used a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferonni's post-test. Non numerical data were categorised into themes. For example, when rating the three most positive and negative aspects of the return to the home country, items relating to difficulty relating to others, struggling to break back into friendship groups, the perception that one was not expected to have changed, the feeling of lack of interest in the time period spent overseas were classified together as 'being misunderstood'. Similarly, items relating to improved resources and efficacy in the workplace, the joy of working in a team again, opportunities for clinical training, clearer career paths and structures were classified as 'job factors'. 'Job practicalities' referred to items such as lack of knowledge of changes in NHS politics and procedures, difficulty in getting back onto the career ladder and difficulty in getting accreditation for work undertaken overseas. In contrast, 'job experience' referred to items relating to the confidence and up to date skills of the returning individual. A similar categorisation of themes was used to describe the actual support received by returners. When asked to give some advice for a Christian overseas worker who was due to return, a range of helpful responses were received; these were somewhat diverse and therefore are listed in fullness rather than being summarised. The final question, relating to potential ways to improve things for future returners, revealed several clear themes which are highlighted in the text, and represented graphically.

### **Results:**

Fifty six respondents took part. Twenty two countries were represented (Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Lesotho, Zambia, Nigeria, The Gambia, Sudan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Switzerland, UK, Canada, Ecuador and Guatemala). 73% were involved in medical work of whom 61% classified this as via 'mission/ church hospitals' and 39% as 'government medical'.

### **Question-by-Question Analysis of Results**

#### **How long were the respondents overseas?**

The respondents had been overseas for time periods from three months to greater than 10 years. The most frequently represented group were those who had been overseas for between two and four years.

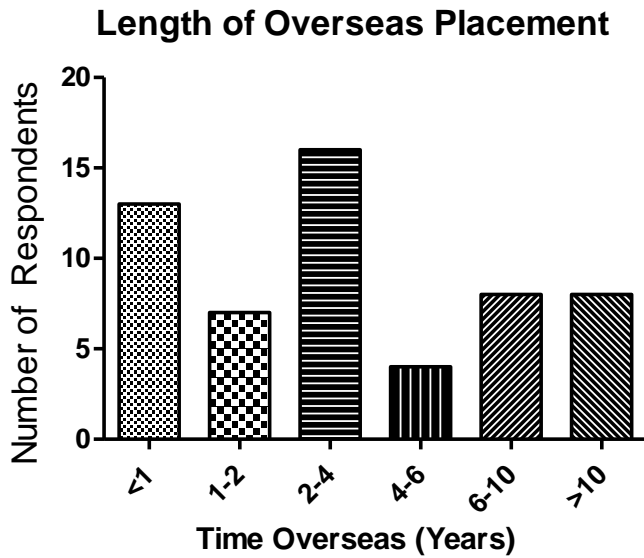


Figure 1 Length of time spent overseas

### How difficult did the respondents find the transition back 'home'?

Using the scoring system of 1-10 (where 1 represented no problems and 10 indicated that severe difficulties were encountered), responses were obtained as shown in Figure 2. 59% of respondents indicated a difficulty scale of at least 5 out of 10.

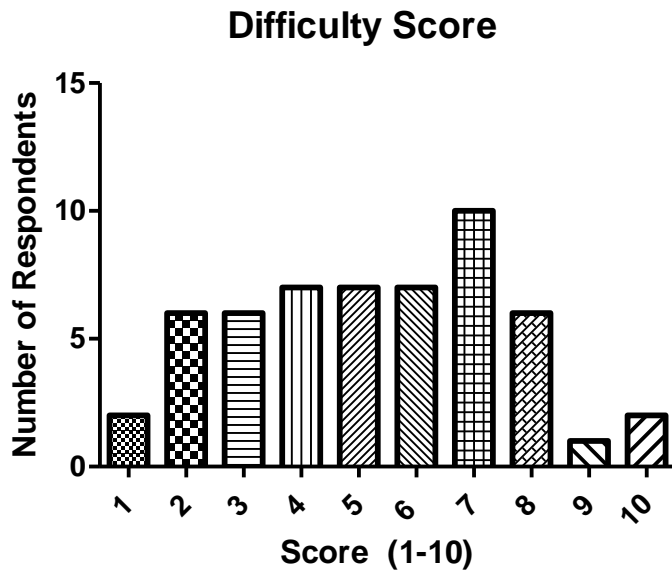


Figure 2 Difficulty score, with 1 indicating no problems and 10 indicating that severe difficulties were encountered

## Did time overseas, support mechanisms or the type of work undertaken have any association with the amount of difficulty experienced on return?

To determine whether the perceived difficulty in return had any association with either length of time overseas, the formal support structure of the individual or the type of work in which the individual was engaged, the analyses shown in Figures 3 to 6 were undertaken.

There was no association between length of time overseas and the difficulty experienced on return. Furthermore, there was no significant association between the degree of self-reported difficulty in adjustment and the formal support structure of the individual (independent, but affiliated to a mission organisation; independent, but some church support; mission organisation; supported by church; and neither church nor mission organisation support). A trend towards less difficulty experienced by those who were engaged primarily in church-based work, compared to other medical and non-medical professions did not reach statistical significance.

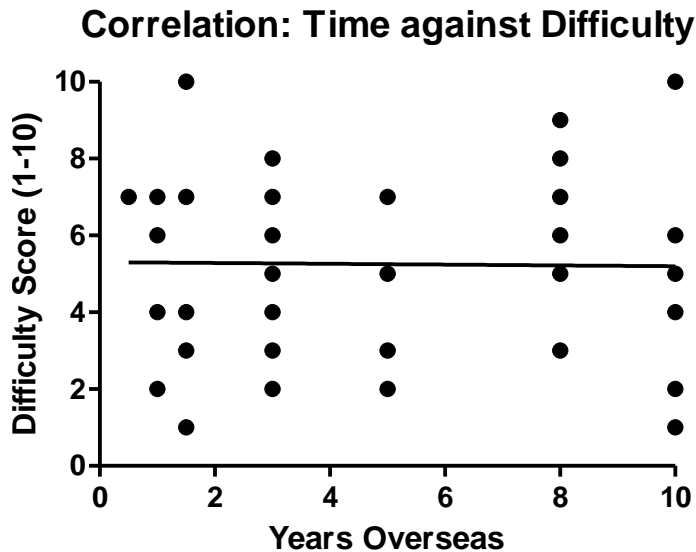


Figure 3 Correlation between years overseas and experience of difficulty upon return

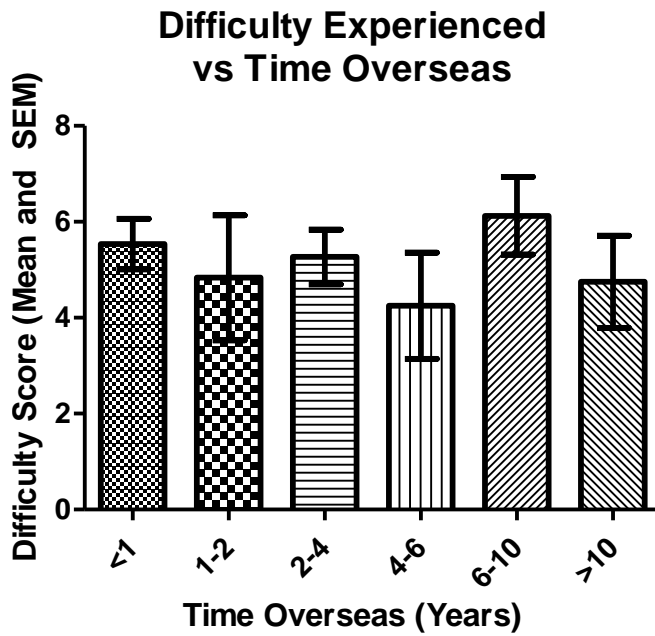


Figure 4 ANOVA of the mean (and SEM) of difficulty score and time period spent overseas

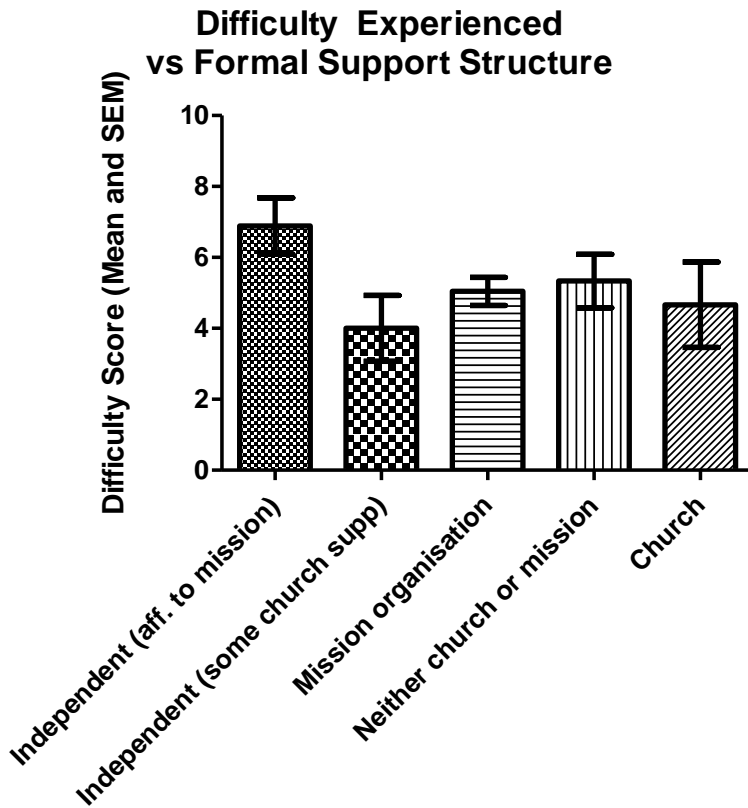


Figure 5 ANOVA of the mean (and SEM) of difficulty score and the formal support structure of the respondent

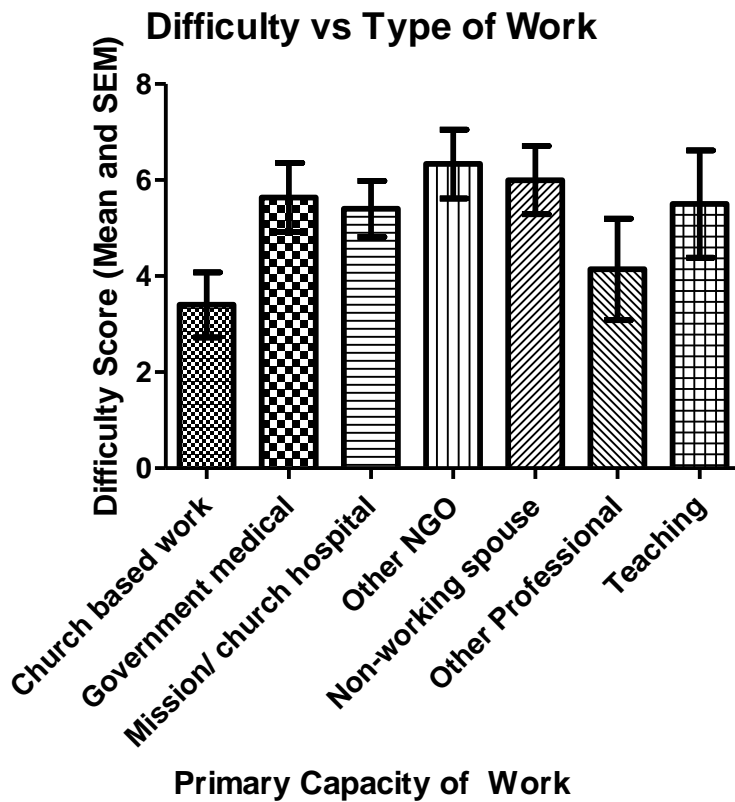


Figure 6 ANOVA of the mean (and SEM) of difficulty score and the primary capacity of work of the respondent

A significant proportion of respondents suggested that mandatory debriefing may ease the transition back to one's home country. However, analysis of perceived difficulty between those respondents who did undergo some form of debriefing compared to those who did not (Figure 7), revealed absolutely no difference in perceived difficulty of transition.

## Did Debriefing Reduce Difficulty?

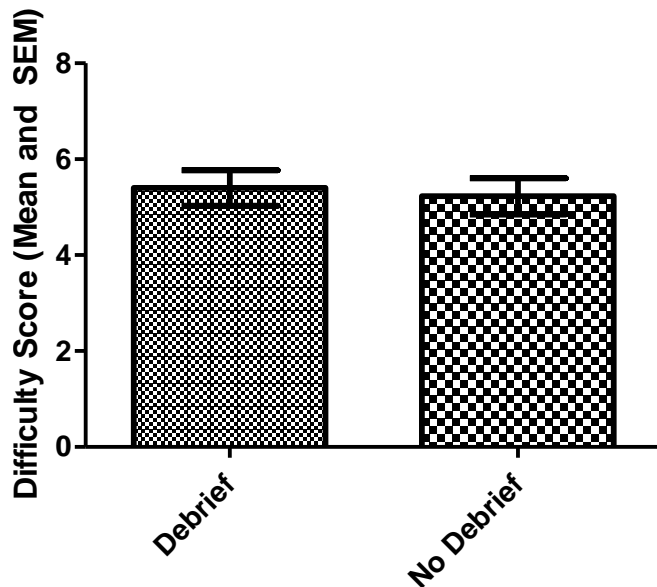


Figure 7 Mean and SEM of Difficulty Score in respondents who underwent debriefing, compared with those who did not

### What were the most positive and most negative aspects of the return home?

The responses given for the three most positive aspects of the return were pooled and grouped according to theme. The majority (85%) of respondents were pleased to return to friends and family. Almost half reported positive work-related factors, such as ease of communication, improved computer facilities, access to training, a clear career structure and improved team-working opportunities. The majority of other positive responses related to returning to a familiar culture and language where there were greater social, educational and recreational opportunities for children, and the existence of strong infrastructure, rich resources and political stability.

## Ten Most Positive Aspects of Return

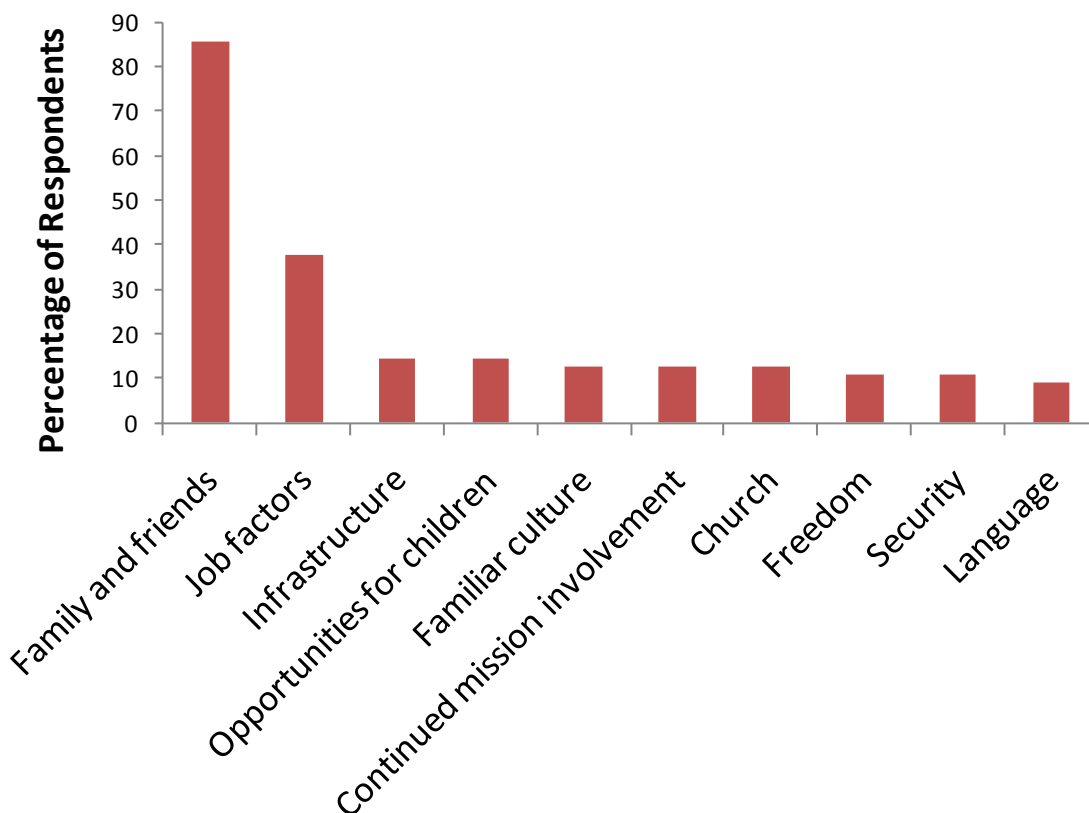


Figure 8 The ten most positive aspects of the return to the 'home' country

The most negative experiences for two thirds of respondents included feelings of being misunderstood, having difficulty in re-establishing relationships, feeling 'different' and isolated and feeling that others were not interested in the work undertaken overseas. Almost half reported practical difficulties in the move, relating to finding accommodation and work, having to move on several occasions and the need to settle children who had lived much of their lives overseas. More than a third of respondents cited leaving friends behind as a major challenge, in addition to missing some other aspects of the overseas community, including a more holistic and spiritual worldview, the incorporation of prayer and worship into daily hospital life and the sense of community. Almost a third struggled with the materialism and consumerism of the society to which they returned.

Forty two percent of respondents cited negative experiences relating to returning to work in their home culture. The majority of these comments came from people returning to work in medicine and dentistry, and included first of all practical difficulties, such as getting back onto registries, getting permanent positions, having work undertaken overseas accredited and becoming accustomed to changes within the NHS. Negative factors relating to the experience of work included lack of confidence and up-to-date

skills, a feeling that work was no longer as satisfying and frustrations at the high expectations of patients with minor medical complaints.

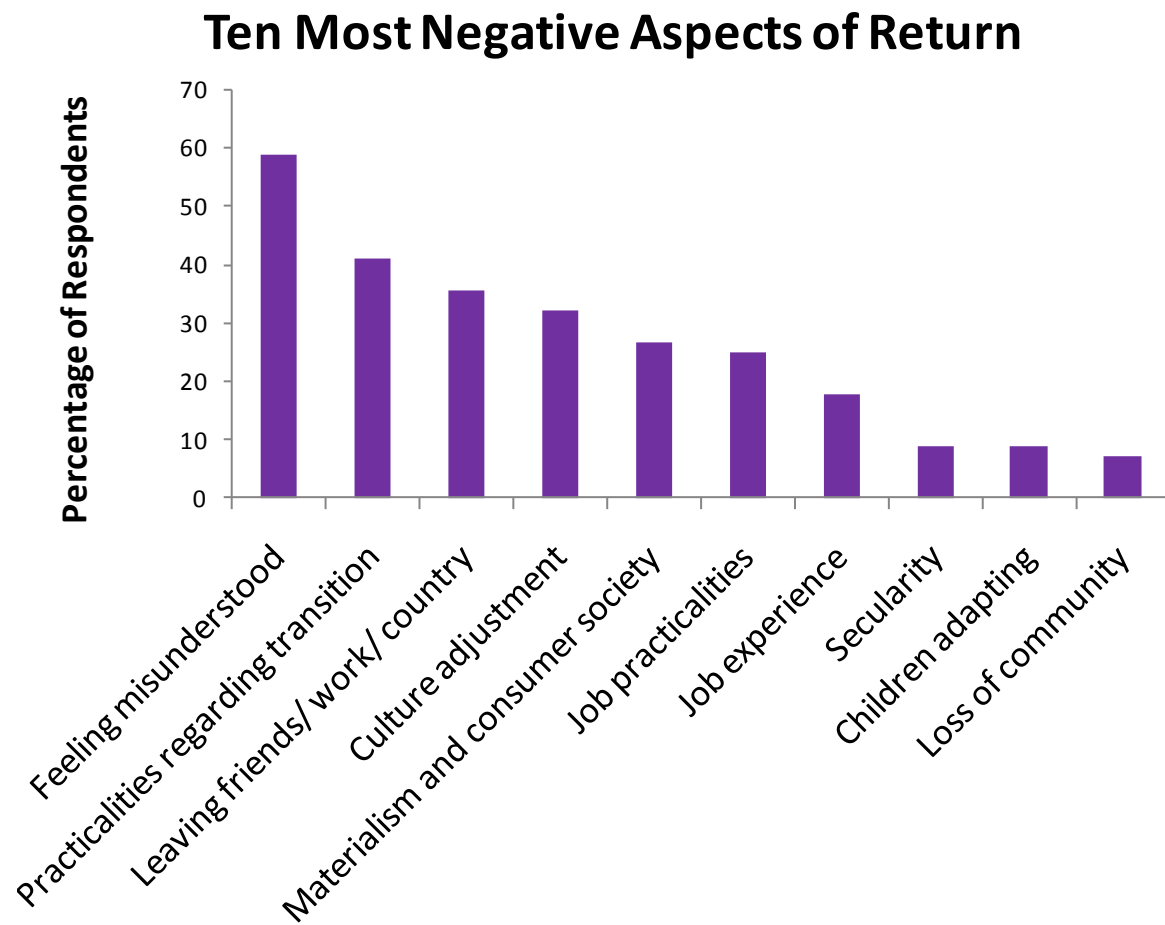


Figure 9 Ten most negative aspects of the return to the home country

### How were respondents supported during the transition period?

Respondents were asked about the support they received during the transition back home. Forty one percent of respondents stated that they did not receive any support during this period. For others, the two main categories of support were that provided by individuals – friendship, hospitality, showing an interest in the returner - and formal debrief procedures which were available to 21%. Only small numbers of respondents stated that they were supported by prayer, mentorship, the opportunity to share their overseas experiences and the continued interest of their church in the ongoing work overseas.

## Support Recieved on Return

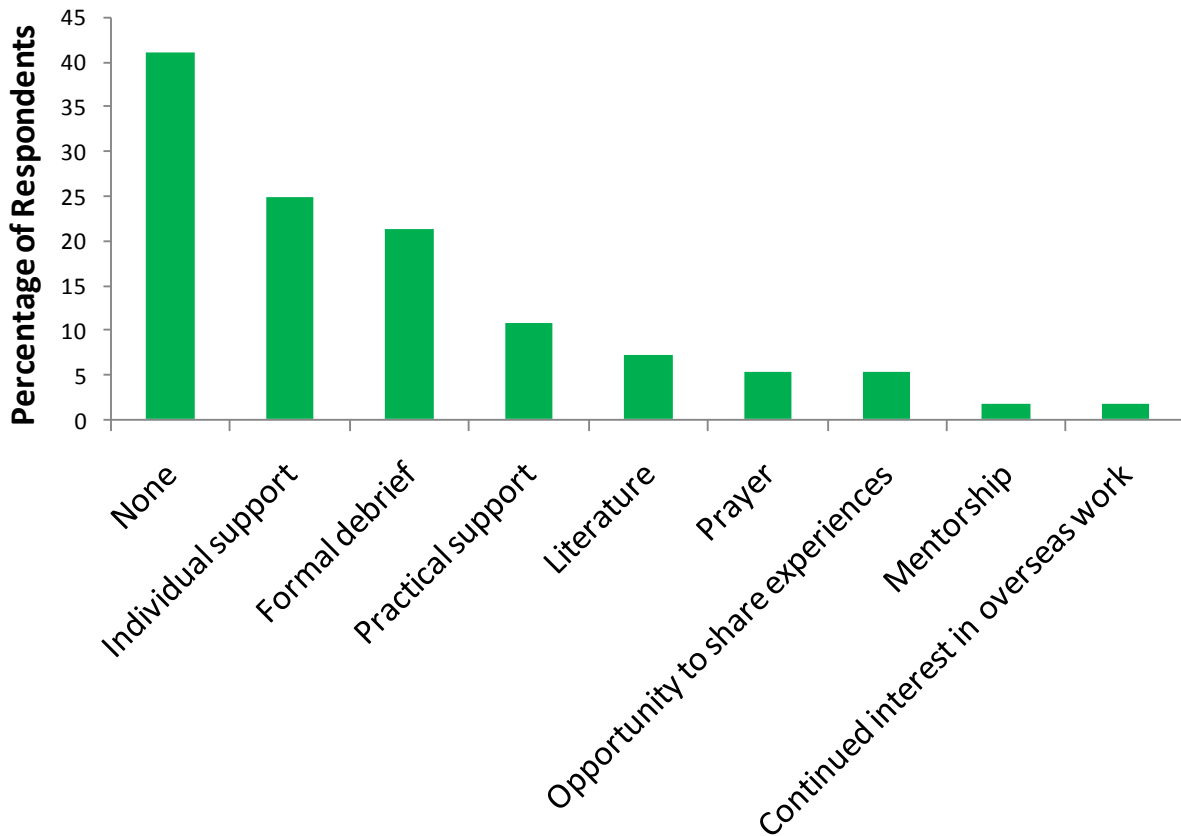


Figure 10 Support received by workers following their return to their home country

### What advice would you give to a Christian overseas worker who is due to return?

The responses received to this question were personal, diverse and helpful. It was difficult to categorise these according to themes, so they are listed here in their entirety.

- It takes time to settle back in. Don't expect things to be exactly the same as when you left.
- Read one of the excellent books about coming home - e.g. Re-entry (Can't remember who it is by. This one is best for trips up to a couple of years long - there are others for bigger transitions). Talk to people who come and go. Make sure you have a friend you can be really honest with.
- To make sure they have someone they can call in that country who has lived there and can relate to what you're going through.
- Prepare your return better than I did: say good-bye and hand-over your job a minimum of 4 weeks before you board the plane and tour the country in a relaxing way (without meeting Mr. & Mrs. X & Y).

- Having someone pick you up upon arrival, try to arrange as many things as possible before returning (home, work) to prevent the "fall into the black hole". Prepare mentally for the other culture shock...
- Before you return, spend some time thinking about and reflecting on your experiences. If you kept a journal read the first few entries to remind you how you felt when you arrived, Often the 'culture shock' is worse going back so don't be surprised if you find things hard at first.
- Know that it's going to be difficult. Pray. Talk to people about how you feel. Get involved in new things. Realise that God will use you everywhere.
- think about it before you leave overseas, and consider what you want to do when you return and actively plan how you will do it
- Maintain mentors (ideally more than one) who can help/ advise on the transition back to work in the UK. If able to be appraised (if medic), to maintain this and probably to stay registered with GMC (or other professional body). Do not expect the added value you bring to be recognised as a positive, it may be regarded as a 'distraction' as not in Job Description. There are a minimum set of requirements, which have to be met, and you need to show how you meet these competencies, when other trainees will have a tick box CCST confirming them, whereas you may struggle to 'prove' yourself competent if returning as a consultant. On applying for posts I was told to reference competencies to UK work (if possible) rather than my overseas experience, as appointment committees were looking to governance reference points in the UK. To do this expect to do locums or attachments, with a view to evidencing in the UK the requirements (e.g. audit) on a JD.
- Prayerfully consider if this is time to return. Be prepared and support family in preparation for changes. Focus on the positive aspects of what God is calling you back home to do - but do not underestimate, and be open and talk about the things that you will miss.
- I delayed getting a job for a few months on return, to help kids (and myself) settle back into UK and I think that helped a lot. God does have a plan and is in control, and is the same, remaining faithful in this country as in Africa. Keeping up to date with appraisals was very helpful in getting back into work in UK.
- i) Coming back is much easier if coming back to a job which is international health related rather than completely UK focused. ii) Keep in touch with overseas friends - many UK friends are either not interested or won't fully understand / want to hear about overseas experiences
- Think about it actively. Seek out people who can help you with transition. Talk to your church about how they have dealt with this kind of thing before.
- Be prepared. Resolve any outstanding issues before leaving if possible (as much as depends on you). Try and link up with others who have been through it and can provide mentorship and support. Expect it to be difficult. Try and see it as a move from one mission field to another, rather than a return home; a Christian should never really feel truly at home in this world
- Expect it to be difficult. Make a decision to be regularly thankful for the good things. Return to the place where you have history if you can. Get together with other returnees who understand
- To have plenty of time to reflect on experience, easing back into working life as easily as possible. To have some formal structured debriefing, particularly if identified very stressful experiences.
- Speak to someone at you home church who knows what you are going through. Give it time, it takes at least a few months to get back into the swing of things even if you've only been away for a few months.
- That they should start sorting out their plans for their return well in advance of coming home

so that they have something to come back to and finding someone who can act as a mentor type figure on their return

- Expect it to take time and give yourself that time. Don't expect things to be normal straight away (which is what I did!)
- To pray, to speak about the feelings with persons who are knowing the same experience, mentoring for a longer time. Read information about re-culture-shock and give your family and friends information about the re- culture-shock
- Expect everything and give yourself time. No rush and just enjoy to be back.. then find soon work or an occupation to have a fix schedule in the day
- Pray - know God loves you - know He is providing support for you. My testimony is that one day whilst trying to read my Bible I saw a verse in the concordance section I had not seen before Psalm 68:6a - that week I found a cousin lived locally and her and her family became a great source of encouragement and support.
- Be kind to yourself Give yourself space and time to process Debrief either formally or with friends Don't expect everything to go smoothly, even though it is a 1st world country. Be aware that not automatically entitled to NHS treatment or benefits
- Take time to debrief with your organisation Try not to make any major decisions in the first few months of being back i.e. changing church/job etc. Pace yourself- expect to feel out of sorts/ emotionally up and down and be gentle Get in touch with people who have recently returned - talk to them and share how you feel. Reminisce about your time away Get some time of extended prayer - especially over any difficulties experienced on the field
- Find a welcoming church if you are in a new area. Re-establish links with friends. Keep in touch with overseas friends. Look forward, but cherish your memories. Accept that it will be difficult at first Pray
- Look for opportunities to serve and be interested in what is happening among the people that are your new community
- 1. Have a support group/family/friends at home who will help prepare things on the home side. e.g. finding a suitable house to rent or even just cleaning up the house owned by the returnee. Have some food/milk/coffee etc. ready for the first few days. 2. Plan to take time to settle back. The longer overseas the longer to settle in. i.e. don't plan to go straight to work within a few days of return. Even give time for holiday to see family/friends before rushing into meetings. 3. If returning with kids, will need special consideration of their needs. e.g. bring pictures or items that remind them of people they are leaving behind and may never see again. Prepare ahead of time for the transition from one school to another. 5. Depending on the reason for return, may need to calculate some de-brief time or even psychiatric assessment to work through painful experiences or broken relationships on the field. etc.
- Take more time to say goodbye and think about leaving in advance, so that it does not overcome you. Talk to children about leaving to prepare them.
- Find someone who has done it before - someone to talk through issues with, someone who at least understands the questions if not necessarily providing the answers; give yourself time and space - treat coming 'back' to your passport country as your new mission field - learn the culture, the language etc. just as you did when you went overseas. Remember what culture shock is - you will experience it again. Assume this is a foreign country - if you have been overseas for any length of time then a lot will have changed. Learn what you can before you get here - look at local newspapers, read editorials etc. to see what the current issues are. My husband went onto the Guardian website called 'Comment is free' in an attempt to understand the debates and assumptions that are out there.

- Give people the benefit of the doubt. They don't ask the right questions because they don't know the right questions to ask. It's not that they don't care. Be patient with them and at the same time seek out someone who has had similar experiences so that you have a place where you can vent.
- I think every situation is different so it's hard to give generic advice. For GPs I would strongly suggest not dropping off the performers' list as it is such a chore getting back on it. And in general try to go back to where you have family/friends/ church support rather than starting all over again in yet another new place.
- Speak to someone who has already been there. Don't assume that it was the way it was when you left, especially if you have been away a long time. It is reverse culture shock. Remember God doesn't get it wrong!
- Have some counselling or get a support person to talk to once every few weeks about how the transition is going. Keep that up for at least a year.
- Don't have high expectations on yourself in get up to speed immediately
- Expect some difficulties. Get back into your local church ASAP, get to know new people there. Start early to find out about working professionally in the UK again.
- Perhaps to be aware that change is not so easy. To be ready for feeling a little alone and not understood.
- Pray! Hang in there despite the pain
- Take time, try to sort out some work and accommodation before you get home.
- To be prepared that, even though you are returning "home", that your experience has changed you and your perspective and so that you will need to prepare and work hard to settle back in upon return.
- Don't set goals and expectations too high. Don't go it alone.
- Make sure you keep professional links and paperwork up to date
- take time to leave well and say good goodbyes so you don't have regrets
- Reminder of the material secular nature of the UK
- Before you even go overseas find out the implications in your profession. e.g. registration, NHS regulations. Stay where you are!!!!!! (just joking!)
- Remember that friends and family are so much more a factor in feeling settled and happy than standard of living. Look forward to it.
- Remember that other people may have had changes in their lives while you've been away and you need to remember to ask them how they are as well as to tell them what you have been doing. Also to take it slow on return - to rest, gradually reintroduce things into normal life. To acknowledge that it might be hard - therefore not to be surprised if it is!
- Take the lead in talking about time away/showing photos etc. - if you don't, you might never be asked! It's important for your friends to know about your time away, and likewise you have to remember a lot has gone on for them in the time you've been away. - Realise it can take a lot of time to re-adjust - Maintain links with some of the people you knew/organisations you worked with overseas. - Talk to people who have also worked abroad and returned to your home country.
- Take time to settle back in, reflect on your time and write it down.
- To read the book "Re-entry" by Peter Jordan before you come home to prepare yourself. Don't expect people to be interested. Make an appointment to see your pastor/ mission committee; don't expect them to come to you. Prepare yourself for insensitive questions e.g. Why don't you have a suntan? Plan in some time to reflect before starting on the next thing. Don't isolate

yourself. Pray!

- Be prepared for reverse culture shock(!): keep church contacts fully informed of your practical needs on return, ask them to appoint one or more persons to liaise with you to assist with practical needs and inform the church of these. Accept it will take at least one year to adjust and settle.
- Have a holiday to rest before you get busy. Pray with someone else regularly who has been through the same transition. Maintain family traditions that you enjoyed on the mission field: e.g. movie night with home-made pop-corn and pizza; making American pancakes; BBQ; have friends over for games evenings.
- Go through a debriefing time, preferably before arriving home. During that time set up reasonable boundaries personally and for your family. Document the positives about your cross-cultural experience, so that you don't lose the lessons God taught you. Be realistic about your re-entry timeframe. Get involved with church, work, and family but don't get too involved too quickly.
- If wanting to return to professional work make sure that the PCT or equivalent is clear about their requirements
- Be ready for some culture shock. If you have a spouse, talk through the transition with them since they'll be going through the same thing. If there are others who are moving back around the same time as you, keep in contact with them. They'll also understand what you are going through.
- Recognise that re-entry can be a difficult process and don't be surprised if you struggle - this obviously can be manifested in a variety of ways. Depending upon how long you have been overseas allow yourself a realistic length of time to adjust to life back 'home'. Remember you have returned from your service overseas a changed person - folk back home have not been through the same experiences and so don't either expect them to think the same way you do or judge them for not
- Work towards returning - don't leave in a rush

### How could church/ mission organisations/ CMF better support returning workers?

The response to the question of how the process could be improved for future overseas workers yielded several important themes. The responses are listed below in their entirety, with words relating to a specific theme highlighted in bold. Key themes are then presented in Figure 10. Forty per cent of respondents suggested that mentorship, either formal or informal, possibly involving the creation of networks of returners, would be of benefit. A quarter suggested that simply showing an interest in the returner, their experiences overseas, the process of transition and the on-going work would be helpful. Fifteen per cent would have valued opportunities to share their experiences, perhaps as a short talk or presentation, and 12% recommended that a debriefing process should be mandatory for returners.

- **Give time** to people to chat **about their experience and future plans**
- Actually I think most missions are handling this well these days. This was not the case after my first trip - for my elective, where I had terrible reverse culture shock and was almost paralysed

by the supermarket and the strange way people around me were behaving! I think the church can only be available, but as they are not dealing with this all the time and few people in any one church will know about it, expecting them to know what to do is unrealistic and unfair.

**CMF could help bridge the gap for people who don't go with a mission - perhaps by providing a buddy near where you will live who has previously been overseas themselves.**

- I am not really sure how the church could help more... it is really very hard for them to relate to what life was like over there, and although they may care for us very much, they don't have the same interest in the foreign country as we do. **It is very appreciated though, when kids our age try to make us feel at home and befriend us.** Their effort is definitely noticed, and makes it easier to feel settled in the US again.
- Send their **consultant or experienced ex-missionary on time to you to help, guide and allow you through the process of returning.**
- **Offer hospitality** if appreciated when arriving back (stay/eat at good friends, to support a nice and safe transition). Being there at airport. Offer possibility to welcome the transitioned in a service, **giving a short presentation if appreciated.**
- **Linking returning workers with people who have been through a similar experience could be helpful; talking things through with someone who has been there before would have been useful.**
- Point to God's word. Mission is not only going abroad. The whole world is a mission field. Where God places you, you will serve, whether it is Africa or Europe. A 'normal' job should not be seen as 'less' than a mission job.
- Could do an **online 'going home consultation'** e.g. now you are going home have you thought about these things? Do you have a plan to address them? Could be done three to six months before going home
- I think there is an underestimation of the challenge, particularly as governance procedures are not well set up to approve returnees. Many people find GMC/ GDC and others are focussed on UK people at present and have not the structures/ processes to support overseas returnees. The added value from working overseas is well stated at a higher level (e.g. Crisp report) but do not expect local appointment committees, Trusts and colleagues to be so affirmative - advocacy at many levels is still required. **CMF can continue to do this with GMC government, and (through our colleagues) at local level. A network of people willing to support attachments may be helpful, and possibly mentors to give realistic advice on the process,** and even help writing CVs and appointment proforma application forms to bring out the (evidenced) criteria selection committees are seeking. **A resource (web or printed) ideally for people when going out, to advise on how to maintain skills, and appraisals for the return process.** Possibly to offer to do appraisals overseas, or in UK (a register of CMF staff trained as appraisers willing to do this) and in time revalidation too. I think mission organisations may not yet realise that the dynamic person in the UK, and overseas, may need a significant period (?supported) in the UK before re-establishing themselves in UK practice. For some this should be planned for in their post, and might influence the period spent overseas, provision of (valid) periods of accreditation within a post, or at least an awareness of the potential cost of overseas service if away for more than 3-5 years.
- Perhaps some written **(on-line) guidance pack** for these organisations detailing common concerns/ difficulty on re-entering UK - contacts for those requiring more assistance. ? **database of those returned a few years ago** (may be especially important for families with school-aged children)
- **Maybe putting returning families in touch with other families who have been through a**

**similar experience. Does CMF hold a register of people willing to offer others support, with info on kids ages and stages at return?**

- Mission organizations could help **by providing links to others who've gone through a similar process / are established and can give advice on getting back into UK work** (e.g. who are already in the specialty to which person is returning to)
- **More information** about difficulties. **More information for churches and friends** to help with transition back. Thinking, and therefore realizing, things may be hard
- 1) **Literature and resources** - make them accessible. **Seminars on returning at conferences.** Articles which **would be read by those with no experience of overseas work** i.e. those who will support returners day to day 2) **Mentorship programmes (those who have returned will probably welcome the opportunity to mentor others going through the same)** 3) **Chances to discuss the overseas work and any on-going issues or prayer points** - could be formal (i.e. from front of a church) or informal 4) Simply ask some questions and **show some interest.** 5) Do not assume a returner can simply slot back into their 'old' life 6) CMF/ organisations could **follow up returners and have plans for how to help those who have struggled to readjust**
- Formal opportunity to welcome back and **debrief?** Over a meal? Being aware that it can be a bereavement process **that takes a long time** - just checking up how you're doing
- Have links to organizations like Interhealth, perhaps having policies that all workers should have a **formal debrief.** Have a low threshold for further support if problems identified.
- Have dedicated **support workers** like described above.
- Cultivate **links with agencies/organisations** that exist to help investigate future options (e.g. work, living arrangements etc.)
- A **retreat** for returnees?
- A **workshop** or course about this theme would be good **and a mentor**
- Give the returner **more time** to come home but to encourage them to have a talk or something and not expecting that this person will be the same like he/she was before he/she left.
- It might be worth ensuring that there is a planned method of a meal at least monthly so that the returnee could know that they had a (**preferably friendly older mentor type of person** to chat to in a small group) and to pray with.
- Have a **welcome home team** to provide **practical support** e.g. groceries, clothes shopping, etc. Be updated on changes in NHS work, GMC, pensions since leaving the country Provide options for support outside of church/sending agency that are available, e.g. Keswick, retreat houses for overseas folk, a person to be a 'sounding-board', or 'release valve' **Organising get-togethers for those in similar situations in geographical area.** Help from church to use new skills acquired overseas that could be used in the church family.
- Provide opportunities both formal and informal for the returning missionary to **debrief, share their experiences** and integrate back into the church
- No experience so cannot comment
- Not sure
- Having a **welcome team** that will smooth the transition for the returnee. They may only work in the background and not actually meet the returnee, but would have found out the needs of the returnee and worked to help make the first few days easier, even if that meant an interim accommodation for the first week to rest/unwind IF needed. Needs would be different for each person and those with good family backup would need less from organisations CMF could help with advice for licence renewal, finding jobs if none lined up to return to.
- Advice on how to re-settle, and how to look back on the time abroad positively. Also advice on

daily life in the home country i.e. health insurance.

- **Link people up with a 'buddy' - someone who has trodden the path before - to give hints and ideas, but mostly just to listen and be able to understand where the person is at**
- **Could create support networks of "returnees" that get together every now and then.**  
Though of course, the key will be not to create an exclusive clique that isolates itself further from the culture they've returned to (we refer to these types of groups as "when we's" in Zimbabwe - because they're always living in the past and can be somewhat bitter about their present experiences), but to support them in re-engaging meaningfully with that culture. Could also produce **some guides for Churches** to help them be aware of what returnees may be facing.
- Vicky Lavy was great and **she put me in touch with other GP returners** and helped me sort out GMC legalities. Otherwise CMF was pretty useless too as there was no group meeting in this area so finding fellowship with local Christian doctors was a bit hit and miss. (I have now helped launch a group to address this lack) I think the main need is for help with **practical things**, like sorting out a car, offering accommodation, helping families get kids into school, (which you can't do without proof of address), depending on the season when you get home even making sure everyone has warm coats etc. **And professionally, again depending on the situation, sounding out local hospital trusts/PCTs for jobs, finding out what documentation is needed etc.** For example, it was only on arriving home I discovered I needed police clearance from Mozambique in order to get my CRB clearance here. That kind of news is not welcome, and having someone this end who lets you know what's needed to get GMC registration, CRB clearance etc. can make it all go far more smoothly. **I think this is an area CMF could really help with** as these things are a bit specialised to expect a local church to know about, but are fairly standard, so CMF could put together a '**returning home**' pack.
- They need to accept that missionaries have had their eyes really opened. Some of the things that have done this have been good, but others have been bad. **The above need to ensure that there is someone to contact who knows where you're coming from.**
- They could **interview the returners** so everyone understands where they came from what their previous life was like. **Support the country or place they came from**, pray for friends left behind or contacts made.
- facilitate support for those **returning from people who've worked overseas previously**
- **Maybe a meeting of people who have returned within past year, to chat and offer each other advice/support?** Maybe someone to contact the new returnee to see how things are going (this could be done by volunteers e.g. **people who have been abroad themselves** and already made the adjustment back here)
- Everyone is different and some want more input than others. I think there just needs to be the offer and the **awareness** that help is at hand if that is what is required.
- Encourage them to find/make friends in UK despite loss. No great wisdom. It's just tough.
- Realise that it is a transition and it may be difficult to get straight back to work, expect us to come back worn out and very tired.
- **Actively link up people who have been abroad and returned (or who are from abroad) - whether in the particular church or the wider community.** Conversions with appropriate members of the leadership team to understand what people who have been abroad have learnt and experienced.
- Simply **being aware of potential difficulties** is very helpful. Being willing to ask questions and offer assistance. Don't assume that because help is not asked for it is not needed or wanted.
- The planning for return must be done **as soon as worker is deployed**

- Our church could have actively prayed and counselled us when we came home. i think they felt that the mission org had done this and that was enough
- Unable to comment
- CMF and CDF could have vital roles in this. But I stress **more should be done at outset rather than when returning**. CDF could put together a **pack of information** about procedure on returning to country as it is a minefield.
- Recognising the need to **accountability groups** for people to fit in to. Also, allowing them to do things in church so that they can get quickly involved.
- **Providing literature** and for **people to be available to talk to** if someone is struggling with returning to their home country. **Prayer support** is essential!
- Most importantly, **by asking about the person's time away** - sitting down and having a proper conversation about it. Also by giving **opportunities for people to talk about their time away during church services/cell group meetings** etc.
- **I spent time with my mentor in church** and talked about the time in Malawi and the problems with the readjust.
- Church mission committee (if there is one) should firstly offer **practical help** e.g. How is the person getting home from airport, do they have somewhere to stay, clothes to wear? (I gave all mine away). Should offer **debrief sessions**, I think at least once a week for first few weeks, just to talk about their time away. Maybe financial help if possible if person doesn't have a job. **Opportunities to talk publically about overseas work**, if not possible to whole church, maybe to home groups. **Maybe opportunities to speak to others who have worked abroad**. How the person can be actively involved in church life, and be a part of local mission.
- By being **pro-active**. Not waiting for requests for help (they will probably not be sought as most don't want to admit to need or be a nuisance to others!) The church should know of your return, publicise it, and take responsibility for appointing a liaison person whom you approve. Do not immediately ask for "reports" on your time abroad, **give space for settling** and reflection. Be practical - prayer and renewed fellowship are great - but do you need a baby sitter, or help with shopping in the absence of a vehicle!!
- Review the last season of life with you. Help you with financial costs of setting up in a new location. Help with **practical advice** on issues such as setting up the phone and internet, tax, and online shopping. **Ask you to share about your experiences** for an evening.
- We went to a healing prayer retreat during our last furlough. This was extremely helpful. I would recommend this to others.
- They could provide **material items** to the returning people. When moving internationally, you have to start completely from scratch. You have to buy food, cleaning products, mop, broom, etc. and it ends up being a huge up front cost. A lot of times the people returning also won't have a vehicle or any furniture. Helping out in material ways like that would make the transition easier.
- One thing I felt was lacking from our church was practical support when we were settling into our home - for example help with transporting furniture, childcare (we had three young children at the time). One evening a member of the church came by and dropped off a lasagne for us for dinner. I was so grateful I could have wept - it was that kind of support that we could have done with more of.
- Get in touch regularly, be honest about maybe not understanding the feelings the returning worker has - but just be there for them.

## Suggestions to Improve Process

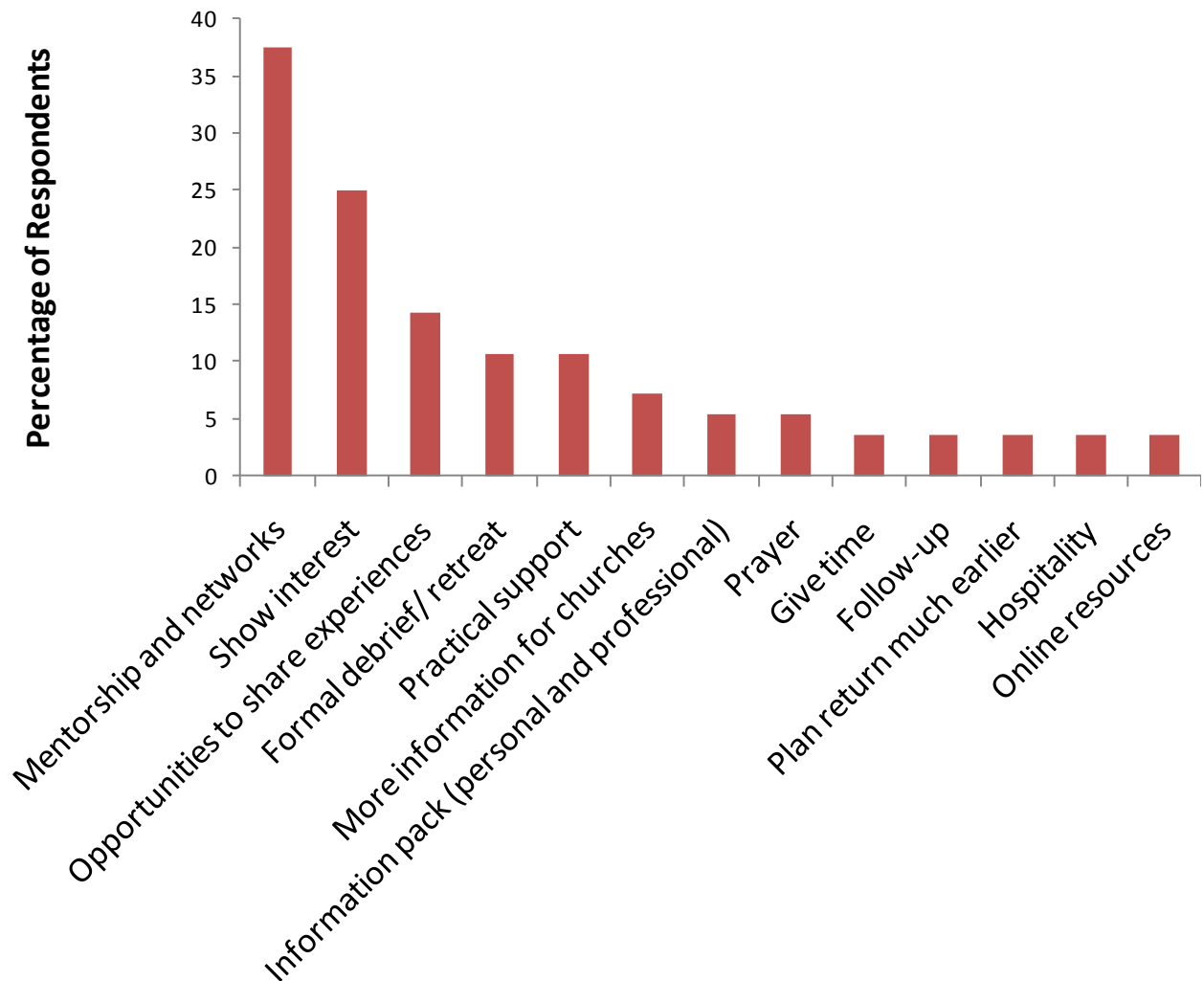


Figure 11 Suggestions as to how churches and sending organizations could improve the process of transition

### Limitations

This study has several important limitations. Firstly, it was a simple 10 point questionnaire, and did not seek to determine in detail the experiences of respondents whilst overseas and during the transition home. Such information would be best gained through the use of semi-structured interviews followed

by more rigorous qualitative analysis. Specific areas of interest would relate to the time overseas, whether any traumatic or particularly challenging circumstances arose and whether the individual experienced any significant life events such as bereavement or the birth of children whilst overseas. The circumstances surrounding the return could have been explored, for example whether this was a planned or sudden return, and whether the individual left gladly or with reluctance. Secondly, it was a retrospective survey, with a variable time period between the return and the collection of these data; bias may be introduced as memories of the experience become selective. Thirdly, although a significant number of participants underwent some form of debriefing, we did not explore whether this took a recommended format, and current evidence suggests that debriefing should be done properly in order to be beneficial. Nonetheless, the data obtained and the conclusions presented in this report are informative and suggest several clear areas where improvements could be made by churches or supporting organizations to aid the returning overseas worker.

## Discussion

This survey drew from the experiences of 56 individuals who had worked in 22 different countries for periods of between three months and more than ten years. Almost two thirds reported a difficulty scale of five out of 10 or greater. The length of time overseas, the formal support structures during the time period overseas and the nature of the work undertaken did not show a significant association with the subjective degree of difficulty encountered upon return.

The most positive aspects of the return related to being re-united with friends and family, the return to a country with familiar language and culture, and the existence of strong infrastructure, personal freedom and political stability. The most negative experiences related to feeling misunderstood following the overseas experience, and practical difficulties relating to relocation and becoming re-established in the workplace.

Most participants provided helpful comments regarding the advice they would give a Christian worker who was due to return from a period of time overseas. Themes covered were the need to prepare for the move; to take time to tidy up loose ends in the host country; the need to anticipate challenges; the value of mentorship and support, possibly provided by somebody who had recently made a similar transition; and importantly, the need to trust that God has a good and perfect plan and will continue to use you and be with you in your new place of work.

There was a disparity between the actual support received by returners and the recommendations made to improve the process for future returners. For example, only 2% of participants commented that they received mentorship through the transition process, whereas 37% suggested this would be a highly beneficial activity. It is a matter of concern that 41% of respondents did not feel they received any support from their church or sending organisation during their transition home, and it is striking that a quarter suggested that one of the main things that could be done to improve the process for others would be to simply have an interest shown in the time spent overseas, the challenges faced during the

return, and the on-going work in the overseas country. Bias may have been introduced at this point, as an individual may have perceived that they received little or no support, whereas fellow church member may have felt that much was done to prepare for their return. However, this is unlikely to provide the full explanation for this statistic. There may be a perception by receiving churches, friends and family that they cannot understand the returner, and hence a fear of being ill equipped to best support them; the responses to this survey suggest that simply being available to listen, discuss, ask questions and show an interest in the overseas work would be highly beneficial in easing a difficult transition. Only 5% reported that they were given opportunities to share their experiences with others, whereas 14% suggested that the opportunity, be it formal or informal, would aid the transition process for others. 21% of respondents had undergone a formal debrief process, and 11% of the cohort suggested that this should become a mandatory process, with opportunity for follow-up and potential referral should difficulties be extreme. However, it is notable that the perceived difficulty score amongst those who underwent a debriefing procedure did not differ from those who did not; potential confounding reasons, such as the degree of difficulty and trauma experienced overseas, the life events of the respondent and their personal circumstances, and whether the return to the home country was anticipated and planned or sudden and forced, were not explored by this survey.

Seven percent of respondents were given some literature regarding the transition process, which they found helpful; a similar proportion recommended the provision of literature not for themselves, but for those who might have little knowledge of overseas work, but who would be involved in their support structures following return (for example, churches, friends and family). In response to the professional difficulties encountered, 6% of respondents recommended that specialized organizations such as the Christian Medical Fellowship, put together a 'returner's pack' consisting of essential information regarding the transition back into the NHS following a period working overseas.

## Conclusions

This study identified some of the main difficulties experienced by Christian workers returning from a period of time overseas. In addition, a wide range of helpful advice for future returners was provided together with suggestions for improving the process overall. Specific areas to be acted upon include the formalization of mentorship and networks; the more wide availability of debriefing, especially for those who did not work under the umbrella of a charity or mission organization; the development of literature for those who will be involved in supporting the returner; and the creation of a resource pack for returning healthcare professionals.

### Survey report by Catriona Waitt

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