Preparing for Your 
NURSING OR MIDWIFERY ELECTIVE 
OVERSEAS
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Introduction
Some of you reading this booklet will have entered nursing specifically with the idea of serving the Lord overseas, some of you will be looking to test the path – heading out on a short term overseas experience to see if a longer stint might be one of the opportunities for service that God has given you – others of you will have never seriously thought of heading overseas before and are tentatively exploring the idea for the first time.

More and more students are now getting the opportunity to go overseas during the course of their training – either as a specific elective opportunity or during the summer vacation. For some students it’s the first thing on their mind – they are not so concerned about their first ward placement, their first injection, their first delivery… what they really want to know is how soon they can be packing their bags for the tiny Leprosy Mission on the far side of the Andes.

Whatever stage you’re at in your thinking, however enthusiastic or uncertain you might feel about venturing into the unknown, this booklet is designed to give you some practical tips on planning your elective, so that you are well prepared and able to get the most out of your experience.

How CSNM & HealthServe Can Help You?
This booklet has been prepared by HealthServe, the overseas mission ministry of Christian Medical Fellowship (CMF) in conjunction with Christian Student Nurses and Midwives (CSNM), in order to assist you in preparing for an overseas nursing elective.

We cannot organise your elective for you and neither CMF nor CSNM are sending agencies for mission to less developed countries (LDCs) but we are both part of larger networks that can help you at almost every step of the way. Many of our members are involved in mission situations overseas. In addition, we also have extensive links with hospitals abroad; UK-based mission agencies and other organisations within the International Christian Medical and Dental Association (ICMDA) and Nurses Christian Fellowship International (NCFI) networks in other countries (see Appendices).

So if you have questions about why, where, when and how you should go, or about the practicalities of travel, immunisations, visas and life in another culture, this booklet will be a good place to start. If it doesn’t answer all your queries, contact HealthServe at healthserve@cmf.org.uk as a first port of call, and we can probably put you in touch with someone who can.

Planning a good nursing elective takes time (12-18 months), careful thought and thorough forward planning. The sooner you get on with it the better.

Why Go?
This might sound a daft question – especially if you’re already convinced that this is what you want to do, but it is worth taking a few moments just to think through some of the many different reasons why an overseas elective is worth the hassle planning it. Your reasons for going will form the foundations for your Aims and Objectives whilst you are out there, and if you don’t get these right then you are likely to have had an expensive waste of time.

• **To Experience Another Culture**
  Even though many UK city’s are extremely cosmopolitan, and the world quite literally on our
doorstep these days, visiting the homelands of some of our neighbours will help us to understand them and their culture better. We'll have greater insight into the kinds of difficulties they have adjusting to our culture; we'll give them pleasure being able to talk from experience about the part of the world that they are from; we'll have a greater awareness of those aspects of our own unconscious daily routine that are also specifically cultural; and we'll have a much bigger vision of God as we start to experience for ourselves the enormity and diversity of the world that he has created and controls.

• **To Develop a Wider view of Healthcare**
  Concepts of healthcare, the health needs of the individual and communities, and the provision of care for the sick and needy vary hugely across the world. Not every culture subscribes to biomedicine, giving you an opportunity to appreciate both its value and its weaknesses; nursing is perceived quite differently even in many western countries and the prevailing illnesses and trigger factors are similarly unique from continent to continent.

• **To Grow in Faith** – Relating to God in an unfamiliar environment inevitably leads to a greater reliance on him and eyes to see him at work in ways you never have before. There is also the opportunity to share Jesus with people in cultures that are more spiritually aware than our own, or to learn from Christians in other cultures. Always there is the opportunity to serve. Even if you are unable to pass on some groundbreaking new approaches to healthcare, just being there and showing people you care, sharing your life with them as they share theirs with you is part of the giving and receiving of the love of Christ.

• **To Test Out Plans for the Future** – Although for many this will be the primary motive for planning an overseas elective, in practice it should be the background and not the foreground against which we lay our plans. Keep it in mind, but don’t let your hopes for the future dominate your experience of the present – the danger is that your plans become your focus and you lose sight of the great things God is doing and teaching you here and now.

**N.B.** Mission is lifelong, worldwide. If you don’t get the opportunity to go overseas as a student don’t despair. You can go as soon as your training is finished, you can go when you have some experience under your belt; and you can go with your kids at any age (growing up overseas in a second culture can be an extremely exciting and educational experience for children at any age). You can get involved with international students in the UK, support your churches missionary activities, support mission organisations financially and in prayer and even have your neighbours round to supper a few times in an attempt to share your life and love of Christ with them!
DECISIONS, DECISIONS – Where to go and What to do

If you’re going away on an elective placement then the first thing to do is to make sure you know what your elective guidelines are.

- Do you have professional insurance for anywhere in the world?
- Do you have to produce a report or an actual research project?
- How long have you got?
- Do you have any holiday that you can use to extend your stay?
- What time of year is your elective?

There is little point in organising an elective in rural Mozambique if you only have 2 weeks, similarly if you’re thinking of going to an African village that gets cut off from the rest of the world during the height of the rainy season it makes sense to check that that isn’t exactly when your elective is scheduled for. A research project is a lot more complicated to produce than a report – especially if you’re working in an area where hardly anybody speaks English.

Once you have set some of these boundaries you can start to think about what you would like to do and where you would like to go.

What sort of nursing experience are you looking for?
- A well equipped mission hospital?
- A rural community clinic?
- A particular speciality?

What sort of spiritual input are you hoping for?
- A mission hospital with an emphasis on spiritual care?
- A non-Christian project?
- Active involvement in Christian outreach?
- Local Christian support?

What sort of person are you?
- Do you cope well alone?
- Do you need someone to travel with?
- Do you make friends easily?
- Do find it hard to keep your spiritual life going on your own?

Where Can I Find The Answers To These Questions?
Hopefully, you will find many of the answers in this booklet! However, there are several other possible avenues:

Other students Grill a student who has recently come back from where you want to go. Make use of their experience and learn from their mistakes as you organize your trip. Your nursing school should have a file of elective reports written by past students. If you can, make contact and talk to the student involved. Talk to your CSNM Link Worker or Staff Worker to see if they can help put you in touch with students who have been on overseas nursing electives.

At HealthServe, which has many contacts worldwide, you will find many elective reports, a database of elective opportunities, and a lot of other useful information on our electives website (www.healthserve.org/electives). HealthServe has a full time worker for non-
medical students, and has strong links with the Nurses Christian Fellowship International (NCFI), including national fellowships of Christian Nurses in over forty countries. You can always contact the HealthServe office (020 7792 4694/email healthserve@cmf.org.uk) if you want to ask a specific question.

Plan to attend one of CMF’s elective days held each March in London and Leeds. Contact the HealthServe Office for dates and details.

Christian mission agencies. (See appendix 2). There are over 20 Christian Mission Agencies based in the UK who have established nursing work overseas and are willing to cater for student electives.

Individual hospitals. (See appendix 3) a number of established hospitals in LDCs will take elective students. Make sure you reply promptly to their questions and supply ALL the relevant details/papers that they request.

From general reading. See appendix 1 for a list of informative books.

Finally, don’t be put off if you don’t find the answers to all these questions. When we put our trust in him God can come up with the most surprising results. Just because you wouldn’t normally choose to go somewhere on your own doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t strike out on your own now. Just be aware that if you’re not looking where you are going it is easy for the devil to trip you up. Don’t knowingly walk into a situation where you know he will find it easy to tempt you because your resistance and support is low.
When Should I Start Planning? As soon as possible! Some of the more popular locations get booked up a year or two in advance!

With most organisations you need to be planning your elective at the very least 9 months to a year in advance, and preferably as much as eighteen months in advance if possible. Once you have received the go-ahead to join a specific hospital / project it can seem like you have ages to get things sorted…. Not true!!!

Write to several organisations, hospitals or clinics that interest you, telling them about yourself, your beliefs and Christian activities and spell out your expectations of the elective. Make clear whether the dates of your elective are flexible and can be varied within limits or are fixed and immovable.

Correspondence can take several weeks, if not months, due both to delays in the post and the fact that your elective enquiry is not necessarily going to be a priority concern to an overworked under-resourced mission administrator and he/she may not reply immediately.

Passports & Visas – check your need for a visa (liase with the embassy of the country you are visiting – you can look them up on the web or in the telephone directory). These can take a long time to process, so start early. Also check to see if you need a police check – some countries will insist upon this before they will process your visa if you’re going to be working with children. Also check the expiry date of your passport – it usually has to be valid for 6 months after the date you plan to return home!

Flights & Internal Travel – plan well in advance. Generally the earlier you book your ticket the cheaper it will be. Do consider how you’re going to get to your actual destination at the other end – can the people you’re going to be working with arrange to have you collected or can they tell you the best way to get to where you’ll be staying. On that note it is a good idea to let your hosts know your travel arrangements as soon as you can (especially if they’re arranging to collect you at the airport) and to confirm them just before you leave.

Keep your baggage to a minimum. Generally you’re allowed 20kgs in the hold and 6kgs hand luggage. If you’re taking any medical equipment and supplies out with you it’s a good idea to keep them together and to have a letter from the hospital you’re going out to saying that you’re carrying equipment for them. Sometimes airlines will wave any excess baggage fee if it’s for humanitarian purposes.

Don’t forget to pack your bags yourself and padlock all zips together. This doesn’t deter the determined thief with a mean looking knife, but it is effective against the opportunistic thief and people trying to plant illegal items in your luggage.
**Money & Valuables** – Take as few valuables with you as you can. If your watch was an expensive birthday present from Aunty Mabel, nip down the market and buy a cheap £5 one for your trip, and invest in a money belt to carry your valuables / passport etc. around in. Try to plan your expenses carefully. Check whether you are better to take your travellers cheques in sterling or dollars, and find out where you’ll be able to change them into local currency (N.B. Some countries will not let their currency out of the country, so you have to find a bank pretty quickly to change your cheques). For instance, is there a bank where you’ll be staying or are you staying somewhere remote and off the beaten track? Remember too that you’ll need to budget for meals, travel, accommodation and sight seeing.

**Insurance** – Travellers on a budget often try to cut corners on health and travel insurance – this is plain daft. Make sure you get appropriate insurance. You also need to make sure that you are insured for any nursing that you do overseas. Student members of the RCN have indemnity insurance for most countries except the USA and Canada. Speak with your college if you are unsure about this aspect of your elective. Also ensure that you have adequate medical and travel insurance that will cover accident, sickness and emergency repatriation. One company that specialises in cover for overseas mission workers is:

**Banner Financial Services Group Ltd**
Email: info@bannergroup.com
Website: www.bannergroup.com

**Funding** – It is a good idea to try to cost out your elective so that you have some idea of how much money you need to raise. The earlier you do this the longer you have to get your funds together!! Also if you are applying to local companies, charities or medical organisations for funds you are more likely to be successful in your application if you can show that your elective is well planned and thought out. Many churches or other Christian organisations will offer support (both prayer and financial support) especially if you can put together a short report or presentation of your experiences when you return. Information on sources of funding for nursing electives can be found in Appendix 6.

**Gifts** – If you are going to be staying with a local family it is a good idea to take a small gift with you to express your thanks – something expressive of your home culture is generally much appreciated. Similarly if you are going to a poor country where you will have contact with some of the local children either through the hospital, orphanage, church etc. remember to take lots of small gifts for them – balloons pack lightly and give hours of fun!!

It is also a good idea to contact the health centre you are going to in order to see if there is any equipment that you can take that would be useful. Then speak with your college and other colleagues or charities to see what you can scrounge. **TALC** is a charitable organisation that produces Teaching Aids at Low Cost. (PO Box 49, St Albans, Herts, AL1 5TX, United
Should I Go With A Friend or Spouse? Obviously this has to be a matter of personal choice. Be aware that you may end up living together in very close quarters and you could fall out in times of stress! On the other hand you may feel happier (and safer) being with someone you know than being on your own in a strange land. It is certainly helpful to have a friend with whom you can talk over the experiences of the day. You might feel less isolated and lonely and it’s always good to have a friendly shoulder to cry on when the need arises!

It maybe that you are thinking of undertaking a joint research project or both be thinking of future service in the same area. If you go with a spouse, then it will be important to consider what he/she is going to do during your stay. Most institutions will probably be glad to use his/her expertise but enquire before you go.

Finally, before you go, encourage your friends back home to write/email you regularly whether they have anything significant to say or not. News from a far country is like water to a thirsty soul and letters/emails can be the highlight of the week.
HEALTHY AND HAPPY

Before you go – make sure that you have organised your injections and anti-malarial tablets in good time. If you need to have live vaccines you will need to leave a certain number of weeks between jabs; similarly with anti malarial medication you are advised to commence it several weeks before you travel in order to make sure that you don’t have an adverse reaction in foreign climes.

The Department of Health produces a booklet, Health Advice for Travellers (available from post offices or by calling 0800 555 777), which lists vaccinations required for most countries and also advice about medical insurance. Another organisation – InterHealth – produces advice on preventative medicine required for the different countries, produces information leaflets on different tropical diseases, and sells relevant medical kits for overseas travel. They can also do pre and post-visit medical cheques and individual advice – Address: 157 Waterloo Road, London, SE1 8US, United Kingdom, Telephone: 020 7902 9000, email info@interhealth.org.uk, website www.interhealth.org.uk

Make sure that you have details of how to contact the local British consulate in an emergency, and do ensure that someone at home has emergency contact details for you and a copy of your flight details and itinerary.

Whilst away – make sure you take suitable health precautions.

- Know which foods are safe to eat (e.g. salads, washed in local unpurified water are best avoided);
- Take water-purifying tablets and boil and filter water where possible;
- Take plenty of insect repellent and remember to wear long sleeves and trousers in the evening and early morning;
- Remember your premethrin impregnated mosquito net, and make sure that you will be able to hang it up properly;
- Sun-hats and sun block are essential for hot climates, and fans come in useful;
- Avoid sloshing your way through stagnant water as worms are common overseas;
- Make sure you know your blood group and have a clean needle and syringe with you as well as plenty of oral rehydration and anti diarrhoeal medication.

Make sure you have health insurance and enough medication – if you take any – to last your whole trip.
WHAT TO PACK

Obviously this depends on where you will be going, but there are a few rules of thumb that are useful to remember.

- Pack lightly and take travel wash, some pegs and a clothes line.
- Take a penknife or equivalent, but remember to pack it in your main luggage and not your hand luggage.
- Remember your torch and plenty of spare batteries.
- Take as much film as you think you will need. Many people like to take a slide film in order to give presentations on return. If this is the case try to take a separate camera with your slide film in it, otherwise you will have to take all your slide shots close together and miss capturing the variety of the experience. Digital cameras offer a good alternative, allowing you to create Power Point Presentations, and extra data cards allow you to take more photos for a fraction of the space and cost of camera film.
- Another essential item is spare camera batteries. These often run out overseas and can be next to impossible to buy. There is little point in having 7 rolls of film if your camera battery conks out!!
- Think about the culture you’re going to and be sensitive when selecting clothes to pack – long sleeves, long skirts (men might prefer long trousers!!) and a head covering for church services are often a must.
- If you have a long journey in your destination country some toilet roll in your hand luggage might come in useful, as might some anti-bacterial handwash.
- A cheap pair of flip flops can be invaluable for use in basic ‘bathrooms’, however in many African countries you will be able to buy these extremely cheaply in the local markets.
- Take ‘things to do’ – games to play, books to read, music to listen to etc., but if you’re travelling in a group beware of spending all your free time plugged into your personal stereo. Some travel speakers can be a useful item to pack.
- A guidebook on your destination is a handy thing to have, and a Bible, notebook and pen essential!!
**ENJOYING THE EXPERIENCE**

**Culture** – remember that cultural differences are not just to be found in what people do, but also in the way they think and the values they hold. Try to find out as much about the culture you’ll be visiting before you go, but even so prepare yourself to feel out of your depth on occasions.

Also, don’t be afraid to ask lots of questions – your hosts will no doubt appreciate your interest, and you will learn lots of interesting and even curious things.

Take a notebook with you and do your best to keep a daily diary of events experiences and especially first impressions. Things which seemed so strange to you at first will soon become common place and you will forget things that you are convinced you will remember. It can also help to work through tough experiences if you write them down. If your aim is to compile a report of your elective experience then a diary of this kind is essential.

You might also try taking a small tape recorder to record some of the sounds / singing / messages from people.

**Loneliness** – In a culture that is communication-mad it can be very difficult to suddenly find yourself 2 hours away from the nearest public telephone, 8 hours away from the nearest e-mail and with a 2 week time lag on snail mail. Even though your hosts may be like a second family it is still not the same as having friends around you who share your culture and reactions to things – especially when you’re facing difficult things in the healthcare setting that you’re not used to seeing. Prepare yourself to deal with these situations so that you’re not totally thrown when they happen.

**Nursing** – this varies so much from country to country. Be prepared to get involved or to stand back as appropriate. Try to learn something about the conditions you will meet in advance as they may be very different from the things you are used to at home, but remember that medication, equipment and treatment rationales are also likely to be vastly different too. Try not to be critical, but in humility learn whatever you can about the local situation and constraints – look for the good wherever you are and reflect on what this experience is teaching you about things at home as well as those overseas.

**Spirituality** – again, the way that people in different cultures express their relationship with God may be vastly different to anything
you have experienced before. You might find this liberating, or you might find it alienating. If the latter, spend time talking with people about their experience of God (and sharing with them yours) and try to be open but discerning about new experiences. You might find it useful to take some of your favourite song tapes with you or a series of sermon tapes from your home church as well as your Bible reading notes.

Be ready for the fact that you might be invited to ‘bring a message or a word’ to the different church groups at rather short notice, so have a few passages up your sleeve that you would feel comfortable explaining or a few Sunday School activities that you could run or a few songs that you could sing.

**RE-ENTRY**

**Reverse culture shock** – You might not think that few weeks in a foreign country can make that much difference to life on return, but you will have been immersed in a very different culture and set of values. Because of this the values of the West can seem self-indulgent; the choice we have on the supermarket shelves unpalatable when you have seen the ravages of malnutrition; the pace of life disorientating, and the advertising boards and values they express upsetting when compared to the living conditions you have just experienced.

You might feel angry and frustrated at friends and family who don’t understand your feelings or take them lightly – you may even feel inexplicably tearful and unable to cope.

Speaking with someone who has been overseas themselves can be enormously helpful, as can spending time trying to understand some of the reasons for the poverty, suffering and injustice that you have seen. It can be all too easy to see things in black and white – the West as the baddie and the Third World as their victims – when really things are not so simple. The Bible tells us that the problem rests with the sinful human heart that in it’s default setting is set on rebellion against God and self gratification no matter where in the world we live.

Spend time in God’s word; think about how your experiences have challenged your attitudes and preconceptions; dwell on the new truths that you have learned about God or the way you have had old truths highlighted and reinforced. Consider God’s faithfulness and his commitment to making you like Christ – tell him how you feel and then refresh yourself with a knowledge of his character and promises – especially the promise of Heaven, which is for all who trust in Christ.

Finally take every opportunity to share your experiences with others. Don’t be disappointed if people can’t listen with rapt attention for 15 hours straight (though you will be more than able to keep going through the night!!), learn to organise your experience in the retelling and try to
think strategically about the things you want people to hear. Use your story as an opportunity to tell people about God, the way he was at work in your life and in the lives of those overseas, and use it as an opportunity to give public praise to him so that his name might be honoured and praised by others too.

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;  
Make known among the nations what he has done.  
Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts.  
Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.  
Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.

PSALM 105: 1-4
## Planning Timetable:

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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Action taken</th>
<th>Date to be Completed</th>
<th>Task Completed</th>
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<td>18 months</td>
<td>Write off to Mission Agencies</td>
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<td>Plan Elective Details</td>
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<td>9 – 12 months</td>
<td>Work out Budget / Costs</td>
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<td>Start Fund-raising</td>
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<td>6 – 9 months</td>
<td>Check Passports &amp; Visas</td>
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<td>Get police Check</td>
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<td>Organise Flights / Travel / Accommodation</td>
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<td>3 months</td>
<td>Confirm travel details with hosts</td>
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<td>Sort out Requests for medical equipment</td>
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<td>Organise Vaccinations</td>
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<td>Purchase personal medical kit</td>
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<td>Purchase any specialist travel items you might need</td>
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<td>Send final confirmation letter to hosts</td>
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<td>1 month</td>
<td>Purchase small gifts for hosts</td>
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<td>Organise Travellers checks</td>
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<td>Give copy of itinerary and contact information to significant others</td>
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<td>Last minute shopping!!!</td>
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