

Home assignment as a ministry situation.

Everyone used to call it furlough. And some still do. But now it might be home assignment, or furlough assignment, or home leave, or some other creative title. Were these changes just cosmetic, or have we been seeking a term that says something about why we believe the missionary is home for this period of time. When a local church becomes aware that their missionary is coming home on furlough, is time given to consider the reasons for which they are coming home? Or is there an assumption that everybody knows why?

In Acts 14:27 we read of Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch for their 'furlough'. We read that they gathered the church together and "reported all that God had done through them." We immediately notice the focus of what they presented - "all that **God** had done." The emphasis lies squarely on the activity of God, and not merely the activity of the missionaries. The previous verse carries the reminder that, at their departure, they had been "commended to the grace of God," and it is the ministry of that grace that they now report on.

The closing verse of chapter 14 tells us that they "stayed there a long time with the disciples." Doing what? The statements in 15:2 and 15:35 suggest clearly that they continued in a teaching role, seeking to contribute to the growth of the Christians at Antioch as they encountered various issues.

All of this ties in so neatly with Phil 1:26, where Paul says "through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

A missionary comes home in order to strengthen the Christians by sharing and explaining what the grace of God has accomplished in the part of the world where they have been. This demands time, because the experience of God that the missionary has gained also equips them to contribute to the growth of the local church as it confronts its own issues. All this in turn reflects accurately the picture in Eph 4:11-12, where it is clear that those who receive ministry gifts, including missionaries, receive them for the growth of the body. There are no lone rangers in this scenario.

This ministry relationship with the church also prepares the missionary for their return to their place of service. It renews the sending relationship, so that the missionary goes back to their ministry aware that the church continues to recognise its sending role. We see this in Acts 15:40 with regard to Paul and the church at Antioch.

This is not the end of the story with regard to home assignment, of course, for we all recognise the need for family interaction, cultural reconnection, and physical and spiritual rest and renewal. It does raise some questions, however, concerning the responsibility of a local church as it prepares for their missionary to arrive home. It also has something to say concerning the planning that needs to be undertaken jointly between the sending church and the mission agency. The mission agency may well have an agenda that includes support generation and recruitment, but there are some biblical principles here that cannot be ignored. There is a ministry role that is an integral part of the 'sending' relationship between the church and the missionary, and it must not be ignored any more than we dare ignore the physical and spiritual refreshment the missionary needs. So when does your next missionary arrive home?