

Coming Off the Mountain: Overcoming the Post Mission Trip Blues

"I could buy that field, build a little house there and do this full time," said Lori, a 39-year old high school geography teacher as she drove past an African village during the last day of her short term mission trip. Larry and Karen, Lori's teammates, nodded in agreement. The couple wasn't considering moving there, but they were planning a return trip. Like Lori, they knew that in a few short hours their mountain top experience would soon be over. Their Christian mission trip to Africa was coming to an end.

Before long, Lori, Larry and Karen, along with the rest of their team members, were back home in the U.S. and back to their "normal" lives. Although they had only been gone two weeks, it seemed like a lifetime of experiences. As they went about their tasks, their minds wandered back to the dusty African roads and the faces of so many people who they had touched while serving abroad. The trip's excitement had turned to sadness. "Will we ever have that kind of experience again," they wondered.

Mission trips are a life-changing experience. Usually team leaders do a great job preparing the team to go, but they don't always do such a good job of getting them ready to come home. It's not uncommon to have some post-mission trip blues. If that describes you, then here are some ideas to help you transition out of them.

Embrace reality. Very few people actually get to live on top of a mountain! It is great to visit, but the experience doesn't last forever. We need to celebrate our experiences but not live in the past. We should focus on being thankful that we got to go and be determined to incorporate lessons from that experience into our everyday lives.

Focus on serving those around you. Know that many people find themselves in some kind of a valley right after a mountain top experience. When that happens, the key is to turn our focus off from ourselves and onto others.

When I return home from a mission trip, I often think of the Old Testament prophet Elijah and his literal mountain top experience at Carmel. There he humiliated hundreds of false prophets in dramatic fashion. But where do we find Elijah right after that incident? He's down in a valley—a desert actually—under a tree asking God to take his life. The story is told in 1 Kings 19, where we see that Elijah had become very self-focused. "I'm the only faithful one left," he said, "I'm the one who has been zealous for the Lord."

God told him that he in fact was not the only one. There were 7,000 others who had stayed faithful. Then God gave him a job—mentoring a young prophet by the name of Elisha—and that task changed Elijah's outlook. In the same way, when you come off a spiritual mountain top, ask yourself how to use your experience to help someone else. Is there someone who you can mentor? Try making ministry a lifestyle not just a two week experience. It's a lot easier when you go from one ministry abroad right into another ministry at home.

In addition to these ideas, the travel guide Lonely Planet

recently had on its website some suggestions for those suffering from post-travel blues: dream big, start a piggy bank, share your passion, and make art. While the article focused on vacation travelers, we can adapt it to missions travel as well.

Dream big! "Turn your post-holiday depression into pre-holiday anticipation," says Lonely Planet. For our purposes, we would say that it's okay to begin dreaming about your next mission trip. Just like Larry and Karen were contemplating a return as their Africa trip wound down, you can begin thinking and planning for your next outreach.

Start a piggy bank. Begin saving now for your next trip. Even if you have family and friends who help support your endeavors, you should still try to do everything you can to be ready financially. In doing so, you may find yourself asking the same question that a Lonely Planet blogger asked herself. "I have to ask if getting so caught up in the possessing of stuff distracts us from what's really important in life?"

The blogger, who only goes by the name "Steph," felt that she had too many "things" and that the cost of owning all of those things was stifling her ability to do what she really wanted to do. So she started selling her excess stuff to use the proceeds for what she considered important. While her focus was not on mission trips, her thinking certainly does apply to those who have a desire to serve internationally. Maybe eBay, Craigslist or a good old fashioned garage sale is the way to get that piggy bank started and get you on the road to your next mission trip.

Find a community of people who share your passion. You may want to organize on-going fellowships with others who went on your trip, or participate in conferences dealing with the region of the world where you worked. You can also find similar interests groups online through Facebook or by following people on Twitter who minister in your focus country. In addition, you can stay abreast of developments in the area by following humanitarian news feeds from services like www.Alertnet.org.

Make art. "Instead of boring your friends with your travel stories, do something creative with your memories," says Lonely Planet. "Make photo books and playlists, turn your journal scribbles into travel writing." They also suggest spicing up the old fashioned slide show with music and snacks that match the destination.

The mountain top experience of a mission trip is a good thing. Celebrate it! Enjoy the moment, but be ready to re-enter your world. Jump into ministry and look forward to impacting more lives in the future. Your mission trip can be the beginning of a lifestyle of service and global focus that will quickly drive away any post-trip blues.

Frank Banfill, August 31st, 2011