

# Returning home

**Interserve England & Wales Partner Joyce Huggett concludes her series of articles on supporting mission Partners.**



Joyce Huggett

She had recently returned to England after working overseas with her husband, and she was pregnant. 'You must be so glad to be home before the baby arrives,' I commented one evening. I had never worked overseas then, so I was puzzled when I noticed that my comment had brought tears to her eyes. I was equally bewildered when she explained that, for her, England no longer felt like home. The primitive village overseas where she and her husband had lived and worked for several years was 'home', and, although it lacked the facilities we took for granted in England, she would have preferred to have given birth to her first baby *there*, amongst the people they had learned to love.

Ten years later, when my husband and I returned to the UK after working overseas, I understood why this young woman had reacted in the way she did. Like so many other mission partners before me, I felt totally disorientated when I arrived back in the so-called 'homeland'. One reason was that we arrived in England in the coldest, wettest June on record. While I was dressed for the Middle Eastern sunshine, my winter clothes were somewhere on the high seas! Another reason why I felt confused and rather like a fish out of water was that, having spent a significant amount of time in countries where the majority of people *never* have enough to eat, I found myself scandalised by the endless rows of foodstuffs in the supermarkets. 'We don't *need* so much choice when most people have little or *no* food,' I complained to

myself – and anyone else who would listen!

## Let go

Looking back, I am convinced that I would have benefited from the insights of a mission partner from New Zealand who insists that when we are negotiating a transition as potentially painful as a return to the homeland, we need to learn to negotiate three vital phases. First, little by little and in our own time, we must *let go* of the way of life to which we have become accustomed, as well as the work we have been doing while working overseas. We must also let go of the immediacy of the friends and neighbours whose friendship we have valued. This 'letting go' phase cannot be rushed. It sometimes lasts for weeks – even months. One of the ways in which healing comes is being allowed to talk about our experiences. Relatives, friends and supporting churches can best help, then, by recognising that the mission partner might well be struggling through a sort of grieving, rather than feeling euphoric about being 'home'. What they might long for is someone who will listen to some of the stories that they long to tell about their time overseas.

## Let be

The sadness eventually recedes. Even so, the returning partner might not yet be ready to start a new phase of ministry. This is why it is important for many that they are given time to re-adapt to the customs, food, weather and people in a homeland

that might no longer feel like 'home'. The 'letting be' period at this stage is as vital as the weeks and months of orientation were when the mission partner went overseas for the first time.

## Let begin

When the newly-returned mission partner has paid attention to these two phases, they gradually discover a readiness, even an eagerness and vision, to enter the 'let begin' phase – that is, they discover the energy and enthusiasm and vision to begin the new work or face the new challenges that God seems to be spreading before them.

## Providing prayer and care

When we are aware of the hurdles some mission partners have to negotiate on their return, hopefully we can welcome them home with sensitivity, care and prayer. Would it help some, I wonder, if a sensitive Welcome Home Service was arranged for them – rather like the Valedictory Service that was prepared before they left the homeland?

Whether or not we pray for them in public, what they desperately need is supportive prayer by friends and supporters. Another thing that most of us long for on our return is someone who will not only tell us *their* news but who will listen to *our* stories, look at the photographs of the people and places that have become precious to us, and wait patiently and lovingly while we gradually recover from the culture shock as well enjoy the good things about returning home.