



ESLY  
CARVALHO

## Holding On to the Good: A Short Experience For Emotional Debriefing

The Bible says that we are to examine all things and hold on to that which is good (1 Thess. 5:21). Many times, missionaries are not given enough time to process their accomplishments and losses—temporary or otherwise—that occurred during a tenure on the field. Furlough always represents a mixed bag of emotions, as well as some kind of loss. For some, it is the opportunity to reconnect with loved ones, feeling the home familiarity that was lost with the mission abroad, and, for once, not feeling like so much of a foreigner or “sticking out.” For others, it is the loss of familiarity, since the culture of the field has become part of their own personalities and often even more so for the children. Losing a routine, friends, familiarity, and culture, even temporarily, requires an acknowledgment.

In contrast, furlough is often a very unstable period of visits and fundraisers, traveling from town to town, home to home, oftentimes dragging unwilling teenagers along. Younger children miss the daily routine of home. At other times, furlough means spending a year in a new school environment with new challenges, both in academics as well as social skills. Latin American missionaries especially struggle with raising financial support for a return to the field or even making ends meet at home. This is due to the concept that missionaries should live as poor as church mice, as well as to poor follow-through on pledges made. And then there are the issues of changes in child education. Home schooling is not an option at this point, and children on furlough will usually go to school in a different language/culture than they had been studying in on the field.

Finally, there are expectations, often unspoken, about the future return to the field. Sometimes missionaries do

This article describes a group debriefing session that lasts about three hours and that is useful for missionaries returning from the field. It is aimed at processing gains and losses on the field, expectations for furlough, and the eventual return (or not) to the missionary field. It offers a quick and practical evaluation of the past, present, and future regarding missionary work. This approach is useful for Latin American missionaries and others as well.

not return to the same place of service, which *really* entails an enormous loss to be processed. Other times, there will be new assignments within the mission itself, even if returning to the same locale. It is a good idea to bring up these expectations as soon as possible, in order to figure out which ones are realistic, scary, or comforting, so that missionaries can have a better sense of stability in a very uncertain environment.

### Debriefing Workshop

The following short workshop provides an opportunity to begin to look at all of these issues. The exercises will be presented with accompanying comments. In ideal terms, many of the issues that come out of such a debriefing procedure will already have been discussed in some fashion within the family and the mission structure. It is hoped that the missionary organization has in place means of communicating missionary needs in acceptable and safe ways, while the workers are still on the field.

Many organizations do have certain structures that show pastoral care and concern for their missionaries, but often-times the focus is limited to operational debriefing. This type of debriefing has its merit, of course. (*How many people were led to the Lord? What were your specific activities on the field? etc.*) A common complaint of missionaries, though, is that they do not have a “place” where they can unwind about what is going on and not risk retaliation or rejection for their feelings. Being able to open up and share about one’s feelings is an important aspect of missionary “health care.” (*How did you feel about certain decisions? What would have been better for your family? How does this impact your relationship with the mission? etc.*) It is interesting to note that Jesus debriefed the apostles on their return from their “missionary incursions” (Luke 9:10; 10:17). Suffice it to say that this particular exercise has emotional debriefing as its primary goal in the con-

text of bridging missionary needs and organizational needs.

It would be good to provide this framework for returning missionaries as soon as possible upon their return. It will ease furloughs, as well as give the missionaries and leadership at headquarters an opportunity to discuss relevant issues. Obviously, a three-hour workshop is not sufficient to cover the whole reentry process. One would hope that the missionary organization has already offered guidelines and materials prior to missionaries’ return. As missionary agencies in Latin America mature, these issues are becoming more and more important in avoiding missionary burnout and subsequent resignation.

These debriefing workshops were developed in the framework of trust and confidentiality among returning missionaries, and they are basically for the benefit of the participants. Children and teenagers can benefit from such an exercise as well and need it just as much as the adults. Leadership at headquarters was not privy to the information that came out of these workshops, which was one of the reasons for success. Missionaries were free to “let down their hair” in a private and caring atmosphere, without fear of retaliation for not “performing” according to the expectations put on them. Obviously, they were free to use the information gleaned from the workshop about themselves as they pleased, but they were also kept to confidentiality regarding their peers who participated. Not all missions will be willing to allow for this level of transparency, but it is essential for the good outcome of this particular process. Participants felt encouraged when they realized that they were not the only ones struggling with certain issues or decisions. The exercise gave them a reality check, as well as perspective and insights into their experiences.

The leader of these workshops (a trained and experienced group psychotherapist) was not part of the mission and had no emotional stake regarding what went on or regarding future decisions relating to the missionaries. This was a com-

pletely neutral and outside person, with no prior knowledge of the participants, brought in specifically for this task, which also heightened the trusting atmosphere. No report was given to the mission headquarters about what went on, but many participants were encouraged to discuss certain hurts and painful decisions with the missionary organization. This workshop was offered in the framework of a week-long reentry and debriefing exercise provided by the missionary organization, through which their returnees were normally routed.

### **Instructions**

What follows is a sample of the instructions given at the start of the session:

“This workshop will enable you to evaluate the years that each of you has just spent on the field and to sort out the things that you want to hold on to. We will also look at expectations for the future and focus a bit on future hopes.

“This will be done through a few action exercises, drawings, and sharing with each other about the wealth of experiences each has had. Hopefully, we will leave the workshop with a sense of closure and perhaps new insights regarding the experience.

“We expect that everyone present will maintain confidentiality about what may be shared here from a personal perspective regarding any of the others.

“Please feel free to share as much or as little as you desire. There is no obligation to disclose anything. However, you will get as much out of the workshop as you put into it. If you feel unable to adhere to these rules, we ask that you discreetly leave now.” (No one has ever left.)

### **The Workshop**

#### ***Step 1***

The participants are asked to introduce themselves, where they are from, and where they served on the field during their last term. (The leader introduced herself first, emphasizing her own cross-cultural

experiences, which helped put the members at ease.) Oftentimes, the participants already know each other, but this is not always the case and should not be taken for granted. Nametags are helpful (especially for the workshop leader!). Usually the leader knows very little about the participants. It is helpful to know which ones will not be returning to the field (for example, due to retirement), so that introductions can include those aspects.

#### ***Step 2***

The participants are given white sheets of paper and boxes of crayons and asked to draw a picture of their experience on the field during this last term. Mention is made of what they left behind. Some people will always protest that they can't draw and will ask if they can write about their experience instead. It is explained to the group that most people cannot draw better than a five-year-old and that this is not an artistic competition. Writing is not an acceptable alternative, since the idea is to access the symbolic part of the brain that is fast, creative (“a picture is worth a thousand words”), and more connected to the emotions. It is also the part of the brain that helps change behavior.

Once the pictures have been drawn, the group is asked to share them in small groups of four or five people (couples should be separated). Pictures usually include significant friends and situations they have left behind, a special pet, and/or religious symbols (such as the Bible, God, etc.). After the small groups are finished sharing, they are asked to pray for one another.

Often this is a very emotional time as participants begin to share about what they have gone through in the last term and what they have left behind. Boxes of tissue should be available to the groups, since tears are commonplace. This is an important part of the process, and the emotions, often strong, are not to be stifled nor suppressed. It may be the only opportunity that participants will have to let out some of the strong feelings they

have had regarding this past experience. Prayer for each other usually brings adequate closure to the exercise. Participants are encouraged to acknowledge the enormity of some of their losses and to allow themselves to grieve.

### **Step 3**

Once again in the large group, participants are asked to symbolically “pull out” of the picture what they would like to hold on to: things they have learned, people they have come to love, things they care about, etc. They are asked to place the item on the part of their body where they would like to keep it forever. For example, a woman may pull out the friendships she has made and place them over her heart. Or perhaps someone will pull out what he has learned and will put it on his head for future reference. One participant pulled out his family and put them in his hand. (“They are engraved in the palm of my hand.”)

This is often a very touching and moving exercise, done in the big group, where others have an opportunity to see what each one would like to “hold on to” from their previous experience. Usually only positive experiences are pulled out and kept.

### **Step 4**

Finally, a “start” and a “finish” line are drawn with masking tape on the floor, about five meters apart. Participants are asked to take off the shoe of the foot that will symbolically take the next step into their future, to show what they envision furlough, retirement, or leaving the field will be like in the ensuing months. All together, they line up at the starting line and move their own shoe the way they feel that the next few months will be like, until they reach the finish line.

It is very interesting to see how different people envision their futures in such different ways. Once, a participant took both shoes with him, saying, “I go into everything with both feet.” Another time, one person went round and round and

wondered if she would ever arrive at the finish line. Others made beelines to the finish: they knew where they were going. Still others took faltering steps, uncertain of what lay ahead. Some did the exercise in silence; others maintained a running commentary. In some groups, participants do the activity one at a time; most do it all together.

### **Step 5**

This is the time for final sharing and closure. The participants are asked to share about what they learned during the exercises, as well as what this opportunity to debrief emotionally meant to them.

## **Conclusion**

It is hoped that this simple exercise will encourage sending groups, from Latin America and elsewhere, to invest in the emotional debriefing of their field personnel. Note that children can also benefit from the exercise and have a lot of fun with it. It is common for missionaries to be debriefed regarding what they have done, including their accomplishments and difficulties, but few get the opportunity to share from the heart about their experiences. And “heart” experiences can be quite different from the “head” experiences. Sometimes they can even be at odds with each other. Even though believers “know” what has happened, it is important to let the feelings come out, whatever they may be. Unresolved feelings and unsatisfied or unrealistic expectations can lead to future problems for both mission and missionary, which is why this exercise can be so valuable. If necessary, participants are discreetly encouraged to seek out counseling, give themselves time in their grieving process, share certain aspects of the exercise with their supervisors, or follow other procedures which might be helpful to them.

Action exercises tend to draw out a lot of information very quickly. In Latin cultures, they have been especially helpful because of the “dramatic quality” of the

Latinos. Women tend to be more comfortable sharing their feelings, but it was amazing to see how many men also opened up, given the chance. The men especially like the shoe exercise. All of the participants commented positively on having been given an opportunity to *do* it instead of having to listen to long lectures on the reentry process itself. It was a good way of getting them “off and running” into furlough and reentry.

### Reflection and Discussion

1. Why is emotional debriefing important? What type of experiences have you had with debriefing?
2. How should confidential information be handled in group debriefing sessions?
3. In what ways could children be involved in their own debriefing sessions?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an outside person do the debriefing?
5. How can sending organizations include debriefing in their member care toolbox?



*Esly Regina Carvalho is a Brazilian-American licensed psychotherapist, specializing in group therapy and psychodrama. She maintains a practice (Plaza del Encuentro) in Quito, Ecuador, where she lives with her husband, Ken Grant, an MK raised in China, and her daughter, Raquel. Esly is the author of many articles on counseling, recovery, and emotional healing and is fluent in three languages, Portuguese, English, and Spanish. She is presently leading Christian counseling training workshops through action methods. Email: plazadelencuentro@attglobal.net.*

