

From Mission Field to Marketplace:

Entrepreneurship and the Journey from Loss to Restoration among Missionary Returnees

Tim Veach & Agam Iheanyi-Igwe draw on extensive research and their own surveys to explore the transformation of returning missionaries into successful entrepreneurs. On the way, they discover the need for the church to recognise business as a vocation.

“I was dealing with national issues with disaster relief, meeting with Prime Ministers, helping to fund and build hospitals... And then I come back and I’m working at a thrift store... It was going from meeting with Prime Ministers to cleaning toilets.” Tom (a pseudonym) is a missionary who returned to the USA after spending years in cross-cultural missions. More than 300,000 missionaries or mission partners like Tom are working in long-term cross-cultural situations worldwide, with about 135,000 sent from the United States alone¹.

Consider this case of a missionary who returns to her home country after an extended period of time in cross-cultural missions:

The returnee initially experiences reverse culture shock. She feels a loss of status as a now ex-missionary, and she struggles to find a new job, resulting in financial hardship. She experiences social isolation accompanied by subtle mental health challenges. She senses the need to let go of her old identity as a

missionary, or at least to reinterpret her understanding of her identity both culturally and vocationally. She begins to consider entrepreneurship as an answer to these lingering challenges.

She then starts a business venture and finds that there are many transferable skills from mission work to entrepreneurship. As she gains confidence in her entrepreneurial activities, she confirms that she indeed seems to have an inherent entrepreneurial disposition and that she had honed entrepreneurial skills while working as a missionary. This realisation helps to define her new status and identity as a businessperson. She comes to terms with her sense of loss while fostering a new sense of identity as an entrepreneur. She begins to feel called to business in much the same way that she felt called to be a missionary.

This narrative summarises the experiences uncovered in our interviews of seven American evangelical Christian missionaries who have returned to the United

States from long-term, cross-cultural Christian missions and now identify themselves as entrepreneurs. Interview participants were identified through purposive sampling via researcher networks, with additional participants recruited at random through referrals, until the narratives in the interviews consistently surfaced the same core themes. The participants did not know each other nor the researchers prior to the interviews. This sampling approach and sample size align with established guidelines for qualitative research of this kind, where depth of insight matters more than breadth².

The interviews, conducted over several months, focused on the re-entry experience, adjustment challenges participants faced, the process of overcoming them, and the role of entrepreneurship in that process. The men and women interviewed had served in Antigua, Cameroon, China, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Ireland, Nigeria, and Uganda, spending an average of six years on the mission field. They now own and operate businesses in retail, professional



services, investment, and social support, organised as sole proprietorships, LLCs, or corporations, with some employing as many as 60 people.

The challenges associated with re-entry are often accompanied by psychological distress, including depression and grief, similar to bereavement³. In the Dual Process Model of Bereavement⁴, individuals cope with loss by oscillating between loss orientation activities, involving a painful search for meaning and some processing of the loss experience itself, and restoration orientation activities, defined by the struggle to re-orient oneself in a world without what was lost. In the restoration orientation, the bereaved develop new roles and identities, which ultimately help them to transition into a new life of meaning and purpose.

An interest in these new roles and identities prompted our exploration into how entrepreneurial activity may be associated with this journey from loss to restoration for missionary returnees. In the descriptions below, we present themes of loss followed by themes of restoration from the narratives of our interviewees, but this should not suggest a linear sequence. Rather, the loss and restoration were happening concurrently, and the movement between them oscillated back and forth between the orientations. The returned missionary may feel affirmed by the progress of the business one day and feel the loss the next day sitting in a church service where they no longer hold the position of professional missionary or guest preacher.

Missionary Returnees and the Story of Loss

The first theme that stood out in the narratives of the returnees-turned-entrepreneurs is loss of status, as illustrated by the opening quote of this essay. For some, like Tom, this meant giving up what they felt was important work in the mission field and taking

any job they could get to make ends meet. Brad's experience was similar: *"I went from being the leader of a 25-person organisation and a teacher in a culture that very highly respected that to, like, a delivery person"*. Others experienced this loss of status within the church context where they no longer had the role or vocational position of missionary. *"I did find myself thinking, when we would go to church, 'Do you know who I am?' And then I thought, 'Whoa, apparently, I have a little pride in my former position.' Because we feel like we were practitioners of mission. And now we*

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were walking into these churches [where] they did not care; they were not interested in us."

Another theme was social isolation and mental health struggles. *"So, we were now like outsiders*

in our own land. ... in general, there are just very few people to talk with about our missionary experience." Suzan, who *"felt like my life was ripped from me... like I'd lost everything,"* shared how *"...there was not much communication from anyone."* In the words of James, *"it was tough. I didn't have anybody to debrief with. I was just kind of: You're on your own."* The sense of loss was even accompanied by mental health challenges. *"I felt a lot of guilt and shame. I went through depression"*, Simon recalled. *"When I first came back it was like I really couldn't have done anything work-related unless I got to the place mentally where I could."*

The story of loss continued with returnees facing employment challenges upon coming home. James expressed that he struggled to find work, so *"there was this sense of floating and frustration, leaving a place where I was needed and had things working and then coming to a place where no one wanted to give me a job."* Underemployment was a problem, too, where local employers just did not see the value in employees with international experience or overseas connections. Simon, who had rich overseas professional experience

during his mission years, described his first job after coming back as working with teenagers in a coffee drive-through, to make a paycheck. He recalls thinking, *"What am I going to do? What's my skill set? I have a Bible degree. We have mission field experience. We don't really have any tangible skills."*

The culmination of these factors may be likened to a kind of identity crisis. This phenomenon was seen in terms of cultural identity, as Matthew suggested, *"We were not the same people we were when we left.... Completely different. Here, we were not feeling like we were really fully American anymore; but feeling we were a different sort of people.. We'd learned new languages. And when you learn a different language, that also changes how you think."* There was also a crisis of vocational identity, like for one returnee who wanted *"...to get back into real ministry."* She continued, *"And ...real ministry for me, at that time, my mindset was, it had to be preaching, teaching in a church context... But things have changed as far as my thinking is concerned."* They therefore had to reconcile their previous vocational identities as missionaries with the current ones as entrepreneurs. Brad told us, *"Somebody was asking me the other day, do I like business better? Or do I like ministry better? I didn't have a really good answer in that, when you're in ministry, there's different things than in businesses. It's definitely changed my identity."*

Still, as we listened to the returnees discuss their hardships and challenges, we noticed descriptions of hopeful opportunities embedded within the narratives of loss and identity crisis. They were making lemonade from lemons, as they identified entrepreneurial opportunities within these re-entry challenges and saw how their God-given gifts could be used in a new way. Simon recalled, *"I couldn't afford being a pastor of a small church. I was quickly using up all my resources, my savings. So, I decided, maybe I could do this [business] one day a week or something like that. So that's how I got started."* James describes their experience this

way, “I was laid off during COVID, and it was really hard. I just said to myself, ‘You have to be responsible for what you do with the cards that you’re dealt.’ So, I took a month and just worked really hard to create an online business... kind of replicating what I used to do in [the mission field].” Yet another returnee expressed that she had gone through enough challenges as a missionary and after returning to know how to “feel things out”, which led to confidence in starting a business.

Entrepreneurship as Restoration

The two main ways these returnees described the roles of entrepreneurship were in the identification of transferable skills from mission field to business ownership, and in the recognition of an entrepreneurial disposition that ultimately enabled them to identify a calling to business.

Transferable skills refer to competencies gained through missionary experience which naturally support entrepreneurial activities. For instance, initiative-taking and problem-solving were common skills cited by the interviewees. Mark told us how he was “raising up congregations.” He told us, “I would have a dream or a vision. I would go into a village where there was no church, and when I would leave, there would be a church, with a pastor and a building, and maybe a school that we had built. So, starting a business was kind of the

same way of starting from scratch. Now I have an office, and a business, and 55 or 60 employees”.

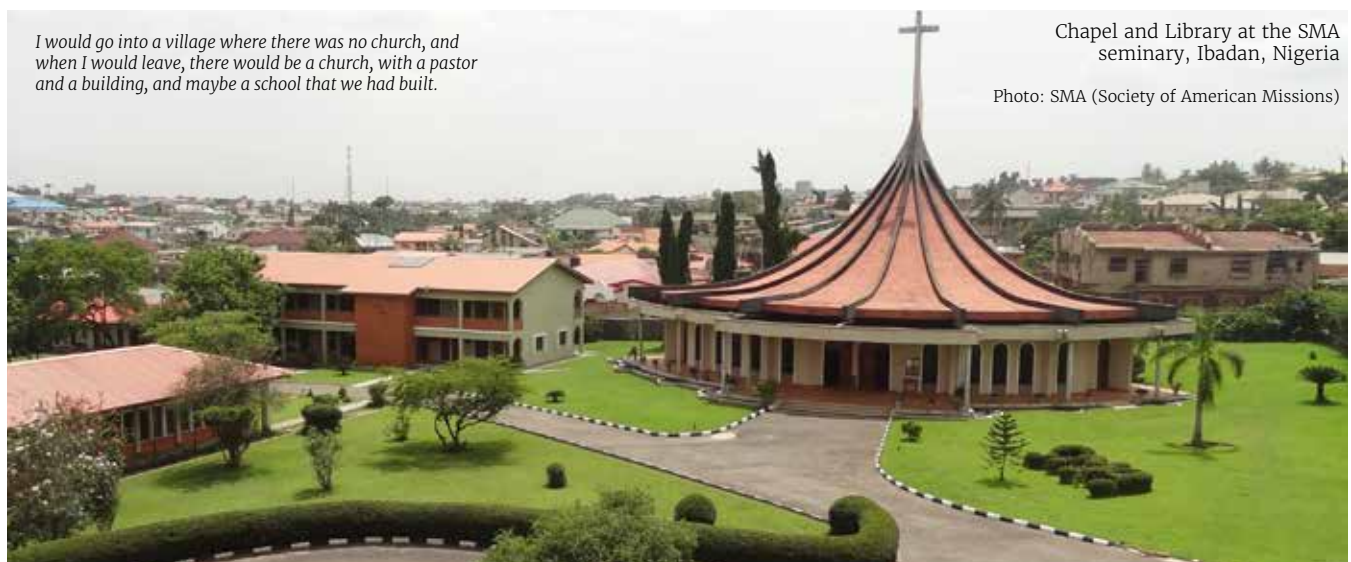
Tom painted a similar picture of these skills, telling us, “I think there’s a great sense of satisfaction in building. Often as missionaries, we need a lot of creativity, and problem solving when just normal solutions don’t work. Typically, entrepreneurs find solutions to problems in new ways or better ways. For many missionaries, you go here, you figure out what needs to be done, you get the work started and then get the ministry going. And you do it on a shoestring. So, mission work is a form of entrepreneurship.”

Returnees also credited mission field experience with fostering in them independence, self-reliance, and a tolerance for discomfort, all qualities they agreed were essential for both mission work and entrepreneurship. They also identified other transferable skills, including managing people, creativity, building entities from scratch, organisational development, administration, hard work, concepts relating to risk-taking, and a so-called missionary mentality. One posited, “a missionary could already be ahead of the game when it comes to entrepreneurship.” Suzan even suggested, “theoretically, missionaries are self-starters. They buck some trends. They persevere through hard times when everyone’s telling them they’re kind of crazy. All of those aspects... 100% entrepreneurship”.

As the returnees reflected on their transition, they alluded to an inherent entrepreneurial disposition predating their missionary service. Indeed, missionaries and entrepreneurs appear to be cut from the same cloth, making the transition into entrepreneurship natural. In the words of James, “I’ve always had an entrepreneurial heart, where I would come up with business ideas, but I would give it to other people because I’d think: ‘I can’t do business because I’m in ministry’”. Mark described his entrepreneurial bent long before his missionary service: “Well, even before I went to [country], I always had this small business where I made stuff, or I buy and sell stuff. And when we came back, I thought I would just start a business.” Furthermore, as they reflected on their new identities as entrepreneurs, they framed business not as a departure from, but as an extension of their calling, with business itself taking on the character of Christian vocation that they had previously associated with mission work.

Helping Missionary Returnees on the Journey – Theological and Practical Approaches

In light of these returnees’ experiences, we propose two responses; one is a theological framework in reflection of God’s calling in vocation, and the other consists of practical suggestions mostly concerned with member care of missionaries after return.



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Chapel and Library at the SMA seminary, Ibadan, Nigeria

Photo: SMA (Society of American Missions)

Business is Also a Holy Vocation

First, theological reflection on vocation might be helpful in some aspects of the vocational identity crisis with which some of our interviewees grappled. A dualistic perspective views so-called spiritual activities (such as service of the church or in the mission field) done by “spiritual” folk (missionary, pastor, or priest) as sacred; while earthy, temporal activities (such as business) done by “ordinary” folk (laity) are considered secular. In this worldview, serving as a pastor or missionary is a higher calling than being a businessperson. Here, the missionary is at the top of a pyramid, and the businessperson is at the bottom; and to truly serve God one must climb the pyramid to the higher calling. In the context of this worldview, one can see how disorienting it might for someone who finds themselves moving in the opposite direction!

Historically, the concept of vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”) has shifted from a universal identity to a narrow professional designation and back again. Paul addressed the believers in the early churches as people who are “called” (*klētoi*) in Christ (Romans 1:6–7; 1 Corinthians 1:2) through baptism—a meaning embedded in the word for church itself (*ekklesia*, “called-out community”). However, a sacred–secular dualism emerged by the third century, restricting calling almost exclusively to clergy and monastics. The Reformation challenged this by reclaiming the sanctity of all lawful work and positioning the milkmaid’s labour as equal to the monk’s prayer⁶, a recovery later solidified by Vatican II’s “universal call to holiness”⁷. One might consider this long recovery of calling to be essentially complete as a matter of Christian teaching, but the vocational identity crises of some returned missionaries suggests that the church still has work to do.

If we wish to define vocation as the response of God’s people to the divine call, we must recognise that living vocationally will encompass any kind of work since that calling is expressed both within and beyond the religious community. This mindset, during re-entry, addresses vocational identity crises by recognising that a transition from cross-cultural mission work does not signal the end of one’s service to God. For one whose life is surrendered to Christ, it is merely a transition to a different arena of service—even if that arena is entrepreneurship. An emphasis on God’s kingdom mission can help returnees see themselves as missionaries who have changed fields, rather than as former missionaries. This posture recognises that for a Christian whose heart is in the right place, making profit as a businessperson is no more or less *spiritual* than accepting financial support as a missionary in the field. The bottom line is stewardship of God’s resources, which is required in both scenarios.

Re-entry Support

Secondly, returned missionaries – particularly those transitioning into entrepreneurship – are under-served by existing support structures within the church and broader Christian community. The challenges are well-documented: first-time entrepreneurs face high failure rates, and nearly all the returnees we interviewed emphasised that access to time, capital, and relational support were integral to their success. Civilian re-integration training for missionary returnees has not historically been the focus of mission organisations. One interviewee, Suzan, drew a telling contrast between her own return from the mission field and a family member’s return from military service, the latter providing a comprehensive programme designed to help veterans

find employment and transition into civilian life. This comparison is relevant considering how the apostle Paul uses military warfare language to describe Christian ministry and mission (2 Cor 10: 1–5 and Eph 6:10–20). The challenge mission agencies face in providing appropriate member care during the re-entry season may be due to the scarcity of resources, likely requiring inter-agency

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collaboration in order to ensure that all needs are met.

Encouragingly, there is growing emphasis on member care within mission agencies, supported by the expanding influence of the Global Member Care Network (GMCN) and its pyramid of care model, which incorporates the church, family/friends, professionals, and people helpers into the process⁸. In this vein, re-entry can be seen as a shared

responsibility of the missionary, the mission agency, and a local church, with the financial needs of missionaries in re-entry given ample attention. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that missionaries are still experiencing gaps in organisational care, with re-entry being an especially neglected area – one that some describe as “abandonment”⁹. Our interviewee Suzan confirmed this, as she explained, “*we [the church] often idolise the international missionary in our culture, but we don’t seem to affirm or be able to journey with their re-entry.*”

A pathway of care model with a focus on post-field care that includes debriefing and ongoing support is a healthy way of addressing challenges such as grief, reverse culture shock, and expectation management, along with other transition needs of the returning missionary¹⁰. In this pathway, support from other returnees could help returned missionaries to reflect on their growth, and to

normalise their experience¹¹. This model of member care, when done well, of course, does not eliminate the difficulty of missionary re-entry, yet it may help to remedy many of the challenges.

Practical Next Steps to Foster Entrepreneurship

■ Validated job testing. Use validated job diagnostic surveys to test for entrepreneurial disposition. Models such as Hackman and Oldham's Job Diagnostic Survey¹² may be used to identify the traits of missionaries prior to re-entry in order to provide job preparation support; whereas an entrepreneurial intention survey could be administered to assess the dispositions of missionaries who may be better suited toward entrepreneurship.

■ Mission support organization development. Establish specialised organisations focusing on developing entrepreneurial confidence while identifying business startup opportunities for returned missionaries. Returnees' narratives back this up: "I know ministry, but I don't really know business"; "to learn more from others that (sic) know more than I do in the area of business has helped"; and "it would be nice if there were resources [to support business startup]".

■ Business-As-Mission investment and incubators. Form investment groups and incubators that specifically value the high-risk tolerance and cross-cultural adaptability of such returned missionaries. Considering that

missionary returnees bring an abundance of transferable skills from mission work to entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial disposition, relatively low risk aversion, and a proven track record of pushing through in times of hardship, this seems very appropriate.

Conclusion

While the experience of loss can be traumatic and individuals returning from cross-cultural missions work may struggle through the challenges associated with re-entry, entrepreneurship appears to be a logical pathway toward restoration, offering returnees a new life aligned with God's calling. In the words of one returnee-turned-entrepreneur, "Business is Kingdom." 🇳🇮

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Tim Veach is Associate Professor of Management and Director of the DBA programme at George Fox University in Oregon, USA, where he teaches courses in global business and organisational theory & behaviour. He draws on his nearly 20 years of experience fully immersed in the cultures of China and South Korea in his teaching and research work on cross-cultural adjustment and frontier technologies in the workplace and beyond.



Agam Iheanyi-Igwe is Professor of Theology, Associate Dean of Bible, Theology, and Ministry, and Director of the Centre for Calling and Community at Bushnell University in Oregon, USA, where he teaches courses in theology, ministry, and missions. Originally from Nigeria, his research interests include vocation and mobilising the church for the Great Commission.