Early Returned Missionaries Discussion Guide
Introduction

Returning home early from a mission is typically an unanticipated experience that can be disorienting and painful. Support from Church leaders can be a crucial part of an early returned missionary’s adjustment to post-mission life. The materials in this packet are intended to assist you as a Church leader in helping to ease the transition for early returned missionaries. You may choose to use these materials in one-on-one sessions with an early returned missionary or in group settings with several missionaries.

Early returned missionaries often benefit from reassurance that feelings such as loss, grief, shame, loneliness, impatience, peace, relief, and confusion are common in these situations. They will likely find comfort as they regularly meet with you and are given the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Most early returned missionaries find it more helpful to focus on adjusting to life at home rather than returning to the mission field. You may want to encourage the early returned missionary to have patience with him- or herself, with family members, and with the community. Journaling can help the early returned missionary begin to work through difficult emotions and recognize promptings of the Spirit.

In addition to a section on Counseling Resources, six discussion guide documents are available to help you support the missionary. Topics, questions, and resources may be adapted to the missionary’s specific needs. We particularly encourage you to use the materials on shame in the “What Now?” discussion guide, as many early returned missionaries experience this difficult emotion.

The discussion guide topics are:

- What Now?
- Managing Grief and Loss
- Shaping Their Story
- Continuing as a Disciple
- Vision and Goals
- Savior-Centered Self-Reliance

If you believe an early returned missionary is severely distressed, if the distress is prolonged, or if it has interfered with his or her ability to function, we encourage you to consult with your local Family Services office. Counseling services for the early returned missionary may be available at no charge if the counseling is related to the missionary’s early return.

We hope that you will find these resources helpful. We recognize that your ministering efforts with early returned missionaries may help them not only manage the difficulties they experience but to also continue in lifelong service as disciples of Jesus Christ. As Sister Reyna I. Aburto, second counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, said, “Together, we can break through the clouds of isolation and stigma so the burden of shame is lifted and miracles of healing can occur” (“Thru Cloud and Sunshine, Lord, Abide with Me!” Oct. 2019, general conference).
Questions are an important part of ministering to early returned missionaries. Asking open questions in a kind and compassionate manner can help the early returned missionary feel heard and supported, see his or her service in a broader context, and look to the future.

**Questions to Consider**

You might ask the following questions:

- **Tell me about the circumstances that led to your return home.**
- **What was left undone because you came home earlier than expected?**
  - How do you feel about what was left undone?
- **What is it like to be home?**
- **What is the hardest thing about being home?**
  - On a scale of 1-10, how hard is it? (If the number is high, consider consulting with your local Family Services office.)
- **What is your relationship with the Lord like right now?**
  - How can you strengthen it?
- **How might you continue serving in your current circumstances?**
- **What are your greatest concerns right now?**
- **What are your sources of support?**
- **How is your family responding to your being at home?**
- **How do you feel about attending your ward again?**
- **What are your greatest concerns about the future?**

**Shame**

Missionaries who return home early may experience shame. Shame may be thought of as a fear of separation from God, family, or community. At times, shame may be confused with guilt. Shame is about one’s character or who one is as a person: the fear that “I am a failure; therefore, I am not worthy of love, connection, or inclusion.” Guilt is a focus on behavior: “I did something; therefore, I can do something different if necessary. I still am a valuable child of God.”

President Thomas S. Monson said:

Now, a word for those elders, sisters, and couples who, for whatever reason, may not be able to finish their assigned time in the mission field: The Lord loves you. He appreciates your sacrifice. He is aware of your disappointment. Know that He still has a work for you to do. Don’t let Satan tell you otherwise. Don’t get down; don’t become discouraged; don’t despair.
As I observed in general conference shortly after I was called to lead the Church: ‘Fear not. Be of good cheer. The future is as bright as your faith.’ That promise still holds true for you. So don’t lose your faith, because the Lord has not lost faith in you. Keep your covenants and move forward (“First Presidency Message: Called to the Work” Liahona, June 2017, 5).

Shame and guilt are deeply personal emotions. Shame distorts the truth about who one is. The missionary is a child of God, which means he or she can grow. He or she can always have hope to overcome and to connect with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. Isolation can increase feelings of shame, while talking about feelings and sharing experiences can help manage shame.

Questions to Consider

You might ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- What is your understanding of shame and guilt?
- How might you recognize if you experience shame in this experience?
- How might you recognize if you experience guilt in this experience?
- When you have felt shame in the past, what have you done?
- When you have felt guilt in the past, what have you done?
- How can you apply the lessons you learned from those experiences?

If this discussion or any other aspect of the returned missionary’s experience leads to a prolonged struggle without relief, please consult with your local Family Services office.

Resources

- Adjusting to Missionary Life.
- Jeffrey R. Holland, “Elder Holland’s Counsel for Early Returned Missionaries,” video (7:40).
- Dallin H. Oaks: “It is the best you can do each day, regardless of the outcome. Missionary success should never be measured by the exercise of someone else’s agency. If you present yourself according to mission rules and procedures and according to the instructions of your leaders, and do the best you can to teach, it does not matter whether anyone you teach ever is baptized into the Church. It does not matter to your success. It matters, of course, to them and to other things. But if you are trying to measure your success as a missionary, do not measure it by the exercise of someone else’s agency. If you do, you will be tempted to infringe upon that agency in one way or another, and that is not appropriate” (Devotional, Missionary Training Center, Sept. 21, 1999).
Managing Grief and Loss

Change often involves loss. When we experience loss, we may grieve. Missionaries who return home earlier than anticipated may experience a sense of loss. As they grieve, leaders can help by showing compassion and helping them recognize their skills for managing difficult situations.

Grief and Loss

Grief and loss are to be expected in this life. While everyone grieves in his or her own way, one can find comfort and reassurance in understanding that there are common elements in the grieving process.

The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five stages of grief for individuals facing death; these stages may apply to other situations as well (see Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Foundation).

- Denial
- Anger (in varying degrees)
- Bargaining
- Depression (an emotion, not necessarily a disorder)
- Acceptance (this can lead to finding hope in Christ and allows the individual to create meaning)

These stages are not necessarily sequential. A grieving individual may experience more than one stage at a time, in a cycle, or as a repeating pattern. Discussing how the early returned missionary relates to these stages can help him or her recognize his or her emotions and manage them in a healthy and productive way.

Questions to Consider

You might ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- What losses have you experienced? (Answers might include the loss of a dream or a loss of control.)
- Do you recognize any of these stages? 
  - At what stage or stages might you be in the grief process?
- What might you do if you are experiencing a particular stage?
- What emotions are you experiencing?
- What scriptures, quotes, or insights have helped you?
  - Why? (You might share, in turn, a scripture or quote that has helped you deal with grief and loss.)
- In what other healthy ways are you managing your emotions?
Help the early returned missionary recognize that emotions are an important part of our mortal experience. Emotions give us needed information and help us empathize and connect with others. We may not be able to control the emotions we experience, but we can choose how we respond to our emotions.

**Addressing Unexpected Life Events**

You might consider sharing the following principles and ideas for addressing life challenges.

**Understand the scriptural use of plan versus prepare.** The word plan appears regularly in the scriptures. Most often, it is used as a noun. There is a plan; it is God’s plan. Our job is not to redo the plan. The word prepare also appears regularly the scriptures. Our job is to prepare for our part in God’s plan. “If ye are prepared, ye shall not fear” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:30).

**Serve.** Serving a full-time mission is one way to serve the Lord, but it is not the only way. “If ye have desires to serve God ye are called to the work” (Doctrine and Covenants 4:3). Help the missionary consider how to continue serving. This may include doing family history, studying the scriptures and sharing your insights with others, ministering, and praying to know how Heavenly Father would have you serve (see Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Lift Where You Stand,” Oct. 2008, general conference).

**Study Adjusting to Missionary Life.** This resource contains materials to help adjust to situations. While the early returned missionary may believe it is only relevant to missionaries in the mission field, the following topics and skills can be applicable to individuals at any life stage:

- Stress levels, p. 6
- Managing stress, p. 17
- Breathing exercise, p. 18
- Progressive muscle relaxation, p. 19
- Talking back to negative thinking, p. 21
- Feeling anxious and inadequate, p. 32
- Feeling easily irritated or angry, p. 33
- Feeling exhausted and unmotivated, p. 33
- Feeling lonely, p. 34
- Exercise, p. 28
- The importance of nutrition, p. 27

**Talk to a trusted friend or leader.** Talking with a trusted friend or leader can build understanding. Speaking our thoughts aloud helps us to recognize truth and error. It can also help us sort through difficult and muddled thoughts and emotions.

**Consider professional counseling when appropriate.** Trials and difficult emotions are part of mortal life. It is not necessary to speak with a professional to manage every difficult experience. However, when the emotions persist for a prolonged period without relief, consider consulting

**Be diligent.** We are told many times in the scriptures to be diligent (see Doctrine and Covenants 10:4, Doctrine and Covenants 90:24). Being diligent does not mean being perfect. It doesn’t mean not making mistakes. It means to be persistent and keep trying; to get up one more time than we fall (see Boyd K. Packer, “The Least of These,” Oct. 2004, general conference).
Questions to Consider

You might ask the following questions:

- What has helped you manage difficult emotions and experiences in the past?
- How might you use those tools now?
- How have you prepared for serving the Lord not just as a full-time missionary but for life in general?
- When were you diligent as a missionary?
- How might you apply some of those behaviors and attitudes again?
- Which of the tools listed above might be helpful?
- Who are three people you might talk with?

Resources

Shaping Their Story

The stories we tell ourselves help shape our beliefs and actions. The perspective an early returned missionary chooses will influence how he or she thinks and feels about returning home. Leaders may be able to help shape the story by asking questions, suggesting activities, and providing feedback.

Understanding the Story

When early returned missionaries understand the story they are telling themselves, they can start to recognize their ability to change that story—and thus use their God-given agency. In the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites believed their fathers were “wronged” by the Nephites (see Mosiah 10:11-17). The story the Lamanites and Nephites told themselves shaped how they saw themselves and their brethren.

Questions to Consider

You might ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- What stories did the Lamanites tell about the Nephites?
  - What were the results? (See Mosiah 10:14-17.)
- What stories do you tell yourself about why you returned?
  - What might be some underlying assumptions that are helpful?
  - What might be some underlying assumptions that aren’t helpful?
  - What might be the results of those assumptions?
- What stories do you think others have told about you:
  - In your family?
  - In your ward?
  - In your mission?
  - In your circle of friends?
  - How are those assumptions helpful? Not helpful?
- What do you expect of yourself:
  - Right now?
  - In the future?
  - In Church-related service?
  - What story do you tell yourself that leads to these expectations?
- What are some of your concerns or fears?
  - Who can you talk to about your concerns?
  - Who is your biggest support now?
- What can I do to support your journey?
Resources to Help You Choose Your Story

As you help the early returned missionary to choose their own story, consider the following questions and resources. You might ask:

- What advice might you give to someone else who has returned early?
- When you look back on this experience, how would you like to tell your story?

Consider using any of the following to help an early returned missionary think about how he or she chooses his or her story. You might want to ask the question included here:

- Russ Harris: “Thanking Your Mind: Taking the Power Out of Difficult Thoughts” (1:46).
  - When you get caught in a difficult story that will lead you away from Jesus Christ, what might you do?
  - When might you choose to give it no heed? (See Doctrine and Covenants 20:22.)
  - When might you talk back to negative thinking? (See “Talking Back to Negative Thinking” activity in Adjusting to Missionary Life, p. 21.)
- Jeffrey R. Holland, “Elder Holland’s Counsel for Early Returned Missionaries” video (7:40).
  - What story might Elder Holland want you to believe?
  - What story might Elder Holland want you to write or rewrite?
  - What blessings did you (and your family) receive from your service?
  - What lessons did you learn on your mission that might strengthen you?
  - What is one beneficial thing you have learned from your experience of returning home early?

As you help the early returned missionary tell his or her story and recognize his or her agency, you might encourage him or her to write the story in a journal or share it with a trusted friend to help secure learning.

Resources

- Ether 12:27.
- Preach My Gospel, “How Do I Recognize and Understand the Spirit.”
- Colleen Georges, “Rescripting the Stories We Tell Ourselves,” video (19:48), TEDxRutgers.
- Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” October 2018 general conference or “You Are His Child” (00:44)
When missionaries start their missionary service, they may experience spiritual and emotional growth as they work to feel closer to the Savior. If they are released earlier than anticipated, they can experience a wide variety of emotions including feelings of loss and a lack of direction. Yet as they focus on their commitment to become more like Jesus Christ, they can continue to feel a connection to the Divine and an increased sense of direction, peace, fulfillment, and joy.

Pursuing Discipleship Before and During the Mission

All missionaries and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can experience increased spiritual strength as they study and about the principle of discipleship and apply what they learn. Ultimately, the goal is to become more like Jesus Christ. Elder Robert D. Hales said:

Many people hear the word disciple and think it means only “follower.” But genuine discipleship is a state of being. This suggests more than studying and applying a list of individual attributes. Disciples live so that the characteristics of Christ are woven into the fiber of their beings, as into a spiritual tapestry (“Becoming a Disciple of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” Apr. 2017 general conference).

Help the early returned missionary to recognize how he or she has begun to develop discipleship, or to become more like Jesus Christ, prior to and while serving as a missionary.

Questions to Consider

You might ask the following questions:

- What experiences helped you develop discipleship before your full-time missionary service?
- How did you become a stronger disciple of Jesus Christ as a missionary?
- Would you describe your experiences of discipleship while on your mission?
  - Who was involved?
  - Whose lives did you touch?
  - How did this discipleship help you receive personal revelation?
- What behaviors and practices contributed to your discipleship?

Discipleship after a Mission

When a missionary returns home before he or she has anticipated, many questions may arise, including “What do I do next?” Focusing first on personal discipleship can lead to a sense of purpose, direction, and peace that will allow
the Holy Ghost to direct the next steps (see 2 Nephi 32:3). President James E. Faust taught:

Discipleship brings purpose to our lives so that rather than wandering aimlessly, we walk steadily on that strait and narrow way that leads us back to our Heavenly Father. Discipleship brings us comfort in times of sorrow, peace of conscience, and joy in service—all of which help us to be more like Jesus (“Discipleship,” Oct. 2006, general conference).

When an early returned missionary strives to become like Jesus Christ, he or she can develop confidence. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated:

The gospel is the way of discipleship. As we walk in that way, we can experience confidence and joy—even during times of peril, sorrow, and uncertainty (“The Way of the Disciple,” Apr. 2009, general conference).

In a later general conference, Elder Uchtdorf listed specific ways in which Church members may increase discipleship:

As members of the Church, we are encouraged to immerse ourselves in the words of God through His prophets, ancient and modern. Through sincere and humble prayer to our Heavenly Father, we learn to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit. We accept calls to serve, teach, plan, minister, and administer. These opportunities allow us to grow in spirit, mind and character (“Come and Belong,” Apr. 2020 general conference).

Elder Uchtdorf said that the Church provides many opportunities for discipleship, not only through full-time missionary service:

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ involves much more than talking and preaching of Christ. The Savior Himself restored His Church to help us on the path to become more like Him. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is structured to provide opportunities to practice the fundamentals of discipleship. Through our participation in the Church, we learn to recognize and act on the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We develop the disposition of reaching out in compassion and kindness to others. This is an effort of a lifetime and it requires practice (“Come and Belong,” Apr. 2020, general conference).

Questions to Consider

You might ask the following questions:

- How can focusing on personal discipleship assist you during times of uncertainty?
- Which behaviors and practices assist you in feeling closer to your Savior and strengthening your discipleship?
- How does pondering on your role as a disciple of Jesus Christ affect your plans and decisions?

Resources

- John 8:31-32.
- 3 Nephi 5:13.
- Doctrine and Covenants 123:17.
- Doctrine and Covenants 41:5.
Vision and Goals

Early returned missionaries are often concerned about their future. They may have had plans for their lives after returning home, but now they find themselves worried and wondering what to do. As you work with early returned missionaries, help them use the skills they developed in the mission field to move forward. First, help them connect with their eternal identity to gain a vision of their ultimate goal (see the discussion guide “Continuing as a Disciple”). Then, you may want to help them focus on the present while being mindful of the future, be flexible, find resources, and recognize that a full-time mission is not a destination; it is one step in serving the Lord Jesus Christ. Be aware that a returned missionary’s readiness to engage in meaningful goal setting and action plans will likely fluctuate.

Focus on the Present While Being Mindful on the Future

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior told His disciples to “take no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself” (Matthew 6:34). A verse in the Doctrine and Covenants states that “if ye are prepared, ye shall not fear” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:30), while other verses counsel the Saints to “prepare every needful thing” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:119; 109:8). At first glance these scriptures might seem contradictory, but each contains important principles that are worthy of discussion.

Questions to Consider

You might want to ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- What did the Savior mean by the scripture above found in Matthew?
  - Why do you think He said it?
- How might it apply to you?
- How does the directive in Matthew fit with the charge to be prepared?
- How might both concepts be important now?
- How might you address both concepts in your life?

Encourage and help the early returned missionary to find ways to balance both living in the present and being mindful of the future.

Be Flexible

In the Book of Mormon, Nephi and his brothers were asked to obtain the brass plates so that they could take them to the promised land. Nephi and his brothers had multiple plans and attempted several ways to get the scriptures before they were
successful (see 1 Nephi 3:4). Nephi was flexible and adaptable.

Missionaries experience both success and failure. Help the early returned missionary recognize how the skills he or she gained in flexibility as a missionary can help him or her today.

**Questions to Consider**

You might discuss the following with the early returned missionary:

- Tell me a story about how you were flexible as a missionary.
  - What did you learn from that experience?
- How might that skill apply as you are moving forward?

**Find Resources**

Many resources are available to help an early returned missionary set meaningful goals. These resources include scriptures, patriarchal blessings, welfare and self-reliance workshops, educational websites, and so on. Personal revelation may be the most important resource. Like the Liahona, it can guide the returned missionary to the “more fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:16). (See Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” Apr. 2019, general conference.)

Mentors may be another resource. In the book of Exodus, Moses was overwhelmed by the number of problems he was asked to resolve. He turned to his father-in-law, Jethro, who mentored him by teaching him to delegate (see Exodus 18:10-27).

**Questions to Consider**

You might ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- What resources might be part of your personal Liahona right now?
- What resources do you need to find?
- How are you using personal revelation to help find the best resources?
- How might a mentor help you now?
  - Who might be a mentor?

Consider encouraging the early returned missionary to journal about what resources he or she has and what resources he or she would like to develop.

**A Full-Time Mission Is Part of Lifelong Service**

A full-time mission is only one part of a life of serving Jesus Christ and our fellow men (see Matt. 22:38-39). Encourage the early returned missionary to recognize that returning home early from a mission does not define him or her unless he or she allows it.
Questions to Consider

You might ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- How have you served the Lord and your fellow men and women?
- What are some ways you can serve God with all of your heart, might, mind, and strength now?
- What are some goals you can set to serve throughout your life?
- What resources do you need to serve?
- How will you find these resources?

Discuss with the early returned missionary that while he or she may feel wounded (see Alma 57:24-25), that does not mean he or she is not valued or valuable. The wound may become a source of great strength (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Resources

- Proverbs 29:18.
- Mosiah 2:17.
- Doctrine and Covenants 84:106.
- Russ Harris, Values vs Goals (3:41), video.
Savior-Centered Self-Reliance

When missionaries return home early, they may be concerned about their relationship with Jesus Christ. Elder Robert D. Hales taught that our relationship with Jesus Christ is connected to our ability to be self-reliance. Self-reliance is taking responsibility for our own spiritual and temporal welfare and for those whom Heavenly Father has entrusted to our care. Only when we are self-reliant can we truly emulate the Savior in serving and blessing others.

It is important to understand that self-reliance is a means to an end. Our ultimate goal is to become like the Savior, and that goal is enhanced by our unselfish service to others. Our ability to serve is increased or diminished by the level of our self-reliance (“A Gospel Vision of Welfare: Faith in Action,” 2009, 1-3).

Supporting an early returned missionary in building his or her relationship with Jesus Christ can help him or her become more self-reliant and Christlike. Elder Dale G. Renlund helps us to recognize ways to turn toward Jesus Christ:

What does it take for you to be drawn to the Savior? Consider Jesus Christ’s submission to His Father’s will, His victory over death, His taking upon Himself your sins and mistakes, His receiving power from the Father to make intercession for you, and His ultimate redemption of you. ... Jesus Christ ‘stands with open arms, hoping and willing to heal, forgive, cleanse, strengthen, purify, and sanctify [you and me].’ ...

Reflecting on God’s goodness and mercy helps us become more spiritually receptive. In turn, increased spiritual sensitivity allows us to come to know the truth of all things by the power of the Holy Ghost. ... When we remember the greatness of our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and what They have done for us, we will not take Them for granted (“Consider the Goodness and Greatness of God” Apr. 2020 general conference).

Help the missionary to recognize how he or she has seen God’s goodness and mercy.

Questions to Consider

You might want to ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- How did you see God’s goodness and mercy prior to your mission?
- In other people’s lives?
- In your life?
- How did you see God’s goodness and mercy on your mission?
- In other people’s lives?
- In your life?
- How have you seen God’s goodness and mercy in the process of returning home and since being home?

**Questions to Consider**

You might want to ask the early returned missionary the following questions:

- How have you seen trials help others turn to God?
- How have you seen God turn weakness into strength?
- How have you seen it for yourself?
- What do you believe you did not complete as a missionary?
- How can you allow the Savior Jesus Christ to complete it?

**Savior-Centered Self-Reliance**

Help the returned missionary to consider his or her relationship with Jesus Christ and to take responsibility for his or her own spiritual and temporal growth.
Questions to Consider

You might want to ask the following questions:

- What have you done to build your relationship with Jesus Christ?
- What can you do to continue to build your relationship with Jesus Christ?
- How can you use the experience of returning home early to build your testimony?
- How might you use your experiences to help others come closer to Christ?

Resources

- Gospel Topics: “Becoming Emotionally Self-Reliant”
- S. Michael Wilcox, “Bread or Stones, Understanding the God We Pray To,” Mar. 31, 2009, BYU Hawaii Devotional.