



Coming home?

Jenny Merritt spent 18 years working in Ethiopia. She returned to the UK three years ago, but coming home was more difficult than she expected.



I can never forget the privilege and joy of serving the people of Ethiopia. The individuals I met, the things I saw and experienced, the joys and the sorrows I shared, the friends I made - all these will stay with me forever. I am so grateful for the part I was able to play in the Hosanna School for the Deaf, the community-based rehabilitation programmes, the local church, and for the Lord's ongoing care for them.

I recall coming home after those amazing years in Ethiopia. It felt as if half of me was still there and I knew it would take time before the UK felt like home. I was surprised by the many adjustments I had to make, like using plastic cards instead of cash. The A1 motorway was hair-raising: five lanes of heavy traffic, travelling at 70mph, hoping that we had read signs correctly and were still going in the right direction.

THINKING

And then, even though I knew it was in good hands, I found it very hard to lay down the reins of the school in Ethiopia. I woke up thinking about it: was all well with the students? Were they still being encouraged to read the Bible every day? What of Selamawit, the project leader, going to study for her Masters in Special Needs in Addis Ababa? Was her replacement coping? Did the boarders have all the clothing and bedding they needed? Who was praying with them?

I hadn't expected to find it so hard to return to the UK, although many

people had warned me it would take a while to settle. Nevertheless, seeing my family, visiting churches and long-term supporters and friends again was such a joy.

I have kept in touch with my friends in Ethiopia since then. It's given me a sense of continuity with Ethiopian life, and I have been back to visit a few times, which has been marvellous as I wasn't able to make all the proper farewells I wanted when I finished work there.

CHANGED

But I *have* left. Sometimes communication is frustrating and things have changed, and I still miss the people in Addis Ababa very much, particularly the students who are growing up, and the staff and colleagues who have moved on.

After the transforming experience that was Ethiopia, what do I still find so different about living in England? I have no doubt that it was right that I should come home and I have loved being with family and friends. However, living in the UK prompts many often contradictory emotions: where are those people going, all so well dressed? Heavy traffic is still scary, but at least I can drive at night without fear of being car-jacked. I've noticed, too, how little respect some young people have. In Ethiopia the young have much more respect - but then, it felt that everyone had more time for others in Ethiopia.

I still tend to think like an African. I



am conscious of the importance of the spiritual, rather than the material things around me because I have seen how God provides in a land that has so little.

PREPARING

Would I have done things differently if I had known how hard it was going to be to return? Well, I wouldn't have missed my time in Ethiopia for anything and I shall always thank God for allowing me to go.

To current mission partners preparing to come "home" I would say get someone to work with you on the planning, organising and packing. Leave time to do the people things; make time to say good-byes; and try to catch up with the UK culture - sit and watch even the terrible programmes in TV so you know what people are absorbing and talking about. Join a local church and get involved with God's mission here. Come and be part of the UK again.

Bill and Sara Goodman returned to the UK in 2005 after six years in Addis Ababa. They had themselves and a young family to consider when it came to "settling in".



"We knew that we would never feel the same as everyone else or quite fit in. We were prepared for that; and grateful for our changed perspectives because of all the things we had had the honour to do and live through. We knew that we would need to work at being humble and remember that people hurt even in the midst of so much apparent prosperity. It was a lot harder to help the children navigate being the same on the outside but not the inside. Going into a multi-ethnic school was actually hard because people who looked African were so English!"

"The children said they had no expectations because they didn't know the UK very well. Even though we came back to England frequently, they remembered very little of "home": it really was a foreign country to them."

Had you tried to prepare yourself?

"We read the books, and we did the things they said. We saved our most precious possessions and took time to say good-bye properly. What helped was feeling God's love so palpably during our morning quiet times in the months before leaving."

What was good about being back in the UK?

"Seeing family was good. Having more resources was nice: phones, clothes, music lessons, and the freedom to go



out and about by ourselves. And being healthy - no longer having to live with amoeba!"

"We're loving where we are, but not sure it will be for always. Overseas is still very much on our hearts."

What was immediately hard to adjust to?

"People thinking we had been deprived and wanting to cosset us. How could they know how richly blessed we were? We also wondered whether we were really needed here; so many other people could do the jobs we were seeking."

"There were times when we felt really stupid - not knowing how the simplest of things worked. It took two weeks of covert watching to work out just how

people managed to get trolleys to push round supermarkets."

How did you make those adjustments?

"Seeing folk who had stood with us in prayer through out our time in Addis and the kindness of folk on deputation made a big difference. Just as important is getting excited about what God is doing in England."

After some years, what do you still have difficulties with?

"The lack of adventure and risk; the consumer society with its fascination for celebrity; the lack of appreciation for things like a reliable health service.

We're loving where we are, but not sure it will be for always. Overseas is still very much on our hearts. Being in contact with folk there is still very important."

What suggestions would you make to a mission partner due to return?

"Be kind to yourself. Don't feel guilty because you aren't 'adjusting' the way other people think you should be. The best thing you can do is just spend time with God, time with each other and keep loving each other the best you can. Pray intelligently and play your part in a local church, helping others to get a bigger global perspective. God has led us through the biggest adventure of our lives, and even if we are 'back' in the UK, the adventure is not over yet!"

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