



When a Mission Ends Early

An early mission return can feel like failure, but it may also mark the start of unexpected spiritual growth.

By Samuel Hancock

FAITH

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It is often easier to speak about the parts of life that unfold as we hoped. I could talk all day, every day about the many good things that have come to my life since my wife and I were married. But it can be difficult and awkward to talk about the things that go wrong. Although I love talking about my marriage, it is much more difficult for me to talk about another major life event—when I returned home early from my missionary service for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after seven months. Speaking about my early return and everything associated with it just does not come easily. That difficulty comes largely from within: at some point, I came to see returning home early as a personal failure—something that should not have happened—and that belief made the subject unusually difficult to discuss.

But what if we took a different perspective? We often talk about all the wonderful personal growth that full-term returned missionaries had while serving, but why should growth that early-returned missionaries go through after they return be any different? Of course, not all outcomes are going to be positive. Coming home early from a mission is a very challenging experience that can set a soul on a catapulting track toward self-discovery and growth. As an early returner, and now as a Ph.D. student in psychology, I was able to get funding to do a study on what causes early returned missionaries to get on that track of growth.

My Early Return and How It Led Me to This Study

Before turning to the study itself, some personal context may be helpful. These “positive outcomes” may not show up immediately, nor do I think it’s fair to expect oneself or a loved one to cope with such a dramatic life event so easily. In one of my favorite [articles](#), “Bereavement: An Incomplete Rite of Passage,” the author explains that someone may never entirely “get over” the loss of a loved one — they may learn to generally deal with the loss, but their perception of the experience continually shifts and evolves. I feel the same way about my early mission return. When I came back, I was almost numb. A month later, I was feigning happiness. Two months later, I was questioning my faith. Three months later, I began searching for any identity other than “early-returned missionary” that I could affix to myself, yet each “identity” I attempted to develop was more fragile than the last. My grades at Brigham Young University also suffered.

So what led me to the point I’m at now? By the time I had been home for a year, I had regained my faith through fervent study and prayer, and after being almost forced to develop significantly more humility, stopped my search for a different persona. I was also getting better grades.

During the spring term of 2019, I began finding personal meaning in my attempts to understand others’ experiences and mental processes, and I set out to study psychology. The years went by, and I found myself involved in all sorts of research: the effects of violent video game exposure, the effects of binge eating on the brain, adolescent religious de-identification, and melanoma preventative behaviors in children, among other topics. When the time came for me to begin my own research work as a graduate student, returning to Provo after a couple of

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years as a full-time researcher at the University of Utah, I decided to focus my efforts on understanding other early-returned missionaries, mentored by professors Sam Hardy, Jenae Nelson, Jared Warren, and Michael Goodman.

There was only one other existing academic study on early-returned missionaries. I decided to follow its lead in interviewing each person in depth rather than using survey data. Although this process limited the number of people I could involve in the study, other studies on the use of interviews for niche topics find that researchers tend to reach a sufficient sample level at about 12 interviews. The prior study I mentioned included 12 early-returned male missionaries and had questions on mission experiences, early returns, and post-mission adjustment. I wanted to expand upon this research by including women and spending more time speaking about the identity development participants had gone through since their early return and their perceptions of their future. I also remained open to other salient themes that emerged from interviews. So, I recruited 20 early-returned missionaries to participate in this in-depth study — 9 men and 11 women. I would like to stress that this was a *highly* emotional experience for most people, and I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to interview such wonderful people about their experiences.

Identity transformation

First, every person mentioned feeling an identity transformation in some way. One participant shared:

Honestly, I think coming home from my mission is a really big thing. It really defined who I am as a person and my understanding of church member[s], because before I thought a church member had to be someone [who] grew up in the Church, that served a mission ... things like that. Then I [understood] that a church member is someone that just tries their best to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And so that really [helped] me shape and understand the members of the Church in a broader sense and not just the typical Utah stereotypes. So, I think coming home from my mission definitely helped with that.

This sentiment resonated strongly with my own experience. Even as a missionary, I had felt that coming home early would be a condemnation for the rest of my life, rendering me always some degree of broken in church settings. Only after going through this

process did I realize that it truly is impossible for anyone other than Christ to live a fully “perfect” life, and that joy comes in embracing my imperfections and Christ’s role in my redemption.

Hope for the future

Another finding was that 19 of the 20 participants mentioned an optimistic view of how their futures would develop, given their experiences as early-returned missionaries. Another participant shared:

It’s interesting because I feel less ... fearful for the future because I’m like, I already have had something that has literally broken me down to lower than I thought I could be at, and I came out of it. So, it kind of gives me more confidence that whatever comes, I know I’ve been through the process before of only having God to rely on.

Personally, I feel the same way — I *know* that I can do all things through Christ because I have already been at my lowest, and He has lifted me up again.

Peacemaking and reconciliation

A third commonality, shown in 19 of 20 interviews, was that of peacemaking or some form of reconciliation. One early-returned missionary wrote the following in her journal while on the plane home from her mission, “My Heavenly Father is so wise in giving me an experience like this. It forces me to actually fully trust in Him, which I do. This is one of the first experiences in my life that I can’t fully plan out first.”

This was one of my favorite responses. Having a framework of trusting in God built from strongly needing to do so earlier in life can be so beneficial to one’s future. I’m aware that challenges lie in the future, both for me and this early-returned missionary, but trusting in God first above all else has provided a foundation for all of my decisions that will always yield the best outcome — even if I can’t always see it right then.

Empathy

Despite increased empathy for others not being directly referenced on the list of interview questions, the topic came up in 16 of the 20 interviews. One person said, “Had I not seen myself [at] such a low point in my life, then I wouldn’t be able to reach out to others in a similar state.”

This finding in particular is something I would love to explore deeper in future research. How amazing is it that our imperfections and difficult experiences can actually lead us to become more like Christ? Before my early return, I was of the mindset that early-returned missionaries could generally have stayed out if they had just tried harder. Only after returning early despite having given every ounce of dedication and effort to the Lord did I realize that I’d had it all wrong: I *feel* for people who are in similarly devastating circumstances. I wish I’d had that quality beforehand, but the empathy I developed is one of my most prized possessions, and I thank God for giving it to me.

Faith

A majority (14 out of 20) specifically mentioned having stronger faith in God or religion as a result of their early return during their interviews, while 4 specifically mentioned having weaker faith as a result of their early return. This strong majority of increased faith is encouraging. One person referring to their early return said:

Because of that, the steps I took afterward, it made me read the scriptures harder than I’ve ever read in my life, and it’s made me love just light, seeing people’s light, and the light of Christ in them. I feel like I’m able to see it so easily and I appreciate it so much because I’ve seen the darkness.

Faith is a lifelong journey, and mine has grown as I’ve appreciated the outcomes of my difficulties more and more. It really is amazing to see others appreciate the goodness of Christ even more after having some experience with darkness.

Perceptual change over time

A final theme referenced by the majority of interviewees (12 of 20) was that of perceptual change. One interviewee said, “I guess with more time that passes, I see it in a different way... So, I think it’ll always be in the back of my mind, or it’ll always be something I

reference, just because it was very, very starkly different from any other experience I have in my life.”

It is hard to run away from such a formative experience, and I don't believe it's best to act like it didn't happen. As with all difficulties in life, we tend to see our challenges differently with time, as we learn more about God's love for us as individuals.

What Many Early-Returned Missionaries Still Need

There were more themes that came from these interviews, some of which included negative experiences, but those tended to be highly individual. What did seem to be uniform throughout the interviews was that these people *wanted* someone to talk to about their experience, but often didn't feel that they could. One interviewee said that he didn't have a single person to talk about his early return with — no member of his family would entertain the topic, and he didn't feel like he could bring it up to his friends. The sense of loneliness this young man exuded was palpable.

In my view, these interviews suggest there is positive personal development after a missionary returns early, and thus, *returning early can lead to positive progress in becoming more like God*. However, I want to emphasize that this is still a very difficult thing to go through. Right now the resources for early-returned missionaries are sparse at best. In my view, it would be beneficial if early-returned missionaries had spaces to connect with other early-returned missionaries, and perhaps programs to facilitate these connections.

Therapeutic resources are hard to come by and can be expensive in some settings. As great as those professional resources can be, I do enjoy talking to people who personally know and care about me, or who have been through the same experience of returning early and can empathize with the difficulties. Whether it's organized as therapist-led group sessions, included in guidance for early-returned missionaries as they come back, or offered as rotating free events, I believe that having spaces for early-returned missionaries to talk to each other would be very helpful.

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Those close to early-returned missionaries can offer an invaluable gift: patient love and a willingness to listen without judgment. Early returners are changing and actively growing, just like you are. We have come a long way as a church community in normalizing the idea that those who might deviate from the normative experience are fully worthy of love and support, but I believe we can be even better, and in attempting to do so, can more fully serve as Christ would.

About the author

Samuel Hancock

Sam is a PhD student studying psychology at Brigham Young University. After he returned early from an LDS mission, he decided to research others' experiences with the goal to develop a resource to help early-returned missionaries re-adjust.