

Early **HOMECOMING**

A Resource for **Early-Returned Missionaries**,
their Church Leaders, and Family

KRISTEN REBER

CFI

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FOREWORD

By Kristine Doty-Yells, PhD, LCSW

I have been waiting for this book to be written. In fact, I am heaving a sigh of relief. Finally, this topic is hitting the mainstream of Mormon culture! This book validates the phenomenon of returning early from a mission as a legitimate issue that needs and deserves attention.

In 2010, I embarked on what would become the academic passion of my life: studying early-returned missionaries (ERMs). My youngest son had just returned after five months of service, and I struggled to adjust. One would think I would have handled it well because I had been through it before with my oldest son. But I didn't. And to be honest, I would give anything to turn back the clock and get a do-over. A few months later, one of my students at Utah Valley University came to my office and, in the course of our discussion, mentioned that he had returned early from his mission. I asked him some pointed questions about his adjustment experience, and the answers he gave seemed oddly familiar. I had seen similar behavior in my two children. I wondered if this was a "normal" response to an early return. I decided I really wanted to know the answer to this and other questions, so I put together a student research team and we explored the issue. Two years later, I had the answers I was looking for. And my perspective was forever changed. So, I hope, will yours after reading this book.

As I began to present the results of my research publicly, it was apparent many hearts needed to change. The problem had nothing to do with Church doctrine and everything to do with Church culture. I was stunned at the unkind response people had to ERMs. A colleague at the university heard me share the shocking statistic that 72 percent

of ERMs had feelings of failure. Her response was sickening: “Your research is flawed, Kris; that percentage should be 100 percent.” From that moment, I made it my personal mission to destroy the ugly, negative stigma surrounding an early return.

Since that time, I have conducted four additional studies focusing on ERM issues. I have given numerous presentations and have written several articles on the topic. People started asking me when I was going to write the book. “You need to tell this story!” they said. I pondered the idea, even wrote a few thoughts on the direction such a book could take. But I never felt comfortable actually writing it. I knew the story wasn’t mine to tell. It needed to come from someone who had lived it, someone who had actually returned early.

In the fall of 2017, I was waiting for a friend and had a few moments to sit. I mindlessly checked my LinkedIn profile and saw a message from Kristen Reber asking to talk with me about a book she wanted to write on the ERM experience. It was not the first request of this kind. In fact, I have been asked many times to provide research results, statistics, and even an endorsement to a well-meaning author or nonprofit program creator who wanted to help ERMs transition into a successful post-mission life. I admired each of these people; their hearts were in the right place. But most of the efforts never came to fruition.

Moments after reading that message, my phone rang. It was Kristen. “I want to write a book about early-returned missionaries and was hoping I could talk with you about it.” We spent a while talking about her ideas, what the message would be, the timeline, and other details. I tried to be blunt and almost discouraging just to give her a “reality check.” After all, I had heard this pitch before. But as we talked, she addressed each of my concerns and questions with confidence and clarity. I knew this was it. This was the book that needed to be written, and Kristen was the person to write it.

As she moved through the project, Kristen called me on occasion to get feedback on ideas or ask questions about the research. Honestly, she did not need much help from me. She knew what to do. When she sent me the completed manuscript, I couldn’t put it down. It is exactly the book I would want to read if I were an early-returned missionary.

Foreword

Written with compassion and understanding, it provides beautiful counsel whether you are boarding an airplane to take that long flight home or you have been home for years.

Thank you, Kristen. This book finally tells the story that is long overdue.

INTRODUCTION

My Story

I remember it like it was yesterday: I was home. Home from my mission. I was back in the United States of America, a first-world country, with the comforts I'd known my entire life until twelve weeks earlier. I was again with my family, friends, and ward members who loved me. I had been honorably released but I did not feel so honorable.

I felt guilty, angry, relieved, sad, happy, and depressed all at once. Coming home from a mission early—there is nothing like it. I felt unworthy of the title “returned missionary.” My mission had been nothing like I had expected it to be. Nothing. It was the hardest thing that I had ever done—but not in the way that I had expected. Ignoring the physical illness that got me sent home, the trials that I had faced just as a missionary were overwhelming. And because I had to be sent home early, I felt as though I had somehow failed the Lord—as though He could no longer use me as a full-time missionary because I was no longer worthy to be one of them.

How could I have failed the Lord so quickly? Twelve weeks. Only twelve weeks in the field. Ten of those precious days were spent in the hospital. Many more were spent on my bed in the apartment desperately trying to feel better. So much wasted time. Why couldn't I have been stronger?

I remember sitting on my bed the day after I came home and thinking about all that had transpired in the last six months. Every emotion that I mentioned above was coursing through me. My mom found me, and we talked. I told her everything going on in my mind, no matter how angry or sad I sounded. I just didn't care anymore.

“I’m just so angry, Mom,” I said. “My trainer and my mission president did not understand me. They made it so hard on me.”

“What do you mean?”

“My trainer thought that I was sick and couldn’t get better because the Lord could no longer use me.”

“That’s not true.”

“I hope you’re right. That’s what I keep telling myself, but it’s hard to believe.” The anger gave way to sadness, and I began to cry. “And my mission president made me make the decision to come home! He wouldn’t just send me back! He could see how sick I was and yet he wouldn’t send me home! So many missionaries get sick there, so maybe he just didn’t want to have another missionary that went home early on his record, but whatever the reason, it was cruel!” I knew he must have had his reasons for having me make the decision; I believed he had been called by God to be my mission president, so he must be a good man, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but wonder if it was human weakness that caused him to make me make the horrible decision, instead of relieving me of that burden and subsequent guilt by making it for me.

“I didn’t want to go home!” I continued, “But I had to! And I had to make the decision!” The tears came back. My poor mom just did her best to comfort me with hugs and words of affirmation. It helped, but only temporarily. I had my own inner battle to fight now.

Serving a mission hadn’t been an easy decision. Thoughts to serve a mission didn’t even enter my mind until one day when I was twenty years old and I took a walk trying to clear my head. I felt weighed down by some events that had taken place in the last year. As I walked and thought about the past, a calm, quiet voice entered my mind, and I felt more than heard, “You should not worry about the past. You should think about the future.” In an instant I went from feeling sad and anxious to happy and full of energy. I began to think about school and my goals for writing, when just as quickly, the Spirit whispered, “You should think about serving a mission.”

A mission? I was taken aback by the thought. I had never thought about serving a mission before. Having been raised in the Church, I knew it was an option, but I’d never given that option much, if any, thought. But now I did, and as I thought about it, I felt a little excited.

I've always loved a good adventure. I also began to feel a desire to serve, to teach others the gospel that I loved so very much. I told the Spirit I'd think about it. It wasn't lost on me what a huge commitment and life change a mission was, and I wanted time to make the decision.

It took me six months to make the decision to serve. And sadly, for most of those six months I felt anxious about the decision rather than calm. I wanted to make the right choice. As I prayed about the decision and talked with others, I really felt like I'd be fine either way. That the Lord did not *expect* me to serve a mission, but rather that it was an option. But why that strong, clear prompting when I went on the walk? Perhaps I just needed to consider all my options. Or maybe I really did need to go? Ugh! I was so stressed out.

I received a blessing at one point that told me the Lord would be pleased no matter what I chose. The decision really was mine. The turning point came when I confided in a roommate that I felt some fear and anxiety about serving a mission. She told me that she had felt some fear before she decided to serve, and even afterward too, but she went ahead with her decision because she knew that the Spirit did not work through doubts or fears. I felt the truth of what she was saying. After our chat, I went to my room and read a letter from a friend serving a mission. For whatever reason, in that letter he encouraged me to read Joshua 1:9. I opened my scriptures and read, "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." I felt the Spirit speak to me that I *could* serve a mission; that all would be well. Again, the Lord would be pleased either way, but that if I wanted to serve, I could do so without fear.

I made the decision to serve and didn't look back. When my call arrived and I read that I was going to the Philippines Iloilo Mission, I was ecstatic! I was so excited to teach the gospel! And, admittedly, I was excited to go to a new country and to learn a new language.

A few months later I entered the Provo Missionary Training Center and spent eight weeks there soaking up the Spirit and the Tagalog language. I loved the MTC. I made lifelong friends there. It was wonderful.

I broke my wrist about two weeks before it was time to head to the Philippines and had to stay an extra four weeks. I was frustrated, but I

ended up making more friends as a result. I also learned some powerful life lessons that helped me understand others and empathize with those who feel marginalized. I wasn't mistreated for staying longer or anything, but my experiences during this time helped me find empathy for the marginalized.

Anyways, eventually I arrived at my mission, alone, off-schedule, and groggy from the long flight, but I was excited! I was ready to teach the gospel to every person! I had been trained and prepared. In fact, I'd received *extra* training with those four additional weeks in the MTC. I thought I knew what I was getting into. When I arrived in the mission office and saw the sign that read "Welcome—Philippines Iloilo Mission" it hit me how real this was—no turning back now. I felt a little nervous, but I knew that with the Lord's help I would be able to accomplish the work He had for me there. I also noticed the mission's theme on the sign, "Be Strong and of a Good Courage." I smiled. Surely that was no coincidence.

I met with my mission president in his office, where he welcomed me to the mission.

"What kind of mission do you want to have, Sister Danner?" he asked.

"A good one," I replied, still groggy. It was the best answer that I could come up with in the moment.

"Good. And what do you plan to do to make it a good one?"

"I plan to do everything I can to teach the gospel."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"By speaking with everyone! Absolutely everyone."

"Good."

He bore his testimony to me of the truthfulness of missionary work and had me commit to doing the best I could as a missionary, not only to him, but to the Lord and to myself. I happily made the commitment.

I met my trainer the next day and began my work as a missionary. It was exhausting and rather overwhelming, but I loved it all the same and I knew that with time the exhaustion would go away and I wouldn't be so overwhelmed. I worked hard and my trainer and I got along well.

About two weeks later I began to feel “off.” I was moody, anxious, fatigued—very much not myself. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me. I figured it was culture shock. But as symptoms got worse, it became obvious that I was physically ill. My trainer became anxious for me, then impatient, then worried, and then impatient again. It was understandable why my trainer became impatient: I didn’t have any obvious outward symptoms—just claims of abdominal pain, nausea, and fatigue. I was also so irritable. She believed that the pain was real but also probably thought I was just having a hard time adjusting to missionary life in a new climate and culture, which is what I thought too, and that I just needed to toughen up. I tried hard to keep working, but it was difficult and my mood and physical pains negatively impacted the work.

Seven weeks later, we discovered that I had two life-threatening parasites in my intestines: *Entamoeba histolytica* and *Entamoeba coli* (which is different from the more commonly known *Escherichia coli*). The doctors gave me powerful medication to kill the parasites, and it worked, but *Entamoeba histolytica* means “tissue dissolver” and that parasite had wreaked havoc on my intestines for nine weeks. I still had a long road of recovery ahead of me. I tried returning to the work after my hospital stay, but it was soon obvious to my trainer (and me) that I could not do the work.

We went to the mission home where my mission president wanted me to rest for a couple of days. In hindsight, seven years later, with all the emotions of my early homecoming resolved, I can see how my mission president mulled over every option to get me to stay. In fact, he decided to emergency transfer me to the area of the mission home so that he would be nearby if I needed him or his wife. I was actually the one who received the prompting that I needed to go home. He acknowledged and respected the prompting and made preparations for me. At the time, I was so shocked that *I* was going home early. I had the perception at the time that only *bad* missionaries go home early, and I couldn’t believe that I had actually made the decision to go home, which I thought was even worse than being *sent* home. I felt like I had given up and failed the Lord. I wished my mission president had just made the decision for me so that I didn’t have to feel so guilty. At least I could have said, “Well, I had no choice. He made the decision

for me.” But, no. I had made the choice and I had to own it, and I didn’t want to.

Today, I see things differently and am grateful that my mission president tried so hard to let me stay, and grateful too that he let me receive my own revelation that I did need to go home. I likely would have been bitter at him for *sending* me home, especially with the way things turned out (which I’ll get to shortly). When the choice was made though, I was upset about the situation and mad about being someone who had to go home early. My emotions were understandable, but my anger was misplaced. In fact, it was rather unwarranted, but I didn’t understand that at the time.

Returning to my story, I looked so different on the way home than I had on the way to my mission. On my way to the Philippines, I’d felt perky and happy, and I looked it. When I looked in mirrors on the way home, I didn’t recognize myself. The girl staring back at me looked exhausted, defeated, ashamed, and rather sickly. She even looked, if I’m being honest, a little relieved. But, there was no pep her step. She looked like she could use a good night’s sleep.

When I arrived at the airport, I was greeted by a great group of family and friends. They held up signs welcoming me home and my mom gave me a big hug. How grateful I am that they were sensitive enough to put aside any judgment of my reason for coming home early and give me a traditional homecoming welcome.

As I hugged my family and friends, it was clear that they were happy to see me, but that they were also concerned. It was a welcome home, but at the same time, a temporary one. My family and friends were so relieved to have me back in the United States where I could receive first-world health care, but they also assumed I’d be heading back out to the field. One of my friends said, “Welcome back—for now,” with a twinkle in her eye, and I said, “Yes, for now,” but in my heart I already knew that I wasn’t going to go back. The option was there once I returned to full health, but I’d never fully adjusted to missionary life or the culture of the Philippines. The last three months had been the hardest of my life. My illness had also heavily tainted my view of missionary work as impossibly hard. I had had enough.

Physically, I healed quickly despite the projected long road of recovery. About four days of some solid rest did wonders for me. Mentally, I was in a world of hurt.

The mental battle a missionary faces when coming home early is easily the worst battle. Coming home from a mission early—there is nothing like it. Terribly unfair thoughts plagued me (for years) about how I was an unsuccessful missionary. I thought about how the Lord had no longer been able to use me. I convinced myself that I'd been unworthy to be a missionary. Why else would He have not miraculously healed me?

I chose to stay home because I was afraid to return to my mission. Again, I never fully adjusted to missionary life or the culture I had been called to serve in, and this lack of adjustment combined with my physical illness, and the subsequent toll on my mental health made missionary work seem extremely difficult and undesirable to me, even if I were reassigned somewhere in the United States. I talk about my decision more in chapter 1.

The Creation of *Early Homecoming*

During the first several months after my early return, I wished desperately for a book by someone who had gone through an early homecoming experience before and come out okay and who could guide me through the healing process. There was no such book though. In 2013, I wrote a book called *My Six-Month Mission*. It was a memoir and I gave a lot of details about the six months that I served. The purpose of it was to let other early-returned missionaries know that they weren't alone. It was also meant to help others know that those who come home early are not *bad* (I still had the perception that most people thought that way). However, it was rejected by the publisher. In a way, I was glad. I was not ready to be known as “the girl who came home early.”

The desire to do something stayed, however, and with a professor's encouragement I created a website called earlyhomecoming.com as a resource for early-returned missionaries. But, anxiety caused me to take it down after a year. After that, I moved on with my life. I tried to forget about my mission. I continued my schooling at Brigham Young

University, married a wonderful man that I met while living in Provo, and eventually moved to Washington state where I became a mother. I stayed as involved as I could with publishing and wrote articles for the *Ensign* occasionally. Life was going well.

Every now and then I reflected back on my mission, and finally made peace with it in my mind. It happened. It was a learning experience. When people asked if I'd served a mission, I replied, "Yes, in the Philippines." "Oh, I know someone who served in the Philippines!" and then the dreaded question, "When did you serve?" Sometimes I deflected the question by answering "2010 to 2011." Sometimes I said, "October 2010 to April 2011. I served for six months. I came home early due to some parasites." I never knew why I gave those details, but something in me told me to and I obeyed.

To my surprise, most people were actually pretty kind. Because of cultural notions that returning home early is wrong, and my own shame about returning early, I expected people to feel the same way and be unkind. However, they would usually say something like, "I know someone who came home early due to physical illness" or "That must have been rough. What kind of parasites?" In 2016 I guess I no longer had a pained look on my face, because I began receiving responses like: "Hey, my sister just came home early and she's having a hard time. Maybe you could talk to her? I'll tell her I know someone who came home early and who is doing well now." Those were always my favorites. I slowly began to realize that my experience with coming home early didn't need to be something I hid, but rather something I needed to share.

Thoughts of a book for early-returned missionaries had always been on my mind. Whenever I visited Deseret Book, I always checked the missionary section to see if a book for early-returned missionaries had been written yet. I always hoped it hadn't been. For whatever reason, I wanted to write it, but could never bring myself to dust off *My Six-Month Mission* and re-work it.

In September 2017 I got a job with LDS Publishing and Media Association as the operations manager. During a networking lunch at their 2017 annual conference, I met the acquisitions director, Lorraine Gaufin, from Cedar Fort Publishing and Media. The thoughts about a book for early-returned missionaries had increased in intensity the last

several months (I'd even describe them as promptings) and were particularly strong as I talked to Lorraine. Unable to ignore the thoughts, I asked her if Cedar Fort would be interested in a resource book for missionaries who come home early. I couldn't believe I said "resource book." I didn't know that I wanted to write that. But the thoughts came into my head so fast and I just spilled them out to her.

I knew it had to be different than *My Six-Month Mission*. It had to be more than about me and my experience. The chapters began to form in my mind and I knew it needed to be for and about those who came home early for *any* reason, not just my reason. It needed scholarly research, which I was aware of Dr. Kristine Doty-Yells spearheading at the University of Utah for the last few years. It needed quotes from General Authorities. It needed to be for early-returned missionaries, but also their Church leaders, family, and even friends. I could sense the great magnitude of what I wanted the book to be, and for the first time, instead of feeling inadequate, I felt like I could do it.

Lorraine asked me a few questions, and I must have given good answers because she said Cedar Fort would be interested and gave me her business card. She told me to call her, but I never needed to make the call because I received a call from a different acquisitions editor (Esther Raty) the following week, and what followed was a whirlwind of activity as I put myself full-force into making *Early Homecoming* happen. Cedar Fort wanted it, and they wanted the manuscript in six months time.

I dove into the research. I interviewed dozens of people: early-returned missionaries, their parents, Church leaders, friends, significant others, and former companions. I even interviewed missionaries who completed the full eighteen months or two years because I wanted to compare the experiences. I read academic articles on psychology and the work that Dr. Kristine Doty-Yells had published. I read newspaper articles and magazine articles on the subject. I even contacted the Church Missionary Department with my questions and they gave me what they could. I wanted to have a thorough understanding of the early homecoming experience.

Writing this book was difficult. At times I felt daunted by the task and overwhelmed at my inadequacy. I prayed before each interview and writing session. I am convinced that nothing except the power of

prayer and revelation made this book happen in the timeline that it did. The unfailing encouragement and support of family and friends also helped immensely.

The Purpose of This Book

This book is for anyone who has been affected by an early homecoming for *any* reason. It is for the missionary who returned early from a missionary training center (MTC) as well as the missionary who returned early from the field. It is for those who came home early for health reasons and family troubles, but also for the missionaries that our culture will barely acknowledge as acceptable: those who came home for reasons related to worthiness and personal choice. It is for family, friends, and Church leaders. Really, it is for anyone who seeks to better understand the experience of someone who comes home early.

All names of those I quote have been changed, with the exception of my parents and my husband, James. I changed names not because of any sort of “shame” in returning early, but rather to protect those they speak about, and in case of any unanticipated backlash from sharing their stories. I am indebted to every person who shared his or her story with me. My understanding of coming home early increased dramatically as a result of the many interviews I did, and I am so grateful. I am also indebted to those who reviewed this manuscript in its early stages and provided valuable feedback. This book would not be what it is today without these individuals.

In 2011 all I wanted was to read someone’s story—someone who had come home early from their mission, gone through the pain, made it through, and now lived a good life. Here is that book and more. I hope it will be a valuable resource to many readers. I am so glad that I was given the opportunity to write it. I hope it will bless your life. Wherever you are at in the healing or understanding process, this book is for you.