

Repairing relationships

Relationships don't just happen. They need a lot of work. Mostly that's done through one-to-one contact, and quality time together. That's not easy to do when you've spent the last five years on the other side of the planet, so here are a few tips on how to restore those relationships.

Spend time together. It sounds obvious that we need to spend time with people, but one of the most common complaints is that people haven't seen enough of us. So be focussed and prioritise. Who are the people you value most? Spend most time with them. Once a week, once a fortnight, whatever. Don't completely ignore others, as people you barely know can become some of your most fervent supporters, but you need to be wise in maximising the time you spend with family and best friends.

Eat together. You've got to eat anyway, so use the time sensibly and eat with others. A meal is a great opportunity to get together informally and re-establish a sense of sharing.

Be open and honest. Selectively of course! Many mission workers are tempted to put a brave face on things because they think if they're not seen as successful, they'll lose support. In my experience the opposite is often true, and sharing your challenges and frustrations may generate more sympathy and support. Telling your closest associates how you really feel about life will create trust and intimacy.

Don't bore people. You may be passionate about your ministry, but most of your friends won't be, even if they love you. Remind yourself not to drone on and on about people and places they don't know. It's better to prepare one or two short but pithy stories which encapsulate your experiences and ministry, and then let them ask more questions if they want to.

Meet the kids/partners. Many people will have got new family members while you've been away. Make a point of getting to know them, as this will reinforce relationships with your existing friends.

Reactivate old hobbies. As well as being relaxing and enjoyable, doing things together with friends creates a convivial environment and a sense of belonging.

Think communally. If you fancy a coffee, a beer, or a burger, think about who you can take with you. It's a simple way to include others.

Share memories. People you were once close to have often moved on while you've been away. Re-establish your relationship by looking at old photos together, reminiscing about events, and talking about mutual friends.

Invite people to visit you in the field. They may never come, but they'll love to be invited. If they do come, they'll really understand your living and working environment better.

Hold an open day. It's not as daunting as it sounds. For all those people you don't have a lot of time for, get them done in one big go. Book the church hall, lay on some food (asking everyone to bring and share) and let people come and go as they please. Have regular presentations and prayer slots throughout the day, and circulate rapidly. Yes, it will be tiring, but you'll generate a lot of goodwill.

Have an open holiday. An expansion of the last suggestion. Book a large holiday cottage for a fortnight, and invite family and friends to come and join you for a few days each. You'll create a great atmosphere, get all your friends in one place, and have plenty of time for eating and relaxing together.