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Returning from the Mountaintop: Listening, Discerning, Equipping

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As a young person, I could easily claim the title of “mountaintop junkie.” From youth retreats to mission trips to camp and various other mountaintop experiences, the feeling of having been to the mountaintop and come back changed was so compelling. And nothing deflates that wonderful feeling quicker than the feeling that nobody cares. You tell your friends and your family and maybe do a presentation for your church, but it seems that no one really gets it and

no one really gets you. So you slowly slip back into the daily grind as if nothing amazing ever happened to you.

The time directly after an experience like a spiritual retreat, mission trip or conference is extremely important because it determines how that experience gets integrated into our lives. While it is difficult to measure, many leaders and hosts of short-term mission trips are disappointed in the long-term effects on participants. How do you measure

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someone's prayer life? One study chose to measure the only thing that could be measured empirically: financial givings. The results showed that those who participated in short-term mission trips had not significantly increased their givings to either church or mission projects, and in some cases financial givings went down. Many people who come home from an amazing experience, determined to make changes in their lives, find themselves being sucked back into the same old rut. Without a strategy for re-entry into daily life, mountaintop experiences never get fully integrated into our faith life and little is left but photographs.

The church is far better at preparing people to go on a life-changing experience than we are at receiving them back. Beforehand, congregations help with fundraising, plan mission trip orientation sessions and conduct commissioning services. But what role should the congregation play in receiving back those who have been to the mountain? I suggest that there are three things congregations should do:

- listen
- discern
- equip

First, integrating a mountaintop experience is facilitated through reliving the story. Every time someone shares their experience, it becomes more a part of who they are. When others respond positively, the experience begins to be part of sharer's identity. As we continue to share those stories, the essential pieces become clearer and we are able to live even deeper into those stories. The need for repetition suggests that one 15-minute presentation on a Sunday morning is not going to be enough. Making room for a series of shorter stories will have more impact, rather than one big presentation where the real experience gets lost amongst a barrage of pictures and itineraries. Articles in newsletters, discussions at youth group, stories and pictures at Sunday school are all opportunities to relive the experience.

While these opportunities are all good, they are not enough. Some stories are too intimate to be shared in large gatherings, too complicated to boil down in a few minutes, too radical to be heard judgement-free from the comfortable pew. The kind of listening required here is that of a close friend or mentor. Mountaintoppers need someone who really cares about them and wants to know every small detail of their experience. People who play this role enable others to move to the really important question after any mountain top experience:

What do I do now?

As Presbyterians, we believe that discerning where God wants us to go is a communal, not a solo, activity. Answering the question "What do I do now?" is not something that we should leave others to figure out on their own. Congregations need to pray with these people, hear where they feel they are being led, ask questions and reflect together. For what purpose has God given this experience, or is it just something to cross off our bucket list? The community of support that surrounds us can help answer this question. It will take time, but growing always does. And when a clear direction starts to form, the church can continue its role.

Part of the church's work is to make disciples, to equip God's people for the journey ahead. Those coming down the mountain have been given a gift, something they are unsure how to use. This is an opportunity for congregations to come alongside and discover ways for that gift to be shared. Maybe after experiencing extreme poverty on a mission trip, there is an opportunity to work with those who even in a wealthy country like Canada still do not have enough to eat. Or maybe after worshipping with others from around the world at a conference, there is an opportunity for ecumenical partnership within your hometown. Or maybe after walking a labyrinth on retreat, there is an opportunity to explore a call to ordained ministry. These opportunities can become reality through the congregation.

As much as listening, discerning and equipping assist individuals to integrate their mountaintop experience, these activities touch and benefit the congregation too. Through these acts, a congregation shares in the experience and journeys alongside those who have experienced God in a new way toward a brighter and hopeful future.

As a session, youth worker, minister, elder, teacher, parent or friend, you can use listening, discernment and equipping whenever someone returns from

- camp
- retreats
- youth events
- women's gatherings
- General Assembly