

Returning Home Early

FROM MY MISSION

By **Brittany Romanello Casco**

Receiving my mission call was one of the most profound and glorious moments of my life. I had thought about a mission many times since gaining a testimony of the gospel at age 18. I remember when I received my call to serve in the Taiwan Taichung Mission, I knew that it was right, and I was so excited to serve.

I read my scriptures daily, attended my missionary and temple preparation classes, and even attempted to learn Mandarin Chinese on my own. As the only child in my family, I knew that my mission would bring honor not only to myself but also to my parents and my Heavenly Father. The day I entered the missionary training center (MTC), I felt as if nothing could ever go wrong during the next 18 months. I was excited about everything from seeing baptisms to trying

the Taiwanese cooking I had heard so much about. Little did I know when I entered the MTC that my mission would be very different from what I had expected.

Getting Sick

About four months into my mission, I began to experience pain—not only during physical activities like riding my bike or morning exercise but also when I was sleeping or doing personal study. I began rapidly losing weight. Even drinking water made me sick. Doctors' tests could not determine what was wrong. I had no parasites or viruses. My mission president, my missionary companion, and I were all confused by my deteriorating health.

During the month that followed, I maintained faith that surprised even me. Although I felt frustrated, I was convinced that if I kept working harder, biking faster, and speaking

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my broken Chinese to everyone I saw, God would miraculously heal me. I believed the stories of Christ's healing the sick and raising the dead, and I believed wholeheartedly that He would do the same for me—a weak but enthusiastic missionary. Then one Sunday while my companion and I were biking to the Church



meetinghouse to meet an investigator, the pain and convulsions throughout my body became unbearable. When we arrived at the meetinghouse, I asked the elders to give me a blessing, which helped. As the days passed, priesthood blessings became more frequent and so did prayers for healing.

It was the darkest day of my mission when I awoke one morning in the fiery Taiwanese heat and realized that I could not even move my body enough to get out of bed. At that moment I knew that I would not be able to be a missionary for much longer. My mission president came to visit me, and we counseled together. We talked of all the possibilities, and after much prayer and many tears, the Spirit confirmed that I needed to return home and focus on getting well.

Returning Home Early

Instead of coming home to balloons and “Welcome Home” signs, I was wheeled off the plane to my frightened parents, who immediately took me to the hospital emergency room. Months of testing began, but the doctors could not find what was wrong with me. In addition, well-intentioned people around me said things like, “When are you going back out?” “Are you going to stay home?” “Maybe you were supposed to get married.” “Maybe you were wrong to go at all.”

I felt ashamed and confused. Was I worthy of God’s love? Why was this happening when I had served so diligently? Wasn’t I a good missionary? Was God listening to me? Would my peers accept my “flawed” missionary service?

Over the next six months, I struggled with my testimony, which I felt guilty about. I wondered if I had fallen from grace and if Heavenly Father really loved me. Though I gradually began to feel a little better, I didn’t feel

like I had before my mission. And I still found myself avoiding moving on with my life.

Then one evening my good friend and I were talking. He too had experienced the pain and sorrow of coming home early from his mission because of illness and was working toward returning to the mission field. I remember that night was the first time in six months I had felt true peace. The voice of the Spirit whispered to me, “You need to go back.” I was so relieved to finally know in which direction to move. I went to see my bishop the following day. Then I wrote a fervent letter to the Missionary Department asking if I could return to the mission field. My request was granted, and one month later I was again wearing my name tag.

Six months later, however, I began experiencing the same health

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problems over again. I remember lying in a hospital bed, delirious from hours of tests and injections. I couldn't believe this was happening. This time I knew my mission was over. With tears of disappointment and regret streaming down my face, I listened to my wise mission president say: "Sister Romanello, you loved the Lord two times as much, because you came back." I felt so much comfort from his words. This time as I boarded the plane home, I promised my Heavenly Father I would remain faithful even if I didn't receive answers.

Finding Healing in Christ's Atonement

It has now been a little more than two years since I returned home. I still have lingering problems, and my stamina and energy have not been the same since before I served my mission. The doctors have never figured out what is wrong with me. It has not been easy for me to be a returned missionary who did not get to serve the full length of my mission. Nevertheless, I still love every one of my sweet converts. It has taken time for me to feel validated and know that my shortened missionary service had value just as 18- or 24-month missions have value to other missionaries.

The Lord has given me many opportunities to talk to others who

have faced the trauma of returning home unexpectedly. I know Heavenly Father has led me to them to share my testimony and help them realize that returning home early because of health problems is not a flaw to be kept a secret but an experience to be discussed.

The first time I returned home, I experienced how it felt to neglect my faith, but the second time I returned, I experienced what it was like to stay true. I kept to the basics: studying the scriptures, attending institute, participating in church, and fulfilling my callings. I prayed many times to know why everything happened the way it did. I stopped blaming myself, and I stopped blaming Heavenly Father. As I look at my life since returning home and my visits with my Chinese brothers and sisters who live in my home city, I maintain the firm position that there has been an eternal purpose to it all.

I love the words in Mosiah 5:15: "Therefore, I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life, through the wisdom, and power, and justice, and mercy of him who created all things, in heaven and in earth, who is God above all."

I believe that if I continue living my life in dedication to the Lord, I will be forever blessed. In that way, I know I was healed through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, for although my body could not be 100 percent healed physically, my heart has never been more whole or ready to serve the cause of the Master. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS IF I RETURN HOME EARLY DUE TO HEALTH CONCERNS?

For those with physical, emotional, or mental health challenges, talk to your bishop or branch president for more information on the young Church-service missionary program. See Destiny Yarbro, "Catching the Vision: All Missions Bring Souls to Christ," *Ensign*, Aug. 2015, 24–27.

Service missions can be a great blessing, allowing individuals to live at home and receive appropriate medical care while growing and maturing in the service of the Lord."

Donald B. Doty, M.D., chairman, Missionary Department Health Services, "Missionary Health Preparation," *Ensign*, Mar. 2007, 67.