

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 07: The Member-Missionary Miracle

The Member-Missionary Miracle

Member-missionary work is one of the most frequently mentioned but least understood gospel topics. Member-missionary work occupies a central role in church doctrine and is vital to church growth. Members are repeatedly exhorted from the pulpit and in the classroom to share the gospel, yet few active members ever participate in member-missionary work at all.[99],[100] Missionaries spend more time than ever soliciting referrals, but the relative and absolute number of referrals has declined. Numerous programs, initiatives, and gimmicks -- from "set a date" to missionary dinner programs -- have occupied large amounts of missionary and member time while generating scant results. The Church has overhauled member-missionary programs more sweepingly and frequently than any other major church program, dissolving local seventies quorums, disbanding stake missions, and commissioning local bishops as the head of local member-missionary efforts in recent years. Yet such repeated and drastic reforms have not changed the underlying dynamics of stagnant member-missionary programs in which few members ever make the effort to share the gospel.

While LDS growth rates have declined in spite of unprecedented opportunity, other faiths that have more successfully involved members in proselytism have experienced spectacular growth. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church baptizes between 700,000 and one million new converts each year, due largely to high member-missionary participation. The Jehovah's Witness faith, established only in 1890, now has far more active and participating members than the LDS Church worldwide because of the direct involvement of the average members in proselyting for sixteen hours each month.

A successful member-missionary program requires an understanding of basic outreach principles, vision and leadership, and consistency. I have found that a simple program of scripture-based member-missionary principles can multiply effectiveness in any congregation. The impact of these principles is remarkable. I have often been told by lifelong church members that member-missionary work was an incomprehensible "black box" for them until hearing my presentation, but that afterward missionary work started to make sense for the first time. I have consistently seen member-missionary efforts and successes multiply when these principles are applied. Some have noted that the application of these principles generated seemingly miraculous results. Yet in contrast to so many member-missionary initiatives, this program is simple and scripture-based, with nothing contrived and no gimmicks. The program makes no demands of members except to follow basic scriptural teachings. Many individuals have noted that once these self-evident principles were explained, they wondered how they could ever have viewed member-missionary work any other way.

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Member-Missionary Leadership

This program requires the leadership of a motivated ward mission leader and supportive bishop. Without good organization and leadership, member-missionary programs never amount to more than the sporadic and isolated efforts of a few participating members. Leadership with vision, purpose, understanding, and consistency is essential to raise member-missionary participation from the level of a few isolated members to a cooperative effort of the entire ward.

Member-Missionary Program Overview

This member-missionary program involves several key elements. The first is an initial meeting, typically conducted as a fifth Sunday joint Priesthood/Relief Society lesson. The purpose of the initial meeting is to break down barriers to sharing the gospel and to educate members regarding member-missionary work. The content of this lesson differs in many ways from traditional less effective talks and lessons on missionary work. Second, practical three-minute messages on missionary work are given each Sunday in the opening exercises of Priesthood, Relief Society, Young Women's, and Primary. Third, a well-stocked table of missionary resources is maintained in the chapel foyer. These steps may seem bland and uninspiring. Yet when correctly implemented, they consistently multiply long-term member-missionary participation. In this chapter, I will explain why each step is crucial, how each point differs from less effective models, and how to implement each most effectively.

Vision and Goals

The purpose of this program is not to generate a short burst of member-missionary activity leading to a few more referrals or baptisms, only to quickly taper off to the prior stagnant baseline. Rather, the goal is to change basic member behaviors in a way that will increase referrals and baptisms for years to come by making sharing the Good News a regular part of their life and by providing weekly training to help members refine their member-missionary skills.

Righteous habits are the essence of gospel living. We are commanded to feast daily upon the scriptures, to attend church weekly, and to keep the Sabbath Day holy. Similarly, the central goal of an effective member-missionary program is to encourage members to initiate at least one gospel discussion each week with a nonmember. This goal is far short of the scriptural admonition to open our mouths about the gospel and stand as witnesses of Christ in all places and at all times, yet it is a good starting point that any member can achieve and represents an exponential improvement over current performance. Some members may be able to share the gospel much more frequently than this. Goals centered on numbers of referrals or baptisms are counterproductive to the establishment of the gospel habit of "opening one's mouth." When members are sharing the gospel regularly, referrals and baptisms naturally follow without gimmicks or imposed quotas, and without this habit, scant member-missionary results are ever achieved.

The Startup Lesson

Most members acknowledge the importance of sharing the gospel and have repeatedly been instructed to do so, yet have never been educated or mentored in basic practical elements of the process. Many face barriers of fear or a lack of understanding. Jim Rohn stated, "Education must precede motivation ... If someone is going down the wrong road, he doesn't need motivation to speed him up. What he needs is education to turn him around." Many member-missionary programs fail because they start with motivation rather than training, attempting to inspire members to share the gospel with their acquaintances when most do not know how or are not comfortable with doing so. Apprehension must be changed to enthusiasm, ignorance to understanding, and avoidance to implementation.

While this process takes time, a startup lesson to break down barriers and educate members can dramatically increase member-missionary participation immediately. Members are not instructed to follow a protocol or to implement a narrow program but are taught scriptural principles that can help them to utilize everyday opportunities to share the gospel. I prefer to give this lesson as a concise Power Point presentation which requires approximately twenty minutes, but it can be presented in different ways depending on local needs and resources. The next chapter covers the "Witnesses of Christ" lesson material, which can be modified depending on the audience.

Harness the Potential of Your Member-Missionary Program

Most member-missionary programs run at only a fraction of their potential. The Church Handbook of Instructions and the Stake Missionary Manual state that the missionary program is to be integrated into all programs of the Church. Yet in most wards, efforts of the ward mission leader and ward missionaries are almost exclusively confined to priesthood meetings, with Relief Society and youth meetings being almost entirely neglected. A member-missionary program that functions in this manner is like a car running on only one cylinder. Some data suggest that sisters may be more likely than brethren to share the gospel and to provide member-missionary referrals. Elder M. Russell Ballard stated: "Bishops, engage the whole ward in proclaiming the gospel. You will see that the Lord will bless you and your members with many more converts and many more who will return to full activity. Missionary work should not only be on the ward council agendas but also on Elders Quorum, Relief Society, and other quorum, group, and auxiliary agenda."[101] A major role of stake and ward missionaries is to make sharing the gospel a natural outgrowth of church membership for all members. Making assignments which are accepted by only one or two members, such as passing out a copy of the Book of Mormon each week for a volunteer to place, is less effective and generates only sporadic involvement of a minority of members. The goal of an effective member-missionary program is for all members to share the gospel all of the time and not for a few members to share the gospel some of the time.

Even after a well-received initial presentation, member-missionary involvement will taper off without regular follow-up and ongoing teaching. Ongoing involvement and continued improvement are best done with a three-minute practical missionary message shared each Sunday in Priesthood meeting, Relief Society, and Young Women's opening exercises.

Three-Minute Member-Missionary Education

Superior results are achieved when a missionary message focused on practical implementation is given in Priesthood, Relief Society, Young Women's, and Primary opening exercises each week. Weekly three-minute messages should be coordinated in advance by the ward mission leader and can be presented simultaneously by the ward mission leader, ward missionaries, and full-time missionaries in the various opening exercises. A brief missionary tip should be conveyed that helps members to better understand and implement personal member-missionary activities. These messages should be informational, concise, well-organized, practical, and strategic. Each message should end with a specific call to action. Messages can periodically include an interactive segment that includes follow-up from the previous week, finding out and addressing concerns, discussing problems and challenges, and sharing experiences, although the time must be carefully watched. To respect the time of the teacher, full-time and ward missionaries must keep each weekly missionary message within the three-minute time limit. If

messages go too long, teachers or quorum presidencies will object and the opportunity to present the messages at all may be retracted.

These messages should be given every week, since infrequent or inconsistent member-missionary lessons fail to promote sustained member-missionary improvement because of inconsistent reinforcement and sketchy follow-up. Member-missionary performance improves when individuals recognize that missionary work will be a weekly topic of discussion for which they will be accountable. Individuals are free to share the gospel in whatever manner they prefer, but every member is expected to share the gospel regularly.

The precise topics depend upon local needs, challenges, and member feedback. A few weekly message topics I have successfully used include:

1. Conversational openers for gospel discussions, including the "golden questions" and other approaches.
2. Ways to handle common concerns or objections, such as responses that individuals believe in nothing beyond the Bible or that they believe in God but do not see a need to attend church.
3. Helping members to understand their responsibility to share the gospel spontaneously without waiting for special experiences and avoiding prejudging of others.
4. Considering individual needs and situations and responding to feedback and verbal and nonverbal cues in sharing the gospel.
5. Dealing with rejection gracefully and leaving the door open for future discussions.
6. Times of special receptivity: major life change, birth or death in the family, marriage, change of job, or a move.
7. Educating members about different resources for sharing the gospel and the circumstances under which each can be used most effectively.

Resources

A well-stocked supply of missionary resources should be maintained in the foyer. Every additional step required to obtain a missionary resource -- asking stake or ward mission leaders, calling full-time missionaries, and so forth dramatically reduces the number of individuals who will use that resource. A prominently displayed table of resources can help keep various tools for sharing the gospel in member consciousness and provides a no-stress environment in which members can examine and select resources that they feel may be most helpful for their acquaintances. These varying resources -- Joseph Smith pamphlets, 23 Questions Answered by the Book of Mormon, "Tell Me About Your Family" cards, copies of the Book of Mormon, temple brochures, family resources, family cards, church videos, and so forth -- are constantly available for members and nonmembers alike. Missionary resources should be made as widely and easily available as possible to promote maximum utilization. Many people will spontaneously use missionary resources if they are made easily accessible and awareness of these resources is constantly emphasized.

[99] Ballard, M. Russell, "Members Are the Key," Ensign, September 2000. The figure of 3 to 5 percent given by Elder Ballard in the August 1999 Conversion and Retention Fireside is incorrectly reported as 35 percent in the Ensign article. I have verified with the Church Missionary Department that 3 to 5 percent is the correct figure.
[100] Barna, George, "Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity," Barna Research Update, July 9, 2001, www.barna.org".
[101] Ballard, M. Russell, "The Essential Role of Member Missionary Work," Ensign, May 2003: 37.