

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 08: Witnesses of Christ

The Divine Mandate

The baptismal covenant includes the promise "to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life" (Mosiah 18:9). Joseph Smith declared, "After all that has been said, the greatest and most important duty is to preach the Gospel."[102]

Sharing the gospel is one of the primary missions of the Church. It is also the area where we have the opportunity to make the greatest difference. The Lord has repeatedly declared that sharing the gospel is the activity of the most worth to our personal salvation: "For many times you have desired of me to know that which would be of the most worth unto you. I say unto you, that the thing which will be of the most worth unto you will be to declare repentance unto this people, that you may bring souls unto me, that you may rest with them in the kingdom of my Father" (D&C 15:4,6; D&C 16:4,6).

Why did the Lord declare that sharing the gospel is the most important work of the Church? While important, the completion of genealogy and vicarious ordinances is inevitable. Vicarious temple work does not change outcomes -- it only affects timing. The individuals for whom vicarious work is done have already lived their lives and are in the "night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed" (Alma 34:33). They may have accepted or rejected the missionaries and are already approaching the judgment stage. In contrast, missionary work alters outcomes. It offers the possibility to change the eternal destiny of souls. The Lord's brother James wrote: "He which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (James 5:20).

LDS prophets have repeatedly emphasized that member-missionary work is one of the central obligations of church membership with slogans such as "every member a missionary." Brigham Young taught, "There is neither man nor woman in this Church who is not on a mission. That mission will last as long as they live, and it is to do good, to promote righteousness, to teach the principles of truth, and to prevail upon themselves and everybody around them to live those principles that they may obtain eternal life."[103] He further observed:

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I wish to make this request: that the Elders who return from missions consider themselves just as much on a mission here as in England or in any other part of the world ... We frequently call the brethren to go on missions to preach the gospel, and they will go and labor as faithfully as men can do, fervent in spirit, in prayer, in laying on hands, in preaching to and teaching the people how to be saved. In a few years they come home, and throwing off their coats and hats will say, Religion, stand aside, I am going to work now to get something for myself and my family. This is folly in the extreme. When a man returns from a mission where he has been preaching the Gospel he ought to be just as ready to come to this pulpit to preach as if he were in England, France, Germany, or on the islands of the sea. And when he has been at home a week, a month, a year, or ten years, the spirit of preaching and the spirit of the gospel ought to be within him like a river flowing forth to the people in good words, teachings, precepts, and examples. If this is not the case he does not fill his mission.[104]

Ezekiel recorded the word of the Lord:
Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people; Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand. So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me (Ezekiel 33:2-7).

Our responsibility as witnesses does not depend on others' receptivity (Mormon 9:6). We are commanded to share the gospel,

not simply to provide referrals for the missionaries or to build the church, although these aims are also important. Sharing the gospel is essential for our own salvation and brings us great spiritual benefits, even when others do not accept our invitations. The extent and regularity with which we share the gospel is one of the most sensitive indicators of our spiritual health. Christ taught regarding members of His church: "Inasmuch as they are not the saviors of men, they are as salt that has lost its savor, and is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men" (D&C 103:10).

Gordon B. Hinckley noted: "I wish I could awaken in the heart of every man, woman, boy, and girl here this morning the great consuming desire to share the gospel with others. If you do that you live better, you try to make your lives more exemplary because you know that those you teach will not believe unless you back up what you say by the goodness of your lives."[105] He further declared: "I think every member of the Church has the capacity to teach the gospel to nonmembers. I was told the other day of a crippled woman, homebound, who spends her days in a wheelchair, who has been the means of bringing thirty-seven people into the Church ... We need an awareness, an everyday awareness of the great power that we have to do this thing. Second, a desire ... I am as satisfied as I am of anything that with that kind of prayerful, conscientious, directed effort, there isn't a man in this Church who could not convert another ... Third, the faith to try. It is so simple."[106]

Actual Performance versus the Divine Mandate

The mandate of consistent lifetime involvement in missionary work as taught by almost every LDS prophet has been internalized and practiced by very few LDS members. Elder M. Russell Ballard cited Church Missionary Department research that only 3 to 5 percent of active Latter-day Saints in North America regularly participate in missionary work.[107] In 1987, member referrals accounted for 42 percent of a cross-section of the population of investigators in North America being taught by missionaries. In 1997, that figure had fallen to 20 percent, and members account for only one in ten referrals. The absolute number of referrals has also dropped, in spite of a significant increase in total membership. Elder Dallin H. Oaks reported in 2003 that the average ward or branch in the United States and Canada provided an average of only two member referrals per month.[108] These trends are of particular concern in light of Missionary Department research findings cited by Elder L. Tom Perry in 1991 that 86 percent of new converts who remain active have close personal ties to other LDS members.[109]

Most Latter-day Saints believe strongly that the Church is growing rapidly, but have made no attempt to share the gospel with a non-member within the last year. Christian researcher George Barna found that only 26 percent of Latter-day Saints reported making any attempt to share their faith within the past year, compared to 61 percent of Pentecostals, 61 percent of Assemblies of God members, and 57 percent of nondenominational Christians.[110] The 26 percent figure for Latter-day Saints is not significantly different from the 24 percent of all adults nationwide who report making some attempt to share faith, but it is significantly lower than that of many outreach-oriented faiths. These other groups all report annual worldwide growth rates two to three times higher (6 to 10 percent) than LDS growth rates (2.6 to 3.0 percent), paralleling their higher rates of member-missionary mobilization. George Barna found that 30 to 35 percent of all the U.S. adult Christian population share Christian beliefs with others and that most of these do so at least monthly.[111] Barna's studies do not include the Jehovah's Witnesses, who average sixteen to eighteen hours of member-missionary work each month.

It is stunning that the average LDS member in North America spends over one hour per day watching television, but only one-quarter make any attempt at all to share faith over the entire year. It seems odd that the average Latter-day Saint seems so much less inclined to share the vitally important gospel message than Christians of many faiths with far less to offer. LDS member-missionary malaise can be explained only by lack of effort, since these studies asked only whether individuals made some attempt to share their faith and not how successful those attempts may have been.

Reasons for Low Member-Missionary Participation

A survey of 166 LDS members I conducted in 1999 found that 73 percent of members reported reasons related to fear as the main barrier to sharing the gospel more frequently with nonmembers. Thirty-one percent of respondents noted that they were afraid of saying the wrong thing, while 23 percent were afraid that they would not know the answers to questions, and 19 percent cited a general fear of rejection. Ten percent responded that they were not aware of opportunities around them, while 16 percent stated that they had no difficulty sharing the gospel.

I also surveyed eight-six nonmembers about what was the most important to them when individuals of other faiths shared their beliefs. Thirty-eight percent replied that they most valued the sharer's example of righteous living, while 27 percent cited mutual respect for the belief of others. Twenty-six percent cited the sharer's expressions of how his or her faith has helped him or her in life, and 7 percent noted that service was the key factor. Only 2 percent cited the sharer's ability to clearly explain beliefs as being the most important to them.

While these surveys were not scientifically rigorous, the findings are corroborated by other data. Elder M. Russell Ballard cited Missionary Department research that members are generally much more uptight in gospel discussions than nonmembers.[112] The main barriers to sharing the gospel as perceived by members, including fear of not saying the "right thing" or not knowing the answer to complex doctrinal questions, were of little or no importance to the overwhelming majority of nonmembers.

Some members believe that they cannot share the gospel because of personal circumstances which are less than ideal. They think that because of difficulties in their own family situation, personal weaknesses, lack of knowledge of complex doctrinal topics, or other real or perceived shortfalls, they cannot be witnesses of Christ. We must not allow our own imperfections or

inadequacies to become excuses for failure to share the gospel message. There is only one perfect example, Jesus Christ. He has called us to be His servants, notwithstanding our weakness. We all are in situations that are less than ideal. We are all in need of the atonement of Christ. King Benjamin taught: "For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God ... who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that ye have and are" (Mosiah 4:19,21). The Indian Christian evangelist D.T. Niles stated: "Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." The bread of life of the gospel we share is eternal. Great member-missionaries are not perfect people in ideal situations. Rather, they are imperfect people like you and I who do the best they can with the circumstances they have to work with. God has promised that He will give us grace sufficient to meet the challenges of our day if we will put Him first in our lives (D&C 17:8).

Core Commandments: The Foundation of Member-Missionary Success

A wise sister missionary stated, "To share the gospel, you have to be receiving blessings from it." People receive blessings from the gospel and want to share it when they are living it. President Kimball taught that the progress made by wards and branches is a reflection of the degree to which each member is living the gospel: "The basic decisions needed for us to move forward, as a people, must be made by the individual members of the Church. The major strides which must be made by the Church will follow upon the major strides to be made by us as individuals."[113]

One ward mission leader highlighted the importance of gospel living in member-missionary efforts:
Elder Yoshihiko Kikuchi [of the Seventy] told me that he has seen many programs come and go, but there has only been one consistent common denominator for missionary success in a ward: that is the personal righteousness of the ward members ... Because until we are reading and praying consistently -- every day -- we will not have the presence of the Spirit, and therefore, no true desire to share the gospel beyond mere lip service ... We have a specific plan that we are using to help the members gain the regular companionship of the Holy Ghost.

All effective member-missionary programs focus on helping members to develop and maintain the gospel habits that bring the Holy Spirit, including daily Book of Mormon study, daily family prayer, keeping the Sabbath Day holy, and paying tithing. Without these behaviors in place in the lives of individual members, no member-missionary program will ever reach its potential. Over months and years, the great value of these habits for member-missionary work is unmistakable.

The Wrong Questions

Several years ago, an acquaintance told me that she had recently sat next to a man on a plane and felt that he was "ripe for the gospel." She had acquired his name and address and wanted to submit a missionary referral. I asked if she had discussed the gospel with him. Her answer floored me: "I didn't feel prompted to share the gospel."

I wondered: "Did you feel prompted not to?" Scriptures are replete with admonitions to share the gospel at all times and in all places. Do we need an angel to appear to us and offer compelling personal revelation each time before we attend church, read scriptures, or pay our tithing? Then why do many wait for spiritual promptings to share the gospel as the Lord has repeatedly commanded?

Unfortunately, my acquaintance's behavior is not atypical. Well-intended but less effective programs such as "set a date" have fostered a false belief in many members' minds that they cannot approach anyone about the gospel without first receiving personal revelation. Members have heard so frequently from the pulpit that they should "listen to the spirit" about who to approach that many believe that they can only share the gospel when they feel powerful spiritual promptings. Many are so afraid of saying the wrong thing that they say nothing at all.

Too many members and missionaries ask the wrong questions: "Which of my neighbors is ready to receive the gospel?" "Which door should I knock on?" As a young missionary, I learned the fallacy of such practices. When I prayed to know what street to tract on or what doors to knock on, I only felt a stupor of thought. I quickly learned that all people have a right to hear the gospel message -- not just a select few whom we feel specifically impressed to approach. I learned the truth of the Lord's words: "Go ye and preach my gospel, whether to the north or to the south, to the east or to the west, it mattereth not, for ye cannot go amiss" (D&C 80:3). The Doctrine and Covenants alone contains numerous admonitions to open our mouths about the gospel at all times (D&C 19:29, 24:10, 28:16, 30:11, 33:8-11, 80:3).

There is no scriptural basis for the assumption that members should be able to tell in advance which of their neighbors will be receptive to the gospel message. Attempts to preselect others before even presenting them with an opportunity to hear the gospel message are inappropriate. Christ found more success among the "publicans and sinners" than the outwardly "righteous" Pharisees. I have found that the Spirit often comes only after we demonstrate the faith to sow gospel seeds, and those who wait for divine manifestations before making the effort to share the gospel usually wait in vain.

Why Most Member-Missionary Programs Fail

Most lifelong members have heard hundreds of talks and lessons about member-missionary work, but few act upon them. Talks

and lessons focus primarily on motivating and admonishing members to share the gospel, yet they offer little practical "how-to" information. The few "how-tos" often take the form of contrived programs rather than scriptural principles.

Many member-missionary programs fail because they focus on the wrong goals, emphasizing referrals and baptisms, while neglecting the reality that few members ever initiate a gospel conversation with a nonmember at all. With baptism or referral-based goals, faithful prophets who achieved little success such as Noah and Moroni would be deemed failures. It is appropriate to set goals for our personal effort in sharing the gospel with nonmembers. It is inappropriate to set goals that depend upon the response of others. We cannot control how other people respond to the gospel, and it is manipulative to set goals based on the response of others rather than our own effort.

Ineffective initiatives such as missionary dinners in member homes take missionaries off the street during prime proselyting time when families are home and present the illusion of aiding the missionary effort, while neither the missionaries nor the members are sharing the gospel with nonmembers.

Traditional member-missionary initiatives have focused on planting a very few seeds in carefully selected plots of soil, in conflict with scriptural mandates to offer all people an opportunity to hear the gospel message. How successful would a farmer be who set goals for a large crop yield, but failed to pay any attention to the amount of seed sown? Successful farmers recognize that sowing abundantly is the key to an abundant harvest. Paul declared: "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6).

Habits versus Events

Most Latter-day Saints view sharing the gospel as an infrequent event rather than as a consistent behavior, in much the same way that Christmas and Easter Catholics view church attendance. Yet scriptures teach that sharing the gospel must be a consistent habit and not an occasional event. Sharing the gospel is as essential to our own salvation as attending church, praying, studying scriptures, and paying tithing. We all recognize the importance of doing these other things regularly, and would not be satisfied with having read our scriptures last month or having attended church last year. Our responsibility to share the gospel regularly is lifelong and is not limited to full-time missionary service or missionary-related callings.

The desire to share the gospel is a natural outgrowth of faithful membership. It is a joyful activity that must be a regular part of every member's life. Setting a goal to initiate a gospel discussion with at least one nonmember each week provides a good starting point for any member. We must focus on our personal effort and not on our acceptance or rejection by others. Moroni declared: "I fear not what man can do; for perfect love casteth out all fear" (Moroni 8:16).

Members who make a habit of speaking with at least one person about the gospel each day can bring many people into the Church over the course of a lifetime. If a member only speaks with someone about the gospel once or twice per year, it is unlikely that he or she will ever bring another person into the church.

Member-Missionary Attributes

Effective member-missionaries share the message frequently with many people in different settings and are undeterred by rejection. Elder Henry B. Eyring observed that effective member-missionaries "are like the sons of Mosiah, 'desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble.' Those who speak easily and often of the restored gospel, prize what it has meant to them. They think of that great blessing often. It is the memory of the gift they have received which makes them eager for others to receive it. They have felt the love of the Savior. For them these words are their daily, hourly reality: 'There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.'"[114]

What Should I Say?

Many wonder, "What should I say when I open my mouth?" I do not have a preferred approach, since I find that making the effort to share the gospel consistently is far more important than the approach. There are many ways to share the gospel, but effective approaches incorporate several principles. Keep the message simple, stress its importance to you, and give specific examples of how your faith has helped you. No one can argue with your experience. Elder Ballard observed: "Some members say, 'I'm afraid to share the gospel because I might offend someone.' Experience has shown that people are not offended when the sharing is motivated by the spirit of love and concern. How could anyone be offended when we say something like this: 'I love the way my church helps me,' and then add whatever the Spirit directs. It's when we appear only to be fulfilling an assignment and we fail to express real interest and love that we offend others."[115] The sharer should look for verbal and nonverbal cues and strive to create a two-way discussion, rather than engaging in a monologue.

As we share the gospel, we should focus on the Savior. Nephi wrote: "We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:26). We should also focus on Latter-day Saint revelation. What would happen to

an honorable person in Noah's day who accepted Adam and Enoch as past prophets but did not heed the counsel of Noah to board the ark? Sharing specific blessings that living the Gospel has brought into your life is the essence of testimony. A living testimony must be radiated in our conduct. It is impossible to testify effectively about a principle which one is not living.

Invite the hearer to take some action, whether to read in the Book of Mormon, to pray to God, to attend a family home evening or church service, or simply to discuss matters of faith another time. Individuals should be invited but never pressured.

Leave the Door Open

Many lifelong members testify that it took them years to gain a testimony. So why do so many members expect their acquaintances to jump at their first invitation to hear the gospel and label them as unreceptive if they do not accept? Sharers must learn to accept "no" gracefully. If the listener is not ready to take further steps, the sharer should never attempt to guilt or interrogate him or her about his or her reasons. This will only make the listener uncomfortable discussing gospel topics in the future. Rather, one should keep the door open for future discussion. Missionary Department research suggests that the average U.S. convert has had between six and twenty contacts with the Church before deciding to join. Very few individuals are ready to accept the gospel the first time. Effective sharers let even uninterested hearers know that they are always available and help them to feel comfortable in bringing up or responding to gospel topics in the future. We should never view the response of others we extend opportunities to as a final judgment upon them.

The Book of Mormon Loan Program

Ezra Taft Benson taught that the Book of Mormon is a great sieve and that the members of the Church are under condemnation for taking it lightly. He taught that the Book of Mormon is the standard we are to use in our missionary efforts. Nephi declared: "And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good" (2 Nephi 33:10).

Most Book of Mormon gift programs fall short as distributed books are rarely read or followed up on. Fortunately, there is a superior way to utilize the Book of Mormon which avoids the free sample mentality, ensures time-sensitive accountability, promotes follow-up discussion, and utilizes resources efficiently.

The Book of Mormon loan program involves offering contacts or acquaintances a copy of the Book of Mormon as a loan. The sharer asks for the listener's opinion about the book and emphasizes that he or she does not need to read the entire book, but just enough to begin to form an opinion. Copies of 23 Questions Answered by the Book of Mormon or specific passages addressing issues of interest can stimulate reading. The sharer follows up by telephone or in person at an agreed-upon time a few days later. If the individual is not interested, he or she returns the book. If the individual is interested, he or she can continue to read and discuss, with church invitation or eventual missionary referral as appropriate with the individual's permission.

Most people feel an obligation to return other people's property, and so loaning the book is more effective than giving it away. The loaned status of the book also promotes time-sensitive follow-up that is often lost when the book is given away due to the free sample mentality. The Book of Mormon loan program is nonthreatening to the listener, and most members are surprised at how easy it is to implement.

Other Resources for Sharing the Gospel

Other resources available for sharing the gospel include Joseph Smith testimony pamphlets, pass-along cards, Gospel Principles books, church videos, the mormon.org Web site, and other outreach literature. Members should be aware of tools but not limited by them. Remember that your personal witness is still your strongest tool!

Share the Good News

Members should make sharing the Good News a regular part of their life and focus on the goal of initiating at least one gospel discussion each week in harmony with scriptural mandates. Our efforts to share the gospel are vitally important to our own salvation and to the salvation of others. Nephi declared: "How great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Nephi 2:8). Elder Henry B. Eyring taught: "I can make two promises to those who offer the gospel to others. The first is that even those who reject it will someday thank us ... My second promise is that as you offer the gospel to others it will go down more deeply into your heart. It becomes the well of water springing up into eternal life for us as we offer it to others."[116]

At the judgment we will be asked not whether the gospel is true, but whether we were true to the gospel! There are more receptive people in the world than there are Latter-day Saints willing to witness to them. Opportunities are everywhere. Rick Warren stated: "While we wait for God to work for us, God is waiting to work through us!"[117]

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