



The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 09: Principles of Member-Missionary Work

Maximize Implementation

Elder M. Russell Ballard taught: "Do you know what stake mission leaders and stake missionaries spend more time doing than anything else? Our research shows it is attending meetings, planning, and coordinating. These are good things, but sometimes we spend too much time reporting what we have done or planning what we will do. In contrast, stake mission leaders and stake missionaries invest considerably less time in what makes the most difference: personally interacting with their nonmember and less-active member friends and converts."^[117]

President Charles Creel of the Russia St. Petersburg Mission used the analogy: "Who will catch more fish -- the fisherman who spends ten hours a day preparing his bait and two hours with his line in the water, or the fisherman who gets his bait together in fifteen minutes and spends ten and a half or eleven hours each day fishing?" While good planning is necessary to establish appropriate and effective courses of action, meetings convert no one and the real difference is made finding and teaching investigators firsthand. Eighty to ninety percent of missionary and member-missionary time should be spent on the actual implementation of missionary efforts. When meeting and planning consumes more than 20 percent of time, that time is being used inefficiently and should be reallocated to personal interactions with nonmembers. The world is not "fished out": we simply aren't doing much fishing.

Church Meetings: The Golden Hours

Church meetings and activities represent the "golden hours" for stake, ward, district, and full-time missionaries as well as member-missionaries. From the moment they arrive at church comfortably before the meetings begin to the moment they leave, effective missionaries and member-missionaries are meeting new people and talking to other members about sharing the gospel all of the time that they are not sitting in sacrament or listening to lessons. They ask other members how their efforts to share the gospel are going, learn their experiences, solicit feedback, offer new resources, and follow up on old ones. Be a PPP: a polite persistent pest. Arrive early, stay late, and do not sit down until you have sincerely introduced yourself to any individuals you do not recognize. Do more than say hello -- be a real friend, not an assigned one. Your task is to make each person sincerely feel as welcome as possible. Encourage other members to do the same.

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Friendshipping and Fellowshiping

George Barna wrote: "Research among Christians has found that we have an added difficulty in our lives. We tend to associate with other Christians and thus have few significant relationships with nonbelievers. We struggle with evangelism because we are isolated from the very people God has called us to influence. For most Christians, developing meaningful, authentic relationships with non-Christians will be an act of intent, not an act of chance. We probably will have to look for or creatively make opportunities to encounter and interact with nonbelievers."^[118]

Members should look both for opportunities to foster relationships with nonmembers and to fellowship investigators. No one wants to be "assigned a friend" or have only "Sunday friends." Do not just shake hands; get to know the visitors and become involved in their lives. The following helpful fellowshiping suggestions are intuitive and arise naturally from an earnest desire to fellowship others and help them come into the fold of God.

1. One successful mission president told us that his rule is that he does not sit down at Church until he has met all individuals whom he does not know. This is good advice for members and missionaries. More than one individual has told us that they kept coming to Church because they knew that we cared.
2. Create an environment where the person is comfortable by building on common ground. It is helpful to ask about the person's family, background, and so forth to break the ice and to tailor the approach to their needs.
3. Compliment the person for the efforts he or she is making to come to Church, meet with the missionaries, read the scriptures,

and do what is right. These steps take courage and deserve praise.

4. Find out what exposure the person has had to the Church: how many missionary discussions (or their topics), what they are reading in the Book of Mormon, and so forth.

5. Identify any questions or concerns the person has about the Church. Often they will be raised spontaneously after the first three steps.

6. Be a good listener and show genuine interest.

7. Share brief thoughts or testimony about the blessings living the Gospel has brought into your life. This should be more than an abstract assertion that the gospel is true: tell what it has done for you as you have tried to live it. You do not need to be a scribe; you just need to be sincere.

8. Tell the individual that you would like to visit with him or her at greater length. Ask if the person would like to visit your house for dinner or home evening or if you can attend one of the missionary or new member discussions.

9. Exchange phone numbers or addresses with the person. Do not simply tell him that you are available; agree on specific plans for follow-up. Set a date and time.

10. Carry through and follow up promptly.

Member-Missionary Mentoring

LDS members typically lack hands-on mentoring in outreach. Involvement of members in missionary splits, teaching and fellowshiping visits with investigators, and role playing are essential elements of member-missionary training. Jehovah's Witnesses are mentored early in proselyting by experienced members, often even before they are formally baptized. The practical, applied focus of the Jehovah's Witnesses has proven far more effective at inspiring member-missionary participation than abstract, theoretical LDS member-missionary exhortations that rarely reach beyond the pulpit or the classroom. For many Jehovah's Witnesses, sharing their beliefs with others is a favorite activity that many perform with a degree of joy that contrasts with the reticence and apprehension of most Latter-day Saints. Latter-day Saints do not need vague admonitions from the pulpit to "do missionary work": they need effective examples that provide practical hands-on mentoring.

Quality and Predictability of Talks and Lessons

Rick Warren, pastor of the fastest-growing Baptist church in U.S. history, stated: "Most churches rarely attract unbelievers to their services because members are uncomfortable bringing them to church. It doesn't matter how much the pastor encourages members to bring friends or how many visitation programs are launched, the results are the same: Most members never bring any lost friends to church. Why is this? There are three important reasons. First, the target of the messages is unpredictable. Members don't know from week to week if the pastor will be preaching an evangelistic message or an edification message. Second, the services are not designed for unbelievers, so much of what goes on in them would not be understandable to an unchurched friend. Third, members may be embarrassed by the quality of the service ... What is the most natural way to increase the number of visitors to your church? ... The answer is quite simple: Create a service that is intentionally designed for your members to bring their friends to. And make the service so attractive, relevant, and appealing to the unchurched that your members are eager to share it with the lost people they care about."[\[120\]](#)

The quality of worship services correlates strongly with congregational growth. The Hartsem study, a large-scale study of thousands of congregations (including LDS) throughout the United States, reported that 56 percent of U.S. congregations with "highly inspirational" services are growing, compared to only 27 percent with low-quality worship services.[\[121\]](#) While active members can gain personal benefit even from poorly prepared talks through an attitude of worship, a negative impression is made upon visitors, dampening enthusiasm for return attendance. Speakers must use terms that are understandable for non-LDS visitors. Talks and lessons must consistently be inspirational, edifying, and relevant for nonmembers and members alike so that Latter-day Saints are excited to invite their nonmember friends to "come and see" and visitors are excited to return.

Submitting Referrals

Members should to ask the permission of nonmembers before sending a referral to the local missionaries. If one does not have the contact's permission, the relationship of trust may be disrupted. If the individual is not interested in learning about the Church when speaking with an acquaintance, it is unlikely that they will react positively to missionaries whom they do not know. It is rarely if ever appropriate to submit a referral without the consent of the person being referred. Some exceptions apply for programs such as missionary "singing Christmas cards," which typically do not include a full teaching invitation but require follow-up by the referring member.

Lessons from "Cell Churches"

Cell or house churches or faith groups that meet in member homes have experienced explosive growth over the past two decades and represent the fastest-growing segment of Christian worship today. LDS membership is growing at just over 2 percent per year, while the Southern Baptists have been growing at 100 percent or more per year for almost a decade in nations such as Cambodia and some areas of India where they have employed cell churches as their main growth strategy. Without paid clergy or dedicated meetinghouses, the overhead of cell churches is minimal, facilitating rapid expansion with limited resources. The fellowshiping and integration problems which represent major issues for groups meeting in large freestanding churches are almost automatically solved by the dynamics of cottage groups. Many cell churches experience almost 100 percent member-missionary participation and fellowshiping due to their focus on three or four core issues instead of dividing

member energies among dozens of programs and activities.

Although some elements of cell church programs are not transferable to an LDS setting, important principles can be learned from groups that have reduced worship to essentials. While members of large congregations with choir, mutual, and other activities may be inclined to look with contempt upon no-frills "cell churches" of some other denominations, it is humbling to remember that these groups have far better rates of member-missionary participation than Latter-day Saints do. Peripheral church activities are not always beneficial, since they can distract member attention away from more important activities. Organized weekly congregational worship plays an essential scriptural role in our faith, yet lessons of the "cell church" can be successfully distilled in the context of LDS cottage meetings.

Cottage Meetings

A cottage meeting is an informal gospel-based meeting held in a member's home with nonmembers present. Cottage meetings are not a substitute for investigators attending church, but they represent a valuable supplement that facilitates the consistent achievement of vital teaching and fellowshiping tasks that are at times difficult to accomplish by more traditional methods. I find that investigators and new members have consistently given excellent reviews to cottage meetings held in member homes. More significantly, I have found a much higher return rate for investigators who attended both church and cottage meetings than those who attended church meetings alone. Cottage meetings have also played an essential role in laying the foundation for the church in some new areas and nations, including the Russian Far East area, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Georgia.

In conjunction with regular church attendance, cottage meetings are typically able to foster a higher degree of enthusiasm for the gospel in investigators than attendance at church meetings alone. This is because the problems with many conventional church meetings -- the unpredictability of talks, lessons not specifically tailored to investigators, and inconsistent fellowshiping -- are almost entirely eliminated in the setting of cottage meetings. Investigators enjoy cottage meetings because they are attractive, relevant, and appealing. Cottage meetings are held weekly on a specific night (other than Monday) in a member's home with predictable teachers and consistent interaction. Quality fellowshiping in cottage meetings is almost inevitable, and the relationships that develop are much stronger than those developed in Sunday meetings by a greeting or a handshake in the hall. All this is achieved while simultaneously reaching multiple people within a limited time.

Following are some specific principles and practices that I have found to be helpful in conducting cottage meetings. Others may have found different approaches to be effective in their area. Individuals are encouraged to try different approaches and discover what works best for them.

1. Audience. In addition to the members who will lead the discussion, new members, investigators being currently taught by the missionaries, and a pair of missionaries are invited each week.
2. Topic. The goal of cottage meetings is to help the attendees become better people and establish essential gospel habits. Some of the things we focus on include daily personal or family Book of Mormon reading, weekly church attendance, full Sabbath day observance, consistent personal and family prayer, the Word of Wisdom, and family history work. We also address some fundamental doctrinal topics including prophets, the Holy Ghost, the apostasy and restoration, divine authority, and families. If the investigators understand doctrinal issues but are not reading scriptures and attending church, our teaching has failed. Lessons are scripture-based, and questions are answered from the scriptures when possible.
3. Timing. Respecting the time and other obligations of investigators is vital, and the lesson should always end before the spirit leaves. We keep our meetings relatively brief so that they can be relevant and powerful. In this way, the investigators are eager to come back for more instead of regretting that their whole evening was soaked up. We aim for sixty minutes and never allow cottage meetings to go past ninety minutes, including time for refreshments and socializing. The purpose of cottage meetings is not to provide detailed doctrinal discourses, but to furnish a simple lesson, provide fellowshiping, address questions and concerns, and demonstrate the gospel in action in the home.
4. Relevance. Lessons involve frequent feedback and interaction with participants and are never lectures. The lesson plan must be flexible and meet investigator needs. If the investigators have multiple questions on topics that are more important to them than the lesson, address those questions and topics instead. One must always keep in mind the goal of giving investigators practical teachings that will make their lives better. I will briefly answer questions on tangential or deep doctrinal issues (but to the listener's satisfaction) before leading the discussion back on topic. If you find yourself facing a question you do not know the answer to, tell the questioner that you will have an answer the next week.
5. Consistency. Cottage meetings are most effective when held in the same place at the same time every week. The missionaries know that they are welcome to bring anyone they are currently teaching. The new members and investigators who have attended once know that we will be looking for them the next week. Tuesdays or Thursdays have worked the best for us because Monday is family home evening, Wednesday is our ward activity night with scouts and mutual, and Friday and Saturday are inconvenient for most people for social reasons. When cottage meetings are not held consistently or are held in unpredictable locations, it is difficult to achieve a regular turnout.
6. Relaxed atmosphere. Everyone should be involved. Ask open-ended questions, and avoid manipulative or leading queries.
7. Refreshments at the end. We find this to be a productive time when investigators will open up even more and share things that they might not share even in the small group setting.

Finding through Family History Work

Family history can present one of the best inroads for member-missionary work. The Ensign article "Family History as a Missionary Tool" shares valuable insights about how family history can succeed as a member-missionary tool where less

effective missionary dinner programs and other initiatives have failed.^[122] LDS General Authorities have encouraged the effective use of family history as a missionary tool. Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Presidency of the Seventy noted: "Family history is obviously a crucial tool in redeeming the dead, but it can also play an important role in proclaiming the gospel and strengthening members of the Church. With even minimal coordination between priesthood leaders, family history workers, and missionaries, it will not be difficult to use family history as a tool for conversion and retention of new members and activation of less-active members."^[123] While the program's main goal is to make genuine friends and help individuals to understand the LDS emphasis on the family, some individuals become interested in the Church. Stake missionary Charles Wright noted: "Religion is personal to people and many times is closely held. On the other hand, nearly anybody will sit down and talk to you about your ancestors. You can ask people questions about where they're from, and they enjoy letting you know about their heritage."

Members receive "Tell Me About Your Family" cards which help nonmembers to start recording names, places, and dates. The members then invite the interested contact to a family home evening about family history or a family history open house. Open houses are held up to once per month. Stake Mission President Dean Dexter of the Huntsville Alabama Stake stated, "The most successful open houses included several elements: one, a brief, spiritual presentation on why Latter-day Saints do family history work; two, a demonstration of FamilySearch software, with the computer screen projected for everyone to see, if possible; three, an opportunity for each visitor to sit down at a table and be assisted in filling out the 'Where Do I Start?' pamphlet and other forms."^[124] He noted that displays of family history work done by other members can be helpful and that having full-time missionaries participate "is the most critical and important part of what we are doing at these open houses." Stake High Councilor Robert Swenson stated: "The key is to have the full-time missionaries sit at tables and work with people one-on-one and establish a rapport. Otherwise it's just another family history seminar. People naturally ask questions that lead to opportunities to share the gospel." Charles Drake, a member who has invited up to seven individuals to an open house, stated: "We try to get the same people to come back by having something new for them each time. We want to get well-acquainted with them so we can invite them to another Church activity and move them toward investigating." President Dexter noted that lessons are brief: "We want visitors to leave hungry for more, not overstuffed."

The Case against Missionary Dinner Programs

There is perhaps no member-missionary program as widespread or as ineffective as missionary dinner programs. In many wards, the monthly missionary dinner calendar is circulated with the expectation of a dinner appointment in a member's home almost every night. Some wards even have a special calling for a missionary dinner appointment coordinator. The concept, as described by its proponents, sounds attractive: missionaries can economize time by doing two things at once -- building relationships with members and soliciting member referrals while having a nutritious dinner. Economic justifications have also been cited, since members in some areas are instructed that the missionaries' monthly support funds take into account that they will not be buying their own dinner.

The missionary dinner program neutralizes missionaries by taking them off the street during prime finding and teaching time when families are home. Even when dinner visits are brief, missionary travel time ensures that member dinners consume considerable proselyting time each evening. There is no evidence that wards with missionary dinner programs generate more referrals than those without them, and many wards have experienced a revitalization of member-missionary work when dinner programs were terminated. Members of many other faiths are far more likely than Latter-day Saints to share their beliefs with others, yet rarely if ever have denominational missionaries in their homes.

Like many nonscriptural traditions of the ancient Jews that overrode the weightier matters of the law, the ubiquitous missionary dinner program is not mentioned at all in the official Preach My Gospel manual. The manual instructs that missionaries should finish with dinner no later than 6 PM and makes no exclusions for dinner in member homes. This rule is ignored in most areas, with the large majority of missionary dinner appointments not even being scheduled to start until 6 PM or later. It is difficult to justify a program that consumes vast missionary time while failing to reliably improve member-missionary participation. The missionary dinner program is perpetuated not because it is effective, but because it is comfortable. It provides members with a false sense of contributing to the missionary effort without requiring the courage or effort to approach nonmember acquaintances about the gospel. It provides missionaries with the comforts of home while avoiding the frequent rejection involved in contacting nonmembers. It spins the wheels and generates motion without progress while missionaries and members talk about missionary work instead of doing it. These points inevitably evoke objections from members who have become attached to the missionary dinner program while doing little missionary work themselves. They cite enjoying the spirit that the missionaries bring into their home. Yet missionaries are not called to be surrogate home teachers for active members. We must not be selfish and deny numerous nonmembers the chance to be contacted by the missionaries in the time consumed by every missionary dinner appointment. While occasional well-planned member visits to address specific needs can be valuable, regular dinner visits to member homes when investigators are not present are rarely as productive as alternative finding and teaching activities.

^[118] Ballard, M. Russell, "Members Are the Key," Ensign, September 2000.

^[119] Barna, George, *Evangelism That Works*, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995.

^[120] Warren, Rick, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995, 252-53.

^[121] Faith Communities in the U.S. Today, Hartsem Institute for Religious Research, Hartsem Seminary, fact.hartsem.edu. 122 Bigelow, Christopher K., "Family History as a Missionary Tool," Ensign, October 2000: 29-31.

^[122] Bigelow, Christopher K., "Family History as a Missionary Tool," Ensign, October 2000: 29-31.

^[123] Christofferson, D. Todd, Ensign, February 1999: 77.

^[124] Bigelow, Christopher K., "Family History as a Missionary Tool," Ensign, October 2000: 29-31.

