

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 12: Planning and Time Management

Planning and Time Management

Jim Rohn advised: "Never begin the day until it is finished on paper ... At the end of each day, you should play back the tapes of your performance. The results should either applaud you or prod you." Every evening following the missionaries' return to the apartment, the schedule for the following day is reviewed and calls are made to confirm existing appointments, establish new ones, and follow up with contacts, investigators, and members. The current day is also reviewed to recognize both successes and opportunities for improvement. The schedule for the coming week should be planned at a set time each week and then reviewed and updated daily. It is often easiest to do this after finishing proselyting at 9:30 PM on Sundays, with the knowledge of which investigators have attended church and who is available to be taught. The existing appointments are reviewed along with the needs of each investigator. Gaps in the schedule are considered, and telephone calls are made first to investigators and second to new members to set additional appointments. To minimize travel time, appointments close to each other should be scheduled consecutively when possible. In areas of high receptivity, consideration should be given to improving time efficiency to allow more people to be taught. Investigators can be taught in small or medium-sized groups rather than as individuals, or investigators can be scheduled in a location convenient for the missionaries, such as a chapel or designated member home, in sequential time slots. Consideration must be made to the alternative activities available at various time slots. An effective missionary will harvest the power of prayer in planning. Ezra Taft Benson noted, "In the work of the Lord there should be no serious mistakes. The most important point of your planning should be on your knees."[141]

Evening and weekend time when families are home usually constitutes prime time for missionary work. Because standard business and school hours are often more difficult to fill with productive teaching and finding activities than evenings or weekends, appointments should preferentially be scheduled during the day when possible. Evening and weekend appointments should ideally be scheduled only for individuals who are unavailable during daytime hours.

Several common planning mistakes can impair productivity. One common mistake of inefficient planners is to schedule few widely spaced appointments and view those time slots as inflexible. For most missionaries, only 30 to 60 percent of scheduled discussions with contacts and investigators actually materialize due to investigator no-shows, initially receptive contacts who become disinterested, and invalid or wrong addresses. The prudent missionary overschedules every day, recognizing that many appointments will inevitably fall through, creating gaps. If most or all visits turn out, the missionary must be flexible in delivering powerful but concise teaching to allow the schedule to be kept.

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A second mistake is to lack a suitable backup plan. Some missionaries are repeatedly caught unprepared when appointments fall through and return to their apartments or engage in other fruitless activities stating that there is "nothing to do." The prudent missionary anticipates that many appointments do not materialize, especially with new contacts and investigators who have had less than three discussions. Tracting, street contacting, and brief drop-in visits to members or other contacts in the area often make excellent short-notice backup plans. Backup activities are planned in advance: tracting or street contacting in the area, brief stop-ins to other contacts or members in the area, and so forth. By anticipating trends and being prepared with a backup plan, the disappointment and frustration of broken appointments can be turned into fruitful opportunities. Over the course of a mission, missionaries who lack backup plans will lose hundreds of hours of productive work and tens of thousands of gospel contacts compared to missionaries who plan for contingencies.

A final mistake is to fail to schedule daily contacting time. Maintaining daily exposure to many new contacts and keeping an active turnover of investigators are essential to developing a strong, high-quality teaching pool. Contacting is the foundation of missionary productivity and brings greater vitality to all other endeavors. Schedules should include daily time for tracting, street contacting, or other methods of finding through the missionaries' own efforts. Incidental time spent contacting while in transit to appointments is typically not nearly as productive as dedicated contacting activities and so should be done in addition to and not as a substitute for dedicated contacting time. Two hours of tracting every evening or street contacting during the day represent a far more fruitful use of time than return visits to investigators who are not progressing or dinners with members. If pursued as a resolute goal, 50 to 200 individuals can be approached about the gospel every day in most areas in addition to keeping a nearly full teaching schedule.

Special Priorities

Following up on contacts and referrals is one of the most productive missionary activities relative to the time spent and should be viewed as an urgent priority by all missionaries. On several occasions, I have contacted missionaries to pass on referrals and was told that they did not have time to teach new people, even though they had not had a baptism in months. In other cases, I have followed up a week or later on contacts I referred only to find out that the missionaries in their area had never contacted them. Referrals should be followed up on within forty-eight hours when at all possible, since most are time-sensitive. Mission-level follow-up can be helpful to ensure that referrals have been contacted by the assigned missionaries.

Sunday church meeting hours are the most important time of a missionary's week. It is crucial to meet all new contacts and investigators, record addresses and telephone numbers, and establish appointments when possible. I have been surprised at how frequently some missionaries fail to ask first-time visitors for contact information or to schedule follow-up appointments with them. There is little value in diligent contacting during the week when individuals that show up to church slip through the cracks through poor prioritization or neglect.

The Secret of Missionary Work

President Ezra Taft Benson stated that the secret of missionary work is work. Besides obedience, work is the most important factor in gaining and keeping the companionship of the Holy Spirit. Remarkable spiritual experiences come the way of those who tirelessly serve and not to those who sit back waiting for experiences to come to them. The Lord needs hands that do His work more than lips that pray. While visiting missionaries in Japan, President Heber J. Grant stated that missionaries should work at least as hard as those who earn salaries, implying that this was often not happening. I felt the most powerful manifestations of the Spirit as a missionary when my companion and I had worked very hard putting in twelve and thirteen hour days bringing the word face to face.

In most missions, there are seventy-five hours set aside for proselyting in a missionary week (9:30 AM to 9:30 PM six days per week and 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM on preparation day). Almost any missionary who observes basic mission rules, used efficiently, maintains a vigorous work ethic, economizes travel time, keeps lunch to only one hour or less, and uses preparation day for preparation can consistently reach over sixty hours of proselyting each week. Optimally, at least fifty hours per week or 80 percent of total working time should be spent in actual proselyting activities, contacting and teaching nonmembers firsthand.

Proselyting Hours

Webster's dictionary defines proselytizing as: 1. to induce someone to convert to one's faith; 2. to recruit someone to join one's party, institution, or cause. Many missions include time spent visiting active members, writing talks or lessons for members, attending meetings, and travel time in reported proselyting hours, although none of these activities meet the definition of proselyting. Some of these activities can represent legitimate uses of missionary time, at least on an occasional basis, but working with contacts and investigators face-to-face are the primary activities that build the kingdom of God. When all nonproselyting activities are excluded, it is often surprising how little time is being spent contacting and teaching the gospel firsthand. A large amount of time spent in nonproselyting activities is a sign of inefficient time utilization. It is often difficult for missionaries and mission leaders to recognize and troubleshoot such inefficiencies without a specific breakdown of what reported proselyting hours represent. To avoid numbers inflated by nonproselyting activities, it is valuable to separately report and track the number of hours spent making fresh contacts and teaching investigators.

Preparation Day

Preparation day is the "missionary Sabbath," since it must be spent properly for the rest of the week to run in good order. Sightseeing and other diversions should be enjoyed only after preparation is done. When preparation day time is not utilized appropriately, shopping, personal errands, and other nonproselyting activities spill over into the rest of the week to the detriment of finding and teaching opportunities.

Teach Those Who Are Ready Now

In areas of high receptivity, missionary productivity is frequently limited by the ability of local missionaries to effectively manage their time. Ammon and his brethren could not have experienced high success without good time management skills, regardless of the receptivity of those around them. Many missionaries today continue to visit investigators as long as they will accept visits, even if they are not keeping commitments or making progress. Such visits are typically based primarily on personality and other interests rather than the gospel message. While investigators should never be pressured to be baptized, it is imperative that investigators put forth regular effort toward the development of gospel habits including Book of Mormon reading and church attendance to justify repeated missionary visits. Missionaries should not schedule time with individuals who are consistently unwilling or unable to keep basic commitments. Missionaries must find those who are prepared to observe gospel commitments now, while leaving the door open for those who may be ready later. An active turnover of investigators is essential to keeping the finding and teaching pools vibrant.

[141] Benson, Ezra Taft, Ensign, May 1977.