

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 15: Principles of Finding

The Importance of Finding

It has been said that almost anyone can teach a truly "golden investigator" but that finding such investigators in the first place is much more challenging. Missionary Department studies estimate that finding represents at least two-thirds of missionary work. Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated that the average LDS missionary in North America spends only nine hours per week teaching investigators.[151] Teaching skills and many other elements of missionary preparation often do not even come into play until missionaries have found investigators willing to listen to their message. Missionary success therefore depends greatly upon correct understanding and diligent implementation of principles of finding.

The most notable distinction between great missionaries such as Dan Jones, Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, Paul, the Sons of Mosiah, and less effective missionaries is not in their teaching program, but in their finding program. Effective missionaries reach vast numbers of people by utilizing every opportunity to share the gospel. Whether in receptive or resistant areas, missionaries who understand and apply correct finding principles can multiply their effectiveness.

Reaching Every Soul for Christ

The Savior commanded His disciples: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Those who accept the baptism covenant "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places" (Mosiah 18:9). The Doctrine and Covenants contains numerous admonitions to open our mouths about the gospel at all times (D&C 19:29, 24:10, 28:16, 30:5, 30:11, 33:8-11, 61:3, 71:1, 80:3). The Lord instructs us: "go ... from house to house"(99:1), "search diligently [for receptive people] and spare not" (84:94), "thrust in your sickle" (31:5), "deliver [His] words" (5:6), "[do not] hide the talent"(60:2), "bear testimony in every place" (66:7, also 58:47,59), "publish it upon the mountains" (19:29), "lift up your voice" (34:6), "labor in the vineyard" (50:38), "speak freely to all" (19:37), "warn the people" (88:81), "declare glad tidings" (31:3), and "go and proclaim my everlasting gospel with a loud voice, and with great joy" (124:88). The New Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants all teach that the opportunity to accept or reject the gospel must be presented to all people. Christ taught that the task of reaching each soul with the gospel must be approached urgently because of the limited time available: "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come" (Matthew 10:23).

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Modern prophets have reaffirmed our scriptural mandate to reach each soul with the gospel message. Joseph Smith taught that the responsibility to open our mouths will not be discharged until the gospel trump has sounded in every ear and "the great Jehovah says, 'the work is done.'"[152] David O. McKay stated: "The best means of preaching the gospel is by personal contact."[153] Ezra Taft Benson declared: "We are to take the gospel to every person. Without exception, without excuse, without rationalization, we are to go 'unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'" (Mormon 9:22).[154] Gordon B. Hinckley stated: "It is wonderful what we can do as we practice a little ingenuity. You ought to take advantage of every opportunity in the world to speak with people about why we are there and what we are doing and give them some taste of a gospel message."[155] Elder Tingey instructed missionaries: "Speak to everyone: shopkeepers, passengers riding buses, people on streets, and everyone you meet."[156]

Actual Performance versus the Divine Standard

While the admonitions to "open our mouths," "lift up our voice," and "thrust in our sickle" by speaking with others about the gospel at all times are the most frequent instructions on missionary work found in the scriptures, the implementation of these scriptural mandates is the rare exception rather than the rule. Missionaries I have surveyed in numerous U.S. missions reported spending an average of less than five hours per week tracting or finding through their own efforts, even though most had fewer than five active investigators. As a missionary in Russia, I was shocked when the mission president stated after collecting contacting data from missionaries that the average missionary was approaching only five to ten new people each day. In 1999,

only 2 to 4 percent of people I surveyed in two Eastern European capitals reported ever being approached by Latter-day Saints or "Mormon" missionaries. Over 70 percent reported being personally approached by Jehovah's Witnesses, often multiple times. Many LDS missionaries felt that they had all the time in the world to eke a handful of referrals out of a few new members, while the Jehovah's Witnesses and other more rapidly growing faiths recognized the urgency of reaching large numbers of people quickly.

While I have occasionally found missions where the majority of missionaries are contacting large numbers of people daily, I have more frequently found that missionaries are approaching only a fraction of the number that one would reasonably expect from those whose full-time obligation is to share the gospel. One wonders how receptive nonmembers are to experience conversion when little effort is being made to offer them the gospel. Paul asked, "How will they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14-15). The Lord declared: "With some I am not well pleased, for they will not open their mouths, but they hide the talent which I have given unto them, because of the fear of man. Woe unto such, for mine anger is kindled against them" (D&C 60:2). Full-time missionaries represent the church's primary mechanism of growth. When missionaries are not meeting their scriptural duties to "open their mouths" in all places and at all times, many souls are lost, and church growth is stunted.

I have found little awareness of low contacting rates. Of the hundreds of missionaries and dozens of mission presidents I have interviewed about growth problems in poorly productive areas, external factors such as materialism, atheism, local culture, and anti-Mormon activity have been repeatedly cited. In contrast, not one has cited low missionary contacting rates as a major cause of slow growth. While it should seem obvious that missionaries who contact only a handful of people each day are unlikely to be very successful, the number of individuals approached by missionaries each day -- perhaps the most essential single statistical indicator of missionary effort -- has traditionally not been recorded or reported at all. Many mission leaders with little involvement in frontline missionary activities assume that missionaries are making far more contacts than is actually the case. In recent years, directives to increase time spent with members and inactives have resulted in fewer convert baptisms since missionaries have spent less time approaching nonmembers about the gospel. Such directives have further decreased awareness of low contacting rates and have made it easier for missionaries to rationalize feeble contacting efforts.

Are People Unreceptive?

The idea that people are less receptive to the LDS church than to other proselytizing denominations is a common rationalization for slow growth. My analysis strongly suggests the opposite. Data reported by Jehovah's Witnesses[157] and by numerous evangelical denominations[158] suggests that these other faiths typically have to provide tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of exposures and thousands of proselyting hours to make a single convert. My research suggests that the number of total nonmembers contacted about the gospel per conversion in most LDS missions is in the low thousands and sometimes far less. While the methodologies may be slightly different, the response rate to the message of the restored gospel is one of the highest reported for any denomination, opposition to the Church notwithstanding. This higher receptivity is the result of the true message of the restored gospel, the confirmation of the Holy Spirit, and an enthusiastic missionary force.

In most areas, LDS difficulties finding people to teach reflect poor member and missionary effort far more than any lack of local receptivity. Only 3 to 5 percent of active LDS members in North America are regularly involved in missionary work,[159] and just 26 percent of Latter-day Saints report engaging in a gospel conversation with a nonmember within the past year.[160]

Contacting is the lifeblood of missions. There is no missionary mandate in scripture more frequently repeated than the command to "open your mouth at all times" and to sound the gospel in every ear, yet LDS missionary contacting efforts in many areas are surprisingly low. As a missionary in Russia in the early 1990s, I found that foreign evangelical preachers with no knowledge of the local language could consistently achieve high attendance at their meetings, while many LDS missionaries proficient in the local language struggled to get one or two investigators to church each week. Some argued that evangelicals experienced greater success because of lower standards and that little was required of members of many churches beyond mere attendance. Yet attendance represents an obligatory first step, and most of the commonly cited "higher standards" of the LDS faith -- tithing, the Word of Wisdom, and so forth -- were not officially even brought up until after investigators had already completed several discussions and were committed to baptism. Nor can public opinion be cited as a major factor: most Russians at that time did not know "Mormons" apart from any other foreign religious group. A year later, an enlightening survey conducted by my mission president found that the average missionary was approaching an average of only five people per day about the gospel. While there were many excuses for poor contacting, most missionaries abdicated responsibility for the finding process to members instead of putting forth the effort to contact large numbers of people on their own.

I have since conducted surveys of nonmembers in various cities of Eastern Europe and the United States and have found that surprisingly few people report ever being approached by LDS missionaries, even in areas with a large missionary presence. My surveys of missionaries in most areas have found daily contacting rates that are remarkably low, far below the 50 to 200 contacts a day that I found necessary to sustain productivity as a missionary. Most missionaries consider contacting an undesirable chore to do when they have "nothing else to do," and many fill in schedules with "make-work" visits to members and stagnant investigators in order to avoid contacting whenever possible. Interviews with missionaries demonstrate that many expect an unrealistically large percentage of those they contact to accept the gospel and are disappointed when dramatic results are not achieved with little effort.

Christ taught that the task of outreach is urgent and that spending large amounts of time with the unreceptive cannot be justified while the ripe harvest remains unreaped: "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you,

Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come" (Matthew 10:23). The Apostle Paul taught, "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). "How shall they hear without a preacher?" he asked (Romans 10:15). The scant sowing of the gospel seed is a primary cause of slow growth in many LDS missions. Many other faiths have experienced more rapid growth because they understand the need to contact many thousands or tens of thousands to make a single proselyte, while many LDS missionaries and members expect miraculous results with token effort.

A Message for All the World

As new missionaries, my companion and I prayed fervently to know where we should tract. We yearned sincerely for the Lord to lead us to the "right door," yet we did not receive any specific direction. While we were working hard to be fully dedicated and obedient and were blessed to find and teach some wonderful converts, we felt that something was missing. Where did we go wrong?

As a new missionary, I was guilty of the same misunderstanding as Oliver Cowdery, thinking that the Lord would enlighten me through the Spirit while taking little thought except to ask (D&C 9). I had overlooked the Lord's words spoken to elders preaching the gospel early in this dispensation: "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). I quickly came to understand that the Lord expected me to knock on every door and present the opportunity to hear the gospel message to all people and not just to a select few that I felt especially prompted to approach.

As we worked tirelessly, contacting one hundred or more people each day, the Spirit came in a measure I had never felt while on my knees, and missionary successes multiplied. I have consistently found that the Spirit is often received only after we put forth the faith to share the gospel. While prayer is vital, its primary role is not to determine to whom we should offer opportunities to hear the gospel.

Most of us are unable to discern ahead of time who will be ready to receive the gospel message. Assumptions that missionaries and members should be able to do so are out of harmony with scriptural mandates that every soul is to be reached with the Good News. Those who accepted the gospel were rarely individuals that I felt a burning spiritual impression to approach or with whom I had particularly memorable initial conversations. They were simply those who put forth the effort to nourish a seed of faith when others did not.

Many members and missionaries are overly concerned with finding the perfect plot of soil to plant their few seeds in and dedicate much effort to attempts to alter the nature of the soil instead of planting more seeds. The Parable of the Sower teaches that the selection process occurs once seeds have been abundantly sown and not by the sower choosing to plant only a few seeds (Matthew 13).

All people are entitled to an opportunity to hear the Lord's words. The selection process is to occur in the heart of the hearer and not in the mind of the sharer. Our role is to knock into all the doors, to reach all people, and to offer the gospel message universally. Who accepts the gospel message is in God's hands. Any goal short of providing all people with an opportunity to accept or reject this message is unsatisfactory.

A Vision for the Unreached

The Lord declared that "this is a day of warning, and not a day of many words" (D&C 63:58). Many less effective missionaries contact few new people each day while repeatedly visiting a few friendly but lukewarm investigators who have read little in the Book of Mormon and are not regularly attending church. Such missionaries often express touching emotions about the deep responsibility they feel to give their nonprogressing investigators yet another chance, yet seem to feel little if any responsibility toward the countless individuals whom they have never presented with a single opportunity to learn about the gospel at all. Great inequity exists when a few noncommittal individuals are allowed to monopolize vast amounts of missionary time, while millions of others have never been offered the opportunity to hear the gospel message. It is natural to feel strong emotional ties to individuals we have worked with and prayed for, but greater perspective is required to maintain a sense of responsibility toward those we have not yet met.

Successful missionaries maintain a constant vision of responsibility to the unreached. Every activity, whether meeting with members or returning to visit nonprogressing investigators, is carefully weighed against the opportunity to meet fresh contacts. They schedule several hours of contacting time daily, regardless of how busy they may be with other activities. The burning desire to offer the gospel message as widely as possible overrides the desires of the "natural man."

The Principle of Self-Selection

In areas of exceptional receptivity, many missionaries find that time limitations seemingly do not allow them to teach all of those who are willing to accept visits with conventional approaches. Under such circumstances, missionaries often make arbitrary decisions about who to teach. Many missionaries become saturated with low-yield visits while receptive individuals remain

untaught. In these cases, the limiting factor in Church growth is not the lack of receptive individuals in the community but the time management skills and work ethic of the missionaries. A missionary who does not understand when it is time to move on will never be able to bring large numbers of quality converts into the Church regardless of local receptivity.

Many ineffective missionaries require prospective investigators to demonstrate commitment rather than effort as a prerequisite for initial or ongoing teaching. Missionaries serving in some areas of Latin America would drop investigators if they were not ready to accept baptism within two weeks of the first contact. Many educated and contemplative investigators were abandoned by missionaries in favor of more impulsive individuals who were willing to accept baptism quickly but experienced high rates of relapse and inactivity. Instead of building a strong core of committed members, this practice fostered revolving door patterns of quick baptism followed by almost immediate inactivity. There is no scriptural basis for the expectation that quality investigators should be ready to accept baptism within an arbitrary period, only that they put forth continuing effort to learn, study, and implement Gospel Principles. In some Eastern European missions experiencing an initial wave of receptivity, arbitrary guidelines were imposed requiring that individuals attend church, often several times, before they could even receive a copy of the Book of Mormon. Without an opportunity to read and understand God's word, a sincere investigator would have no reason to demonstrate denominational commitment to the LDS Church any more than to the numerous other faiths that provided religious literature more accessibly.

In view of the eternal importance of the gospel message, the decision of who to teach out of many potentially receptive people cannot be rightly based on arbitrary factors. We must ensure that threshold self-selection criteria represent reasonable expectations of the pure in heart and are not unscriptural or unfair.

The key to the appropriate allocation of missionary resources lies in the scriptural principle of self-selection: "Mine elect hear my voice, and harden not their hearts" (D&C 29:7). Instead of taking it into one's own hands to decide who is "prepared" to receive God's word, the effective missionary makes the gospel message widely available and invites receptive individuals to participate in activities that can lead to teaching, such as attending church and reading in the Book of Mormon. Investigators who continue to put forth independent effort to attend church and study the Book of Mormon should be worked with patiently, even over prolonged periods, since these gospel habits eventually lead to conversion in the large majority of cases. Some of the strongest mission converts I correspond with are individuals who studied the Book of Mormon and attended church for several months before making the decision to join. The effective missionary does not place deadlines on conversion. Rather, he focuses on helping investigators to develop the habits of daily scripture reading, church attendance, and obedience to other gospel laws that allow the conversion process to occur by facilitating a change of heart through the spirit.

Individuals who do not demonstrate a willingness to attend church and are not diligent in studying the scriptures should not continue to be taught but should be invited to attend church or contact the missionaries when they are willing to study the gospel more earnestly. Those without root or depth of soil sort themselves out, placing the responsibility for selection on the investigator instead of the missionary.

Learning when to let go of those who are not ready to receive the gospel and move on is an essential element of missionary maturation, as is the recognition that moving on from a nonprogressing investigator does not represent a final judgment on him or her and does not close the door to future opportunities. In our desire to give one more chance to a recalcitrant soul who is progressing slowly if at all, we must not lose the vision of our divine mandate to reach those yet unreached. By making the gospel message widely available and letting the faithful manifest themselves through their actions, scriptural self-selection practices ensure that missionaries spend their time teaching the most receptive individuals. This results in more committed, higher quality converts, maximizing the benefit to both the investigator and the Church.

Rick Warren wrote: "It is a waste of time to fish in a spot where the fish aren't biting. Wise fishermen move on. They understand that fish feed in different spots at different times of the day. Nor are they hungry all the time. This is the principle of receptivity ... At certain times, unbelievers are more responsive to spiritual truths than at other times. This receptivity often lasts only briefly, which is why Jesus said to go where the people would listen. Take advantage of the responsive hearts that the Holy Spirit prepares. Notice Jesus' instructions in Matthew 10:14 (NCV): 'If a home or town refuses to welcome you or listen to you, leave that place ...' This is a very significant statement that we shouldn't ignore. Jesus told the disciples they were not supposed to stay around unresponsive people. We aren't supposed to pick green fruit, but to find the ripe fruit and harvest it."[161] He further stated: "Is it good stewardship to continue badgering someone who has already rejected Christ a dozen times when there is a whole community of receptive people waiting to hear the gospel for the first time? ... The apostle Paul's strategy was to go through open doors and not waste time banging on closed ones. Likewise, we should not focus our efforts on those who aren't ready to listen. There are far more people in the world who are ready to receive Christ than there are believers ready to witness to them."

Understanding the Roles of Finding Methods

Under "Finding," the white LDS Missionary Handbook states: "The most effective sources of finding are members and investigators. Plan to use these and the following sources (listed in order of effectiveness). 1. Recent converts. 2. Baptismal services. 3. Stake missionaries' contacts with members and nonmembers. 4. Part-member families. 5. Members in general. 6. Former investigators. 7. Current investigators (referral dialogue). 8. Media, visitors' centers, and Church headquarters referrals. 9. Activation efforts (unknown address file). 10. Service activities. 11. New move-ins. 12. Special interest contacts. 13. Tracting. 14. Street contacting. 15. Speaking with everyone."

From the time they enter the Missionary Training Center, missionaries are repeatedly taught that finding activities based on their own efforts are the very least effective, weighing in at numbers eleven through fifteen. Not surprisingly, many missionaries quickly come to believe that their success at finding people to teach depends little upon their own initiative or effort. Many individuals cite the preceding list as rationalization for neglect of repeated scriptural admonitions to open their mouths about the gospel at all times.

Results are often widely discrepant with the sweeping claims of effectiveness presented in this list. Many missionaries achieve far greater success through tracting and street contacting than by soliciting referrals from members; others find reactivation efforts and service projects less fruitful than their own contacting efforts. Over 98 percent of baptisms on my mission came from tracting or street contacting, since there were few members from whom to solicit referrals. A heavy reliance on member referrals may produce acceptable results in areas such as Utah with very high member to missionary ratios and high member involvement but fails to produce similar results in nations without such favorable ratios. Conversely, street contacting and local media efforts that produce dramatic response in some newly opened areas of the world where few individuals have had an opportunity to hear the gospel may not generate such exuberant responses in areas of Western Europe or North America that have been saturated with evangelistic messages of different faiths for decades.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Finding Methods Elder Dallin H. Oaks reported that "of investigators found through media campaigns, about 1 to 2 percent are baptized. Of investigators found through the missionaries' efforts, about 2 to 3 percent are baptized. Of investigators found through the members, 20 to 30 percent are baptized."[162] This is valuable information, although it is based on North American studies that cannot be extrapolated to other areas. Many international missions experience baptism rates well above the 2 to 3 percent U.S. rate for investigators found by the missionaries' efforts.

Some individuals point to such data to justify missionary finding programs that consist exclusively of soliciting referrals from members. Since member referrals are ten times as likely to be baptized as those found through the missionary efforts, they argue why even bother with other contacting methods at all? Why not concentrate missionary finding efforts soliciting referrals from members rather than dissipating effort on tasks with only a fraction of the yield?

While such reasoning may sound appealing, it is erroneous. These data are helpful in assessing teaching success rates once referrals are in hand, but they do not consider the average amount of time necessary to obtain referrals or establish an investigator in the first place and therefore do not answer the question of what finding method is the most effective.

Most missionaries I have surveyed cite an average of at least seven to ten member visits to obtain a single referral, and sometimes far more. When visitation and travel time are included, the amount of time needed to procure a single member referral is considerable. Nor are all referrals of the same quality: some members give referrals to the missionaries without the individuals' permission or knowledge, with success rates that are little better than those of "cold call" street contacts, while other members provide better quality referrals. Since only a fraction of individuals referred by members become active investigators, the amount of missionary time needed to generate a single investigator from member referrals is typically much greater than is recognized. Because hundreds of street contacts can usually be made in the time it takes to obtain a single member referral -- let alone an investigator -- and because success at soliciting referrals is unpredictable, the effectiveness of working through member referrals and street or tracting contacts cannot be validly compared at an individual level.

When measuring the effectiveness of finding approaches, results must be assessed per unit time, rather than per contact. If it takes ten member visits requiring ninety minutes each when travel time is included to obtain a single member referral and one referral in five becomes an investigator, it would take seventy-five hours of missionary time to generate one investigator from member referrals. If one can contact thirty people in an hour by tracting or street contacting, over two thousand individuals can be contacted in the average time needed to obtain a single investigator from member referrals. Even if only one individual in one hundred contacted became an investigator, the missionaries' time in this example is far more effectively used contacting nonmembers through their own efforts rather than visiting members to solicit referrals. The precise figures vary in different areas, but careful analysis often favors the missionaries' own finding efforts over member visits to solicit referrals without prior leads.

Contacting may seem less productive because it involves speaking with many people at a low response rate and because the near-constant rejection is emotionally taxing. The natural psychological bias against contacting results in a strong tendency to underestimate results from contacting efforts and to overestimate results of referral solicitation. Except in areas with overwhelming member to missionary ratios, the mental gymnastics invoked by many to rationalize a primary or exclusive focus on member visits as the basis of finding efforts typically do not result from an unbiased evaluation of the data, but from a desire to avoid the hard work and rejection of contacting in favor of more comfortable activities.

The scriptural mandate of reaching every soul with the gospel message deserves independent consideration in every finding program. Even if the productivity of tracting or street contacting efforts and working through member referrals were the same, the independent contacting efforts would be preferable because they offer exposure to the gospel message to hundreds or thousands of people in the time that would offer such opportunities to only one or a few individuals when working through member referrals. It cannot be surprising that missions where missionaries choose to do little independent contacting typically fall far short of their growth potential. Greatly increased productivity is achieved when one abandons the mindset that contacting is an undesirable task to be done when there is "nothing else to do" and reorients one's thinking to focus on the divine mandate to reach every soul in one's area and to reach them repeatedly.

The Value of Contacting for Church Growth

President David O. McKay taught that "the best means of preaching the gospel is by personal contact,"[163] yet many missionaries and even some mission leaders insist that missionary contacting efforts are so ineffective as to scarcely be worth the bother. It seems unfortunate that the value of independent missionary finding efforts continues to be controversial. Some missionaries express the deterministic view that God will inevitably guide the elect into His Church, regardless of member or missionary effort. Scriptures flatly contradict such erroneous beliefs and teach that the effort put forth by members and missionaries to share the gospel makes a tremendous difference in the lives of nonmembers and in the growth of the Church.

While some converts possess a high degree of discernment and insight and might perhaps come into the Church under any circumstances, for most the road to membership is more situational than theological. Most converts had not embarked on a systematic search to find the one true Church but accepted an invitation from a missionary or member when they felt something important was missing from their lives. The divine word rang true, and they received their own spiritual witness of the restored gospel as they exercised faith and made sacrifices.

The value of independent missionary contacting efforts can be appreciated by examining areas where such efforts are not permitted. In the Ukraine Donetsk mission, local law allowed proselytizing in Donetsk and Kharkov but prohibited foreign missionaries from approaching nonmembers without invitation in Dnipropetrovsk, where missionaries relied on strongly emphasized member-missionary efforts to find investigators. All cities had a similar missionary complement throughout their early histories. In 2001, there were approximately 700 members each in Donetsk and Kharkhov, the two cities allowing missionary outreach, and only 250 members in Dnipropetrovsk.

In Minsk, Belarus, there were about 150 active members in 1994, when contacting by full-time missionaries was prohibited. Since that time, investigators have been found almost exclusively through member referrals. In 2001, there were approximately twenty full-time LDS missionaries in Minsk, but still only about 150 active members. Although well over one hundred man-years of full-time LDS missionary labor had been expended in Minsk during this period, Church growth was slow, and existing members were lost to inactivity nearly as fast as new converts were baptized. In both Minsk and Dnipropetrovsk, finding programs based exclusively on member referrals resulted in drastically stunted growth compared to that which occurred in other areas where missionaries found investigators both through their own efforts and through referrals, even though independent missionary contacting efforts in the latter areas were far from optimal. Many other case studies could be cited demonstrating similar results.

Advocates of finding through member referrals alone frequently cite the example of Utah missions. Utah missions have among the highest annual baptism rates in the United States, with the overwhelming majority of baptisms coming from member referrals. Proponents conveniently neglect to mention that the three Utah missions encompass less than 1 percent of the LDS missionary force but draw referrals from more than 1.7 million LDS members in Utah, representing one-seventh of the world LDS population, as well as benefiting from the Church's foremost tourist attractions. Utah experiences an average of only 1.5 convert baptisms per ward per year, well below the world LDS average. This represents an annual growth rate of 0.2 to 0.5 percent when baptisms of member children and move-ins are subtracted. Relative to the number of members, Utah member-missionary efforts are among the least effective in the world.

Some also support member-only finding methods by citing the spectacular Church growth in Mongolia in spite of restrictions on contacting. Research demonstrates a high degree of spontaneous interest, with many self-referrals spontaneously requesting teaching or baptism. Such growth patterns do not reflect poorly on contacting, since there has been no opportunity for direct local comparison, but rather reflect circumstances of exceptional receptivity under which almost any kind of finding effort would be successful. While missionaries in highly receptive areas sometimes find more abundant teaching opportunities than their time management skills allow them to utilize, such remarkable levels of spontaneous interest cannot be extrapolated to other cultures.

Low growth rates are understandable in situations where contacting is not permitted by law and missionaries are working as diligently as they can under local conditions. However, stunted growth is much less acceptable in the far larger number of cases where missionaries have wide freedom to contact but choose not to fully utilize the opportunities that the Lord has provided.

Limited versus Unlimited Methods

Finding methods that depend on the referrals of others are intrinsically limited. In contrast, the potential of contacting is virtually unlimited and is restricted only by the missionaries' work ethic and motivation. I have repeatedly been surprised at how many missionaries and mission presidents, even in areas with few members, expect the local members to bear almost the entire burden of finding people to teach without effective independent missionary finding methods. Missionary productivity has progressively declined in spite of greatly increased time spent soliciting member referrals. Only a small minority of active LDS members have made any attempt to start a gospel conversation with a nonmember over the past year in spite of frequent missionary exhortations. In most areas, it is not feasible for hard-working missionaries to occupy their time productively working through referral sources alone. Members, new converts, and investigators should certainly be asked for referrals, but this can often be done efficiently at church meetings or other scheduled activities with telephone follow-up, without having to divert vast amounts of time away from scripturally mandated outreach activities.

Optimizing Finding Programs

Which finding method is best? Finding through members? Contacting? Working through media? Given the wide discrepancy in results among the same methods in different areas, or even among similar categories implemented in different ways, the only tenable answer is that the effectiveness of an approach depends on local circumstances and that the "best" approach varies among areas. Any generalization that one method is always "more effective" than another conveys a misunderstanding of the dynamics of finding methods. It would seem foolish to ask a carpenter whether the hammer, the saw, or the measuring tape is the best tool. All of these tools have different uses, and the carpenter who goes through his career using only a single tool will encounter many difficulties not experienced by those who know how to utilize a variety of tools for their most appropriate functions. It is a disservice to claim that certain finding methods are categorically "more effective" or "less effective," rather than teaching the underlying principles by which each finding method can be optimally employed.

Most missionaries have strong views about which finding methods are more or less "effective," yet have little or no training on how to implement each method most effectively. Sweeping claims that one finding method is always more effective than another only obscure the reality that there are more and less effective ways to implement any given finding method and that different methods are complementary rather than conflicting when properly implemented. One can make frequent and lengthy visits to members' homes to solicit referrals, or one can speak to members individually at church and telephone during the week to follow-up or drop by when already in the area. One can stand passively by a park display or sign board waiting for someone to approach, or one can boldly approach passersby.

Nearly a century ago, President B. H. Roberts observed: "If tracting is the backbone of missionary work, how is it that we do not have some treatise or instruction on the subject, some manual; or some definite course of training in it? There was no answer to the question except to confess to the neglect of the subject; and that, of course, was no answer."[164] Today, modern missionary manuals offer little insight into such basic topics.

Principles of Finding

With unlimited needs and limited resources, good stewardship requires not only that we share the gospel regularly, but that we also employ the best approaches in the most effective fashion. Effective missionaries use a balance of finding approaches, although the optimal balance depends greatly upon local circumstances. Each finding method has a valuable role, and each method can be employed in effective or ineffective ways. The real question is not whether to find through members, through one's own finding efforts, or through media, as all are needed, but how to employ each approach most effectively. Attention must be given not only to choosing the optimal finding methods for local conditions, but also to implementing each finding method as effectively as possible.

There are no substitutes for hard work and creativity. The innovative missionary enthusiastically applies a variety of finding methods and modifies approaches based on observations and results. Here are some principles to consider in determining how and when to best employ each finding technique.

Time Utilization and Planning

Every missionary should allocate daily time for finding and contacting, regardless of how busy he is teaching discussions and visiting members. This principle is crucial to long-term missionary success. One should never think in terms of filling up one's schedule, but in terms of reaching souls. Priorities and approaches must be reconsidered if missionaries are spending less than 80 percent of work hours contacting and teaching the gospel face to face. Meetings, personal errands, and other nonproselyting activities provide no one with the opportunity to hear the gospel.

In an era when missionaries are taught from official sources that their own efforts are the least productive of all finding methods and some believe that contacting is so unproductive as to almost not be worth bothering with at all, it is easy for many to avoid contacting by filling schedules with additional member visits and trips to old investigators who fail to keep commitments. Missionaries who shirk scriptural mandates in this fashion fall far short of their potential. The litany of rationalizations and false philosophies many contrive in attempts to excuse themselves from scriptural contacting obligations defies both reason and inspiration.

Finding methods should be scheduled in a complementary fashion at the times when each is most effective. Some finding methods are more effective at some times than others or are only available at certain times. An overreliance on one or two methods frequently results in finding missionaries wasting time when their finding method of choice is not available. Street or park contacting is usually most productive during the day, but much less effective at night, and is often slightly more effective on weekends when families are together and individuals are less rushed. Tracting has low yield during business hours, but a higher yield in the evenings and on weekends when families are home. Member visits are best scheduled so that they do not take missionaries off the streets during prime proselyting and teaching time when nonmember families are home. The holiday season in Christian nations provides special opportunities for presenting messages about the Savior. Schedules for free English lessons for international college students are often best attended during the school year.

Some finding methods offer the predictable opportunity to approach many people about the gospel in a short time, while others

require far more time to make a single contact and are less predictable. Some approaches require significant advance planning, while others do not. Media efforts, community presentations, family history workshops, and so forth can be effective with appropriate planning and preparation. Tracting and street contacting can be done almost anywhere with little preparation or notice and make excellent backups when teaching plans fall through.

Response Patterns

Different audiences experience varying patterns of responsiveness to finding methods. When my companion and I tracted in Russia, most people who let us in for conversation were young or middle-aged. When we placed church invitations in several thousand apartment mailboxes, the average age of church visitors the next week was significantly older. Elderly people, who were often reluctant to open their doors to strangers, responded better to invitations they could read and study on their own, while younger people usually responded better to personal contact. Broad societal outreach requires the implementation of complementary finding methods, each of which is most effective at reaching a specific audience.

Geographic Constraints

Finding methods face geographic considerations. Most residences can be reached by tracting, although locked apartment buildings and gated communities create limitations. Street contacting is most effective in high-traffic areas such as parks or metro stations, but varying governmental policies in different nations allow missionary contacting in some locations while restricting it in others.

Finding methods and locations also affect contact distribution. Missionaries serving in central areas of large cities often find that many individuals contacted in public areas live remotely, leading to greater follow-up travel time or requiring referrals to be passed off to missionaries in other areas. Tracting often offers geographic advantages because most individuals live where they are contacted, and travel time can be economized by tracting through adjacent areas. When tracting contacts do not keep an appointment, time can be used to stop by on other contacts or investigators in the same area or to continue tracting nearby.

Saturation and Diminishing Returns

Directives to spend more time soliciting referrals from members and less time contacting nonmembers are based on the untested assumption that spending twice the time with members will generate twice the number of referrals. Both field data and an analysis of referral dynamics suggest that this assumption is inaccurate. Missionaries today spend more time than ever working with members, yet the percentage of a cross-section of U.S. investigators being taught as a result of member referrals fell from 42 percent in 1987 to 20 percent in 1997.[165] Most full-time missionaries spend dozens of hours each month visiting members, participating in missionary dinner appointments, and soliciting member referrals in other ways, but the average North American LDS congregation produces only two member referrals each month.

Except in areas where the member base is extremely large, attempts to solicit member referrals reach a point of saturation and diminishing returns, meaning that incremental effort results in a progressively smaller increase in the number of referrals received. Even diligent members who are good referral sources eventually run out of fresh leads, while the majority of members never provide a referral, no matter how frequently missionaries visit. While much can be done to improve member finding effectiveness, this depends much more upon the presence of an effective member-missionary program in the local congregation than on missionary visits. Every effort should be made to solicit referrals that are easily obtainable, yet care should be taken to ensure that member visits do not detract from primary proselyting responsibilities without producing corresponding practical results. The precise point of saturation depends on number of members (active and inactive making varying contributions) and the relative obedience to the gospel and motivation of the members. Saturable finding methods are most helpful when combined with a balance of other finding approaches, but typically produce suboptimal results when used as the main or sole finding method.

In contrast to referral-based finding, tracting and street contacting are unsaturable except in very small towns, with two to three times the effort typically generating two to three times as many contacts. Such unsaturable finding methods generate linear returns that are limited only by the missionaries' work ethic and should represent the primary finding method in most areas.

Programs that directly involve missionaries or members in sharing the gospel with nonmembers almost always produce superior results to indirect methods that involve merely exhorting others to do so. Effective finding programs make the gospel message available to large numbers of people on a consistent basis, fulfilling the gospel mandate to sound the gospel in every ear. It is usually much more effective to make large numbers of fresh contacts each day than to dedicate large amounts of time to visits attempting to solicit referrals. It is more effective to mentor members in sharing the gospel on splits or in teaching situations than to exhort them to share the gospel over dinner.

Process Improvement

One should work hard, listen to the spirit, and evaluate progress objectively and regularly. Missionaries should set reasonable expectations and realize that rejection is the most common response at every step. Nonetheless, one should not persist in

approaches that are not effective after adequate trials. Effective missionaries use ingenuity and try new finding methods that they feel are more likely to be successful than their current ones. If an approach is not working, they determine why, modify the approach as needed, and reevaluate later for fine-tuning.

Contacting Goals

While contacting is hard work and involves near constant rejection, I have repeatedly found that missionary success over the course of a mission is determined more by the number of people contacted each day than by any other single factor. Paul taught: "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). The habit of approaching at least one hundred new people each day about the gospel is perhaps the most vital single trait that a missionary can acquire.

Even at return rates per contact that seem extremely low, contacting can still be a very effective church growth tool when missionaries and their leaders have the vision and discipline to make consistently large numbers of gospel contacts. My companion and I had to contact over one thousand people to find a single individual who was ready to join the Church, yet we averaged one baptism per week for the last eight months of my mission because we contacted 100 to 200 people each day. Jim Rohn taught: "This little equation, when understood and acted upon, is perhaps the most powerful equation there is in regards to long-term achievement and accomplishment ... Your short-term actions multiplied by time equals your long-term accomplishments." Just as the spiritual benefits of daily scripture reading may be barely perceptible after a few sessions but accrue to great levels over time, the results of diligent daily contacting may not be obvious in one week or even one month but become vast over sustained periods.

With the possible exception of particularly resistant areas of Western Europe, low contacting effort is almost always a major cause of poor missionary success. Almost any missionary companionship willing to put forth adequate effort can contact one hundred new people per day, with abundant time remaining for teaching discussions. In some small towns where distances between homes are large, missionaries may find a minimum of fifty contacts each day to be more realistic. There is almost never any valid reason for a companionship to average fewer than fifty gospel contacts in a day, except in nations where contacting is prohibited.

A missionary who consistently contacts one hundred people per day can reach over 70,000 people over the course of a mission, while one who contacted only five per day would reach only 3,600. In a relatively receptive area that averaged one baptism per five hundred contacts, a missionary with the simple habit of contacting one hundred people each day could achieve approximately 140 baptisms over the course of a mission. If an average of 5,000 gospel contacts were needed to achieve one baptism in a highly resistant area, a missionary who approached one hundred contacts each day could bring fourteen people into the Church.

A continuing flow of investigators through the finding and teaching pools is essential both to productivity and to refinement of missionary skills. More importantly, the best and often only way for missionaries to consistently receive the Holy Spirit is by contacting large numbers of people daily. Missionaries who make few new contacts find that it is difficult to receive or maintain the companionship of the Holy Spirit, regardless of their sincerity.

Expectations and Reality

Many missionaries expect that a relatively high percentage of contacts and investigators they teach will be baptized and are therefore content with making few contacts. Even under the most favorable circumstances, only a small fraction of individuals contacted and taught will be ready to accept the gospel, since not everyone is willing to adhere to gospel laws. Yet it is not enough even for us to reach each individual once. We must present individuals with multiple and frequent opportunities to receive the gospel. Multiple contacts are often required even for sincere individuals to develop a desire to investigate the Church. U.S. research suggests that the average convert has had between six and twenty exposures to the Church before deciding to join. Since people are receptive to the gospel at different times and often require multiple exposures to the gospel before accepting it, we cannot consider our duty to be done when each individual has had a single gospel opportunity. We must offer the gospel widely so that it is available to individuals when they are ready and not simply when we finally decide to make the effort to share it with them.

Overcoming the Fear of Man

The burning desire to share the gospel felt by servants of Christ is replaced by fear in the carnal man. Beyond the theoretical understanding that contacting is important, effective contacting requires a driving sense of responsibility to reach the unreached and a high tolerance for rejection. Developing these traits is one of the most difficult emotional and psychological tasks many missionaries face, and many never develop them over their entire missions. Missionaries must prepare themselves mentally and spiritually to be undeterred by rejection. President James E. Faust taught: "Missionaries still need to have the right attitude in contacting people. They need to cast aside all fear and be positive about the great message which is here."[166] He further taught that missionaries should "fear not and doubt not. We have a leader who fears not and doubts not." Moroni wrote: "I fear not what man can do; for perfect love casteth out all fear" (Moroni 8:16).

Participating in the first contact of nonmembers with the Church is the most exciting part of missionary work for me. Initially, I

contacted diligently out of a sense of the importance and urgency about the gospel message, although I found contacting challenging. Later in my mission, I came to greatly enjoy contacting. Different individuals offer such a variety of experience and perspective that contacting can be very rewarding when approached with the proper attitude. Even when people are not interested in the Church, I am enriched by the experience. By varying in one's approach, trying out new words in the mission language, and working to build on common beliefs, one can turn contacting from a chore into an exciting and enjoyable activity.

The Book of Mormon Loan Program

Missionaries can economize time while increasing their productivity by using the Book of Mormon as a sieve, allowing the honest in heart to self-select. Ezra Taft Benson taught: "The Book of Mormon is the great standard we are to use in our missionary work. It shows that Joseph Smith was a prophet. It contains the words of Christ, and its great mission is to bring men to Christ. All other things are secondary. The golden question of the Book of Mormon is 'Do you want to learn more of Christ?' The Book of Mormon is the great finder of the golden contact. It does not contain things which are 'pleasing unto the world,' and so the worldly are not interested in it. It is a great sieve (see 1 Nephi 6:5)." He taught that the wicked are offended at it, the worldly are not interested in it, and the righteous delight in it.

In many missions, missionaries do not allow contacts to receive a copy of the Book of Mormon until they have already received the first discussion. In other cases, congratulatory articles celebrate wards that have distributed copies of the Book of Mormon indiscriminately to anyone who will accept one, often with little or no follow-up. Fortunately, there is a program that is superior in virtually every way to the extremes of inadequate use of the Book of Mormon or of indiscriminate distribution without meaningful follow-up.

The Book of Mormon loan program is an effective finding method for both missionaries and members that involves offering a copy of the Book of Mormon as a loan to individuals with the request that they read just enough to form an opinion. If the acquaintance has specific questions or interests, reading passages can be recommended. A copy of 23 Questions Answered by the Book of Mormon can help the acquaintance find portions that may stimulate his or her interest. The missionary or member mentions that he would like to meet with the contact to discuss the principles of the book at greater length if he or she finds the contents to be interesting. For a book to be loaned, the contact must agree to read in the book and to return it if he or she is not interested. A tentative follow-up within the next several days should be agreed upon, and individual's telephone number and address are obtained. If the individual wishes to borrow a copy of the Book of Mormon but is reluctant to provide his or her telephone number or address, a commitment to return the book during Sunday church meetings can be obtained and local church address and meeting times can be provided. One should not give out a church invitation before requesting the individual's telephone number since the person may subsequently decide not to provide personal contact information that is often necessary for follow-up.

The recipient is told that the Book of Mormon is not being given as a gift, but is being loaned and that he or she will be expected to return it. When the book is given as a gift, many people feel no sense of accountability or urgency for reading it due to the prevalent free sample mentality. However, most individuals do feel a sense of obligation about returning other peoples' property. After a few days, the missionary or member calls or stops by to follow up at the agreed time. If the individual is interested or would like to discuss the book, the Book of Mormon has worked as a sieve increasing the value of the missionary's time and discussion ensues. If the individual is not interested, the book is picked up (for follow-up in person), or he or she is asked to return the book at a church meeting or at another convenient agreed-upon time (if follow-up is by telephone). The Book of Mormon has acted as a sieve and that individual has sifted himself out, saving the missionary considerable time. While not every uninterested person may return the book, many do. Because of the opportunity cost of time, missionaries do not need to spend their time picking up books unless it is convenient. They can be left in the home of investigators at the missionaries' discretion. The individuals brought into the Church through the Book of Mormon loan program have a high rate of continued activity because they are truly converted to the gospel message and not to the missionaries or to the social programs of the Church.

Case History

In one Brazilian mission, my father as a missionary divided his time equally between morning and afternoon and divided the city into two halves, and one of the halves into two quarters.

For three hours each morning, he would go to one quarter and go door to door with his briefcase full of copies of the Book of Mormon. At each house, he would say: "Here is a book. It is not for sale. It is a loan. It is for your husband to read to you. We will return in two days to see how you like it."

For three hours each afternoon, he would go to the other half of the city and do conventional tracting, namely, introducing himself and his companion as missionaries of the LDS Church and offering to present a missionary discussion.

On even days he would go to one quarter in the morning, and on odd days he would go to the other quarter.

Each copy of the Book of Mormon was underlined in passages where the basic points of the gospel leading to conversion were indicated. At the bottom of the page, the reader was pointed to the next reference: "Go to page --."

During the time this experiment was conducted, one person was baptized by conventional tracting. Ten people were baptized by the Book of Mormon loan program.

My father did not have time to mark all of the copies. He printed up a marking chart and found that not only members, but also even nonmembers were often very happy to mark the books for him. Some of them confessed that they stopped to read the passages as they were underlining them.

In this manner, my father was able to distribute copies of the Book of Mormon in Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, and German and tracts in Russian and Japanese because the book was not available at that time in those languages.

The book was left with the family for as long as they continued reading it. The books were picked up from disinterested families and loaned out again to new contacts.

Whenever a book was left with a Jewish family, he would refuse to take the book back. His mission President, Wayne Beck, assured him that some day they would not be able to resist the temptation to read it. "The Jews are great readers," he said.

My father spent all the money ever sent to him on his mission by well-wishers on copies of the Book of Mormon. Upon leaving the mission, he had one hundred copies of the Book of Mormon in the hands of people who said they were still reading them. He affirms that if he were ever called on another mission, he would spend all his daylight hours doing nothing but loaning copies of the Book of Mormon. Evenings, of course, were always reserved for teaching.

Family to Family Book of Mormon Program

Ezra Taft Benson cited the Family to Family Book of Mormon Program as one of the most effective missionary approaches, noting the need for families to send copies of the Book of Mormon on missions for them.167 I have found that many investigators give positive feedback about the value of the following measures:

1. A photo of the individual or family. An address should also be included if the family desires to correspond.
2. The book should include a copy of a printed personal or family testimony which focuses not simply on assertions that the Book of Mormon is true, but on the blessings one has received through following its principles.
3. A copy of 23 Questions Answered by the Book of Mormon, complete with page references, to stimulate meaningful reading.
4. Local contact information for the Church. Individuals who enjoy reading the Book of Mormon receive limited benefit if they cannot find the Church.

Working with Members Effectively

There are effective and ineffective ways to work with members. Some missionaries believe that one cannot find through members without a long period of building trust, often through frequent visits and excessive socialization. Ezra Taft Benson taught:

Too many missionaries are neutralized and occasionally lost (excommunicated) because of over-solicitous members, member sisters who "mother" the missionaries, and socializing occurring between missionaries and members. Because of the importance of members and missionaries working effectively together on the member missionary program, it is vital that missionaries maintain the proper missionary image and have the reputation as great proselyting elders and not simply "good guys." The greatest help members can be to a missionary is not to feed him, but to give the names of their friends so that he can teach them with the spirit in their homes and challenge them, with the wonderful members helping to fellowship.[168]

Frequent missionary transfers and more pressing scriptural responsibilities make it impractical and inappropriate for each member to get to know each missionary well socially, nor does socialization alone generally result in the generation of productive referrals. Visits can be counterproductive when missionaries stay too long or visit too frequently. The utilization of all opportunities to speak with members at church meetings and functions and close follow-up with appropriately timed telephone calls can save many needless trips and fruitless visits.

Effective finding through members involves at least three factors. First, missionary visits to members are centered on helping members to develop and continue basic gospel habits that generate spiritual growth, including reading the Book of Mormon daily, saying prayers, sharing the gospel, observing the Sabbath Day and Word of Wisdom, attending the temple, and the habit of regularly initiating gospel discussions with nonmembers. Members with these habits are much more likely to participate in member-missionary work. Righteousness is the precursor of effective missionary work and the source of self-motivation. When the objectives of missionary visits are nebulous, social, or centered exclusively on soliciting referrals, little is accomplished.

Second, missionaries must work hard at independent finding methods and teach investigators appropriately to build trust. When missionaries successfully find, teach, and baptize quality converts who remain active, members gain confidence and are more willing to invite their acquaintances with less prompting. Conversely, when missionaries are unable to regularly get new investigators to church or when poorly committed "converts" are quickly lost to inactivity because of being rushed to baptism prematurely, member confidence in missionaries is seriously damaged.

Finally, missionaries must ensure that their referral expectations are reasonable based on the ratio of members to missionaries and past performance. The cliche that "if members were doing their job, missionaries wouldn't have to tract" is neither scripturally sound nor realistic in most areas. The belief that finding people to teach is "someone else's job" is attractive to human nature but obscures personal responsibility and dampens independent effort.

Finding through Media

Latter-day prophets have taught that we have an obligation to share the gospel through media. Spencer W. Kimball taught: "When we have increased the missionaries from the organized areas of the Church to a number close to their potential, that is, every able and worthy boy in the Church on a mission; when every stake and mission abroad is furnishing enough missionaries for that country; when we have used our qualified men to help the apostles to open these new fields of labor; when we have used the satellite and related discoveries to their greatest potential and all of the media -- the papers, magazines, television, radio -- all in their greatest power; when we have organized numerous other stakes which will be springboards; when we have recovered from inactivity the numerous young men who are now unordained and unmissioned and unmarried; then, and not until then, shall we approach the insistence of our Lord and Master to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."[169] Of his media interviews, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated: "We have something that the world needs to hear about, and these interviews afford an opportunity to give voice to that."[170]

Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted that in North America "studies show that about 6 out of 10 of adult converts said that they were positively influenced by our media messages before deciding to be baptized."[171] This figure does not apply to international areas, where relatively few converts have been exposed to church media messages. Little LDS media outreach is conducted in areas of the developing world where costs are low and response rates are high. George Barna has found that in the United States "more people use Christian media than attend church" and that large numbers of non-Christians listen to Christian radio.[172] The impact of media messages even on the relatively stagnant North American religious scene suggests that the potential for media messages in the developing world is immense. I have often found that the use of outreach media is the primary difference between the finding program of Protestant missionaries and pastors who do not speak the local language but succeed in assembling large congregations and that of LDS missionaries who speak the local language yet have few investigators to teach. Many of the best media opportunities are at the mission level and below. Local media opportunities are often both more effective and less expensive than national ones and can be fine-tuned based on local needs and results.

Church Media Outreach

The value of religious feature stories run by major news networks is usually diluted by the simultaneous presentation of inaccurate or opposing views. Press interviews with church leaders, feature articles, and public service advertisements without specific contact information and a call to action may generate Panerai Replica some positive feelings but rarely inspire individuals to investigate the Church or accept the missionary discussions. Positive publicity in the lay press is often only weakly positive, while negative articles are often strongly negative. Many network television stations in the United States and Western Europe now categorically refuse to run evangelistic advertisements, making it more difficult for churches to conduct outreach through secular media. Many churches have found that their efforts are better directed toward developing their own media outreach venues than attempting to achieve wide positive exposure through the lay press. Churches that do their own religious broadcasting and printing can proclaim the gospel message without the content being altered or attacked by third parties before even reaching its audience.

Optimizing Media Programs

LDS media messages can directly generate referrals, or they can exert a positive influence that may increase receptivity in future LDS contacts. In receptive or newly opened areas, direct-response media messages that invite contacts to attend church, read the Book of Mormon, or visit with the missionaries are much more effective than image messages that promote a positive view of Latter-day Saints but do not invite to action. Effective media programs should be sustained over time. With few exceptions, ongoing media programs that achieve modest but constant exposure usually produce superior long-term results to large, one-time media events.

Awareness of the principles of threshold effort, response rate, and respondent receptivity can help to optimize media outreach for any area. Threshold effort is the personal effort that the respondent must put forth to act upon the media invitation, such as making a telephone call, inviting the missionaries, or attending a church meeting. The response rate is the number of individuals who respond to the media message, typically measured per thousand exposures. Respondent receptivity is the rate at which respondents become investigators or progress in other ways toward church membership.

Media programs generate different response rates and reach different audiences based on the content of the message and the effort required from the respondent. The response rate is inversely proportional to the threshold effort. However, the average respondent receptivity is directly proportional to the threshold effort. Free literature or video offerings increase the response rate but lower respondent receptivity. LDS-specific media content, such as Book of Mormon, typically lower response rate but increase respondent receptivity compared to content that is not unique to Latter-day Saints, such as the Bible. Programs that require greater threshold effort, such as attending church, will receive fewer responses than those that require less effort or offer free materials, but those who do respond will be more likely to become serious investigators.

The message content and required threshold effort must be balanced against the response rate and productivity of visits achieved to optimize results in the context of community receptivity and missionary availability. Media programs with threshold-commitment ratios that are mismatched to local needs can dissipate time and resources better utilized in more productive ways. One elder in the southern United States stated that his companionship received an average of three referrals per day from the Lamb of God video program but that the program had resulted in very few converts across his mission. He noted that more baptisms resulted from talking with nonmembers on the way to and from media referral appointments than from visiting the media referrals themselves, explaining that "many people here just want free stuff."

Media programs in areas of high community receptivity and abundant teaching opportunities should favor a high threshold effort such as church attendance or reading in the Book of Mormon. Such initiatives reach modest numbers of individuals who are more likely to progress to conversion and Church membership, ensuring that missionary time is utilized as effectively as possible. This is especially crucial in missions with low missionary to population ratios. In contrast, low-threshold, high-response rate programs offering free books or videos to be brought to an investigator's home may be useful in less receptive areas where missionaries face major difficulties trying to find anyone to teach at all.

If a media initiative does not produce the desired outcome, the message content and the initial required effort can be modified to produce a locally appropriate balance between the number of referrals and contact interest level. If the number of referrals generated is high but few individuals become converted, the media program should be modified to require greater investigator effort, leading to fewer but more productive teaching opportunities.

Media Examples

Media opportunities should be utilized to increase positive church exposure. In one city, I wrote an article on the Church in Russian that was published in a local newspaper. We had many discussions and several baptismal commitments due to publicity from the article. We also paid for an attractive signboard with information about the Church with our meeting time to be posted near a bus stop. Several individuals came to church as a result of the sign and were baptized. Since many people had seen the sign, contacting efforts were more successful. We presented local libraries with a copy of the Book of Mormon and Gospel Principles book with the church addresses and times pasted inside. The Gospel Principles book was well received because of its accessible format and organized and well-referenced overview of LDS doctrines. Small newspaper advertisements provide an inexpensive way to increase public awareness. One mission companion was baptized after attending church meetings he found through a newspaper advertisement with nothing but the Church's name, location, and meeting time.

Referral Process Improvement

My follow-up audits have found that not all missionaries consistently attempt to reach referrals. Addresses are not always valid, telephone numbers are often not provided, and much time can be lost attempting to visit contacts that are not home. Referrals are time-sensitive, since receptivity often wanes with time. It is necessary to ensure that receptive referrals are reached promptly, while avoiding the dissipation of large amounts of time in repeated attempts to locate hard to reach contacts with only minimal interest.

The challenge begins with referral forms that allow submission of only name and contact information. Additional information can economize missionary time and increase the likelihood of successful contact. Important questions include: What is the best time to visit or call? What exposure have you had to the Church? Do you have LDS friends or acquaintances? What interests you about the LDS Church?

This additional information allows missionaries to reach the individual and establish rapport much more effectively than is possible by cold-calling with nothing more than a name and address. Such information can also provide missionaries with the impetus to make repeated or exceptional attempts to contact difficult to reach but potentially high-yield contacts, while avoiding repeated and often fruitless efforts to reach low-yield ones. A contact who has attended church in another area, has close member friends, has studied the Book of Mormon, and has expressed a strong interest in receiving the discussions warrants far greater effort to reach than an individual who has expressed only a casual curiosity or an individual referred by a member without his knowledge or permission. Systematic mission-level audits are valuable to ensure that referrals disbursed to missionaries are followed up promptly.

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