The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 19: The Cost of Inactivity

Only as converts become active members does missionary work satisfy its divine purposes. Efforts to improve convert retention are often undermined by widespread misconceptions that low retention rates are either unavoidable or inevitable. One missionary shrugged off the catastrophic inactivity of quick baptism tactics with the reply: "At least these people are on the rolls so that now we can keep track of them better and look after their home teaching." If one hundred converts are baptized but only twenty or thirty are still active one month later, this performance is generally viewed as a resounding success. The missionaries met their statistical goals, a few converts remained active, and the responsibility for dealing with the other 70 to 80 percent is shifted to overwhelmed local members. Convert loss is not inevitable, nor does rampant inactivity represent only minor collateral damage on the way to meeting monthly baptismal goals. It is possible to generate large numbers of inactives in a relatively short time, yet even years of intensive fellowshipping and reactivation work are rarely able to fully reverse the damage done by prior accelerated baptism programs.

The Cost to the Convert

The cost of inactivity is devastating and immense. President Gordon B. Hinckley stated: "Nobody gains when there is baptism without retention. The missionary loses, and while the Church gains statistically, the membership suffers, really, and the enthusiasm of the convert turns to ashes.'[196] He further noted: "Actual harm may be done to those who leave old friendships and old ways of doing things only to be allowed to slip into inactivity." He taught: "What does it profit the missionary to baptize someone who leaves the Church within six months? Nothing is accomplished; in fact, damage is done. We have pulled them away from their old moorings and brought them into the Church, only to have them drift away."[197] Those who lapse in fulfillment of solemn covenants find their eternal prospects worse than if they had never met the missionaries at all. Wilfried Decoo, an experienced Belgian church leader who became the president of a branch of 200 members with only 10 percent activity as a twenty-two-year-old convert, reflects on his work with inactives over more than three decades: "This is far more than a problem of organizational failure. If we take our religion seriously, we are talking about the prospect of a kind of spiritual death for those millions whom we have lost ... For many the suffering begins already in this life. I know, from years of experience in working with inactive members, of the agony -- some of it lifelong -- involved in the process of leaving the church. Here are people who once joyfully discovered the gospel, gained testimonies, and then turned their lives upside down and even severed relationships with families and friends to follow gospel principles, only to sink back eventually into the bitter pool of disillusionment."[198]

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The Cost to the Congregation

I have been inundated with messages from members around the world who have long noted problems with the widespread revolving-door quick-baptize approaches. Such stories have come not from critics, but from faithful members, including bishops, high counselors, stake presidents, branch presidents, CES teachers, ward mission leaders, stake mission presidents, and returned missionaries. They cite the tremendous burden of recent and ongoing quick-baptize practices to the work of the Church. Wilfried Decoo noted the cost to the congregation of disillusioned inactives: "Probably every unit of the church has some of these sad souls, and they are not all converts, of course. In the larger wards or branches they can be assimilated and their potential for disruption can be contained. In the mission field, however, both their presence and their influence can be disproportionately large, partly because a small branch might not be large enough to integrate them readily, and partly because branch presidents and bishops are not allowed to evaluate the readiness for baptism of even seriously troubled and eccentric converts if missionaries and mission leaders are determined to baptize them."[199] High activity empowers a ward or branch, while inactivity saps vitality. The disproportionate number of poorly committed and troubled individuals rushed to baptism in some areas can overwhelm and cripple previously healthy units.

The Cost to Outreach

Low activity and retention rates contribute to poor member-missionary participation among actives, since self-absorption with internal problems hinders mission outreach. Which congregation is better suited to reach out to the community: one with 75

actives and 25 inactives or one with 75 actives and 300 inactives? The first is able to meet its own needs and reach out to the community. The second is chronically unable to meet even its own home teaching needs and remains forever self-consumed by internal troubles, unable to effectively reach out to the larger community. Outreach to lost members is time and resource intensive, and Christ refers to the shepherd leaving the ninety and nine to find the one that is lost. One might contemplate how Christ's "ninety and nine" to one compares to the ratio of approximately thirty "found" sheep to seventy "lost" sheep in today's church.

Just as faithful, testifying members represent a great asset to church growth, nonobservant inactives and disgruntled former members present a liability. One leader in an area recovering from the effects of longstanding quick-baptize tactics stated: "Today we spend a majority of our time attempting to rehabilitate those members that were baptized years ago without adequate preparation. Essentially, what we did then was open a hospital for the sick ('the whole have no need of the physician') without having any doctors on staff. The result was predictable. Everyone got sicker. We are paying dearly for it at this time, because our time is consumed in an effort to reactivate." The considerable missionary time that is diverted from contacting and teaching investigators to reactivation efforts in low-retaining areas significantly slows growth. It is far more efficient to teach converts correctly and ensure that they are fully converted in the first place than to rush unprepared individuals to baptism and attempt to pick up the pieces later.

The Cost to Fellowshipping

Soldiers in major military conflicts report that they are afraid to grow close to newcomers because of the tremendous emotional expense and coping problems they face when friends are killed in battle. Aloofness and withdrawal become natural defense mechanisms for survival. Similarly, most members find that it is too emotionally draining to repeatedly attempt to warmly fellowship new converts and develop close friendships, only to have the large majority vanish into inactivity or outright hostility within a short time of baptism. I have known many members who have tried earnestly to fellowship investigators and converts, only to find their enthusiasm for fellowshipping and member-missionary work irreparably damaged as they witnessed the overwhelming majority of poorly prepared converts rapidly become disinterested or hostile due to the lack of a testimony, relapse to old habits, or family pressures. Rush baptisms, low retention, and poor fellowshipping become a vicious cycle, and the few converts with genuine commitment to the Church may find their friendship needs unmet. The emotional scars from even a brief period of low-retaining accelerated baptism programs can demotivate fellowshipping efforts for years. Repeated exhortations to members to increase fellowshipping in such areas rarely leads to sustained improvement.

In elucidating these dynamics, I do not imply that there is any valid excuse for failures of fellowshipping, even in accelerated baptism areas. A small percentage of members are able to consistently fellowship new converts in spite of the tremendous emotional burden of revolving door inactivity. Yet if we are to correct definitively the underlying issues and foster a widespread, sustained increase in member fellowshipping, accelerated baptism programs and other missionary initiatives that place converts at great spiritual risk and undermine member confidence must be abolished. The credibility of local missionary efforts must be rebuilt by consistently responsible teaching and baptizing tactics and improved prebaptismal preparation, leading to more consistently positive interactions among active members, investigators, and new converts. This in turn leads to a surge in member enthusiasm for missionary work and fellowshipping.

Prevention: The Best Medicine

President Thomas S. Monson taught that we must "start at the headwaters to ensure activity."[200] Many missions have elaborate plans for reclaiming inactives, but no clear plans for improving the quality of prebaptismal preparation and stopping the loss of converts to inactivity. Is it good stewardship to persevere in bailing water out of a leaking ship without first plugging the hole? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and extra effort to teach new converts correctly before baptism and establish firm gospel habits often does far more good than hundreds of hours spent working with inactives. For those who feel that it is too difficult to prepare converts properly for baptism, try home teaching hostile or disaffected individuals every month for the rest of their lives and attempting to remedy the enormous personal, social, and spiritual problems that inactivity inflicts upon individuals and the Church. It is much more honorable to leave individuals without adequate understanding and commitment unbaptized than to rush them into a lifelong obligation for which they are not prepared.

[196] Hinckley, Gordon B., LDS Church News, July 4, 1998.
[197] Hinckley, Gordon B., Woods Cross Utah Regional Conference, January 10, 1998.
[198] Decoo, Wilfried, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," Dialogue, 29/1 (Spring 1996): 97-113.
[199] Decoo, Wilfried, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," Dialogue, 29/1 (Spring 1996): 97-113.
[200] Monson, Thomas S., LDS Church News, April 10, 1999.