

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 20: Growth and Standards

Are Quality and Quantity Competing Aims?

Many view quality and quantity as competing or even mutually exclusive aims. One missionary who served in a large Latin American country with many nominal members but few actives acknowledged: "The quality of prebaptismal teaching was never much of a focus. Many hoped that by simply baptizing large numbers of people, enough of them would remain active to build the Church." Many others cite little quality control in the prebaptismal teaching process, leading to "revolving door" retention problems with new converts going inactive almost as quickly as they are baptized. A missionary in a low-retaining area of the United States conveyed an attitude I have heard expressed by hundreds: "Our job is just to teach and baptize. What happens after is the members' job." Such beliefs lead missionaries and leaders to write off convert losses as inevitable or to blame failure upon local members without making any genuine effort to evaluate and improve the gaping deficiencies in their own teaching and prebaptismal preparation of converts. Many proponents of accelerated baptism programs actually believe that the fractional retention rates such methods incur are compensated for by a modest alleged increase in baptismal numbers associated with rushed baptisms and low standards and express that high attrition is simply the cost of having a "productive" mission.

On the other hand, some attempt to excuse poor performance by claiming that slow growth is an inevitable result of a focus on quality. Over the past fifteen years, I have frequently heard mission and area leaders concerned about poor convert retention instruct missionaries and members that convert retention must be improved through a focus on quality teaching. They claim that achieving quality growth requires diverting large amounts of time and attention away from finding activities, rationalizing the decline in baptisms. Yet much of the talk about quality has been so vague that it is difficult to distill practical lessons. Most leaders have been reluctant to establish or enforce meaningful standards beyond attendance at one to three sacrament meetings and affirmatively answering a list of questions that deal primarily with belief.

My interviews with investigators and new converts in many areas where missionaries pride themselves on "quality teaching" have produced little evidence to support their claims. While missionaries may have conducted more social visits or engaged in more small talk with the investigators, I have found that converts have still attended church only irregularly before baptism, have failed to establish habits of daily scripture reading, and have been abstinent from forbidden substances for only a brief period before baptism. Not surprisingly, such areas continue to suffer from low retention rates that represent only a meager improvement. Guidelines that prospective converts should abstain from alcohol and tobacco, attend church, and read scriptures become more nominal than real when there is no minimum period of observance before baptism. Without clear standards which are consistently enforced, of what can quality possibly consist? With missionaries facing continuing pressure to baptize investigators quickly to meet arbitrary goals, the quality of convert preparation reflects primarily the minimal accepted standards.

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When daily scripture reading, consistent church attendance, and adherence to other basic gospel laws are optional for baptism, we cannot be surprised that convert retention remains the exception rather than the rule. At a mission conference in Brazil in 1965, a visiting authority taught: "Don't hide behind the mask of quality. If you say 'we are baptizing fewer people because we are baptizing quality converts,' then the question is: what were you doing before?"

Quality and Quantity

President Gordon B. Hinckley has affirmed that the Lord wants both quality and quantity, rather than one or the other or, as has most often been the case, neither. The scriptures teach that both quality and quantity, both faithfulness and fruitfulness are expected. The "field is white, already to harvest." Disciples of Christ are sent not to generate paper lists of inactive members, but to establish a living, vital Church. The Savior emphasized both missions: "I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16).

Ammon and his brethren succeeded at both baptizing thousands and achieving full retention: "As many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away" (Alma 23:6). Early missionaries of the

modern era such as Dan Jones, Wilford Woodruff, and Brigham Young also baptized thousands in the British Isles while achieving retention rates above 90 percent. Most of these great missionaries also built the Church "from scratch" in new areas and were able to achieve rapid growth and excellent retention without the benefit of an established member base.

A great lesson of my mission was that quality and quantity are simultaneously achievable. During the last six months of my mission, my companions and I taught and baptized approximately 25 percent of all of the converts in the mission. Over 90 percent of the converts were still active two years later. Almost all of these individuals were contacts with no friends or family in the Church, and some were baptized in areas with few or no other active members. So their retention cannot be attributed merely to social relationships. This growth can be credited to the application of specific principles learned from insightful companions, as well as to diligent work and the Holy Spirit. Since that time, I have carefully studied exceptional missions around the world where high growth and retention were both achieved. In every case, I find the application of common principles of growth and retention that are deficient in less productive missions.

Is Poor Retention an Inevitable Step in Maturation?

Some claim that a so-called "critical mass" of members is essential for rapid growth and optimal retention and that current low activity rates are an inevitable result of the process of establishing the Church in new areas. They claim that activity rates will rise as the Church becomes more established, citing higher activity rates in Utah and the Mountain West than in surrounding areas. This is an apples and oranges comparison which is not supported by existing data. The observation that activity rates are higher in areas where active members have many children and where there are few convert baptisms provides no useful insight for rectifying the problem of catastrophic convert losses that have continued to occur in both international areas and in regions of North America that rely primarily on convert growth. The Church has been established in Mexico, Chile, and Japan for well over a century, but activity rates in all three countries hover between 20 and 25 percent, and the passing of many years has done little to rectify the crisis of inactivity. In contrast, some newly opened areas, such as West Africa and Eastern Europe, have activity rates that are somewhat higher. Rampant inactivity cannot simply be waited out. Poor retention is no more a necessary part of the growth of the Church than sickness is a prerequisite to health.

Public discourse on LDS convert retention centers has traditionally centered so overwhelmingly on the need for fellowshipping of new converts that it is easy to lose sight of other factors which play a similar or even greater role in retention. If it were true that member fellowshipping represented the key factor in convert retention, it would not have been possible for Ammon, Dan Jones, Brigham Young, and other highly effective missionaries to organize from scratch large congregations with excellent retention in areas without preexisting Church infrastructure. On my mission, I also found that it was possible to organize healthy congregations and consistently achieve very high convert retention in areas with few or no members. In contrast, programs that focus on fellowshipping as the primary or exclusive means of convert retention typically achieve only slight gains. As a ward mission leader in an area of the United States where missionaries systematically rushed unprepared converts to baptism, I found that even the most diligent fellowshipping efforts only marginally improved very low retention rates. Explanations of retention problems solely in terms of member fellowshipping focus on superficial social issues while ignoring much deeper spiritual ones.

Missions that have applied appropriate scriptural teaching standards have almost immediately achieved very high convert retention rates, while missions that have not have continued to lose the overwhelming majority of their converts even as unit rolls have swelled. The principles that can uniformly ensure excellent convert retention in any area are discussed in detail in the Convert Retention chapter.

Do High Standards Hinder Growth and Retention?

Many members and critics alike have unquestioningly accepted the assumption that high membership expectations are detrimental to LDS growth, claiming that the church is "incapable of growing exponentially" and that "the strict lifestyle that the church promotes, eschews alcohol, premarital sex and even coffee, prompts many converts to drift away."[201] They claim that rapidly growing faiths attract members easily because they require little, while attributing stagnant LDS growth rates even under circumstances of great opportunity and receptivity to "high standards." There is nothing helpful or developmental about such claims, which blame slow growth on the "hard-heartedness" of local people while ignoring any opportunity for improving our efforts.

Sociologists have long observed that the world's rapidly growing missionary churches are not those that require little (Catholic, Orthodox, and mainline Protestant churches experience few conversions), but faiths with high membership requirements, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists (growing at 8 to 11 percent annually) and Jehovah's Witnesses. The "Hartsem Faith Communities Today" study, the largest study of religious congregations in the United States in history, found that strictness of member expectations contributes to high growth rather than dissuading prospective converts.[202] Sixty-four percent of U.S. congregations with strict member expectations are growing, compared to only 37 percent with low member expectations. Congregations with explicit and high member expectations are also much less likely to experience conflicts that sap vitality. Many other studies demonstrate the correlation between high standards and high growth and retention. In a landmark paper entitled "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," Laurence R. Iannaccone of Santa Clara University presented evidence that free-rider members, or individuals who maintain nominal membership while failing to contribute, weaken any religious body and result in the fruitless dissipation of resources.[203] He wrote: "Any attempt to directly subsidize the observable aspects of religious participation (such as church attendance) will almost certainly backfire." Low standards, or subsidization of commitments, foster maladaptive dynamics that hamper church growth. Rapidly growing denominations understand that converts who join with the

expectation of giving active service strengthen a church, while those who join expecting to be passively served weaken it.

High Standards, Strong Converts

I have consistently found that prebaptismal preparation practices correspond highly to convert retention. In areas with excellent retention, missionaries have consistently ensured that converts have firmly established the habit of meaningful daily reading in the Book of Mormon well before baptism. The investigator has consistently attended church every week for one month or more. He has fully overcome substance addictions, with at least four weeks of full abstinence from substances forbidden by the Word of Wisdom. The missionaries have actively involved members in at least two formal discussions or visits prior to baptism, facilitating the development of friendships that extend beyond handshakes and hallway greetings at church. The baptismal interview is insightful and helpful, and the baptism of candidates who have not demonstrated consistent adherence to basic gospel laws throughout the teaching period is delayed until such habits have been firmly established and demonstrated.

A common pattern is also found in most low-retaining missions. The typical investigator has attended church only once, twice, or several times with gaps before baptism. He has rarely read more than ten pages in the Book of Mormon and has not developed the habit of consistent daily scripture reading. Little or no effort has been made to involve members in the teaching and fellowshipping process prior to baptism. Investigators have often been abstinent from tobacco or alcohol for two weeks or less and experience catastrophic relapse rates after baptism. The baptismal interview represents little more than a rubber stamp focusing on nominal belief and future promises, while making little if any effort to ascertain the investigator's consistency in adhering to commitments over the teaching period. Converts often feel unprepared for baptism but report feeling pressured by the missionaries to be baptized quickly.

Faiths that achieve high convert retention rates require high prebaptismal standards. Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have lifestyle, commitment, and time requirements that are comparable and in some ways more demanding to those required for LDS membership. Seventh-Day Adventists follow a law of health that is stricter than the LDS Word of Wisdom, requiring not only abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, but also a near-vegetarian diet. Seventh-Day Adventists also worship on Saturdays rather than Sundays, which presents social and cultural challenges. Even with these commitments, the Seventh-Day Adventist church is growing rapidly and retains 78 percent of new members. The average Jehovah's Witness proselytizes nonmembers for an average of fifteen to twenty hours each month. Jehovah's Witnesses must also give up birthday parties, Christmas and Easter celebrations, and more. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventist investigators are typically expected to attend church regularly, often for months, to complete Bible-study courses, and to adhere consistently to membership requirements prior to baptism.

Faiths that require little offer little and fail to mobilize the commitment and dedication that are prerequisites for sustained rapid growth. Individuals experience the blessings of faith only as they put forth effort and make sacrifices, and so the failure of low-commitment quick-baptize programs is predictable. Joseph Smith taught: "A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation."[204] Faiths with low expectations often fail to even get their existing members to church and experience few voluntary conversions. Strictness is not a barrier but an asset to growth and retention.

Who Benefits from High Prebaptismal Standards?

Some suggest that high prebaptismal standards are unlikely to have much impact on retention. They claim that standards may weed out a few grossly unprepared or insincere individuals but are unlikely to make much difference for the sincere converts. They also express concern that the higher teaching standards could result in a sharp drop in total baptisms and speculate that accelerated baptism programs may lead to greater growth.

Data contradict such claims. The consistent success of appropriate prebaptismal requirements in elevating convert retention rates from 20 to 30 percent prior to their implementation to 80 to 90 percent afterward demonstrate that benefits are experienced by the overwhelming majority of prospective converts. While some insincere and uncommitted individuals are "weeded out," this difference in total baptisms is far more than made up over time by a stronger long-term membership base and by the application of principles discussed in the Principles of Finding chapter. I have found that the vast majority of prospective converts are sincere and genuinely want to succeed in the Church but find themselves severely disadvantaged when rushed to baptism without having developed essential gospel habits. Many converts who have gone on to become branch and district presidents and serve faithfully in other callings have reported that holding them back from baptism until they were well prepared was the best thing anyone did for them and made a formative difference in impressing upon them the seriousness of gospel covenants. Quality retention programs do not improve retention only for marginal converts. They dramatically improve retention rates for the entire spectrum of sincere converts who desire to succeed in the Church but require proper training and habituation in order to become spiritually self-reliant.

Some have presented examples of converts baptized after a very brief period of teaching who remained active in the Church and went on to serve in leadership callings as "proof" that accelerated baptism programs are effective and appropriate. Few would consider the stories of survivors of an airline that delivered only 25 percent of its passengers safely as documentation of an acceptable safety record, nor would an anecdote of an acquaintance who survived unscathed after speeding through red lights demonstrate that such a practice is appropriate or advisable. Most such examples presented by accelerated baptism proponents involve converts with other strong connections to the Church that the claimants fail to recognize as salient factors in

promoting ongoing activity, such as a spouse, other family members, or close friends who are active members. Even the 20 to 25 percent retention rates typically reported for accelerated baptism programs often overestimate their success, since the small segment of converts with strong preexisting ties to active Church members make up a disproportionately large number of those who remain active. Retention rates for cold contacts baptized through accelerated baptism programs are even lower.

[201] Gerstein, Josh, "Mormons Rising in Government, Business, Schools," New York Sun, October 18, 2005.
[202] "Faith Communities in the U.S. Today," Hartsem Institute for Religious Research, Hartsem Seminary, fact.hartsem.edu.
[203] Iannaccone, Lawrence R., "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," American Journal of Sociology, 99/5 (1994): 1180-1211, updated version online at lsb.scu.edu/econrel/Downloads/Strict-D.PDF.
[204] Smith, Joseph, Lectures on Faith, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1985, 6:7.