

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 22: Achieving Full Convert Retention

Convert Profiles

In most low-retaining LDS missions, the average 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 lacks the habit of daily scripture reading. He has not established meaningful friendships with active members prior to baptism and has often been abstinent from alcohol or tobacco for two weeks or less.

In areas with high 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 average investigator has consistently attended church weekly for four weeks or more and has been abstinent from alcohol and tobacco for a similar period. They have also established meaningful friendships with active members that extend beyond handshakes and hallway greetings in church. Active members have typically been present for at least two missionary discussions with the investigators.

A key to high retention is to modify the profile of converts being baptized from the quick-baptize, low-commitment profile found in areas of poor retention to the higher commitment profile found in areas with good retention. This is entirely within the control of missionaries who understand these principles and work together with members to ensure the true and lasting conversion of new converts.

The Best Time for Change: Before Baptism

The quality of prebaptismal teaching and preparation lays prospective converts' spiritual foundation and plays a large role in determining whether they will experience full activity and continued spiritual growth, social membership alone, or inactivity. While new converts are generally willing to make substantial life changes to qualify for baptism in the true Church, much of the impetus and urgency for additional change is lost after baptism, especially if prior commitments remain unmastered. If prospective converts have not achieved consistency in basic gospel habits including daily scripture reading and weekly church attendance before baptism, it is unlikely that they will ever develop these habits.

Elder Henry B. Eyring noted:

Another fallacy is to believe that the choice to accept or not accept the counsel of prophets is no more than deciding whether to accept good advice and gain its benefits or to stay where we are. But the choice not to take prophetic counsel changes the very ground upon which we stand. It becomes more dangerous. The failure to take prophetic counsel lessens our power to take inspired counsel in the future. The best time to have decided to help Noah build the ark was the first time he asked. Each time he asked after that, each failure to respond would have lessened sensitivity to the Spirit. And so each time his request would have seemed more foolish, until the rain came. And then it was too late.[208] //

When inspired counsel is not followed the first time it is heard, the power of the hearer to follow it in the future declines dramatically. The discrepancy between expressed and internalized beliefs grows, and this discrepancy becomes accepted. This explains why prospective converts who are properly taught are often much more inclined to follow inspired counsels than many longtime members. The period of prebaptismal teaching presents the best chance the converts will ever have to assimilate and implement the essential gospel laws they were not taught as children.

Building Spiritual Self-Sufficiency: Habits of Faith

Living testimonies require constant spiritual nourishment. The most efficacious and dependable form of nourishment is self-nourishment. Those who depend on others to replenish the oil in their spiritual lamps will find that their lamps will inevitably run dry. Those with gospel habits are fortified to remain firm and resilient through adversity while those without them falter on

the smoothest of roads. New members who join with established habits of daily scripture reading, Sabbath observance, daily prayer, and others become spiritually self-sufficient in the local congregation. Their habits provide not only for continued activity, but also for cumulative growth. Aristotle noted: "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." Jim Rohn stated, "Motivation gets you started, and habits keep you going." He further noted: "Success is nothing more than a few simple disciplines, practiced every day; while failure is simply a few errors in judgment, repeated every day. It is the accumulative weight of our disciplines and our judgments that leads us to either fortune or failure." These same principles apply to spiritual matters. President Heber J. Grant taught: "It is not position, it is not education that gives the Spirit of God; but it is keeping the commandments of Almighty God and being lowly in heart and desiring to fulfill the commandments of God in our daily walk and conversation. I bear witness to you here today that no man ever will fail in this Church, who is honest in his heart, honest in the payment of his tithes and offerings, who obeys the Word of Wisdom, who attends to his family prayers and his secret prayers, and who attends to his quorum meetings. No man will fail who is doing his duty in this Church."[209] Converts with these habits are immediately able to provide service and strength to the Church and the community. In contrast, even intensive postbaptismal fellowshipping and teaching are often inadequate to keep converts without these basic gospel habits from inactivity or nominal social membership with little spiritual progress. A well-prepared new member with firm gospel habits towers spiritually over lifelong members without them.

It is imperative for each new convert to fully overcome harmful addictions before baptism and to firmly establish basic habits of weekly church attendance, daily scripture reading, and obedience to other basic gospel laws. Sociologists estimate that it takes at least three to four weeks for repetitive acts to become habits. Converts do not develop gospel habits by accident. Consistent missionary emphasis and follow-up are vital.

Fortify Prospective Converts for Adversity

Effective missionaries help investigators to anticipate and prepare for adversity and help investigators to focus from the beginning on the need to "endure to the end" to receive eternal life. Ineffective missionaries emphasize the glorious promises of the gospel while underemphasizing personal responsibility and failing to prepare investigators for inevitable adversity, leaving the investigators or converts disillusioned and unable to cope when challenges arise. Some seek success by preaching a "prosperity gospel" promising rapid temporal and social blessings that differs from the message of Christ and His disciples. Christ promised faithful disciples his peace, but noted that this inner peace is "not as the world giveth": he does not promise worldly success (John 14:27). To the contrary, he promises that trials and persecution are the common lot of all believers (John 15:20, 16:33) and that He will test us to see whether we will abide in His covenant. Investigators must be willing to "bear their cross" and "count the cost" before embarking on the path of discipleship to ensure that they have the dedication and commitment to finish (Luke 14:27-33). Heber J. Grant taught: "Do the elders of Israel when they go out into the world to preach the gospel hold out flattering inducements to those whom they meet to become Latter-day Saints? No. On the contrary, they tell them that if they embrace the gospel they may expect that their friends and associates will turn against them, and that their names will be cast out as evil. That is the kind of promise they make to them."[210]

Church membership is the path to sacrifice and in no way represents a "quick fix" to personal issues, financial problems, or gaping spiritual wounds. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ does hold the answers to life's problems, but answers and blessings are often received only with sustained righteous living. Those who accept the gospel must understand that they will face ridicule and persecution from friends and acquaintances, and often even from family members. How will they respond to this opposition? All those who heed the ridicule of those in the great and spacious building representing the pride of the world fall away from the iron rod of scripture that leads to eternal life (1 Nephi 8:33-34). Investigators should also be taught that Church members, while striving to varying degrees to uphold gospel principles, are imperfect. They must be prepared for the likely eventuality that another member may say or do something that they may perceive to be offensive. Investigators must be taught to join the Church prepared to serve rather than expecting to receive service.

Baptismal Dates

Rather than committing investigators to a firm baptismal date, I find that it is more helpful to make a list of the basic gospel commitments for the investigator, including daily Book of Mormon reading for half an hour, weekly church attendance, observance of the Sabbath, Word of Wisdom observance, and daily and family prayer, with the understanding that the investigator will work toward baptism as he or she makes progress in these areas. When missionaries focus on gospel habits instead of deadlines, investigators realize that the missionaries are there to help them to meet their spiritual needs and develop a relationship with Christ rather than merely attempting to rush them to the font. After obligations are fully disclosed and investigator needs are carefully considered, a tentative timetable may often be mutually agreed upon, with the understanding that the ultimate baptismal date will be moved back if necessary depending on the investigator's diligence in observing core commitments and establishing gospel habits. It is necessary to be firm in standards required for baptism. Failure to attend church consistently, read scriptures, or fulfill other gospel commitments should always result in any anticipated baptismal date being moved back. When the tentative dates need to be pushed back to allow additional opportunity for the development of gospel habits, most investigators are relieved at the opportunity for additional preparation. They understand that it is not the date that is sacred, but the covenant of baptism, which demands earnest preparation. Using the approaches recommended in this book, over 80 percent of investigators who I asked to be baptized accepted the invitation, and over 80 percent of those carried through with the commitment. This compares to approximately 20 percent at each step with traditional programs. This does not imply that most investigators were baptized, but rather that those who were not ready had selected themselves out by a repeated failure to read scriptures, attend church, or put forth effort in other ways before progressing to the appropriate discussion. Some selectivity and discernment are necessary in assessing when to ask for the baptismal commitment. With appropriate preparation, teaching, and missionary responsiveness, there should be very few surprises regarding who accepts

the baptismal commitment, and the vast majority of commitments obtained should follow through. Accelerated baptism approaches that demand too much too soon backfire and drive away receptive people, leaving missionaries constantly surprised, bewildered, and disappointed.

Baptism is a wonderful experience for investigators who are properly prepared, but like other gospel ordinances, it is a covenant that brings blessings only when we do our part. Inactives who were rushed to baptism without adequate preparation often disclose that their baptism was a letdown and they did not feel anything special. In contrast, converts who have been well prepared cite burning spiritual feelings and remember their baptismal date as one of the most wonderful days of their life. Many new converts whose baptism was delayed until they were truly ready stated that this was the best thing anyone ever did for them. Baptisms are more meaningful and investigators are far more likely to remain active when missionaries focus on spiritual preparations for baptism rather than the event itself. Investigators who are consistently keeping commitments also need to understand that while gospel habits must be in firmly place before baptism, it is not necessary for preparation to be dragged out indefinitely.

Fellowshipping

Scriptures and Latter-day prophets have repeatedly emphasized the imperative to nurture prospective converts and new members. President Gordon B. Hinckley stated: "Those who have come into the Church made a great sacrifice, many of them, when they were baptized. They are precious. They are the same kind of people that you are and their generations will become the same kind of people as will your generations if they are nurtured and brought along in the Church. I don't know how to say it more strongly. This is a matter about which I feel so deeply as I go about this Church across the world."[211]

Missionaries have far more influence over the fellowshipping process than is commonly recognized. Many missionaries baptize converts who have attended church only once or twice, and most missionaries do not invite members to discussions even with converts committed to baptism in the push to achieve baptisms quickly. Even the most avid members have little opportunity to fellowship prospective converts if the missionaries do not invite them, and their only possible contact with the investigators is a brief hello in the hallway at the one or two church meetings the prospective converts may attend before baptism. The missionaries control the teaching schedule and baptismal dates and are therefore the only ones who can reliably ensure that members are involved in the fellowshipping process well before baptism.

Elder L. Tom Perry noted: "According to research, 86 percent of the active converts have close personal ties to other LDS members or relatives."[212] Since only 20 percent of investigators in North America are referred by members, the practice of rushing investigators to baptism before close personal relationships with active members have been established is a recipe for inactivity. Fellowshipping efforts that begin at or after baptism are usually much too late. In order for all new converts to develop "close personal ties to other LDS members," fellowshipping must start long before baptism and be built in to standard teaching protocols. Inviting one or more local members to at least two discussions or visits with the investigators prior to baptism helps to initiate fellowshipping and ensures that the integration process of prospective members into the local congregation is already well underway by the time of baptism. When members are brought into the investigators' homes or the investigators are taught in member homes early in the teaching process, deeper and more personal relationships are developed than occur with superficial church contact. This practice breaks down barriers of unfamiliarity and embarrassment that can occur without this transition when new members may be reluctant to allow home or visiting teachers into their home. Involvement of members with prospective converts long before baptism facilitates a smooth transition of nurturing responsibilities from the missionaries to local members that is much more effective than assigning home teachers to cold-call absent converts they have never met. Members and local leaders much prefer being involved early in visiting receptive investigators with missionaries, rather than being assigned to activate uncommitted converts who have established patterns of inactivity almost immediately after baptism.

Our Responsibility

Given the importance of each soul, we cannot be content with approaches that result in anything less than full church activity of each new convert. Missionaries and members have an ethical and moral responsibility to strive to act always in the best interest of their investigators, rather than in the interest of specific programs, monthly baptismal goals, or other considerations. We have a duty to provide each investigator with the best possible prospect of long-term activity through quality teaching and sound preparation. Convert loss shortly after baptism is entirely preventable. A discerning missionary approach, proper teaching, fellowshipping, and emphasis on the basic commitments without excuse or exception provide the best medicine to prevent early inactivity. Later inactivity will likely never be entirely avoided, since the moral agency and obedience of the member in living the gospel are dominant factors in this later period. However, wards and branches can both strengthen active members and reduce the prevalence of inactivity in this period by focusing on consistent obedience to the fundamental principles of the gospel that increase worthiness for the companionship of the Holy Spirit and generate spiritual growth. Full convert retention is never achieved by chance. It occurs when the scriptural principles of conversion and retention are consistently applied.

The Need for a Comprehensive Program

Some have claimed that lengthier periods of prebaptismal teaching make no difference in convert retention. Such claims are faulty both because the "lengthier periods" cited are typically very brief (usually less than three weeks) and because of continued neglect of other major convert needs. A farmer trying to grow crops in a challenging climate recognizes that multiple elements, including sunlight, watering, fertilizer, weeding, and spraying for bugs, are all necessary for an abundant harvest.

Would it be fair for an individual attempting to grow crops in the dark with no water to conclude that adding fertilizer makes no difference in crop growth or to claim that sunlight is not important for crop growth when seeds placed under a scorching sun but never watered or nourished fail to thrive? Successful convert retention is achieved only when multiple steps are taken to achieve positive outcomes. Converts who come to church for two months but who fail to read scriptures or abstain from substances prohibited by the Word of Wisdom may still fall away, but this does not mean that consistency in attending church is not important. The full synergistic benefit of each element is achieved only in conjunction with other essential factors. A comprehensive retention program employing multiple essential elements is necessary to achieve optimal convert retention.

Achieving Full Convert Retention

During my first year as a missionary in Russia, my companion and I worked diligently and taught many converts. Yet we were troubled by the loss of 20 to 30 percent of our converts within the first year. In retrospect, were able to identify clues of the individuals' need for more rigorous preparation for baptism that we had not picked up on as we followed official teaching protocols. We also served in areas where the majority of converts baptized only a year or two previously by prior missionaries were already inactive. Some had not fully overcome tobacco or alcohol addiction before baptism and experienced relapse. Even sincere converts had been baptized without adequately developing the habits of regular church attendance and daily scripture reading that they needed to succeed as Church members. The loss of many converts and serious difficulties even among active members were causes of great concern to missionaries, mission leaders, and members alike. Serving in an area where the Church was relatively new, we felt a great need to build the Church on the right footing and were troubled by the failures and missed opportunities that were already becoming apparent.

After careful study, fervent prayer, and the input of an insightful companion, we instituted steps not found in the missionary manuals of the time to ensure that our prospective converts had indeed undergone a genuine and life-changing conversion. We wanted converts to join the Church ready to serve, rather than arriving at the gate of baptism with gaping spiritual wounds only to rapidly succumb to inactivity. We wanted to build durable converts who would remain strong in a nascent congregation with few or no members or in an established congregation where active members were not ideal examples. We did not want to build a church with teetering and indecisive souls who could be retained only if all other members in the ward conducted themselves perfectly but would fall away in the real-world setting where the implementation of congregational programs often fell short of the ideal. We wanted to empower our new converts by placing the keys to spiritual growth in their own hands, rather than fostering dependency on other sources from which help was often not forthcoming.

My companions and I implemented these steps, focusing on full disclosure of membership expectations in a no-pressure setting and on the investigators' cultivation of firm gospel habits before baptism. Almost immediately, we began experiencing dramatically greater success in both quality and quantity. We rejoiced as new converts joined the Church better prepared to serve than many longtime members, and the branches we served in became more vibrant and productive. Convert retention, which we had previously viewed as a frustrating "black box," became predictable as we applied basic scriptural principles. Over 90 percent of the converts we taught the second year were still active in the Church two years later. We were thankful to the Lord for answering our prayers and granting greater productivity and improved convert retention, even if the impact was largely limited to our companionship.

Since returning from the mission field, my research has validated the widespread applicability of these principles in many cultures. I have repeatedly found that one-year convert retention rates have exceeded 80 percent in every mission and culture where the principles in this guide have been consistently implemented. One mission president in Latin America observed that when he arrived in the mission field two years earlier, the one-year retention rate in his mission was 18 percent, with 49 percent of converts never returning after the first month. After implementing every point of this program, he noted that the one-year retention rate in his mission climbed to 83 percent. He also observed that the quality of converts being baptized greatly increased and included more professional people, including physicians, engineers, and attorneys. One mission president in the Philippines noted an increase in one-year convert retention from 8 percent to 95 percent with the missionwide implementation of these points. I have received numerous letters from missionaries, bishops, ward mission leaders, and branch presidents who note dramatic and sustained improvements in their local convert retention rates after applying the principles described here.

The 12 Points are discussed in the following section. In the mission field, we implemented points 1 through 8. I believe these points to be the most vital. In 2001, I added points 9 through 12 in response to additional available research on convert retention. I claim no credit for this program, since its principles are scriptural, practical, and intuitive and offer no profound conclusions once one has come to a correct understanding of the nature of the conversion process. I am indebted to excellent missionary companions for their insight, especially to Christopher Eastland.

Retention programs based on similar principles have been independently developed in some missions with considerable success. Almar Pihelgas, former president of Tallinn Estonia Stroomi Branch, explained why convert retention rates in Estonia rose from 20 percent in the early and mid-1990s to over 80 percent in 2001: "In the recent two years, we have centered our missionary work effort to teaching the people first and to make very sure that they indeed understand all things they need to understand before they can be baptized. Things are now much different; we do not lose people anymore because they do not understand the teachings of the Church, only when they decide that they do not want to follow them."

The ongoing difficulty with poor convert retention, which represents perhaps the most serious challenge facing the modern Church, is tragic, since early convert loss is almost entirely avoided when missionaries have the understanding and discipline to properly teach and prepare prospective converts. I have consistently been able to trace the problem in areas with low convert

retention to the neglect of these principles. Ward leaders in areas where adequate retention programs have not been applied by local missions note that in retrospect, almost all of their converts who remained active after baptism satisfied at least five or six points of this guide, while quick-baptizees who rapidly fell away satisfied few or none. Jim Rohn observed: "We must all suffer one of two things -- the pain of discipline or the pain of regret and disappointment." We can choose to fulfill scriptural mandates and build strong congregations of active members, or we can choose to continue accelerated baptism tactics and then attempt to cope with the consequence of fractional convert retention rates.

The new Preach My Gospel manual lists elements of most of the 12 Points in the retention section, although they are not presented as mandatory and no specific time frames are given. I believe that the obligatory nature of each step (especially 1 through 8) as well as the period of observance (at least four weeks) makes a critical difference between success or failure to retain converts.

The 12 Points for Nearly 100 Percent Convert Retention

The 12 Point program can dramatically improve convert retention in any area. The 12 Points listed here are not theories or ideas, but have consistently facilitated one-year convert retention rates between 80 percent and 100 percent across widely different cultures. They are derived from scripture, the teachings of modern prophets, and research. The modest effort and coordination that are required to apply these steps is overwhelmingly in the long-term interest of both the prospective convert and the Church. Some points may not be applicable to every area, such as areas without a temple, where converts cannot perform proxy baptisms, or newly opened areas with no members to fellowship prospective converts. Nonetheless, every point that is possible in one's area should be consistently applied for each prospective convert.

The combination of appropriate prebaptismal preparation and nurturing facilitates the continuing activity of new converts so that missionaries can rejoice as Alma: "And they shall be gathered into the garners, that they are not wasted. Yea, they shall not be beaten down by the storm at the last day; yea, neither shall they be harrowed up by the whirlwinds; but when the storm cometh they shall be gathered together in their place, that the storm cannot penetrate to them; yea, neither shall they be driven with fierce winds whithersoever the enemy listeth to carry them" (Alma 26:5-6).

Seven points involve helping prospective converts to establish essential habits of faith before baptism that lead to ongoing spiritual growth, while five involve appropriate nurturing. Individuals experience conversion and receive the blessings of the gospel only as they put forth the effort to nourish the seed of faith and obey God's laws. No baptismal date should be considered firm until essential gospel habits are in place.

Habits of Faith

For at least four consecutive weeks before baptism, prospective converts should implement habits of faith:

1. Consistently read in the Book of Mormon for half an hour each day.
2. Consistently attend all church block meetings.
3. Observe the Sabbath Day.
4. Hold daily personal and family prayer.
5. Obey the Word of Wisdom and completely abstain from forbidden substances.
6. Obey the Law of Chastity in word, thought, and deed.
7. Receive an adequate baptismal interview centered on basic gospel habits.

Nurturing

Prospective converts should also be nurtured by missionaries and members:

8. Missionaries should ensure that active members participate in at least two missionary discussions or visits with the prospective convert prior to baptism.
9. Converts should receive a calling within one week of baptism. In most cases, the calling should already be determined by the time of baptism.
10. Home teachers should be assigned, and appointments for the first home teaching visit and first new member visit should be established prior to baptism.
11. New converts should be greeted by the family history coordinator at baptism and started on personal family history work immediately after baptism.
12. In areas where temples are available, converts should be prepared to participate in temple proxy baptisms within six weeks of baptism.

Discussion of the 12 Points

Now each point will be examined and discussed in turn.

1. Consistent daily reading in the Book of Mormon for half an hour each day for at least four weeks. Ezra Taft Benson taught that individuals and families should read and study the Book of Mormon for half an hour each day and make it a lifetime pursuit.

He taught: "There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid deception. You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path."[213] He reaffirmed that the members of the Church are still under condemnation for taking the Book of Mormon lightly, "and they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon" (D&C 84:54-57). No amount of nurturing from external sources can make up for a failure to consistently study the Book of Mormon in the home. Establishing scripture reading as a consistent habit takes time.

2. Consistent attendance at all church block meetings for at least four weeks. Most investigators are not regular churchgoers in any faith at the time they receive the missionary discussions, and successfully establishing the habit of weekly church attendance requires major life change. Becoming accustomed to the three-hour LDS meeting block may take considerable effort, even for converts previously active in other faiths who have attended shorter worship services. Even simple fellowshipping tasks become much more difficult when converts are not regularly attending priesthood and Relief Society meetings. If a convert has attended church sporadically or has attended sacrament meeting but has not regularly attended the other block meetings prior to baptism, there is no basis to believe that a convert will begin consistently attending all meetings as a member. Missionaries who accept irregular patterns of prebaptismal church attendance should not be surprised when these same patterns continue after baptism and taper off into eventual inactivity.

3. Observance of the Law of the Sabbath. Sabbath day observance, which extends beyond simply attending church meetings, is vital to the spiritual progress of investigators and members. Isaiah taught: "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isaiah 58:13-14). The sacrament differs from the food we pray over at every meal in that it is not only blessed, but also is sanctified, or made holy. Similarly, the Sabbath Day is not only blessed, but also is sanctified by the Lord himself (Genesis 2:3), and its observance offers blessings not attainable through other sources. The need to dedicate the Sabbath Day to divine service, without shopping or work activities (where possible), typically requires a major lifestyle change that must be fully impressed upon prospective members and consistently implemented prior to baptism.

4. Regular daily personal and family prayer. The scriptures command: "Pray always, lest you enter into temptation and lose your reward" (D&C 31:12). James E. Faust quoted President Spencer W. Kimball: "In the past, having family prayer once a day may have been all right. But in the future it will not be enough if we are going to save our families."[214] Daily prayer helps investigators and converts to strengthen their relationship with Christ, receive divine inspiration, and resist the temptations of the world. Where possible, we should follow Daniel's example of holding personal and family prayers morning, noon, and evening (Daniel 6:10). My father's family does this by holding family prayers at each mealtime prior to and separate from blessing the food. By linking prayers to meals, this is never forgotten.

5. Obedience to the Word of Wisdom, with consistent abstinence from forbidden substances for at least four weeks before baptism. Elder Dallin H. Oaks reported: "According to one study, 75 percent of adult converts in North America had to give up at least one of these substances mentioned in the Word of Wisdom -- tobacco, alcohol, coffee, or tea -- and 31 percent had to give up smoking, a very addictive habit ... However ... one third to one half of them reported that they had experienced 'occasional,' 'frequent,' or 'complete' lapses into their abstinence."[215] Rates of tobacco addiction are even higher in much of Asia and Latin America than in the United States.

In spite of the magnitude of the substance abuse problem, missionaries receive little training on how to help investigators to overcome substance abuse issues. The Word of Wisdom is officially presented only in the last discussion before baptism, and there are no official standards regarding any obligatory period of abstinence to qualify for baptism. When missionaries routinely baptize converts who have been abstinent from highly addictive substances for only a few days, one can appreciate why relapse rates are very high. Mark Twain's quip that "quitting smoking is easy, I've done it a thousand times" takes on tragic significance in areas where missionaries and mission leaders do not have the insight to insist that prospective converts have fully overcome substance addictions before baptism. New converts with substance abuse problems are often embarrassed to divulge their situation to other members and rarely seek help.

Missionaries, who are usually the only ones aware of an investigator's Word of Wisdom challenges, are in the best position to ensure that the investigator has fully overcome harmful addictions and prevent relapse by requiring an adequate period of full abstinence from forbidden substances before baptism. Medical studies demonstrate that the relapse rate for smokers abstinent from cigarettes for less than three to four weeks is catastrophic. Missions that have insisted that investigators fully overcome substance addictions by abstaining from all forbidden substances for at least four weeks before baptism have achieved much higher convert retention rates than missions without such policies.

6. Obedience to the Law of Chastity in word, thought, and deed for at least four weeks. Moral transgressions are among the most serious of sins (Alma 39:5), yet also among the most prevalent. Those who even think immoral thoughts cannot be fellowshipped by the Holy Spirit (D&C 42:23). Joseph F. Smith stated: "There appears to be something beyond and above the reasons apparent to the human mind why chastity brings strength and power to the peoples of the earth, but it is so."[216]

The Church, which requires that members refrain from any sexual relations outside of marriage, faces a widening gulf between scriptural standards and secular values. In the United States, 60 percent of all adults,[217] including 54 percent of mainline Christians, 42 percent of weekly church attendees, and 36 percent of born-again Christians believe that premarital cohabitation

is morally acceptable.[218] Sociologist Stephanie Coontz observed: "People's behavior about marriage changed more in the past 30 years than in the last 3,000."[219] One recent study reported that 95% of Americans born from the 1940s onward had engaged in premarital sexual relations by age 44, with the median age of first premarital relations reaching 17 for those born after 1970.[220] Promiscuity is also spreading rapidly, even in nations which have traditionally fostered strong family values. In China, 70 percent of Beijing residents reported sex before marriage in 2005, compared to just 15 percent in 1989.[221] Similar trends of growing permissiveness and promiscuity are seen in many other nations.

I have sometimes heard missionaries refer lightly to moral sins, stating that unmarried investigator couples "just need to move out or get married so that they can be baptized." Such attitudes trivialize the repentance process. President Kimball wrote of one young couple: "They were very disturbed when their marriage was postponed to allow time for repentance. They had rationalized the sin nearly out of existence. They pressed for a date, the first possible one on which they could plan their temple marriage. They did not understand that forgiveness is not a thing of days or months or even years but is a matter of intensity of feeling and transformation of self."[222] While missionaries must be sensitive to feelings and should not pry into moral transgressions, they must be firm in ensuring that the repentance process is truly at work and that the requisite transformation has occurred.

7. Every prospective convert should receive an adequate baptismal interview to ensure that he has consistently applied the previously mentioned gospel habits for the requisite period. Appropriate interviews ask open-ended questions to allow the investigator to explain gospel principles as he or she understands them and what he or she is doing to live these principles. Scriptures require that prospective converts must have "a determination to serve him [Christ] to the end, and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins" (D&C 20:37). Individuals who have not established consistent gospel habits have not demonstrated the "fruits of repentance" that are required for baptism. Moliere wrote: "All men are alike in their dreams, and all men are alike in the promises they make. The difference is what they do." The baptismal interview represents the best and last opportunity to ensure that converts are living basic gospel laws and are fully prepared for baptism. I have known many converts who have thanked the missionaries or the interviewer for delaying their anticipated baptism, since the delay reinforced the importance of gospel covenants and helped them to become much stronger and more committed members. When the opportunity to ensure that converts are appropriately qualified for baptism is abdicated by missionaries and leaders who are more interested in padding monthly statistical reports than in ensuring the true conversion of converts or building the Church, irreversible damage is done. If the one-year convert retention rate in your area is below 80 to 90 percent, the quality, insight, and discernment of prebaptismal interviews needs to be improved.

8. Missionaries should invite active members to participate in at least two missionary discussions or visits with the prospective convert prior to baptism. Fellowshipping is crucial, and few converts remain active without developing meaningful friendships with active members. The First Presidency mandate that converts must feel unity with local members to qualify for baptism[223] requires that fellowshipping efforts must begin long before baptism and that prospective converts must be attending church consistently. The traditional pattern of initiating fellowshipping efforts only at the time of baptism is much too late. Missionaries can ensure that meaningful fellowshipping occurs and that friendships are established well before baptism in every case by inviting active members to participate in the discussions in the investigator's home or by teaching the prospective convert in a member's home.

9. Appointments for the first home teaching visit and first new member discussion should be established prior to baptism. The Church Handbook of Instructions teaches that home teachers should meet the new members at or before the time of baptism. Accelerated baptism programs arranging baptisms on short notice violate this directive, which requires good coordination and communication between the full-time missionaries, ward and stake missionaries, and local priesthood leaders. New converts must be visited promptly and have the new member discussions started.

Local leaders must ensure that the new converts are assigned reliable home teachers. Ward missionaries and members who have established friendships or participated in the fellowshipping process can also make good home and visiting teachers, although local leaders must rely upon inspiration in making appropriate assignments. At a minimum, the ward mission leader, quorum president, or missionaries should personally discuss the urgency of the assignment and the status of the individual as a new convert to the assigned home teacher, so that the convert does not fall through the cracks as an unfamiliar name on a long assignment list. Any special needs or interests should also be discussed with the home teacher. The home teacher should attend the baptism. The missionaries or ward mission leader should also follow up closely for several months to ensure that timely and consistent home teaching is occurring.

10. Converts should receive a calling within one week of baptism. The prospective convert should be interviewed by the bishop and discussed in ward council or bishopric meetings well before baptism so that a timely calling can be issued. President Gordon B. Hinckley noted: "With the ever-increasing number of converts, we must make an increasingly substantial effort to assist them as they find their way. Every one of them needs three things: a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing with the 'good word of God' (Moroni 6:4). It is our duty and opportunity to provide these things."[224]

11. Converts should be greeted by family history missionaries at or before the time of baptism and started on personal family history work. This helps the converts to become involved in another mission of the Church. When new converts were started on personal family history immediately after baptism, convert retention rates in one area of Utah rose from 40 percent to 80 percent.[225]

12. Where possible, converts should be prepared to participate in temple proxy baptisms within six weeks of baptism. Converts

who attend the temple within six weeks of conversion to perform proxy baptisms experience increased retention rates. This is especially true when the converts are working on their own family file.

The actual time needed to implement these points for prospective converts varies widely according to individual needs. As a missionary, I found that the average time between the first contact and baptism with the implementation of these points was approximately six to eight weeks. Some missions implementing these points have reported average teaching times of up to three months for investigators to consistently implement all gospel habits and prepare for baptism. While quality teaching and preparation require more effort and discipline than accelerated baptism programs, they meet the investigator's spiritual needs, provide consistent, lasting Church growth, and fulfill scriptural and prophetic mandates in ways that accelerated baptism programs do not.

New converts should also be encouraged to obtain their patriarchal blessings, which provide guidance and strength, and to prepare to attend the temple to receive their own endowments.

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