

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 24: Understanding Inactivity and Reactivation

Real versus Alleged Causes of Inactivity

The Savior's parables teach that converts are lost for different reasons. In Luke 15, Christ taught that some inactives willfully stray (Parable of the Prodigal Son), some are lost through neglect or carelessness (Parable of the Lost Coin), and some are lost from a lack of adequate teaching or pastoring (Parable of the Lost Sheep). Some leave because of social issues; others because of family pressure; some because of worthiness problems or difficulty living commandments; and some because of lack or loss of belief in LDS doctrines and teachings. James Duke noted: "Lifestyle issues, which usually involves some degree of disobedience to commandments, are major reasons why people drop into inactivity, but members give many different reasons for their inactivity. Lack of social integration into the ward is also a major cause of inactivity."[227]

A talk given at the April 2005 General Conference stated that studies showed "that almost all less-active members interviewed believe that God exists, that Jesus is the Christ, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and that the Church is true."[228] The location, methodology, and sample size of the cited study or studies was not disclosed. It seems unlikely that such results could have been obtained outside of Utah, since none of the hundreds of leaders, missionaries, and members I have interviewed outside of the Wasatch Front cite local data anywhere near this favorable. Numerous national censuses and religious self-identification studies around the world have almost invariably found that only a small fraction of international members identify the LDS Church as their faith of preference.

One Missionary Department survey of U.S. inactives reported that "85%+ of all inactives retained active testimonies of the restored gospel" but chose not to attend because of Word of Wisdom issues, a lack of Sunday church clothing, a real or perceived offence by local members, a lack of friends in the ward or branch, or feelings of unworthiness. If an individual stops coming to church for such reasons, one wonders of what an "active testimony" could possibly consist. Because of social acceptability bias, many respondents may cite external reasons deemed acceptable to the interviewer rather than acknowledging issues of personal worthiness, lack of interest, or disbelief, especially when research is conducted by Church employees rather than by independent researchers. A more discerning and meaningful follow-up study would evaluate how many of those who claimed that they did not attend because of the lack of suitable Sunday apparel promptly returned to full church activity after being given appropriate clothes and how many of those who reported staying home because they had no friends at church started attending regularly once diligent fellowshipping and home teaching measures were implemented. While some few do return, my experience is that only a small fraction of those who claim such reasons are reactivated after the alleged deficiencies are remedied. In most cases, addressing one excuse only brings a litany of new ones. It would be naive to accept justifications such as the "lack of Sunday clothes" as primary causes of inactivity.

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A survey on substance abuse relapse among new converts cited in an Ensign article noted that of those who relapsed, over 90 percent stated that they had "a very high desire" to stay abstinent for prohibited substances after baptism.[229] Like the prior study, this study lacked the discerning follow-up questions that are necessary to ascertain the validity of the assertions. What did the individuals do to translate their "very high desires" into meaningful action? Did they seek help, meet with the bishop, see a physician, or try a treatment program? The effort individuals put forth to achieve their alleged desires is the only valid test of sincerity. Studies show that the large majority of smokers are dissatisfied with the habit and express at least a theoretical desire to quit. But what do they do about it? If one were to ask one hundred people if they desired one million dollars, there is little doubt that well over 90 percent of them would express a "strong desire." Do they put in the requisite effort to study, work, and plan, or do they purchase lottery tickets and sit in front of the television waiting for their big break? The "strongest desire" expressed in words but not backed up by action is only an idle fantasy.

Census data from around the world consistently report self-identified religious affiliation far below official LDS membership numbers, and very low international activity has seen little improvement in spite of the diversion of large amounts of missionary time into reactivation work. Such data should lead us to look beyond flattering but superficial explanations of inactivity as primarily a social phenomenon and to examine its deeper causes. While social factors can play a role in member retention, the tremendous impact of prebaptismal preparation, gospel habits, testimony, and personal effort upon member retention must not be overlooked.

Why Do Most Reactivation Programs Fall Short?

Having followed the situation in Eastern Europe closely since 1991, I have heard many times of soon-to-be stakes held back only by "reactivation problems." While I was on my mission from 1992 through 1994, it was widely anticipated by both local leaders and visiting authorities that stakes in St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Budapest would be organized within one to three years. I have heard leaders state on numerous occasions that "if only we could reactivate fifty Melchizedek priesthood holders, we could form a stake." It was stated repeatedly that work with members and inactives would represent the key to growth. At the time of this writing, there are no stakes in Russia. A stake was created in Ukraine only in late 2003, nearly a decade later than widely expected. In spite of a strong focus on reactivation for nearly ten years by intelligent, dedicated mission leaders and, according to one general authority, "the best missionaries the church has to offer," the anticipated gains of reactivation remain largely unfulfilled. Some missions experienced slight gains in member activity rates, but most of these areas have subsequently relapsed. The diversion of large amounts of missionary time into member rehabilitation efforts contributed to a sharp decline in convert baptisms since missionaries spent less time proselytizing receptive nonmembers. Even in missions where missionaries spent a full 50 percent of their time with inactives, the vast majority of growth has continued to come from the baptism of nonmembers rather than the reactivation of carnal members.

Reactivation programs failed or produced scant gains, because they were based on erroneous assumptions. The first assumption was that inactives were overwhelmingly individuals with "active testimonies" who had been lost because of the lack of socialization or nurturing who were merely waiting for the invitation to come back. As we have seen, only a small minority of inactives fit this description. Most international inactives are "never-actives" who had been rushed to baptism by the missionaries, often without attending church more than one or two Sundays, without fully overcoming substance abuse habits, and without gaining a solid testimony of the gospel. Many would not have been baptized if scriptural requirements for baptism had been applied. Since many such inactives were never active to begin with, even massive "reactivation" efforts rarely result in any meaningful gains among this group. Many others were active for only a brief period or had made the decision to stop attending due to lifestyle or testimony issues.

The second assumption is that it is easier to reactivate disaffected members than to make new converts. Some argue it must be much easier to reclaim those who have already accepted the restored gospel and are familiar with LDS teachings than to "start from scratch" with nonmembers who know nothing about the Church at all. Such reasoning, however attractive, is not factually supportable. I have consistently found that missions that divert large amounts of missionary time away from proselyting into reactivation work consistently experience a sharp drop in convert baptisms for which the meager number of reactivated members does not come close to compensating.

The dramatic successes of Ammon and his brethren among the nonmember Lamanites compared to the scant results achieved among the apostate Nephites and the considerable growth of the early Church among the Gentiles after its rejection by the Jews should lead one to appreciate that reactivation work is often less fruitful than proselyting. Rick Warren observed: "Growing churches focus on reaching receptive people. Non-growing churches focus on reenlisting inactive people ... It usually takes about five times more energy to reactivate a disgruntled or carnal member than it does to win a receptive unbeliever. I believe that God has called pastors to catch fish and feed sheep, not to corral goats!"[230] He continued: "Often the local pastor and I would spend the afternoons making evangelistic house calls. Many times the pastor would take me to the same stubborn case that previous evangelists had failed to win. It was a waste of time. 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."[231]

Reactivation work is important, yet the awareness that each soul is precious demands that endless time and resources cannot be dedicated to low-yield activities when more productive alternatives exist. Especially in new areas where resources are limited, resources should be preferentially allocated toward teaching receptive and committed individuals who can strengthen the Church. There is always a role for reactivation work, yet reactivation programs must be held to the same results-based standards as conventional proselyting techniques. A balanced perspective must be kept on reaching those who are receptive, whether they are nonmembers in the community or less-active members.

Diminishing Returns in Reactivation

The fact that few areas of the international Church have achieved activity rates above 30 to 35 percent after more than a decade of strong worldwide emphasis on work with members and less-actives suggests that none of the widely implemented reactivation programs have been particularly effective or noteworthy. Even with exhaustive effort, most reactivation programs rarely activate more than a small fraction of inactives.

After a certain amount of effort is put forth to reach all inactives, a point of diminishing returns is reached. Continued work with the same people becomes progressively less likely to result in activation. Beyond the point of full saturation, additional reactivation effort produces little or no results. No matter how many opportunities inactives are given to return to Church fellowship, they retain moral agency and must make their own decisions. Even the most powerful teacher cannot convert or reactivate those who refuse to give a fair audience. When King Lamoni preached "as many as heard his words believed, and were converted unto the Lord. But there were many among them who would not hear his words; therefore they went their way"

(Alma 19:31-32).

While reactivation efforts can generate slight gains, they should never be allowed to become a black hole that diverts large amounts of missionary time away from more productive efforts to contact and teach nonmembers. Reactivation work is usually a dead end among "never-actives" who were not adequately prepared for baptism in the first place. Sometimes it is better to acknowledge the loss of some individuals to the Church and move on to more fertile pastures instead of continuing to pour vast amounts of resources into reactivation projects producing scant gains at the expense of outreach to nonmembers.

Concentrating Efforts to Reach the Lost

The Parable of the Shepherd leaving the ninety and nine to reach the one (Luke 15:4-7) and the Parable of the Lost Piece of Silver (Luke 15:8-10) teach the necessity of concentrated efforts to reach the lost. There is no parable of a woman going to simultaneously seek ten lost pieces of silver, nor of a shepherd leaving a handful of found sheep to gather a whole flock of strays.

While one would ideally like to be able to dedicate unlimited resources toward reactivating each inactive member without decreasing nonmember opportunities to hear the gospel, the reality is that we have limited time and resources available in an era when "the harvest is great, but the laborers are few" (Luke 10:2). Understandably, no one wants to be responsible for allocating outreach priorities and potentially denying some individuals opportunities. Nonetheless, good stewardship demands that we prioritize to ensure that limited resources are directed toward the most receptive audiences. Those who refuse to prioritize deny the most receptive people an opportunity to hear the gospel.

Factors Associated with Reactivation

The decision of which inactives should receive priority attention depends on both receptivity and resources. While prayerful consideration is vital, the individual who understands what factors impact the likelihood of reactivation is much more likely to be inspired by the Holy Spirit than one who does not.

The following factors improve the likelihood of reactivation:

1. The individual regularly attended church for at least six to twelve months before going inactive.
2. A close family member of the inactive person, especially a spouse, is an active member.
3. The individual has close friends who are active members.
4. The individual has drifted into inactivity relatively recently.
5. The inactive is a teen or young adult.
6. The individual was raised in the Church by an active family.

The following negative factors diminish prospects for reactivation:

1. The inactive did not attend regularly for any meaningful period after baptism.
2. There are no family members active in the Church.
3. The individual has no close friends who are active members.
4. The individual has been inactive for many years.
5. The inactive is an older adult.
6. The inactive is a convert or was raised in an inactive family.
7. The inactive is actively affiliated with another faith.

Personal factors also play a role. Many individuals with a seemingly positive profile never return to church, while some individuals with multiple negative factors are successfully reactivated. Yet understanding the factors associated with reactivation can help us to set realistic expectations and to ensure that those most likely to respond receive priority attention.

Reactivation efforts are most effective when they focus on helping inactives to develop the habits of daily scripture reading, personal and family prayer, church attendance, Sabbath Day observance, and to feel fellowship with the Saints.

Upbringing and Activity

George Barna noted that most of those in the United States who become Christians do so as children. He wrote: "Children between the ages of 5 and 13 have a 32% probability of accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior. The probability of accepting Christ drops to 4% for those who are between the ages of 14 and 18. Those older than 18 have a 6% probability of accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior."[232] People come into the LDS church at all ages, although young people tend to be the most receptive. Barna reported that 61 percent of U.S. adults who attended church as children are attending church today, compared to 22 percent of adults who did not attend church as children.[233] Barna continues: "Attending church over the course of years appears to have affected the religious practices of people, too. The survey discovered that adults who attended church as a child are twice as likely to read the Bible during a typical week as are those who avoided churches when young; twice as likely to attend a church worship service in a typical week; and nearly 50% more likely to pray to God during a typical week." The study also noted that "denominational loyalty has remained unexpectedly strong among those who were attending church during

their early years."[234]

Being raised by a churchgoing family also increases chances of returning to activity after periods of inactivity. LDS sociologist James Duke cites Stan Albrecht's Activity and Inactivity study: "Of every 100 people born in the Church, only 22% remain active throughout their lives. That means 78% are inactive for a year or more at some time. Most, 44%, return to activity, while 34% remain inactive ... Those who become inactive usually do so during the teenage and young adult years. Those who return usually do so during young adulthood. If young Latter-day Saints grow up in a religious home in which many gospel principles are practiced, 44% will remain active their whole lives ... On the other hand, of the young Latter-day Saints who grow up in an inactive home, 13% of them will remain active."[235],[236] Among those raised in active families, there is a correlation between daily scripture reading and other gospel habits in the home and long-term church activity. Children who grow up in the homes of inactive parents hostile to the Church or completely disengaged from LDS beliefs are far less likely to return to activity than those who grow up in the homes of less-active parents who still acknowledge the truth of the Book of Mormon, who attend church at least occasionally, and who have faithful church members in the immediate or extended family. If a slight majority of lifelong U.S. members who go inactive eventually return to the fold, the prospects for return to activity among international inactives are far less hopeful, because few international converts were raised in LDS homes, and most converts were active only for a brief period if at all.

Inactivity among Converts

Convert inactivity occurs in three main peaks, although some overlap exists. The first peak is within the first two months after baptism and relates primarily to poor teaching and inadequate prebaptismal preparation. Inactivity in accelerated baptism areas is heavily front-loaded, with up to 80 percent of inactivity occurring within the first two months. Inactivity in this period is completely avoidable by ensuring that prospective converts have established firm habits of obedience to gospel laws and have fully overcome alcohol and tobacco addictions and other prohibited behaviors before being considered for baptism.

The second peak occurs from two months to one year after baptism and often relates to deficient fellowshipping or nurturing, although gospel habits of daily scripture reading and weekly church attendance often have not been instilled by the missionaries. Inactivity in this period can usually be prevented by involving members in the teaching and fellowshipping of converts starting well before baptism to ensure that the converts have developed strong friendships with active members before baptism. As with the first peak, ensuring that prospective converts have established the habit of daily scripture reading and weekly church attendance is vital.

The third peak occurs more than one year after baptism and usually relates to the convert's willful choice to stray. Sometimes inactivity is attributed to some real or imagined offense or to difficulty in accepting a specific gospel teaching. It can occur when an individual leaves old friends in a ward or branch and never makes the effort to connect up with the Church in his or her new area. Whatever the ostensible cause, inactivity of this third kind is generally related to personal disobedience of the inactive member. While at times serious transgression may be involved, very often this inactivity is due simply to neglect of daily scripture reading, daily prayer, church attendance, Sabbath day observance, and other basic commandments that shape our character and determine our eternal destiny. Our implementation of these commandments determines whether we make daily progress toward emulating the Savior or stagnate in our growth. While this third peak of inactivity will likely never be entirely avoided, it can be reduced when individuals have been required to develop positive habits of spiritual nourishment before baptism and when obedience to basic gospel laws rather than mere social activity is a constant focus in the local congregation.

Missionaries who have spent large amounts of time working to reactivate inactive converts from prior years typically experience success far below the figures cited in Albrecht's study. While this study provides interesting insight into those born into active LDS families in the United States, it does not apply to converts. Those born in the Church who later lapse into inactivity often have the experience of their entire upbringing as well as a strong family support system to guide them back into the Church, while most adult converts go inactive within several weeks of baptism and lack the family support and background of lifelong members. Reactivation efforts in areas of convert growth generally achieve only slight success and are typically far less successful than efforts to teach new investigators. Converts do not have the benefit of having been taught gospel habits all of their lives, and convert retention drops below activity rates of lifetime members when converts are poorly taught or are baptized without meeting scriptural requirements.

Nonetheless, convert growth has major potential advantages over growth among children of record. Converts make an informed decision to select the LDS Church over other alternatives, while children raised in LDS homes are raised in a tradition with little opportunity to make an independent decision until coming of age. Perhaps for this reason, the highest recorded activity and retention rates have occurred among converts. All of Ammon's converts remained active (Alma 23:6), while over 97 percent of converts baptized in the British Isles between 1840 and 1890 emigrated to join the U.S. saints.[237] Indeed, appropriate teaching and preparation of prospective converts offers the unique opportunity to build new congregations that are stronger and more vibrant than those in established areas. Wonderful and miraculous events occur when converts are prepared to receive the Holy Spirit. Spencer W. Kimball observed that "if there were no converts, the Church would shrivel and die on the vine."[238]

Extremes of Involvement

The extremes of lack of involvement and burnout from excessive church-related demands can both contribute to inactivity. The impact of lack of involvement is well-known, while the impact of member burnout has been less extensively studied. Many active

international members are assigned multiple church callings and long lists of inactives to home or visit teach. The travel costs of attending church and filling church-related assignments several times throughout the week can be prohibitive for many. Some individuals have gone inactive after years of faithful service in the Church, citing burnout at simultaneously carrying multiple callings and chronic guilt at being unable to visit all of their numerous assigned home teachees every month. Some of these individuals express that they want "a break," want to be "left alone," or want to "get their life back" of friends and outside interests that they were not able to maintain while all of their discretionary energies were focused on church assignments. The expectations of the Church should be within the reach of every active member and should never be allowed to eclipse personal physical, mental, and spiritual well-being or family needs. Christ taught: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

Postrelease Inactivity

In areas where the Church is young and members have little familiarity with the natural cycle of congregational leadership change, inactivity frequently follows the release of leaders from callings. My second mission president reported that in our mission area with just over twenty branches, fourteen former and current branch presidents and members of district presidencies went inactive or left the Church over a three-year period.[239] While leaders are typically viewed as representing some of the strongest members, leaders may be particularly vulnerable to spiritual malnourishment, because administrative time demands are sometimes allowed to crowd out daily scripture reading and other activities essential for spiritual growth. Constant tasks of planning, organization, and administration leave leaders with little opportunity to be taught or edified. Many leaders are caught off guard by the sudden and largely unanticipated nature of their release and are left with a void where they had found fulfillment through service. Some may feel that nonleadership callings are not as honorable or important or may mistakenly believe that release from leadership represents a personal disgrace. Others may be offended when those over whom they previously had been given stewardship, often younger or more recent members, become their priesthood leaders.

There is little data on how postrelease inactivity can be avoided. It may be helpful to impress upon local leaders that at the time that the calling is given that callings are temporary and that release is inevitable. Church callings do not constitute rungs on a corporate ladder. All callings are important. Change of callings is part of the natural cycle of the Church, and release is not a personal affront. It is also necessary to ensure that leaders are not overburdened, are meeting personal and family needs, and are maintaining habits of daily personal scripture study. Scriptural references to priesthood and leadership offices, such as minister, pastor, deacon (Greek "diakonos" = servant), teacher, and apostle ("one who is sent forth"), all convey connotations of service rather than rank. Christ taught: "But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:11-12). It may be helpful to discuss with local leaders in advance the challenge that some may face in returning to seemingly less glamorous positions in their local ward or branch. The prospect of postrelease inactivity should be anticipated, and members should be closely supported throughout transition periods.

Activity and Vitality

The struggle to achieve even meager activity rates in accelerated baptism areas has too often led to complacency when members attend church at all. In most congregations, a minority of active members are responsible for the majority of the growth and progress. Most units have many active but noncontributing or minimally contributing members who participate in the social activities of the Church but fail to press forward along the iron rod and partake of the fruits of the Spirit. It is believed that only about half of active adults pay tithing, while only a small minority of active members read scriptures daily or share the gospel regularly.

It is not so important what stage an individual is at as long as he is making continued progress. There will always be some individuals who rely upon the testimony of others until they can stand on their own. Even outwardly highly active individuals have considerable opportunities for improvement. Members and nonmembers of all walks of life are welcome to attend meetings and benefit from blessings of teaching, fellowshipping, and the Holy Spirit (D&C 46:3-5).

Church attendance, while essential, is not our final goal. Daily scripture reading and adherence to other gospel laws present keys to continued spiritual progress. Missionaries and members must maintain a constant focus on the consistent implementation of basic gospel laws that bring spiritual blessings into the lives of investigators, members, and less-actives alike.

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