

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section III. Chapter 26: Introduction to Leadership

LDS Pastoring Quality Is Excellent

By both comparative and absolute standards, the sensitivity, insight, and quality of counsel given by LDS bishops, stake presidents, and other leaders is outstanding. There are occasional exceptions as in any large organization, although the rarity of such exceptions is remarkable. Several factors contribute to the high quality of pastoral LDS leadership at all levels. The LDS Church has a lay clergy without remuneration, except for a modest living allowance given to authorities at the highest levels. Unremunerated service requires dedication and personal sacrifice and eliminates the inherent economic incentives of a paid clergy of other faiths. LDS leaders can focus on feeding the flock rather than themselves (Ezekiel 34:2) and are rewarded with the abundant grace of God (Mosiah 27:5). Personal worthiness is a requirement for LDS leaders at all levels, and most LDS leaders have extensive personal experience in the life application topics on which they counsel local members. Sustaining of LDS leaders by divine calling, rather than by vote, eliminates much of the disunity that exists in other denominations.

Pastoral versus Outreach Leadership

Over the course of a three-year term, the average LDS mission president is responsible for the baptism of some 2,600 new converts taught and baptized by missionaries under his supervision. Some missions achieve large numbers of baptisms but retain only a fraction of converts. Others achieve higher retention but make relatively few converts in areas of considerable opportunity. Still others suffer from both low retention and few baptisms. Relatively few missions succeed at both baptizing large numbers of converts per missionary and retaining even a bare majority. To a great extent, these differences reflect mission and area leadership.

Although Church doctrine has always taught that the prophet is the only man who will never lead the Church astray, a widespread misconception exists that lesser leaders are virtually infallible. Poor convert retention rates in many areas of the world, slow Church growth in receptive areas, and serious challenges that have remained unaddressed for prolonged periods emphatically demonstrate that this is not the case. A sincere and righteous person can be an excellent pastoral leader, but a poor mission leader. One can study the gospel, strive diligently to live the gospel, teach the gospel, write about the gospel, and serve faithfully in numerous church callings without understanding elementary principles of missionary work. Leaders have varying levels of understanding and experience a learning process.

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Outreach leadership poses special challenges for even the most faithful and capable members. Pastoral leaders have considerable accumulated experience in the programs of their local wards, while most outreach leaders have had only remote or infrequent experience with finding, teaching, and retaining converts. Successful outreach leadership requires several attributes beyond those required for pastoral care. Mission leaders often face the task of organizing new congregations from the ground up with fresh converts and are given broad authority to devise and implement their own policies and programs. In contrast, most congregations are in maintenance rather than growth mode, and programs remain fairly static even with the variable personalities of pastoral leaders. The calling of a new bishop or stake president does little to alter the church experience for the average member, while a change of mission presidents can dramatically impact missionaries, converts, and nonmembers. Outreach leadership demands a much greater ability to collect, analyze, respond, and appropriately act upon information from a wide variety of sources than that necessary for pastoral leadership. Outreach leaders must understand the values, interests, and desires of local nonmembers and develop and coordinate programs to effectively reach them. An understanding of language and culture, people skills, teaching skills, organization, time management skills, the media, and missionary dynamics are essential. While pastoral leaders can successfully act in largely the same way in Utah, the Philippines, or Russia, conducting missionary work in the same fashion in all areas would be a disaster. Most mission presidents who have previously served as pastoral leaders quickly find that the circumstances of the mission field require intense and comprehensive reeducation.

The historical isolation of the LDS Church in the Utah Zion presents unique outreach leadership challenges not faced by groups such as the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses that have always existed as minorities in secular societies. A disproportionately high percentage of mission presidents come from areas of Utah and the Mountain West with some of the

lowest member-missionary participation rates in the world. Many individuals who have had little or no ongoing involvement in missionary work since their missions in young adulthood suddenly find themselves in the position of administering international missions with only cursory training. While some elements of Utah church service are applicable to international missionary work, many others are not. The lack of adequate life preparation of leaders as well as of individual missionaries has had profound implications on international LDS growth and retention.

Leaders versus Managers

Peter Drucker noted: "Effective leaders are not those who are loved or admired. They are those whose followers do the right things. Popularity is not leadership. Results are." A good leader knows what needs to be done, knows how to do it, and is actively involved in implementation, facilitation, and teaching. All effective leaders lead by example. Early mission presidents such as Dan Jones were first and foremost missionaries. Through their own efforts, they brought thousands of converts into the Church. Perhaps the greatest deficiency of LDS outreach leadership today is that most mission leaders lack regular involvement in frontline proselyting activities. Many mission presidents finish their entire mission without ever tracting door to door, without engaging in dedicated street contacting, and without ever teaching a first or second discussion to a nonmember. When direct involvement of leaders in the finding and teaching process occurs at all, it is infrequent. It is rare for modern outreach leaders to bring anyone into the Church through their own efforts.

Finding, teaching, and retention work are not menial tasks, but the very essence of the missionary effort. Tal Bevan stated: "Never hire someone who is more than one step removed from the customer."[241] Dr. Kevin Evoy noted: "The supervisor should have previously had direct customer experience, and should continue to have some ... If you lose track of your customer's experience at any point where s/he contacts your business, you sow the seeds for a growing, unchecked problem." While the large size of missions today precludes many mission presidents from spending the majority of their time in these activities, the need for all individuals in leadership positions to have personal daily involvement in proselyting has not changed. Even the brightest and most talented leaders are rarely able to develop adequate insight into what is effective or even appropriate in missionary work without regular involvement in all stages of the finding, teaching, and retention processes. Few things are more detrimental to the missionary effort than instructions and policies announced to missionaries and members by superiors who have never tried them themselves. Involvement of leaders in frontline action can have a tremendous moderating effect on mission policies, making them more practical and harmonious with real-world feedback. Those who do not regularly devote time to find and teach nonmembers and retain converts are merely managers, not leaders. No amount of prayer and meditation can bring the Spirit in full measure in the absence of ongoing personal involvement. If the insight and inspiration of a leader are not enough to make him an effective missionary, how can it possibly be adequate for the missionaries and members he supervises?

The Holy Spirit and Information

The Spirit speaks to both mind and heart (D&C 8:2) and not our heart alone, so enhancing our understanding can also increase our receptivity to the Spirit. We are commanded to "study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people" (D&C 90:15) and to "hasten ... to obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion" (D&C 93:53). The Holy Spirit cannot draw water from an empty well, nor does inspiration occur in a vacuum. The Lord declared that "it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 131:6) and that "the glory of God is intelligence, or in other words, light and truth" (D&C 93:36). We might also ponder whether we can effectively minister salvation to others if we do not understand scriptural outreach principles. The Lord declared: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6), and one wonders whether any fulfillment of this prophecy can be more tragic than the catastrophic convert losses that have occurred in areas where accelerated baptism programs have been implemented by those unaware of their consequences. Effective missionary work does not happen by accident, and the results of zeal without knowledge consistently fall far short of the potential achieved by those who are both dedicated and informed. Gathering the information necessary to become fruitful servants is an essential responsibility of disciples of Christ.

Collecting Quality Information

There are few fields where productivity and effectiveness have not been revolutionized by the information age. U.S. Major Matthew Holt stated, "In war, you live and die by information ... This conflict clearly demonstrates that ... technologies offer an advantage for the collaborative exchange of information to assist the unit or to assist command and control. From '95 to today, it's day and night."[242] U.S. Army Major Bryan Hilferty stated: "That information, I used to get it by people shooting at me. This has changed the pattern of war." Similarly, faiths that have embraced the value of information for planning and implementation of outreach efforts in a time of exponentially increasing knowledge have experienced an explosion of growth.

Church growth researcher Dr. James Montgomery stated: "Develop, maintain and use a solid base of data. The Living Bible translates Proverbs 18:13 thus: 'What a shame -- yes, how stupid -- to decide before knowing the facts' (Proverbs 18: 13). The second common denominator in successful growth programs is that denominations not only have their heads in the clouds but their feet on the ground. They see that the way to accomplish their dreams is not through sentimental, emotional fantasizing but through a concrete understanding of their situation. These denominations study their context to see who is responsive to the gospel and how to best reach them. They study their own resources to see how big they are, how fast they are growing, what their effective and ineffective methods are and so on. They study other growing churches and denominations to find good ideas for their own programs."[243]

When missionaries are fully aware of local needs, beliefs, concerns, and opportunities, they are able to direct their time and energies most effectively. Jim Rohn noted: "Nothing is more powerful for your future than being a gatherer of good ideas and information. That's called doing your homework." He further instructed: "Take time to gather up the past so that you will be able to draw from your experiences and invest them in the future. Don't let the learning from your own experiences take too long. If you have been doing it wrong for the last ten years, I would suggest that's long enough!" New information sometimes dictates that we must change our paradigms and approaches. Hugh B. Brown taught: "God desires that we learn and continue to learn, but this involves some unlearning. As Uncle Zeke said, 'It ain't my ignorance that done me up but what I know'd that wasn't so.'"[244]

There has been an understandable official reluctance to provide large amounts of material on missionary work in the fear that over regimentation would stifle local creativity and inspiration, yet the deficiency has not been one of over regimentation (the old ward mission handbook had only ten pages), but of failing to convey essential principles at the same time that programs such as missionary dinner programs and "set a date" programs conveyed serious misconceptions. It is no more reasonable to expect each mission president, missionary, and member-missionary to receive the inspiration necessary to effectively build the Church to its potential without adequate education on outreach principles, than to withhold the Doctrine and Covenants and expect each bishop to receive the principles of local church governance by personal revelation.

Research, data gathering and analysis, and ongoing quality improvement processes are necessary for any successful mission. The most relevant data is local, since much institutional research has traditionally been conducted in areas not representative of world outreach. Research conducted in U.S. areas with a large member base and other favorable conditions often has limited applicability to new areas: An African proverb notes that "smooth seas do not make skillful sailors." The little Missionary Department research that is made public is often done so only in a piecemeal fashion, impairing the reader's ability to assess the validity and applicability of research findings. Quality improvement processes have several components: systematic and validated research conducted in both new and existing areas, consistent communication of current and past findings to missionaries, members, and leaders, implementation of appropriate policy and program changes based on empiric data, and continuing feedback mechanisms to identify challenges and problems early.

Translating Information into Action

Christian researcher George Barna expressed his disappointment at the failure of his ten-year informational campaign to improve outreach and reverse concerning trends in many Protestant and evangelical churches, stating: "Most of the information users in ministries don't know how to use information. We kill ourselves to give them good information, good research, and they nod their heads approvingly and then they don't do anything with it. Disney, we give them the information and the next day they've got a policy; they've got a program; they've got something to convert that into practical action."[245] He continues: "The strategy was flawed because it had an assumption. The assumption was that the people in leadership are actually leaders. [I thought] all I need to do is give them the right information and they can draw the right conclusions ... Most people who are in positions of leadership in local churches aren't leaders. They're great people, but they're not really leaders."

I believe that many of today's LDS leaders have a much higher capacity for genuine leadership than their average Protestant or evangelical counterparts. However, even the most compelling research findings are often not translated into viable plans for practical action, and when such action occurs at all, it is often very late. In 1996, Wilfried Decoo noted: "Presumably the church has been doing some research on the process of new member integration in recent years, but it is difficult to see how the results of that research have made a difference."[246] While Seventh-Day Adventists quickly recognized and comprehensively remedied concerning retention trends in the Philippines and Latin America in the 1960s, Latter-day Saints have only recently taken steps toward educating missionaries on convert retention issues after more than forty years of official accelerated baptism programs with fractional retention.

C. Peter Wagner stated: "I knew very little about [church planting] when I started, but one thing I thought I knew was that the best church planters would probably be experienced pastors who had served several parishes and who had accumulated the wisdom and maturity to do it well. Wrong! Not that some fitting this description wouldn't make good church planters because they do. However, experienced pastors do not turn out to be the most likely talent pool. Younger people who still have more options and more flexibility are considerably more likely to do well."[247] While I have no evidence that younger people are categorically more successful in missionary work, individuals with longtime experience with less effective programs are often unable to adapt to more effective models. Even worthwhile lessons learned during prior service may not always be relevant and applicable within a different culture or within the same culture many years later. James Moss wrote: "Renewal will seldom occur if the pastor has been at the church needing renewal for a long time. I simply don't know of a single instance where renewal occurred after one pastor had three significant loss years in a row. Renewal will best occur at the beginning of a new pastorate."[248] The Savior himself taught that "new wine must be put into new bottles" (Mark 2:22).

There is almost always a gap between theory and practice. The average person contains in his library vast amounts of wisdom which are never implemented. The task of leadership is to distill practical insight and to provide a framework that facilitates its implementation. Effective leaders understand that missionaries and members must be mentored with effective example and hands-on teaching. The leader or teacher who believes that he has met his responsibilities simply by giving instructions will inevitably face unpleasant surprises. As a ward mission leader, I have found that regular involvement with missionaries and members in finding and teaching activities is essential to ensure that they are able to implement principles that they have been taught.

Communication and Collaboration

Communication between mission leaders has traditionally not been encouraged, and the arrival of a new mission president has typically been marked by wholesale policy changes with little or no transfer of information. Even when communication occurs, it is almost always limited to direct file leaders or others within an administrative area. The fact that so few missions have achieved both quality and quantity in growth suggests that there are few ideal role models or mentors for new leaders. Brian Tracy noted: "No one lives long enough to learn everything they need to learn starting from scratch. To be successful, we absolutely, positively have to find people who have already paid the price to learn the things that we need to learn to achieve our goals." Policies limiting communication between mission presidents are intended to promote renewal and fresh perspectives, but the more common outcome is a system without corporate memory that is often unable to learn from mistakes, where each new leader must perpetually reinvent the wheel to succeed and where improvements that required great insight to implement are swept away with the changing of the guard. Decelerating church growth at a time of great opportunity and decades of crisis-level convert loss suggest that such approaches have failed to accomplish their desired ends.

Although the LDS Church has nearly as many full-time missionaries as all other U.S.-based denominations combined, there is no forum for communication or discussion of missionary matters beyond district meetings, mission conferences, and ward member-missionary correlation meetings. Both on my mission and since, I have learned far more about effective missionary work from peers than from leaders. Most missionaries I have interviewed also suggest that this is the case. The mentoring of a companion and the insight of peers are frequently more relevant and helpful than the decrees of leaders, who often have little direct involvement in finding, teaching investigators, and other core missionary activities. Communication among individuals of the same level in wider circles has sometimes been discouraged with the disparaging misnomer of "lateral revelation." The insight and information of peers, while not to be taken as authoritative, can often stimulate thought and lead to valuable improvements in ways that the counsel of leaders cannot. Communication and sharing of ideas in wider circles does not supersede hierarchal authority, but seeking outside information and experiences is often a necessary element of fulfilling our divine mandate to do all that is within our power to further the purposes of missionary work.

Statistics and Reporting

While no statistics will ever be able to completely capture the complex realities of an international church, statistics have optimal value only when indicators are chosen that closely reflect the true purposes of building the Church and achieving a vibrant, participating membership that can experience the full blessings of the gospel. I believe that all too often we have been using the wrong indicators. Mission reporting has traditionally focused on immediate and short-term statistics such as baptisms and discussions that often do not accurately reflect these aims. Short-term outcome measures disconnected from indicators of real growth are easily subverted and produce a selection bias for methodologies that produce flashy immediate baptismal numbers but fail to strengthen the Church correspondingly. A ten-minute "doorstep discussion" with a hurried or impatient listener has little in common with a well-taught ninety-minute discussion. The baptism of an individual who has attended church only once or twice before and is quickly lost to inactivity bears only the most superficial resemblance to the baptism of a committed and well-prepared convert. If evaluation is the key to excellence, quality statistics with intrinsic meaning can aid in the recognition and resolution of challenges. Active membership and retained converts statistics are far more revealing of true progress than raw membership and total baptism numbers. Similarly, the number of individuals approached with the gospel message in one day is a much more telling indicator of what missionaries are actually doing than reported proselyting hours that include nonproselyting activities and fail to convey how time is being used.

Local Reality Checks

Compared to pastoral leaders who have personal contact with the individuals and programs they direct each week, outreach leaders are insulated from the effects of their policies and have little direct accountability. While pastoral leaders typically live in a ward or branch long term, including after their release, outreach leaders may not see the results of inactivity beyond their brief stay. In combination with the use of short-term baptismal statistics, the lack of accountability for long-term results eliminates any incentive for quality by outreach leaders. It is therefore easy for outreach leaders to advocate ineffective or even harmful policies while remaining out of touch with the ultimate results. Local leaders who live in an area long-term and face local reality checks are often able to make more realistic decisions about convert preparation than transient missionaries.

Recognizing Sentinel Events

Confucius taught: "A man who does not think and plan long ahead will find trouble right at his door." Difficulties, whether a particular discussion point that multiple investigators do not seem to understand, challenges in finding people to teach, problems in the ward, or poor retention of baptized members, are not necessary phases of church growth any more than illness is necessary for good health. The prudent shepherd watches for sentinel events that can help him to identify potential problems early and correct them before they become entrenched. One mission president in a newly opened area identified problems of inactivity fairly early in that mission and quickly intervened to improve missionary teaching and minimize convert loss. While there were still some challenges, they were of a much smaller scale than in neighboring missions, where numerous branches had to be recombined due to unchecked inactivity.

Identifying and Removing Pathologies to Church Growth

In 1990, Elder Boyd K. Packer remarked: "In recent years I have felt, and I think I am not alone, that we were losing the ability to

correct the course of the Church."[249] Less effective unofficial programs such as missionary dinner appointments have gained a life of their own while becoming virtually institutionalized in LDS culture, while many core mandates such as President Benson's instruction to flood the earth with the Book of Mormon or President McKay's "every member a missionary" challenge have seen only scant implementation. Other mandates, such as President Kimball's vision of worldwide gospel radio, have never been implemented at all. Tares grow quickly, but wheat is choked out without constant cultivation.

Church growth expert Rick Warren wrote: "The wrong question: What will make our church grow? The right question: What is keeping our church from growing? ... All living things grow -- you don't have to make them grow. It's the natural thing for living organisms to do if they are healthy ... Since the church is a living organism, it is natural for it to grow if it is healthy. The Church is a body, not a business. It is alive. If a church is not growing, it is dying ... The task of church leadership is to discover and remove growth-restricting diseases and barriers so that natural, normal growth can occur."[250] Warren noted: "If it works, I like the way that you are doing it."

The Cure or the Disease?

Every program has a cost in time, effort, and resources. Failure to appreciate the cost of new programs brings unanticipated and undesired consequences. One area presidency concerned at low member activity instructed missionaries in one mission to "spend half of their time with members." Predictably, the number of baptisms fell to approximately half its prior level as missionaries diverted time away from contacting and teaching nonmembers to comply with the new directive. Activity rates experienced only a slight transient increase as it became apparent that member activity was not primarily a function of missionaries spending time on social member visits with a smattering of gospel teachings, but of quality prebaptismal preparation and consistency in establishing firm gospel habits. One mission president, concerned at the shortage of active priesthood holders in his area, instructed missionaries to boost male baptisms and "stop teaching women" unless their husband was also interested. This mission achieved its goal of increasing the percentage of adult male converts not through any significant increase in male baptisms, but through a precipitous decline in baptisms of women and youth. In another case, a mission president concerned at the lack of member referrals instituted a ban on tracting and street contacting to encourage missionaries to find through members. When members were not available for visits, many companionships spent vast amounts of time idly that otherwise could have been used to find productively through their own efforts.

These leaders were bright professionals, but had little understanding of core principles of missionary work, and likely had little opportunity to develop an understanding outside of their own trial and error. In each case, the problematic policies demonstrate concern over existing problems but convey a lack of understanding of their true causes and solutions. The failure of these policies and many others was predictable from their inception, yet considerable time and resources were allocated to less effective initiatives at the cost of many souls who could have been found, baptized, and retained with effective, scriptural initiatives. The quotas and bans of managers are almost always counterproductive and stand in contrast to the education, empowerment, and example provided by true leaders.

"Playing the Game"

A strong social acceptability reporting bias in missionary work filters out much potentially unpleasant information. There is a widespread unwritten belief that all information reported must be positive and that to report negative information implies a lack of faith or personal disobedience. In letters to the mission president, many missionaries who have not had a baptism in months describe in flowery terms how well "the work is going." While one would never wish to deflate enthusiasm, there is also a need for candidness and insight. Many missionaries are apprehensive that mentioning difficulties or concerns, no matter how well-founded, can have negative repercussions for the missionaries, from being labeled as faithless or disobedient to being demoted. In some cases, this is true. One of my brothers was demoted from the position of zone leader in his mission in Germany after he tried to share with the mission president some challenges with the proselyting program that the president had mandated. There is a real danger in surrounding oneself with "yes-men" who simply "play the game" by telling leaders whatever they want to hear. Many leaders are perceptive enough to see through such behavior, yet vital information on challenges is often not conveyed in a timely fashion. Information on challenges and problems is often the most valuable kind, because it provides the greatest opportunity for growth and improvement. Proactive mission leaders are aware of the barriers that many missionaries feel to sharing information on challenges as well as successes and actively solicit feedback in a candid and nonpunitive fashion.

The True Master: The Savior

Missionaries are occasionally given instruction by mission leaders or visiting authorities that conflict with scripture. The counsel of all lesser authorities should be evaluated in light of teaching of the living prophet and scripture. Some mission leaders expect missionaries to demonstrate a level of obedience to their instructions that the leaders themselves are not willing to render to the living prophet, the apostles, or to scripture. Our primary obedience belongs to the Savior. The fact that mission leaders are called by church authorities does not provide a carte blanche, and the scriptural warning that "many are called but few are chosen" applies as much to leaders as to missionaries. Leaders have a responsibility to adhere to scriptural mandates and can expect the loyalty of their missionaries only to the extent that their own programs and agendas are consistent with scriptural and prophetic teachings. A Chinese proverb declares: "He who sacrifices conscience to ambition burns a picture to obtain ashes."

Cost-Effective Missionary Work: Dollars and Sense

While the number of individuals without the gospel is virtually limitless, church funds and resources are limited. There is a responsibility to use funds as efficiently as possible to result in the greatest good for the most people. Growth has relatively little to do with the amount of money spent in an area but correlates strongly with the work ethic of individual missionaries and members and the way that money is spent. Denominations such as the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses with a fraction of the funds of the LDS Church have achieved rapid and extensive world growth through ambitious outreach projects. The LDS Church has spent far more money per convert than any other major denomination in Eastern Europe, including those with comparable membership requirements and better retention.

One of my mission companions from Ukraine was baptized when he came to church after reading an announcement in the newspaper with only the church name, meeting time, and location. Based on his experience, I discussed with my mission president in Russia the possibility of running advertisements in local newspapers inviting people to church. At the time, these advertisements could be placed for ten dollars or less. He was interested in the idea and checked with regional authorities, who informed him that the Church allocated no funds for mission-level media outreach. Yet the area office allocated to the mission hundreds of thousands of dollars in building and legal fees for a single chapel, and thousands of dollars for youth conferences, travel expenses, and other items with little if any correlation to church growth, while missionaries were allocated only a few copies of the Book of Mormon each week. Rick Warren stated: "When finances get tight in a church, often the first thing cut is the evangelism and advertising budget. That is the last thing you should cut. It is the source of new blood and life for your church."[251]

Programs versus Purposes: The Power of Focus

The past three decades have been remarkable for the proliferation of simple, mission-focused house churches across the world. Within Cambodia alone, the number of Christian believers increased from about 200 to over 100,000 in a ten-year period, with the number of churches doubling almost yearly. How can such no-frills organizations succeed without all of the programs of larger churches? Without organized choirs, enrichment nights, or potluck dinners? While there is some evidence that well-run and purposeful church activities can play a useful role, many point out that smaller house churches have experienced such explosive growth because of reducing the role of the church to its core missions. The real growth occurred when evangelism became a broad-based, grassroots effort integrated into the daily life of local members who had caught the vision of their potential. Those involved cite the power of consistent focus on a few important objectives: scripture study, faithful living, church attendance, and member evangelism.

One sacrament speaker claimed that for a ward or branch to function fully, 212 individuals would be needed to fill callings. Many Latter-day Saints cite heavy time commitments to church-related activities. Church activities can spread across most of the week for a family with children of several different ages. Wards with the most peripheral programming typically have some of the lowest rates of member-missionary participation. Utah, with thousands of large wards with extensive church programming, averages only 1.5 convert baptisms per year per ward, a convert growth rate of less than 0.5 percent per year. Actual harm is done when member time and resources are consumed by peripheral programs while core tasks such as member-missionary outreach go undone. Evangelist Larry Stockstill observed that any child can take all of the toys out of the closet and clutter the room -- it takes wisdom to know which ones not to take out.[252]

Expectations to fulfill callings and attend activities are accompanied by home and visiting assignments, with monthly visitation lists that can be quite long, especially in areas where activity rates are low. In many international areas, active members may hold two or even three callings. Yet many members who would never voluntarily missed a mutual activity or homemaking meeting cannot remember the last time they started a gospel conversation with a nonmember. If the average active member spends numerous hours per week in church activities but fails to accomplish essential tasks, is it any wonder that so many feel burned out rather than edified? At the judgment, will the Savior ask us how many times we attended weeknight church activities, or will he ask us whether we took every opportunity to share the gospel with our neighbor?

At times, we must step back and examine our purpose and mission. Wards and branches do not need to juggle dozens of different programs to receive the full blessings of the gospel: they only need to do the few basic and important things well. The Spirit is gained by consistent obedience to basic gospel laws, not by a plethora of programming.

Scriptures teach that "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). Vision dictates that our ultimate purposes must determine what form the programs will take. Too often this process is reversed, and well-intentioned but poorly conceived programs such as the missionary dinner program and the accelerated baptism program become ends in themselves that can eclipse or subvert the more important processes of teaching members to witness of the gospel regularly and making active, committed proselytes who have undergone a genuine and lasting conversion. We must transcend the small-minded thinking of ineffective programs such as "who is going to feed the missionaries on Tuesday" and focus on the bigger picture of "how are we going to reach our ward area, mission area, or world with the gospel."

In his book Real Teens, George Barna warned that the "high level of current religious involvement among teens in misleading."[253] He wrote: "Millions of teenagers are involved in church-related activities each week, but their motivation is relational rather than spiritual. Once their relational networks change upon graduation from high school and college, we expect a continued decline in church attendance among the emerging generation unless churches revamp their ministries to reflect the unique cultural customs and expectations of the new breed of young people." While scripture-oriented activities such as seminary and Church Education System classes play a well-documented role, LDS studies have failed to bear out an independent effect of

peripheral, nonscripture-based weekday activities in increasing either the retention rates of young people or their faithfulness in scripture reading, Sabbath day observance, church attendance, and personal prayer. Citing the Young Men's Study, LDS sociologist James Duke observed: "The factors that had the greatest influence on the religiosity of young men were: home religious observance (family prayer, family home evening, and family scripture study), agreement with parents' values, having one's own spiritual experiences, having a priesthood advisor or other adult leader who cared, and being integrated into the ward. Programs and activities seemed to have little influence except as they encouraged the other factors listed above."[254],[255]

President Boyd K. Packer stated: "In recent years we might be compared to a team of doctors issuing prescriptions to cure or to immunize out members against spiritual disease. Each time some moral or spiritual ailment was diagnosed, we have rushed to the pharmacy to concoct another remedy, encapsulate it as a program, and send it out with pages of directions for use. While we all seem to agree that over-medication or over-programming are critically serious problems, we have failed to reduce the treatments. It has been virtually impossible to affect any reduction in programs ... We do not seem to be able to solve a problem without designing a program with pages of instruction and sending it out again. The most dangerous side effect of all we have prescribed ... is the over-regimentation of the Church. This ... is a direct result of too many ... instructions ... Local leaders have been effectively conditioned to hold back until programmed as to what to do, how, to whom, when, and for how long. Can you see that when we overemphasize programs ... we are in danger of losing the inspiration and the resourcefulness that should characterize Latter-day Saints? Then the very principle of individual revelation is in jeopardy and we drift from a fundamental gospel principle!"[256]

Dr. Lin Yutang wrote: "Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom in life consists in the elimination of non-essentials." Effective missionaries, member-missionaries, and leaders learn to focus and eliminate nonessentials which otherwise become barriers to growth. Rapid growth occurs not through the proliferation of peripheral programming, but by concentrating energies and resources on a few clearly defined, powerful strategies that make the most difference. As we individually and collectively have limited time and resources, we must focus on doing the most important things so that we can bring forth "much fruit" as we abide in the Savior (John 15:5).

Home Teaching

Under the vision of home teaching, every family and individual is to be assisted and watched over by a pair of priesthood holders whose role is to friendship, teach, and assist with both temporal and spiritual needs. A story is told of a group of touring musicians from a region of central Russia who desired to join the Church with LDS members in the Midwest for several weeks. The area presidency rejected this request, stating that "you can baptize them if you can guarantee their home teaching." There were no LDS units in their area of Russia, and the musicians returned home unbaptized. This is wise counsel, since the practice of baptizing transients soon to leave an area almost inevitably leads to inactivity, even when congregations exist in their home area. Yet the reality is that even in areas with established congregations, few converts are visited promptly or regularly by home teachers. One North American study found that three months passed before the average convert was even assigned a home teacher, not even considering when or whether they may have been subsequently visited. Outside of North America, monthly home teaching rates run as low as 5 to 15 percent, and there are many wards and branches around the world where no home teaching happens at all. Few international wards ever reach 30 or 40 percent home teaching, and most perform at far lower levels.

There are many reasons why home teaching, although proclaimed as a universal imperative for the world church, has chronically underperformed internationally. A profound imbalance between shepherds and lost sheep has been generated by accelerated baptism programs. In congregations where only 20 percent of members are active, even if qualified priesthood holders represented a full quarter of active membership, the typical companionship of two priesthood holders would be assigned forty members to home teach each month. While some of these individuals are part of families, it is not uncommon for companionships to be assigned eight to twelve households and sometimes more. Even when the monthly visits are completed, there is no reprieve since each subsequent month demands that each household be visited again. It is often difficult for even the most diligent and committed working men with families to coordinate numerous visits each month with their companion and their assigned home teachees. Home teaching presents a major economic and time burden for international members without their own transportation in units that cover large geographic areas. These problems of time, coordination, availability, and expense are compounded by the fact that most individuals on international LDS membership rolls are completely inactive, and many do not wish to be home taught. Being assigned to regularly home teach individuals who do not wish to be visited at all can be highly demoralizing for even the most dedicated members. It is frustrating and unfulfilling for dedicated members to achieve only 25 or 30 percent home teaching, not because of any lack of effort, but because some hostile members refused visits, while others could not find a workable time. The frequent combination of unrealistically long assignment lists with frequent apathetic or hostile receptions leads many members to develop an aversion to home teaching that is not reversed by repeated admonitions from the pulpit.

Monthly home teaching statistics are reported to leaders all the way up to church headquarters, producing considerable pressure on local leaders to report high home teaching percentages. The combination of a paucity of active priesthood holders in relation to official membership and pressure to achieve favorable home teaching numbers sometimes leads local or stake leaders to adopt irregular measures in an attempt to increase home teaching. I have lived in at least two U.S. wards where home teachers were assigned individually without a companion in an attempt to increase the number of assignment lists. A subtler and more widespread but functionally equivalent practice is pairing an active member with an inactive "companion." There is no uniform policy on what constitutes a home teaching visit, and the interpretation varies widely among units and stakes. In several wards, dramatic increases in reported home teaching rates represented not markedly increased home teaching effort, but a liberalization of the definition of a home teaching visit to include any form of contact or even attempt to

contact. When standards are not standardized, the statistics are uninterpretable. The relevance of home teaching statistics to the faithfulness of local priesthood holders is confounded by wide variations in reporting practices and the artificial cap placed on maximal home teaching rates by large numbers of inactives who desire no contact. Many chronic zeros on home teaching tallies result from the practice of keeping the names of disengaged and hostile members on the rolls indefinitely unless they request name removal through a largely unpublicized process.

Stories are frequently told of the few individuals who returned to the Church after years of inactivity through the efforts of a faithful home teacher, with the ostensible moral that one should never give up on anyone. The overwhelming majority of such individuals have other roots in the Church, such as upbringing in an LDS home or active family members. Of the large majority of international LDS inactives who were lost shortly after baptism, very few ever return to activity, and there is little evidence that home teaching efforts make a difference. In a Church with over twelve million members, even highly ineffective programs will produce occasional successes if practiced on a sufficiently massive scale, and anecdotal stories of a few successes cannot be considered proof that a program is effective without empiric evaluation and consideration of alternatives.

The Savior's Parable of the Shepherd leaving the ninety and nine to find the one lost sheep seems to bear little resemblance to the modern Church, where nearly two-thirds of the members are completely inactive. The Parable of the Shepherd teaches that efforts must be focused to be effective. I have frequently seen new members who could have been retained with only modest effort fall through the cracks in areas where the efforts of local members and leaders have been spread too thin on home teaching and reactivation programs. Many are so overwhelmed by the responsibility of reclaiming long lists of individuals who have been inactive for years that new converts are rarely contacted or visited promptly when they become just one more name on a long list of primarily unreceptive assignees. My research suggests that for every longtime inactive in the international church who is reactivated through heroic measures, we lose multiple converts and actives out the back door through neglect. The continued emphasis on home teaching and reactivating disaffected and hostile individuals obscures the ability of many congregational and quorum leaders to prioritize crucial interventions for new converts and other receptive individuals for whom these efforts are likely to make a difference. Most leaders are unwilling to accept less than the vision of universal home teaching, leaving local efforts scattered and dissipated. Unwillingness or inability to prioritize and focus interventions on receptive individuals for whom they are most likely to make a difference results not only in ineffective outreach to longtime inactives, but also in failure to retain even receptive new converts and struggling actives.

I believe that no home teacher should be assigned to visit more than four to five households. Longer lists accomplish little except to impose unrealistic demands and discourage the home teacher. Even if four or five visits could be made each month, this would represent a dramatic improvement in the performance of the worldwide home teaching program. Members should be assigned to visit monthly only those who are willing to be visited and taught. Home teaching reports should be standardized to count visits only when individuals receive the maximum contact they allow up to a full visit, representing the home teacher's best effort. A telephone call or doorstep visit should be counted for those who refuse a full visit, but not for active members who can be formally home taught.

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