

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Introduction

The responsibility to share the gospel is a defining obligation of Latter-day Saint (LDS) membership. President Ezra Taft Benson taught, "As members of the Lord's Church, we must take missionary work more seriously. The Lord's commission to 'preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark 16:15) will never change in our dispensation. We have been greatly blessed with the material means, the technology, and an inspired message to bring the gospel to all men. More is expected of us than any previous generation. Where 'much is given much is required' (D&C 82:3)."[1] Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated, "If you will ponder it in your mind, you will come up, in my judgment, with the conclusion that we could bring immeasurably more people into the Church than we are now doing. We could fellowship more than we are now fellowshipping; in practice this could be five or ten or twenty times as many as we are now baptizing. Perhaps in due course it should be 24 times or 100 times as many as at present."[2] The productivity of LDS missionary efforts has declined in recent years in spite of increasing but underutilized opportunities. The discrepancy between potential and actual church growth largely reflects the discrepancy between the Lord's commandments and our actual performance. Sincere, dedicated missionaries and members often experience limited success because of a lack of understanding of essential principles. //

My interest in missionary work is lifelong. During high school, I worked summers at fast-food restaurants to finance my mission in its entirety. By the time I entered the Missionary Training Center (MTC), I had read the entire Book of Mormon in Russian and had largely memorized the missionary discussions without ever taking a formal language course. My mission in Russia in the early 1990s presented great opportunities for growth. My companions and I worked hard, but it took months of prayer, study, sweat, and tears to come to an understanding of basic growth principles that turned frustration and suboptimal results into remarkable success. I am indebted to the insight of exceptional companions, whose wisdom has had a lasting impact on my life.

When I returned home, I felt that my mission was not complete. I felt an obligation to continue to utilize these missionary principles personally and to make them available to others. Over the past decade, I have spent many thousands of hours of personal time making a diligent study of missionary work. I have traveled to over twenty countries and have interviewed hundreds of missionaries and members and numerous mission leaders, taking meticulous notes and recording hundreds of case studies. I found that growth and retention in most areas barely scratched the surface of the potential and sought the insight of exceptional missionaries and leaders. I made a careful study of effective missionaries and member-missionaries to distill common principles of success, while also analyzing challenges in less-productive areas. Thousands of quotes relevant to missionary work from general authorities and scripture were prayerfully contemplated and used both as a source of insight and as a standard to assess the validity of the many competing mission philosophies. I read dozens of books and thousands of articles on missionary work from both LDS and non-LDS sources for any additional bits of information or insight. Finally, I carefully investigated the successful programs of other denominations that had achieved faster growth and higher retention. My understanding of the principles of missionary work today is dramatically different than when I entered the MTC and continues to be refined by ongoing experience and research.

The publication of the Preach My Gospel manual in September 2004 represented a major step forward for the LDS missionary program. For the first time in the history of the standardized missionary program, all LDS missionaries were educated about their own essential role in ensuring convert activity through quality prebaptismal preparation. The Preach My Gospel program offers a greater focus on tailoring the gospel message to local culture and to individual needs. The manual provides an excellent foundation and merits careful study. However, overall missionary productivity has demonstrated only modest improvement, and convert retention rates remain very low in much of the world. In some cases, challenges remain, because the guidelines of Preach My Gospel are not consistently followed; while in other cases, essential principles of missionary work are still not being fully conveyed.

This book is written for an LDS audience. The inclusion of some references from other faiths does not endorse their activities or teachings. Other denominations lack the full gospel, modern revelation, and the divine authority that are necessary to build Christ's Kingdom on Earth. LDS and non-LDS missionary efforts are not equivalent. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to categorically dismiss positive lessons from other groups without careful investigation and analysis. Selected items are presented in the same spirit that Joseph Smith proclaimed: "Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true 'Mormons.'"[3] Citations from successful evangelists of other faiths are used to corroborate many of my longstanding observations in an LDS setting. Statistical comparisons with other faiths are also

employed, as claims of "rapid growth" are meaningless without contextualizing benchmarks. To make comparisons as appropriate as possible, high-commitment groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists are most frequently used in comparisons rather than low-commitment Protestant and evangelical groups.

Many members and missionaries believe that since church growth is the Lord's work, good results will be achieved regardless of their own effort or understanding. Poor growth rates and low convert retention even in areas of great opportunity demonstrate the fallacy of such beliefs. The Lord's promises are conditional. The Savior taught: "By hearkening to observe all the words which I, the Lord their God, shall speak unto them, they shall never cease to prevail ... But inasmuch as they keep not my commandments, and hearken not to observe all my words, the kingdoms of the world shall prevail against them" (D&C 103:7-8). Fragmentary or incomplete obedience to divine mandates has not and will not bring forth the Lord's full blessings.

There are many factors that we cannot control completely which affect the way that people respond to the gospel. However, much can be done to increase our effectiveness. While the application of righteous principles can bring a greater degree of success, missionaries should not compare their success or attribute success to their own abilities. The Lord alone shall be glorified at the last day, and we are all His servants. The Apostle Paul stated, "So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:7).

The purpose of this book is to help missionaries and members to bring full-time and member-missionary efforts up to their full potential. The principles presented here are distilled from scriptures, teachings of modern prophets, extensive research, application, and experience. The principles described in this book work. They are not speculations or ideas, but principles of growth that I have repeatedly seen validated both in their presence and absence in cultural settings around the world. Jim Rohn stated, "Success is the natural consequence of consistently applying basic fundamentals." If these principles are misunderstood or neglected, missionary efforts become frustrating, inefficient, and poorly productive, even under circumstances of great opportunity. The application of these principles consistently results in dramatic and sustained improvement in finding, teaching, and retaining converts for member-missionaries, missionary companionships, wards and branches, and entire missions. The principles in this book can dramatically improve the productivity of any full-time missionary, member-missionary, or mission leader.

This book includes many findings and recommendations that can be implemented by individual members and missionaries and others that can be implemented only by leaders. The latter findings are included for a general LDS audience, because there is no definitive line between membership and leadership in a lay church. Today's missionaries are tomorrow's ward mission leaders and mission and area presidents. A member who teaches primary today may tomorrow find himself as a counselor in a mission presidency or as an expatriate witness in a nation with no established congregations. When members do not have a correct understanding of the principles of missionary work before they receive a leadership calling, such understanding is rarely achieved thereafter. Many excellent official instructions on missionary work have been widely ignored by church membership, demonstrating the need not only to instruct, but also to inform and educate, and to do so not only from the top down, but also in a grassroots fashion. The LDS missionary program will approach its potential only when there is widespread understanding of the correct principles of missionary work at all level of church membership.

Space does not allow a comprehensive presentation of the vast number of case studies compiled in distilling the principles found in this book. When examples are used, I have usually tried to avoid designation of specific mission names and years which could allow identification of individual leaders and missionaries. With rare exceptions, I have felt that their right to anonymity outweighs any need of mine to provide full documentation of every principle cited. Additional documentation on specific topics is available upon request. I continue to collect data from all sources and welcome feedback.

Although some have disagreed with specific points without attempting to implement them, no one who has implemented the principles here has ever reported to me results that are less than excellent. I hope that those who may disagree with my conclusions on some points will not overlook the abundant material presented that they can benefit from in other areas. Individuals must assess the relevance and applicability of the material presented to their own circumstances.

My motivation is the burning conviction that every soul is precious and deserves the best missionary effort possible in the interest of their eternal welfare and the knowledge that our current performance has barely scratched the surface of the potential. We learn from the story of Gideon (Judges 7) that small numbers of people who do the right things can accomplish far more than much larger numbers who do not. Even a small number of missionaries and members who prayerfully study and implement the principles found in this book can have a major impact on worldwide church growth. I pray that those who read and study this book will gain an understanding of what must be done to improve our personal and collective effectiveness as missionaries and member-missionaries, an understanding of how to do it, and the desire and commitment to get it done.

The material in this book is given "not ... by way of commandment, but by wisdom" (D&C 28:5). I am solely responsible for the content, and any views expressed are mine and not those of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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[1] Benson, Ezra Taft, Ensign, May 1985.
[2] McConkie, Bruce R., Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 21, 1975.
[3] Smith, Joseph Fielding, ed., Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1976, p. 316.