



The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 06: Church Growth Solutions

Church Growth Solutions

Understanding the true causes of low LDS growth and poor convert retention is a prerequisite to finding solutions. Many false and unhelpful rationalizations for poor performance have achieved wide circulation. Donald McGavran noted: "Commonly alleged reasons for lack of church growth are ... erroneous or invalid ... Sometimes, of course, 'a resistant field' is indeed the true reason; but often it is not, as is abundantly proved by the growth in that very field of other [churches]. Nongrowth also frequently means that growth is not being sought, or is being sought in resistant rather than responsive segments of the population."^[98] We must recognize the fallacies of widely circulated explanations for poor growth and low retention to avoid directing our efforts in ways that do not produce the desired results.

Church growth and retention ultimately derive from God's grace through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in harmony with natural and spiritual principles. For those who do not understand these principles, church growth is a mysterious and frustrating "black box," while those who understand and apply correct principles find that high growth and excellent retention are predictably achievable in virtually any cultural setting. Success results from the consistent application of correct principles. The specific principles are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters on member-missionary work, planning, finding, teaching, convert retention, and similar topics. For most topics, the divine mandate in scripture and from the words of modern prophets is first defined. Then actual performance (typically well below the divine mandate) is documented. Finally, principles achieving dramatically improved results are expounded.

//

Once specific obstacles and opportunities have been identified, we must distinguish between those that we cannot significantly alter and those that we can. Undue focus on uncontrollable external factors often exaggerates their importance and distracts attention from our own opportunities for improvement. We may not be able to eliminate political or cultural barriers, yet we can optimize our outreach efforts in each land according to the freedoms and opportunities available. We cannot readily improve the receptivity of society at large, but we are far more likely to find the honest in heart if we share the gospel with many people rather than with few. We may not be able to prevent every member from being lost to inactivity due to lifestyle choices, but we can ensure that prospective converts are properly taught and prepared so that attrition does not occur due to lack of commitment or understanding. When focused effort is made wholeheartedly to improve that which lies within our own power, the results are astounding, and individuals find that results depend far more on their own effort than they had realized. Shakespeare penned, "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie which we ascribe to heaven." Only as we make the effort to cleanse the inner vessel and bring our own efforts into full harmony with the Lord's mandates can we expect the fulfillment of the Lord's promises.

^[98] McGavran, Donald Anderson, *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 17-18.