



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Reasons for Quick-Baptism Tactics in the LDS Church

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Overview

The LDS Church stands apart from many nontraditional Christian groups who engage in fervent missionary activity in terms of prebaptismal qualifications for new converts. The Seventh Day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses require prospective members to meet criteria before baptism that mandate regular church attendance, enrollment in educational classes, and worthiness that must be sustained for an extended period before eligible for full membership and baptism. In many areas of the world, the LDS Church requires potential converts to attend at least two sacrament meetings and pass a baptismal interview where a missionary asks questions pertaining to testimony development and gauges the individual's commitment to live certain basic and fundamental church teachings. Due to the short period of time required for individuals to attend church meetings prior to baptism, the LDS Church experiences convert retention rates sharply lower than many other Christian denominations.

This essay examines reasons for why the LDS Church implements quick-baptism techniques, provides recommendations for members and leaders to set reasonable goals and also follow scriptural protocol and church policy regarding convert baptismal standards, and contrasts the LDS approach to the conversion process with other outreach-focused Christian groups.

Reasons for Quick-Baptism Tactics

The motivations for missionaries hastening the conversion process and pressuring investigators to join the Church in a matter of days and weeks instead of months are varied and complex. Many missionaries and mission leaders express a fear that prolonged periods of prebaptismal preparation for investigators will reduce the likelihood that they will be baptized. Missionaries and church leaders have at times argued that the investigator will lose interest in joining the Church if they are not baptized within a matter of weeks following the decision to accept an invitation extended by missionaries to be baptized. Some leaders suggest that rushing prebaptismal preparation in an effort to baptize converts and confirm them will allow increased access for these new members to spiritual strength and communion with God from confirmation and the Gift of the Holy Ghost which they would not otherwise have as unbaptized investigators. While it may prove true that shortening the period of prebaptismal preparation will increase the focus of the convert to be baptized and confirmed as a member, there is no guarantee that newly baptized members will remain active in the following months and years ahead.

Anecdotal evidence of some individuals joining the Church in a short period of time has legitimized rushed baptismal preparation. Unfortunately Latter-day Saints who are active at present that had just a couple weeks elapse between their initial contact with missionaries and their baptism and confirmation stand out as the exception to the rule instead of the norm. Pressure from full-time missionaries to quickly baptize investigators - particularly children and former investigators who regained interest in the Church again - has influenced member attitudes regarding the acceptable length of prebaptismal preparation. In some locations, members have been the driving force toward baptizing converts with substandard prebaptismal preparation especially if they have a personal or family connection to members in the congregation. Although greater member-missionary involvement often correlates with higher convert retention, the failure for converts to become somewhat self-sustaining in meeting basic requirements of weekly church attendance, daily scripture study, and meaningful personal prayer lays a sandy foundation that often does not sustain new converts in difficult times or crisis of faith.

The Church has encouraged missionaries to commit investigators to baptism during the first missionary lesson. This commitment has often been overemphasized over other important invitations such as weekly church attendance. The method for accomplishing this aggressive proselytism strategy is for missionaries to make a strong spiritual impression on investigators and commit them when they feel and experience this moment. The challenge with this approach is that it often rushes underprepared investigators into baptism without developing habits that self-sustain activity such as weekly church attendance,

daily prayer and scripture reading, and enrollment and attendance in seminary or institute. Success in implementing a first-missionary-lesson baptism commitment hinges on investigators beginning to already attend church on a weekly basis and desire to join the Church due to member-missionary efforts.

Goal setting in missionary work has often centered on reaching certain numbers of convert baptisms over other indicators. The excitement of committing large numbers of investigators to baptism often supersedes concerns for how new members with minimal or substandard levels of commitment attend church, live church teachings, and form friendships with fellow members. In many areas of the world, plans to baptize certain numbers of new converts in a given time period are often more reminiscent of quotas rather than goals as at times church leaders reward missionaries for reaching these numbers through special meals at restaurants, vacation trips, and other incentives. In some areas, missionaries report that failure to meet baptismal goals as a zone or mission can result in mission leaders cancelling special activities. This business-like reward and punishment approach to finding, teaching, and baptizing converts often results in little missionary accountability for retaining new converts as the focus heavily emphasizes committing and baptizing additional converts and maintaining minimal or substandard involvement retaining previously baptized converts. Consequently, the flood of new converts with little prebaptismal preparation and minimal or substandard fellowshipping produces logistical and administrative challenges that often overwhelm active members and leaders in their retention efforts. In some areas of the world, the unsuccessful coordination of setting and reaching missionary goals between full-time missionaries and local members has contributed to quick-baptism tactics which can occur with little or no local church leader involvement until just prior to or on the actual day of the baptismal service.

Missionaries targeting youth for finding investigators and baptizing new converts has also contributed to quick-baptism tactics. In many countries around the world, youth under age 18 appear to constitute the bulk of convert baptisms. Higher receptivity to the Church, more impressionability than their adult counterparts, and higher affinity for full-time missionaries has promoted quick-baptism tactics among youth. Youth-directed proselytism and outreach presents opportunities and challenges. Youth converts can provide strength to the Church if they serve missions and remain active to fill leadership positions as adults. Many youth converts also excel in member-missionary work and are less hesitant to refer friends and family to the Church. However, many youth converts are the only member in their family. This results in challenges for limited numbers of active adult members to motivate and support large numbers of youth converts particularly when they experience periods of reduced interest in the Church or may quit attending church altogether. Many of these youth exhibit stronger fellowshipping and sense of belonging with full-time missionaries rather than local members. The transient nature of full-time missionaries due to periodic, sudden transfers to other areas or total removal of assigned missionaries from a congregation can result in many youth falling into inactivity.

There is a common belief that adding large numbers of converts to the Church will perpetuate growth. This belief appears to arise from mission leaders and missionaries observing that increasing numbers of missionary lessons taught and new investigators gained correlates with increasing numbers of investigators attending sacrament meeting, setting baptismal dates, and being baptized. Although this approach often holds true for achieving numerical goals, acceptable rates of convert retention and member activity cannot be ensured. Many missionaries and leaders who hold this belief often think that if investigators are simply baptized, all other barriers and challenges to conversion and LDS lifestyle will automatically fall into place.

Recommendations to Achieve "Real Growth"

Real church growth occurs when converts attend church services, hold callings, fulfill their member responsibilities, and live church teachings for an extended period of time. Just like when a person who is less invested in a relationship possesses more power in the relationship than the person who is more committed to the relationship, investigators and new converts often exhibit the most control in the investigator/new convert-missionary relationship. These dynamics result in many challenges. First, missionaries often spend large amounts or most of their time dedicated to work with individuals who demonstrate little interest in the Church. Missed appointments, irregular church attendance, and poor follow through with other commitments tend to be overlooked as missionaries can convey a sense of desperation to find anyone that will listen to their message even for just part of the time. Second, missionaries feel a sense of obligation to not give up on investigators and new converts when they avoid contact and slip into inactivity. A sense of duty for a missionary to do all that he or she can do to motivate and redirect faltering investigators and converts back to the Church can overwhelm efforts to concentrate on finding those who exhibit consistent interest and greater receptivity to the Church and its teachings. Third, the Church allocates large numbers of full-time missionary manpower to relatively unproductive areas and stretches small numbers of missionaries in many of the most productive areas.

Requiring consistent seminary or institute attendance over an extended period of time as a prebaptismal standard can improve convert retention rates in locations where these Church Education System classes are available. Classes can offer additional education on church teachings, effective skills for how to study the gospel independently, and provide testimony-building experiences prior to baptism and confirmation. Both seminary and institute also provide socialization opportunities which can improve fellowshipping and integration into the local LDS community. In addition to providing segue for post-baptismal gospel study and additional opportunities for social integration, regular seminary and institute attendance demonstrate stronger conviction to follow church teachings and become an active participant rather than a passive bystander at church.

There appear many strengths to introducing a more standardized process for bringing new converts into the Church. Standardization can troubleshoot potential sources of convert attrition, place greater focus on pre-baptismal gospel study, and mandate consistent attendance at church and select church programs or activities. However, greater standardization of the conversion process does not safeguard against whether missionaries and church leaders follow proscribed protocol. Enforcing stricter baptismal standards serves primarily as a method to prevent missionaries and church leaders from rushing the

conversion process or extending mission outreach in an inappropriate manner. The key to a successful missionary program or paradigm lays in common-sense principles and following church teachings outlined in the scriptures. For instance, a common-sense principle would be delaying the baptism of a youth with no Latter-day Saints in their family until local leaders can ensure that members can provide the needed long-term ecclesiastical and logistical support to retain the convert. Another common-sense principle for youth converts is delaying baptism until the investigator has developed habitual church attendance sustained for a period of at least six months. The scriptures indicate that converts must fully repent of past sins and transgressions, manifest their personal conviction and faith in God to the congregation, and demonstrate that they will remain faithful to living church teachings in order to qualify for baptism (Doctrine and Covenants 20:37). Missionary and member reports from around the world indicate that this scriptural mandate is not consistently enforced.

David Steward succinctly describes the burden a "lost" convert to the Church in *The Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work*. In the chapter "The Cost of Inactivity," Stewart identifies four stakeholders or initiatives that are negatively impacted by convert attrition: The convert, the congregation, outreach efficiency and potential, and fellowshiping morale.^[1] The convert who goes inactive changes from a potential resource and support to the congregation to becoming a liability. New members drive much of the growth of the Church and are often at the forefront of member-missionary activity due to their ability to relate with nonmembers, recent personal experience undergoing the conversion process, and often large numbers of friends and family who are not Latter-day Saints. When a new convert stops attending church or avoids contact with local leaders and missionaries, the ability for the Church to grow and become self-sufficient diminishes. The congregation is at a loss when a convert is not retained due to reduced manpower and resources to fill local callings and establish a sense of community. Outreach efficiency and potential also decline when converts are not retained as resources that can be dedicated toward finding, teaching, and baptizing additional converts are channeled into often tedious and unproductive reactivation efforts. Simply put, it is easier to keep a convert active rather than try to "rescue" the convert who had little or no meaningful church attendance at the time of their baptism months, years, or decades earlier. Accumulating numbers of scores or hundreds of inactive members on church records for a single ward or branch overwhelm active membership and present a perpetual "debt" that hangs over church leaders' heads as an issue of concern with often no easy remedy. Repeated efforts to reach these "lost" members may reactive some, but also irritate and distance others from the Church even more. Fellowshiping morale can also be eroded by lengthy home teaching and visiting teaching lists that include large numbers of inactive and less-active members who are often uninterested, avoidant, and cynical. This can result in membership in some congregations avoiding member-missionary work due to doubt and insecurity that potential converts will go inactive one day despite their fellowshiping efforts. These challenges do not legitimize members, leaders, and missionaries to give up on less-active and inactive members but stress the importance of not baptizing underprepared individuals so that they do not become a burden to the Church in the future.

Accepting higher baptismal standards may also require missionaries and leaders to accept initially lower numbers of convert baptisms. Church leaders and missionaries must ask themselves the question, "is it better to baptize 100 converts and retain 25 or baptize 25 and retain 20 to 25?" Although baptizing 100 converts appears far more impressive than baptizing 25, retaining 80-100% of the 25 converts rather than 25% of the 100 converts produces the same end result but without the heartache, disappointment, and stress on leadership and fellowshiping morale. Stronger and often accelerated growth will ultimately occur if convert retention rates increase as inactive members do not detract limited resources from utilization in more productive areas.

Baptismal Standards in Other Outreach-Oriented Faiths

Other missionary-focused Christian groups generally do not have two separate hierarchical and administrative structures like the LDS Church, one for general church membership and one for full-time missionaries. The uniform approach to both missionary and member work has resulted in the burden of responsibility for new converts resting on the local church leader and ordinary members of the denomination in a given area. For example, the congregation must consider whether the baptismal candidate has reached a sufficient degree of knowledge and commitment in order to be approved for baptism in the Seventh Day Adventist Church.^[2] This standard involves individual members in the congregation to take responsibility in recommending a convert to be baptized and demands that the potential convert demonstrates consistency in attending church services and meeting other core membership requirements. In the LDS Church, converts may be baptized with no direct member involvement almost totally independent of local church leadership. This can result in a rift in missionary and leadership responsibilities and inconsistent follow through with retention efforts. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain some of the highest prebaptismal standards among major proselytizing denominations. Witnesses staff their entire missionary force with ordinary members and require prospective members to engage in proselytism prior to consideration for baptism. This is in major contrast to the LDS Church where active, temple recommending holding members generally do not participate in any intentional missionary efforts on a day-to-day basis. As a result of high convert baptismal standards, Witness number among the highest retaining Christian denominations at present.

Conclusion

Over the past several decades, rushed pre-baptismal preparation to achieve arbitrary goals generally set by full-time missionaries appear the primary cause for worldwide inactivity and convert retention issues in the LDS Church. Higher convert retention rates and greater self-sufficiency in local leadership often occur when church leaders adhere to reasonably high standards for convert baptisms instead of compromising quality convert baptisms to reach arbitrary goals. The root of the inactivity problem centers on the focus of missionary work. Drawing away the focus from simply baptizing and confirming a convert as a member of the Church to ensuring each convert demonstrates habitual church attendance for an extended period of time, enrolls and regularly attends seminary or institute, and has social supports to meet his or her individual needs will be required for any progress and uniformity to occur in ameliorating convert retention rates worldwide.

[1] Stewart, David G. Jr. "The Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work," 2007.
<https://cumorah.com/lawoftheharvest.pdf>

[2] "Guidelines for Engaging in Global Mission," www.adventist.org, retrieved 27 March 2012.
<http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/guidelines/main-guide7.html>