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Reactivation

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Efforts to reclaim individuals who are listed on church records but no longer attend church services fall under the umbrella of reactivation. The goal of reactivation is to make contact with “lost” members, addressing and resolving issues responsible for a member no longer attending church services or meeting worthiness standards, and provide fellowshipping and social support to motivate these members into complete church activity. Inactive members come from a variety of backgrounds. Some were raised in active or inactive LDS families whereas others joined the Church as children, teenagers, or adults. Some inactive converts originally joined the Church as individuals whereas others joined the Church with one or two relatives or with their entire immediate family. There are some inactive members who have many Latter-day Saints within their families yet there are others who remain the only member in their families.

Many members, missionaries, and leaders have oversimplified what leads to inactivity and therefore only partially address barriers to reactivation. For instance, church leaders have referenced studies that report nearly all less-active members believe many of the fundamental and defining tenets of the LDS faith such as Joseph Smith was a prophet and that God and Jesus Christ exist.[1] While this may be true in some predominantly LDS areas of the western United States, hundreds of member, church leader, and returned missionary reports collected by the Cumorah Foundation over the past two decades from all areas of the world contradict these findings. Data from independent missiology researchers suggest that on a global scale most inactive members do not have a testimony of the basic doctrines of the Church due to the brevity of their activity in the church, shallowness of their conversion, and failure to develop meaningful and comprehensive adherence to LDS teachings.

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The ever increasing number of inactive members on church records over the past several decades has prompted a renewed focus on reactivation considering the Church historically experienced some of its most rapid numerical membership growth during this period. In 2004, the Church restructured its missionary program through the publication of the revised missionary guide Preach My Gospel. The new missionary guide frequently references the importance of working with ward and branch leaders in teaching less active and inactive members through reactivation efforts.

Church leaders and missionaries have reported hit-and-miss implementation of reactivation efforts within their jurisdictions before and after the release of Preach My Gospel. Programs for encouraging effective reactivation efforts have also varied by jurisdiction and church leader. One stake president in California reported in 1987 that a simple plea for local leaders to visit less active and inactive members and invite them back to church resulted in the reactivation of several families in every unit within in stake.[2] However, at present senior missionaries in many areas of the world report that local leader efforts to make contact and visit inactive members are sporadic or to not occur at all and that these responsibilities are instead placed on full-time missionaries. In 1989, President Thomas S. Monson expressed concern for the "ever-expanding numbers" of prospective elders (adult males on church records who have not been ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood) and identified four factors in successful reactivation efforts: Inspired teaching, the involvement of all ward organizations, an involved bishop, and focus on small groups.[3] In 2003, President Monson adjusted his four elements of successful reactivation to replace focus on small groups with focus attention on each individual.[4] LDS apostle Elder David A. Bedar noted in a 2006 General Conference address that many of the less active and inactive members he would visit as a stake president stopped attending church because they were offended by another member.[5] In approaching reactivation work, one stake president in Virginia expressed his belief that non-church going members in his stake become inactive because they were offended by someone at church, they do not feel worthy to attend church because of a worthiness issue they do not know how to repent of, or they were not fully converted.[6] The Ensign has published articles since as early as 1989 indicating that some recent converts stop coming to church and become less active shortly after baptism.[7] In 1991, new mission presidents were informed that full-time missionaries may be utilized in reactivation efforts.[8] Some senior missionary couples have exclusively focused on jumpstarting reactivation efforts through programs such as home teachings.[9] In the late 2000s, one church leader noted that

over 1,700 inactive and less active members were reactivated through a mission-wide reactivation program that included 17 stakes and four districts in Peru.[10]

The most productive reactivation efforts help less active and inactive members identify motivations to return to activity and assist these members in making a plan for coming back to church and recommitting to live church teachings. Church leaders, missionaries, and ordinary members focus energy on receptive less-active and inactive members. Developing and maintaining habitual personal daily prayer and scripture study are essential practices to instill in every member that help motivate church attendance and compliance to church teachings. Intrinsic motivation is required for long-term reactivation of inactive members whereas extrinsic motivation yields few enduring results. However, extrinsic motivation factors such as desire for socialization with members or entertainment in some church activities or programs can serve as a steppingstone in reactivation efforts.

The perception of less-active and inactive members by church leaders can become a barrier to successful reactivation efforts. In a recent General Conference address, Bishop Richard C. Edgley expressed concern for how church leaders and members may treat inactive and less-active members differently than active members in their reactivation efforts. Bishop Edgley recounted an experience serving in a stake presidency where he unknowingly asked an inactive member in a large ward to serve as a stake missionary. The request surprised the inactive member who indicated that she had not attended church for years but the experience nonetheless assisted the member to return to church activity as Bishop Edgley processed with her how this was possible.[11] Bishop Edgley utilized this experience to illustrate how proper perspective and invitations can help reclaim lost members and strengthen the Church.

Notwithstanding repeated stress on reactivation from church leaders, members and missionaries throughout the world report that these efforts bear little fruit. There have been significant challenges initiating reactivation work in most countries. Unfortunately many church leaders and members are overburdened and burnt out due to few available members to staff leadership and church callings. This has resulted in low levels of interest and poor enthusiasm for reactivation efforts. The lack of active and willing members to carry out reactivation efforts or the enormity of the number of inactive members in a given area has prompted some mission presidents to specifically request missionaries to dedicate certain amounts of time each week for reactivation work. There have been mission presidents who designate some missionary companionships as reactivation missionaries due to low member activity rates and poor self-sufficiency in local leadership. Unfortunately few of these efforts yield noticeable results and reactive few inactive members. The primary challenge in many areas of the world centers on the fact that many inactive members have little recollection of their brief period of activity in the Church, especially those baptized as children or teenagers. With virtually no testimony base to build upon and gospel light to rekindle, missionaries face the almost insurmountable task of recommitting long-term inactive members to follow church teachings they do not remember or do not know because they were never adequately learned and applied. In other words, reactivation work carried out by full-time missionaries in many areas of the world closely resembles proselytism efforts among nonmembers. However, these reactivation efforts are often accompanied with the hurt feelings and annoyance of inactive members as active members and missionaries pressure them to return to church activity.

The allocation of full-time missionaries to reactivation efforts in locations where local member reactivation manpower is insufficient to meet these needs has reduced the growth of the Church worldwide. Reactivation work is a salient responsibility but the amount of energy and dedication to run effective reactivation programs siphons resources that can be applied to often more productive activities such as finding and teaching receptive nonmembers, opening additional cities to missionary activity, and church planting. The opening of some new missions within the past decade has appeared partially due to renewed reactivation efforts such as in the Philippines, Mexico, and Peru where there are hundreds of thousands of inactive members in each of these countries. Within the past decade, the Church has experienced only a modest improvement in reactivation efforts within these countries as indicated by relatively few districts maturing into stakes and slow congregational growth during this period.

The motivation of missionaries and church leaders to pursue reactivation efforts deserves serious thought and consideration. Ill-fated efforts often result from shallow and inconsistent approaches generally intended to reach an arbitrary goal with little care for individual people, such as the organization of a stake, the maturation of a branch into a ward, or the creation of a new unit in a lesser-reached community. Although these goals are meaningful indicators of real church growth and member activity, leaders and missionaries can expect little long-lasting growth without ordinary members befriending and expressing concern and care for individual members. The mechanical methods of some reactivation efforts leave inactive members more resentful of the Church as they resemble the quota-driven rushed baptismal tactics that brought many of these disenchanted members into the Church in the first place. The absence of genuine care and love for the individual in these difficult but essential efforts stands in total contradiction to the motivations and reasons proscribed by church leaders and scripture. President Monson declared that love "is the ingredient most needed as a catalyst to spur activity in the Church."[12]

Delaying the baptism of underprepared investigators is the best antidote for reducing the number of inactive members in an area and to make reactivation efforts more productive. Rushed convert baptisms with substandard prebaptismal preparation and postbaptismal teaching and fellowship are the primary cause for inactivity woes in most countries. Stricter baptismal standards that require converts to weekly attend church for a couple months instead of a couple weeks, enroll and participate in seminary or institute, and live essential church teachings like the Word of Wisdom and the Law of Chastity for an adequate amount of time as determined by the severity of past addictions and habits without relapse can help increase convert retention rates to as high as 80-90%. Providing adequate postbaptismal member support through home and visiting teaching, new member lessons, and socialization and fellowship with ordinary members are methods that the congregation can implement to retain new converts after baptism. Heightened baptismal standards and more consistent and efficient post-baptismal follow through may initially reduce the number of converts baptized in a given area but in the long run the Church will have fewer converts who go inactive. The Church will also be significantly more endowed and enabled to help lost converts return to

church activity if higher baptismal standards are maintained because lost converts will have a stronger doctrinal base and gospel understanding from which members and missionaries can build upon and rekindle.

Additional factors influence the success of reactivation efforts other than the depth of conversion and duration of previous church activity. Young adults, teenagers, and children are more easily reactivated than middle aged and older adults. Members who relatively recently stopped attending church and following church teachings are more likely to be reactivated. The presence of a spouse or another family member who is an active member improves the prospects of an inactive member to return to church activity. The prognosis for reactivating those raised in an active LDS family is also noticeably better than those raised in an inactive LDS family. Inactive members who are not active in another church or religious group are also easier to reactive.

Successful reactivation efforts in some areas require church leaders to organize new congregations that assemble in locations closer to the homes and communities where inactive members reside. Church leaders and missionaries in many countries indicate that long distance prevents some members from attending church regularly and receiving adequate ecclesiastical support. For example, in the Philippines travel is often difficult and costly, preventing or hampering reactivation efforts among inactive members with interest in returning back to Church. The opening of a group or branch in communities where sizable numbers of inactive members reside can be a key ingredient to successful reactivation.[13] Church planting in these circumstances also plays an important role in ordinary proselytism efforts among the general nonmember population.

The outlook for reactivation efforts in the Church appears mixed within the foreseeable future as the Church has continued to emphasize the importance of reactivation work in the success of missionary work and the strengthening of individual congregations. However, reactivation efforts continue to be headed by full-time missionaries in many areas of the world, particularly those countries and locations with the most pervasive and severe inactivity problems. Greater interest, commitment, and reactivation skills possessed by ordinary members and local church leaders will be required for greater success in reclaiming lost members in the coming years and decades.

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[3] "Love is a catalyst that spurs reactivation," LDS Church News, 8 April 1989.
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[4] "Reach out, rescue the fallen," LDS Church News, 12 April 2003.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/43587/Reach-out-rescue-the-fallen.html

[5] Bednar, David A. "And Nothing Shall Offend Them," General Conference, October 2006.
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[10] "Reactivation efforts offer the warmth of 'home'," LDS Church News, 11 October 2008.
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[13] "The Church in the Philippines," LDS Church News, 11 May 1991.
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