

LDS Growth Encyclopedia on Missionary Work and Church Growth (Missiology)

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Finding

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: March 3rd, 2014

The process of locating individuals and families who are interested in taking the missionary lessons or attending church is called finding. Finding constitutes one of the central activities of missionary work that acts as the gateway for obtaining new investigators. Finding generally precedes missionary lessons, testimony development, the solidification of gospel habits, and the formation of social relationships with members.

Preach My Gospel includes an entire chapter on finding people to teach and frequently alludes to the importance of finding throughout the manual. The centrality to finding people to teach is evident in the first sentence of text in Preach My Gospel, "you are surrounded by people."[1] Preach My Gospel provides specific ideas and recommendations for how full-time missionaries and ordinary members can initiate conversations with strangers during an organized proselytism activity or just in passing during the day. Specific finding methods discussed inthe manual include collaborating teaching and finding efforts with ordinary members that live within the assigned proselytism area, media and church headquarters referrals, family history research, contacting former investigators, service, street contacting, and door-to-door proselytism. Preach My Gospel has demonstrated a major reform in the missionary program that has de-manualized finding from memorized dialogues in the former Missionary Guide to trusting missionaries to analyze situations, study the gospel, and be sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit in order to effectively find interested people to teach. Many of the most successful missionary programs utilize all finding techniques in order to maximize outreach but particularly emphasize local member involvement in finding investigators.

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Methods for finding investigators significantly varies by cultural and societal conditions. In locations with high receptivity to the LDS Church, street contacting and door-to-door proselytism can be effective proselytism activities due to sizable percentages of the population interested in organized religion and LDS teachings. However, these finding activities number among the least efficient and effective according to returned missionaries and church leaders in most areas of the world.[2] The primary challenge baptizing and retaining individuals found through street proselytism and door-to-door finding centers on the socialization of these individuals into their assigned congregation. Individuals who were initially found by full-time missionaries but make friends at church have the greatest prognosis for long-term activity as they do not depend on full-time missionaries for ecclesiastical and social support after baptism. Individuals found through the proselytism efforts of full-time missionaries that do not make friends at church generally continue to rely on missionaries for attending church and feeling welcomed in their congregation. These converts experience a poor prognosis for long-term activity as missionary transfers disrupt the continuity of post-baptism fellowship for many new converts who do not integrate with ordinary members.

The most effective and efficient methods for finding investigators rely on member-missionary involvement. Ordinary members who refer friends, family, neighbors, acquaintances, and coworkers to full-time missionaries to receive the missionary lessons generally produce the highest caliber converts who are the most resistant to becoming inactive and losing interest in the Church regardless of cultural conditions that affect receptivity. The most successful member-missionary programs require ordinary members to provide nonmembers with some basic orientation to LDS teachings and worship and prepare them to receive the missionary lessons from full-time missionaries. Finding often consumes the majority of the day for many missionaries due to a lack of investigators to teach. Member-missionary involvement significantly reduces time spent by full-time missionaries in often arduous and unproductive finding activities as full-time missionaries receive teaching referrals for prepared individuals who want to learn more about the Church.

Less-active and inactive members have been a good finding resource in many areas of the world. The reason for why these members generally provide a greater supply of investigators to full-time missionaries than their active counterparts centers on their lack of social entrenchment within the LDS community or congregation to which they pertain. Most less-active and inactive

members also exhibit less inhibitions to discuss their religious beliefs. Many of these members who retain a testimony of the Church often extend appropriate and natural invitations to nonmember friends to learn more about the Church and socialize with fellow members.

Media campaigns and advertising have facilitated finding new investigators and baptizing converts but these approaches present many of the problems associated with tracting and street contacting. These problems include exacting large amounts of resources with relatively few results and difficulties socially integrating investigators and new converts into their assigned congregations. Although media campaigns and advertizing demand little time and energy from full-time missionaries, these approaches are costly and less effective than other finding methods such as member-missionary work.

Innovative finding methods have at times overcome societal and cultural conditions that have dampened receptivity. Some of these methods have included contacting new move-ins within a specific neighborhood or city as these individuals often have less developed social networks and are more pervious to the LDS gospel witness. The Church has held open houses for recently constructed meetinghouses and has organized special musical performances and exhibits to attract public attention and provide a passive method to introduce the Church and its teachings to the general public. These programs have experienced good success in many areas of the world, especially when ordinary members invite their nonmember family members, friends, and acquaintances to attend and follow up with these individuals with additional invitations to learn more about the Church. These methods have been successful in some countries where receptivity to the Church is low as they provide a less direct and intimidating invitation to enter a church meetinghouse and associate with ordinary members without formally attending a worship service or receiving the full-time missionaries into their homes.

Full-time missionaries in nearly all areas of the world continue to heavily rely on street contacting and door-to-door proselytism for finding investigators notwithstanding the often low level of efficiency of these activities in finding quality investigators that can be socially integrated into their respective congregations. Within the past decade, there has been increased emphasis on reactivation work and member-missionary participation which has potential to improve convert retention and member activity rates in the long run if member participation consistently occurs. Missionaries in most areas of the world continue to report that member-missionary participation remains weak and often limited to only a small handful of members. Greater church growth will occur once local members become more open in sharing their beliefs and invite others to learn more about the Church and when mission and local leaders make a conscious effort to bridge the gap between full-time missionaries and ordinary members.

[1] Preach My Gospel, p. 1

[2] Val Johnson, R. "How to Be a Great Member Missionary," Ensign, August 2007. http://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/how-to-be-a-great-member-missionary