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

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Member Missionary Work

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Ordinary members and ward and branch missionaries perform member-missionary work when they find investigators for full-time missionaries to teach, introduce others to the Church, teach gospel principles, invite others to attend church and other commitments, and provide fellowship to recent converts. Member-missionary work is critical for achieving real church growth due to the importance of member involvement in the conversion and retention processes.

Church leaders have urged all members to engage in missionary activity for the past half century. In 1959, former LDS Church President David O. McKay emphatically declared "every member a missionary".[1] This statement has since been widely circulated and promoted within the Church to encourage ordinary members to participate in proselytism efforts. Member-missionary work was reemphasized in the 2000s and 2010s as numerous church leaders regularly stressed the importance of member involvement in the conversion process, and have strongly urged and pleaded with members to take an active role in finding, teaching, baptizing, and integrating new converts into their congregations.

The most effective and efficient methods for finding investigators rely on member-missionary work. Member involvement significantly improves the likelihood of investigators joining the Church. In 2000, LDS Apostle Elder Dallin H. Oaks reported that only 10% of investigators who received the first missionary discussion were referred by members but that 20-30% of member-referred investigators were baptized. To contrast, only 1-3% of investigators found through media campaigns or full-time missionary finding efforts were baptized.[2] In addition to greater success baptizing a higher percentage of investigators, 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. Church leaders have urged members to work side-by-side full-time missionaries to improve the success and effectiveness of missionary efforts. In 2007, Elder Erich W. Kopischke of the Seventy taught that members must collaborate with full-time missionaries in teaching and preparing investigators for baptism to experience greater success.[3] Notwithstanding robust findings regarding the effectiveness of member-missionary work in accelerating church growth and improving the productivity of full-time missionary efforts, church leaders report that the percentage of investigators found through member efforts declined between 1987 and 1997 from 42% to 20%.[4] In more recent years, the majority of active members do not report engaging in gospel-related conversations with nonmember friends, family, and acquaintances, and that members rarely extend invitations to attend church or meet with the full-time missionaries in their home.

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Member-missionary work is not only effective in baptizing a higher percentage of potential converts, but also in retaining new members. Elder Oaks reports that church leaders have observed that members provide a powerful influence to investigators by modeling how to live LDS teachings, informally teaching gospel principles and doctrines to new converts, and socially integrating new members into established congregations.[5] In 1999, LDS apostle Elder M. Russell Ballard emphasized that converts found and baptized by full-time missionaries without member support are more likely to experience socialization problems and become inactive.[6]

There are several different methods for members to perform missionary work. These include initiating gospel conversations with nonmembers, using proselytism materials ranging from pass-along cards to a copy of the Book of Mormon, inviting others to

attend visitors' centers and historical sites,[7] and using the internet and social media. The Church has produced a large arsenal of proselytism materials including The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, missionary lesson study books, pass-along cards, the Articles of Faith cards, and videos such as Finding Faith in Christ, The Restoration, Together Forever, and The Lamb of God. Ward and branch leaders play an important role in promoting member-missionary activity within their units by well stocking meetinghouses with these resources, and demonstrating how members can use these materials when opportunities arise for sharing the gospel. Pairing a full-time missionary with a local member for an evening or a day can double the number of appointments and outreach for a full-time missionary companionship in a proselytism area, and provides both a full-time missionary and a local member to teach, fellowship, and support individuals contacted or visited.

Social media presents one of the most simple, convenient, and non-confrontational approaches for ordinary members to engage in proselytism. Members can link online personal profiles with church websites and post updates and pictures that relate to LDS teachings and the importance of their faith in everyday life. Invitations to nonmember friends, acquaintances, and family through social media to visit a church website or to watch a church video on YouTube can be effective means of cultivating interest in the Church in others through social media applications and websites. Internet-based technologies can permit members to refer individuals prepared to meet with missionaries, attend church, or request a copy of the Book of Mormon with ease. The Church's online meetinghouse locator permits individuals to locate the nearest meetinghouse to their home and obtain church meeting times. In recent years, the Church has highly promoted its revamped mormon.org website where ordinary members can create profiles that relate their conversion to the Church, share the reason for their continued activity, and explain church teachings or commonly-asked questions regarding the Church and its beliefs.

Some common methods designed to motivate members to share the gospel have little effectiveness in augmenting the number of convert baptisms and achieving good convert retention rates. The missionary dinner program provides meals to missionaries in members' homes and numbers among the least successful programs widely instituted in the Church worldwide. Many claim that the program can help improve member-missionary efforts through full-time missionaries motivating members to have the courage to talk to nonmembers about the Church. However, there is little evidence to suggest that much success occurs as a result of missionaries eating dinner and sharing a short gospel message in members' homes. In 1975, former Church President Ezra Taft Benson warned new mission presidents of the dangers and ineffectiveness of missionary dinner programs, stating:

"Too many missionaries are neutralized, and occasionally lost (excommunicated), because of oversolicitous members, member sisters who 'mother' the missionaries, and socializing occurring between missionaries and members. Because of the importance of members and missionaries working effectively together on the member missionary program, it is vital that missionaries maintain the proper missionary image and have the reputation as great proselyting elders and not simply 'good guys'. The greatest help members can be to a missionary is not to feed him, but to give the names of their friends so that he can teach them with the spirit in their homes and challenge them, with the wonderful members helping to fellowship."[8]

There are some conditions that increase the likelihood of member-missionary work. Religious freedom restrictions limit finding methods to member referral and passive proselytism approaches, resulting in greater member-missionary participation and oftentimes more interested investigators than in countries with few or no religious freedom restrictions. Locations with large numbers of new converts are often more effective in member-missionary work. New converts and less-active members often exhibit greater member-missionary interest and activity than their seasoned counterparts due to often larger numbers of nonmember friends, family, and acquaintances. New converts often exhibit enthusiasm about their newly found faith and excitement to share with others their testimony and extend invitations to nonmembers. This results in a positive feedback for growth as additional converts remain active and share the gospel with others.

Locations with visible and consistent member-missionary programs exhibit higher levels of self-sufficiency than locations where member-missionary programs are poorly developed or nonexistent. Vibrant member-missionary programs regularly baptize new converts and experienced good convert retention as full-time missionaries receive teaching referrals for individuals prepared and referred by ordinary members and converts baptisms generally have a social support system at church that is established prior to baptism. Full-time missionaries do not have to rely on tracting and other activities to find investigators through their own efforts and experience considerably fewer frustrations and challenges teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts when member-missionary work occurs. In the 2000s, the Church frequently stressed the importance of member-missionary work in improving convert retention rates worldwide.[9]

Locations with low levels of member-missionary involvement generally experience stagnant or slow active membership and congregational growth. Nominal membership growth significantly varies in countries with low levels of member-missionary involvement and depends on the level of receptivity to LDS teachings. For example, the Church in countries like Brazil and Mexico experiences strong, steady membership growth but slow or stagnant active membership and congregational growth due to missionaries finding and baptizing most converts and low member-missionary participation. This has resulted in a disconnect between new members found through the efforts of full-time missionaries and active members in the congregation. The Church in other countries that experience slow nominal membership growth such as many countries in Eastern Europe do so because of low receptivity coupled with poor member-missionary participation. A lack of member-missionary work in the Church has been the primary obstacle to achieving greater church growth around the world due to historically limited numbers of full-time missionaries, higher success in baptizing and retaining investigators found through member efforts, and oftentimes greater speed in expanding national outreach as members share the gospel with individuals who do not live in locations with an established ward or branch.

There remains a significant need for more standardized education and resources for building member-missionary skills in Latter-day Saints. The most effective method to improve member-missionary participation and build confidence and skill in

ordinary members sharing the gospel is to instruct members on how to effectively share a brief gospel message to a nonmember during the opening exercises of Priesthood, Relief Society, Young Women's, and Primary.[10] It is interesting to note that the Church has published a full-time missionary guide called Preach My Gospel yet there is no manual instructing members on member-missionary work. Church leaders have rather focused on members living church teachings, using the internet, and adapting Preach My Gospel to fit a member-missionary venue but these approaches have not appeared to make any noticeable changes in the percentage of members who engage in member-missionary activity. Online resources on effective member-missionary work that were developed by church members can be found at:

http://www.missionaryhelper.com/membermissionary.htm

https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=law_harvest&chapter_id=10

The outlook for future trends in member-missionary work appears mixed as many LDS populations are reluctant to initiate proselytism efforts among nonmembers. The recent surge in the full-time missionary force, increased public awareness of the Church, and repeated and reemphasized statements from general church leaders may motivate more members to share the gospel with others. The Church in locations with a more recently established presence appears most likely to experience the greatest success in member-missionary work due to the newness of members' conversions and the often high degree of enthusiasm and excitement of recent converts share the gospel with others.

[1] McKay, David O. Conference Report, Apr. 1959, 122

[2] Oaks, Dallin H. "The Role of Members in Conversion," Ensign, March 2003. http://www.lds.org/ensign/2003/03/the-role-of-members-in-conversion

[3] Kopischke, Erich W. "Preach My Gospel - the Unifying Tool between Members and Missionaries," General Conference, October 2007. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2007/10/preach-my-gospel-the-unifying-tool-between-members-and-missionaries

[4] Oaks, Dallin H. "The Role of Members in Conversion," Ensign, March 2003. http://www.lds.org/ensign/2003/03/the-role-of-members-in-conversion

[5] Oaks, Dallin H. "The Role of Members in Conversion," Ensign, March 2003. http://www.lds.org/ensign/2003/03/the-role-of-members-in-conversion

[6] Ballard, M. Russell. "Members Are the Key," Ensign, September 2000. http://www.lds.org/ensign/2000/09/members-are-the-key

[7] Oaks, Dallin H. "The Role of Members in Conversion," Ensign, March 2003. http://www.lds.org/ensign/2003/03/the-role-of-members-in-conversion

[8] Benson, Ezra Taft. Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 21, 1975

[9] Ballard, M. Russell. "The Essential Role of Member Missionary Work," General Conference, April 2003. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2003/04/the-essential-role-of-member-missionary-work

[10] Stewart, David Jr. "The Member-Missionary Miracle," The Law of the Harvest, retrieved 9 February 2013. https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=law_harvest&chapter_id=10