
The Role of Members in Conversion

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Many of us remember the electrifying call of President David O. McKay (1873–1970): "Every member a missionary!" As members of the Lord's Church, our responsibility for sharing the gospel has been emphasized continually for nearly a half century, but we are still far short of where we must be. President Gordon B. Hinckley has called each of us to increase our efforts in this vital responsibility:

"Brothers and sisters, all of you out in the wards and stakes and in the districts and branches, I invite you to become a vast army with enthusiasm for this work and a great overarching desire to assist the missionaries in the tremendous responsibility they have to carry the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. ...

"... Let us, every one, resolve within ourselves to arise to a new opportunity, a new sense of responsibility, a new shouldering of obligation to assist our Father in Heaven in His glorious work of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of His sons and daughters throughout the earth."

Under the impetus of President Hinckley's words, including his challenge to double the number of people whom we help enter the covenant of baptism, we have been analyzing the sources of teaching opportunities that lead to baptisms. Bear in mind that although the research described here was obtained in the United States and Canada, we have no reason to suppose that the principles we have learned are not applicable in other areas.

How Do We Find People Who Become Baptized?

When we investigated the sources for *investigators who participated in first discussions*, we found the following order of productivity:

1. Missionaries' personal contacting.
2. Media campaigns (which are very costly in dollar expenditures).
3. Members. Relatively few of those who participated in a first discussion—only 10 percent—came to the missionaries through members.

The profile is very different, however, when we study the sources for *investigators who are baptized*: 59 percent of investigators who were baptized started investigating the Church because a member had invited them to be taught or had given their name to the missionaries as a referral. In other words, most teaching opportunities come from the missionaries' own contacting, but most convert baptisms come from the members' efforts.

To look at these findings from a different angle, another study showed that:

1. Of investigators found through media campaigns, about 1 to 2 percent are baptized.
2. Of investigators found through the missionaries' efforts, about 2 to 3 percent are baptized.
3. Of investigators found through the members, 20 to 30 percent are baptized.

In other words, an investigator who is brought to the missionaries through the members is 10 times more likely to be baptized than one the missionaries have found through their own contacting efforts. Do these figures catch your attention on the importance of the members' role in finding people for the missionaries to teach?

(Lest we be too critical of our media efforts, I must add that other studies show that about 6 out of 10 adult converts said they were positively influenced by our media messages before deciding to be baptized. This fact suggests that our media efforts are very valuable in support of other approaches to finding investigators.)

It is ironic and troubling that while we have confirmed the powerful influence of members in the conversion process, evidence from other studies suggests that members are comparatively less involved than they once were in this vital role. In the overall pool of investigators, the percentage of investigators found through the efforts of members declined from 42 percent in 1987 to 20 percent in 1997, even though the average number of investigators taught by the missionaries did not change significantly during that period.

President Hinckley's Challenge

President Hinckley has called us to make a concerted effort to double the number of converts who are currently being baptized each year. “The big initial task,” he said, “is first to find interested investigators.” To do that, he said, we must join in what he called the “better way”:

“That [better] way is through the members of the Church. Whenever there is a member who introduces an investigator, there is an immediate support system. ...

“The full-time missionaries may do the actual teaching, but the member, wherever possible, will back up that teaching with the offering of his home to carry on this missionary service. He will bear sincere testimony of the divinity of the work. He will be there to answer questions when the missionaries are not around. He will be a friend to the convert who is making a big and often difficult change.”

That is an inspired insight and a prophetic challenge!

Members simply must take a more active role in our missionary efforts at every stage: friendshipping those who are not of our faith; sharing Church materials; sharing feelings about the gospel; inviting friends to Church activities, service projects, and meetings; giving the missionaries referrals to visit our friends; inviting those friends to be taught the gospel in our homes; and fellowshipping and strengthening new converts.

Some members do not actively participate in sharing the gospel because they don't feel comfortable starting a religious conversation or they don't know what to say. These feelings can be overcome as we learn how to introduce the gospel to our friends and acquaintances in simple, nonthreatening ways, which may include the following:

Pass-along cards. These cards, which are small enough to carry in a shirt pocket or a purse, offer our friends or casual contacts a free Church item, such as a video or a copy of the Book of Mormon, and include a telephone number they may call to request the gift. The cards also invite our friends to visit the Church Web site www.mormon.org. Using the card is simple, personal, and nonthreatening. A friend or contact is under no pressure to act on the invitation. Since the recipients of pass-along cards already have a member contact, those who choose to request the gift offered on the card are much more likely to be willing to meet with the missionaries than those who do not have a Latter-day Saint acquaintance.

Pass-along cards can be obtained through local ward or full-time missionaries or at a Church distribution center.

The Church Internet site. Interested persons can be invited to visit www.mormon.org. Those who visit this site may obtain information about the gospel and the Church, request Church literature or videos, and find out where they can worship with us.

We can also e-mail pages from this site to friends or send them gospel-themed electronic greeting cards.

Visitors' centers and historic sites. We have learned that as our members go through visitors' centers and historic sites—which they do in large numbers—they are touched by the Spirit, and many feel prompted to give the names of nonmember friends to the missionaries at the center, with a request that local missionaries visit those friends. During 2001, members visiting these centers and sites gave the names of 150,000 of their friends. We found that these friends were unusually receptive. Almost 50 percent of them agreed to have the missionaries visit them. This is becoming a very important source of teaching opportunities.

Encouraging Members' Efforts

In discussing our responsibility for sharing the gospel, President Hinckley said: "I request each stake and district president to accept full responsibility and accountability for the finding and friendshipping of investigators within your stake or district. I request each bishop and branch president to accept the same responsibility within your ward or branch."

In order to strengthen the role of these priesthood leaders, the First Presidency recently approved a major change in the way our missionary efforts are organized in the stakes and wards. In reaffirming that "the bishop is responsible for the work of sharing the gospel, retention, and reactivation within the ward," the First Presidency discontinued all stake missions and changed the callings of stake missionaries and ward mission leaders to ward callings under the direction of the bishop.

One of the effects of this change should be to reemphasize that the responsibility for sharing the gospel rests fundamentally with the members of the Church, and the leaders who have the closest relationship with the members—those in the ward—have more direct responsibility for helping the members succeed in their missionary efforts. To a great extent, the success of this change will depend on the ability of the bishops—and, under their direction, the other ward leaders—to embrace and magnify this responsibility.

The priesthood executive committee—presided over by the bishop, who is assisted by the ward mission leader—functions as the ward missionary committee, and the ward council plays a major role in promoting and coordinating efforts to share the gospel in the ward. In these and other meetings, such as the quorum and auxiliary meetings, the efforts of the members and the needs of investigators and new members can be discussed, plans can be made, and progress can be reported. President Hinckley's teaching on this subject is very direct: "Now, to you bishops who hold your ward council meetings, a discussion of the status of converts in that meeting may be the most important business you will conduct."

Strengthening and Nurturing New Converts

For several years President Hinckley has been reminding us forcefully that "there is absolutely no point in doing missionary work unless we hold on to the fruits of that effort." He continues to remind us that with all of our success in baptizing new members, a distressing proportion of them still fall away into inactivity. We have not yet

significantly increased our effectiveness in fellowshipping new converts so that they invariably continue to grow in the gospel, to serve in the Church, and to receive the blessings of the temple.

Among those converts who fall away, the attrition is steepest in the two months after baptism. When a convert is baptized, there is no time to lose. Fellowshipping efforts must begin well before baptism and must increase in intensity in the months following baptism.

Our experience has shown that members can have a powerful influence in this process in three critically important ways:

1. Modeling gospel living by providing practical, persuasive examples of the joy we receive from living the gospel.
2. Teaching the gospel informally by explaining Latter-day Saint doctrines and practices, answering questions, and helping investigators and new members resolve concerns.
3. Helping investigators and converts become fully integrated into the community of Saints.

When members see themselves as gospel nurturers, as the prophet has invited us all to be, we will be well along toward our goal.

The Problem of Addictions

An extremely important but widely neglected need of investigators and new members is for help in overcoming their addictions.

Most converts say they face this challenge. According to one study, 75 percent of adult converts in North America had to give up at least one of these substances mentioned in the Word of Wisdom—tobacco, alcohol, coffee, or tea—and 31 percent had to give up smoking, a very addictive habit.

This study also showed that almost all converts—over 90 percent—had a very high desire to avoid these substances after their baptism. However, it should not be surprising, given what we know about addiction, that many of these converts experienced some slippage back to their addictions. One-third to one-half of them reported that they had experienced “occasional,” “frequent,” or “complete” lapses in their abstinence.

Helping our new members overcome their past addictions is clearly a vital factor in helping them continue to grow in the gospel. Here we need to remember President Hinckley’s words: “I am convinced that we will lose but very, very few of those who come into the Church if we take better care of them.”

Are most new members getting the special help they need in overcoming their addictions? No, they are not. The study asked these new converts, “Who has helped you live the Word of Wisdom?” As to overcoming tobacco—the most addictive substance in the study—41 percent of the converts said no one had helped them after baptism. Only 13 percent of converts—about one in seven—received any help from other members in overcoming a tobacco addiction. These distressingly low figures show how far we have to go in educating and encouraging members to help converts stay out of the clutches of their old addictions.

On the other hand, when they were asked what was most helpful to them in maintaining their abstinence, converts’ number one response was support from members and missionaries. We need more of that!

Finding People to Teach

I return to President Hinckley’s challenge to double the number of converts who enter the covenant of baptism. Here I have a practical suggestion.

I asked our researchers to calculate, on the basis of our present experience, what we would need to do to double convert baptisms in the United States and Canada. They concluded that we could double baptisms by doing any one of the following:

1. Increase the number of investigators found through media campaigns by 13.5 times. (That would require an extremely large increase in our media budget.)
2. Increase the number of investigators found directly by missionaries by 6 times. (That would require an enormous increase in the number or the effectiveness of our missionaries.)
3. Increase the number of investigators found through the members by 2.7 times.

Which method strikes you as the most readily achievable and the most desirable? The answer is obvious: to focus on increasing the number of investigators found through us, the members. That *is* doable!

In the United States and Canada, the average number of initial teaching opportunities currently being provided by members is about 2 per ward or branch per month. If we could increase that average to 5 per month, we would achieve our goal.

Would this increase in teaching opportunities be a burden our full-time missionaries could not bear? This increase from 2 to 5 teaching opportunities per ward would only increase the average number of investigators found through the members from the current 1.2 per companionship per month to 3.2 per month. We think our missionaries in the United States, who are now spending an average of only nine hours per week teaching investigators, could easily handle that kind of increase.

Conclusion

I hope that three things stand out in the minds of those who have read this message:

1. President Hinckley has challenged us to double the number of our Father in Heaven's children whom we bring into the Church and to improve our fellowshiping and retention of new members.
2. We cannot do this without increasing our members' efforts in sharing the gospel and our effectiveness in those efforts, including friendshiping, inviting our friends to be taught, giving referrals to the missionaries, and fellowshiping investigators and new converts.
3. The extra effort necessary to double our baptisms is within our reach if we can just unite our efforts.

May the Lord bless us in this great effort.

Gospel topics: conversion, missionary work