

# Paradigms and Proselytizing

## *The Effects of Traditions on Twentieth Century Proselytizing Methods*

By David Golding

Many Latter-day Saints believe that their faith and lifestyle place them a cut above the general population. Traditions exist in thousands of LDS families that focus on a devout way of life, but additionally, influence their paradigms of the surrounding social climate. Traditions of thought or belief run strong in family lines for Mormon families. Such paradigms are often construed in a self-righteous vein, lacking true evidence to support the claims. Sociologist Tim Heaton reported at an LDS apologists' conference that "members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rank on par with the U.S. population in general in several statistical measures of lifestyle" (Moore 2002).

While this may expose some radically conservative ideas inherent in LDS family living, it further demonstrates the narrow mindset and cultural ignorance of mainstream members of the Church. Such paradigms of the members being perpetuated into future generations greatly affects the income of new converts, as well as the retention of active adherents.

Doctrinally, we believe that a worldwide effort to proselytize is a divine duty commissioned by God. Our canon of scripture records numerous commands to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to not just Jew and Gentile, but to Christian and heathen, and to all races of humanity. One such instance occurs in the preface of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation recorded by the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1831:

Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.

For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated (D&C 1:1-2).

Since the very beginnings of Mormonism, missionaries have been called to preach. With a new gospel message of restoration, and a new work of scripture, the Book of Mormon, these missionaries attracted many curious audiences. Consequently, these early LDS missionaries improvised and brought out the “ars nova” of proselytizing for their day. A great missionary named Dan Jones brought over 3,000 converts in three years alone through a simple technique of “canvassing.” His, as well as many others’ contributions will be discussed in detail later. The average number of convert baptisms per missionary throughout the 19th century is staggering, and sets this era apart as one of the greatest religious movements in American history.

Throughout the 20th century, however, data shows that convert baptisms per missionary declined. As the 21st century began, convert baptisms were at an incredible low, even with over 60-thousand missionaries in active full-time service; the largest number in all Biblical and modern Church history.

Although many Latter-day Saints believe that more converts are being baptized annually than ever before, the effectiveness of our full-time missionary force is declining, due to a trend of growing unrealistic social paradigms and perpetuated sensational family traditions. When the members of the Church respond correctly to current prophetic counsel and stop shifting the duties of missionary work away from themselves to the missionaries, our efforts to share the gospel to all the world will become more effective, missionaries will be able to return to earlier, more effective proselytizing methods, and more converts will be baptized.

## **19th Century Proselytizing Methods**

When the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, the Church’s first official missionary was called: Samuel H. Smith. He was the younger brother of

the Prophet, sent to declare to the people of New England that the Lord's true church had been restored. He knew little of how to be a missionary, except for the experiences of "camp meetings" that had swept the young nation in the early 1800s. These camp meetings were held in open-air gathering places, with preachers and ministers speaking to large crowds of local residents of the doctrines of the Bible.

Armed with copies of the Book of Mormon, Samuel set out to find honest seekers of truth. His method had not been proven effective before this time; in fact, aside from word of mouth, no formal missions had ever begun for this new church. In simplicity, Samuel taught others of his testimony of the Book of Mormon.

The method used by Samuel Smith was to sell the Book of Mormon. He endeavored to do nothing else. Most of the time, he would stop at inns, houses, and markets to ask if any would be interested in a "history of the Indians." (Jenson 1:278.) His approach was bold but not overbearing. Everything taught was directly related to the point, and the listener knew within his first uttered sentence that there had been a restoration, and that his brother, Joseph Smith, had translated a record of ancient inhabitants of the American continents. Never had he told of the Book of Mormon when he did not testify of its truthfulness. Being one of the Eight Witnesses of the plates, he would often point to his own written testimony in the book and proclaim anew his knowledge of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

The effectiveness of this approach seemed rather low for the time; only a few were brought into the Church. However, those few included John P. Greene, Brigham Young, and Heber C. Kimball—men who would later serve extraordinary missions using the same method of proselytizing that Samuel had. Because of their subsequent missions, this method of using the Book of Mormon as the primary tool in proselytizing proved to be incredibly effective.

For example, let us examine the mission of Dan Jones to Wales. He served from 1845 to 1849, baptizing over 3,000 converts. The Prophet Joseph Smith prophesied of his mission from Carthage jail in June, 1844, revealing that Jones had been "appointed" a mission to Wales by God (Roberts 308).

Jones' method of bringing so many thousands of new converts to the Church was through canvassing large areas at a time, going from even the smallest villages to the biggest cities. His tool was the press, and early in his

mission he organized a Welsh newspaper called “Zion’s Trumpet.” Articles were written weekly in this newspaper, almost always explaining the Book of Mormon and its validity. But more effective than his articles was Jones’ preaching. He would advertise consistently of lectures and forums for any interested folk to come and listen to the message of the restoration.

One such advertisement ran thus:

Invitation!

Dear Reader,—Know that you must stand before the judgment bar of God! Remember that your works will establish your fate in the world to come! Believe an experienced friend saying that only the enjoyment of the true religion will bring you happiness in this world and in eternity; and for your immortal soul, believe the testimony of a truthful witness, that the following principles of the only divine religion that is or ever has been in the world (Dennis J21).

After explaining the need to hear the word of God, Jones listed important points of doctrine from the Book of Mormon, and finished by inviting the reader to a lecture:

“Reader! come, we repeat, and hear for yourself, so that you may be able to judge these truths, understand them, obey them, and enjoy their promises yourself. There will be preaching in [blank], every Sunday at 11:00 o’clock in the morning, and at 6:00 in the evening. We are ready to preach at any time desired by those who invite us to their homes.” (Ibid.)

Jones’ audience was as broad as he could make it. Through the media, he was able to reach thousands of listeners at a time. Not only was he one of the most prolific missionaries in Wales in all Welsh history, he was also considered the most hated man in Wales. With the fame came the criticisms, and no missionary has ever answered the critics of Mormonism more than Dan Jones. As he preached daily to large crowds, half would leave with some measure of contempt while the other half listened intently to the message. Because such large groups had congregated to hear him, Jones taught masses at a time, reaching an unprecedented amount of honest truth-seekers. The result: thousands were baptized in the space of three years.

Our last example of 19th century proselytizing methods is Wilford Woodruff, a missionary responsible for more than 1800 baptisms (Cowley,

120). Woodruff records in his journal that he “[preached] and baptized daily” while laboring in Herefordshire, England (Cowley 119). His own account illustrates his motives and methods of sharing the gospel:

I arose on the morning of the 5th, took breakfast, and told Mr. Benbow I would like to commence my Master’s business, by preaching the gospel to the people.

He had a large hall in his mansion which was licensed for preaching, and he sent word through the neighborhood that an American missionary would preach at his house that evening.

As the time drew nigh, many of the neighbors came in, and I preached my first gospel sermon in the house. I also preached on the following evening at the same place, and baptized six persons, including Mr. John Benbow and his wife, and four preachers of the United Brethren.

I spent most of the following day in clearing out a pool of water, and preparing it for baptizing in, as I saw many to be baptized there. I afterwards baptized six hundred in that pool of water.

On Sunday, the 8th, I preached at Frome’s Hill in the morning, at Standley Hill in the afternoon, and at John Benbow’s Hill Farm, in the evening.

The parish church that stood in the neighborhood of Brother Benbow’s, presided over by the rector of the parish, was attended during the day by only fifteen persons, while I had a large congregation, estimated to number a thousand, attend my meeting through the day and evening” (Cowley 117-18).

Wilford’s manner of bringing converts to the Church was by preaching to large crowds of nearly a thousand, at morning, afternoon, and evening gatherings. He declared the first principles of the gospel and never taught without inviting his listeners to be baptized. He never hesitated to teach others of their immediate need for baptism, and even cleared out a pool nearby to effect the baptisms. Because of his ability to use both the word of God and the Spirit of God in simple humility, many thousands were brought to knowledge of the restoration and many were converted.

## A Change in Proselytizing Methods

Mormon missionaries throughout the 19th century relied heavily on the method of preaching to succeed. Much more was employed by the way of proselytizing than preaching to crowds, but in most cases, missionaries sought to teach in public and in home gatherings. A significant change occurred throughout the 20th century that became a standard for many generations of missionaries: the method of contacting.

The term “tracting” is nearly synonymous with today’s concept of Mormon missionary work. Inside and out of the Church, the well-known reputation of LDS missionaries is that they knock doors. A look at the history of tracting will explain the shift away from preaching.

In the 1800s, tracting was actually the publishing and distribution of tracts, or pamphlets. As noted earlier, missionaries like Dan Jones utilized this method of circulating tracts to advertise the Church. However, at the turn of the 20th century, contacting became the most common method, and the term “tracting” was used in its place. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “contacting” when referring to any door-to-door approach, as well as any street contacting or person-to-person teaching. The term “tracting” will refer to the earlier definition of publishing tracts and distributing pamphlets.

The technique of contacting proved to be incredibly ineffective, and few baptisms resulted from its widespread use (Jensen, 10). In the early 1950s, the Northwestern States Mission developed a plan for increasing the effectiveness of contacting. This plan was later referred to as the “Anderson Plan” because of the major contributions of Elder Richard L. Anderson to its development.

Instead of calling for basic distribution of pamphlets, the Anderson Plan explained that missionaries were to seek permission to enter a home and teach the members of families the message of their tracts. Detailed instructions were outlined, and the purpose of the Anderson Plan was articulated: “The Lord tells us to preach the gospel. PASSING OUT LITERATURE IS NOT EFFECTIVE TRACTING—THE OBJECT IS GET INSIDE” (Anderson, 3).

Terms which were once used to distinguish methods of proselytizing were now associated directly with contacting. In the Anderson Plan, the concept of *preaching* the gospel became one and the same for *contacting* passers-by. True, any form of proselytizing is ultimately a form of preaching the gospel,

but the point I wish to emphasize is that in the mid-20th century, the paradigm shifted, definitions changed, and tracting was viewed as ineffective while contacting was considered the object of missionary work.

By the 1970s, mission presidents were instructed to limit their spread of preaching: “In setting up a tracting district, missionaries should keep accurate records and use a map and record the response of each home. They should work from centers of strength such as a local chapel, new housing areas, centers of population, and be cautious about expanding too rapidly into isolated areas, new cities or into rural country areas where great distances exist between homes.” (Mission President’s Handbook, H-9, H-10.) In the 1960s and 1970s, contacting was emphasized even more, with instructions to seek out especially fathers and men. (Ibid, H-13.)

During this era, the spread of contacting engulfed nearly every mission of the Church. It became the main emphasis in missionary work, and whole books were devoted to enhancing the effectiveness of door approaches. However, every published material on contacting from the 1930s through the 1970s acknowledged that this was an ineffective method unless done with enthusiasm. (See Jensen, 9-55 for a detailed explanation of all published materials during this time period.)

### **The Decline in Effectiveness Due to Paradigms and Traditions**

As word caught on that contacting was a theoretically effective form of proselytizing, new generations of missionaries were brought up believing that such was the only way of finding new investigators. Whole missions dedicated their entire program to enhancing the contacting method, and the Anderson Plan was even reviewed by the General Authorities of the Church. In the 1970s, more texts were circulated detailing a systematic approach of preaching the gospel. Instead of teaching whatever the missionary felt was important, the missionary was taught to only preach following a set outline. These outlines were put into paragraph form and published in the early 1980s, and were entitled the “Discussions.”

The first generations of full-time missionaries to fully utilize the discussions served during the 1980s. Because the normal term of service for an elder is two years, the Church experiences a complete generational

turnaround once every four years. In other words, every mission in the world is completely re-staffed with new missionaries at least every four years, including the mission's president. By 1985, the second generation of the "Discussions Era" had been indoctrinated in the new method. The early 1990s show that the third and fourth generations developed their own methods of using the discussions, and when the 21<sup>st</sup> century approached, fifth- and sixth-generation missionaries served their missions. Statistically, a decline in missionary effectiveness is apparent during the Discussions Era, and by 2003, the discussions were formally replaced by the Church with a new method of preaching the gospel.

The top ten ranked years in LDS history for increase in church membership all occurred in the 1800s. The lowest ten years all occurred during major apostasies of the 1830s and 1850s, as well as the Great Depression during the 1930s. Setting aside obvious crisis moments in our history, the numbers show that the poorest years for church increase all occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and mostly during the 1980s and 1990s, precisely during the Discussion Era. Now, I do not believe this decline in effectiveness was due to the discussions themselves, rather, the development of erroneous beliefs among third, fourth, and later generations of missions.

One major tradition that developed among the members of the Church during the Discussion Era was that the method of member missionary work required a formal discussion in one's home with the elders. In fact, most members expressed a nervousness about such a bold setting for one to learn about the gospel, thus adding to a church-wide apprehension for testifying of the restoration. The missionaries were seen as nearly heroic, returning home with "honor" and fanfare for giving up such a long time of their lives—yet the members of the Church began to place the missionaries on such a high pedestal that even traditions of prayer began to evolve. What once was a prayer for the gospel to roll forth through all the world became the members' plea that the missionaries (not the members) be led to those seeking the gospel message.

Both the belief among the missionaries themselves that contacting was somehow a superior method of proselytizing and the paradigm shift in the members' minds that the missionaries were the ones who were to find investigators contributed to an overall change in perceived member

missionary work. George Barna, a Christian researcher, conducted a study wherein Latter-day Saints were compared with other Christian denominations. Those surveyed were asked whether they had participated in one or more acts of missionary service in the past year. Only 26% of Latter-day Saints reported having done so, while 61% of Pentecostals shared the gospel as well as another 61% of Assemblies of God members and 57% of non-denominational Christians. When one accounts for the fact that only 40-50% of Latter-day Saints in North America are active, and about 20-30% are active in the rest of the world, the best possible case is that only about 15% of all LDS members share the gospel at least once a year. Barna notes that 30-35% of all the U.S. adult Christian population—an estimated 60 million people—share Christian beliefs with others, and most of these do so at least monthly (Barna 2001).

While there are sure to be obvious differences between Mormon definitions of sharing the gospel and other Christian beliefs, these statistics demonstrate one fact: there are less Latter-day Saints who view in themselves a member missionary than adherents of other Christian denominations. The Church's own Missionary Department has reported that only 3 to 5% of active Latter-day Saints in North America regularly participate in missionary work. In 1987, member referrals accounted for 42% of the population of investigators in North America, whereas ten years later, that figure dropped significantly to 20%. By 1997, member referrals accounted for only 10% of total referrals Church-wide (Ballard, et al. 2000).

As the number of missionaries climbed to record highs past 60,000 worldwide, the amount of member missionaries declined drastically. Sensational stories were told instead of the normal day-to-day activities of mission life, and members more and more began to shift away from active missionary work into a more passive role. The discussions were taught commonly from memory, and investigators taught per missionary declined to an all-time low. Changes were desperately needed, and a call for a major paradigm shift among the members of the Church was sounded by the Church's president, Gordon B. Hinckley.

## Church Leaders, Teachings, and the Better Way

Many Church members today are aware of the phrase “raising the bar.” In 2002, many church apostles spoke out for the need for members to become more involved in missionary work. However, this call has been steadily preached by church leaders long before the Discussion Era.

President Brigham Young declared in conference, “I wish to make this request: that the Elders who return from missions consider themselves just as much on a mission here as in England or in any other part of the world.... When a man returns from a mission where he has been preaching the Gospel he ought to be just as ready to come to this pulpit to preach as if he were in England, France, Germany, or on the islands of the sea” (Discourses 328-29).

President Ezra Taft Benson taught at a mission presidents’ seminar that the Church had not yet caught the vision of their leaders of missionary work. He quoted the Prophet of the Church at that time, President Spencer W. Kimball:

Wilford Woodruff baptized two thousand people on his mission in England in a short few months and ... Heber C. Kimball baptized 1,800 in a few months. ... There are hundreds of other brethren who have baptized tens and fifties and hundreds during their missions. Is it possible that each of you could develop some Wilford Woodruffs and Brigham Youngs who could baptize hundreds and thousands? Can we raise our sights?” Quoting from that marvelous verse in the Book of Mormon where Alma talks about bringing thousands of souls unto the Lord, President Kimball then said, “Did you hear the word thousands? ... Not hundreds, not dozens, not tens, but thousands. ... The Lord ... knows what these words mean, and when he uses the word thousands, he means thousands. And that’s ten hundred in a thousand! (Benson 6.)

Certainly, these instructions for members and missionaries to raise their sights and share the gospel are not new. Most recently, President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated that there is a “better way” than contacting “and that way is through the members of the Church” (104). Even among current and historic counsel from our leaders to be member missionaries and to preach at a level like Wilford Woodruff and Alma, missionaries still stick to contacting. In the highest baptizing mission in the South America North Area, the number of contacts nearly doubled the number of first discussions by ten

times (Personal research in cooperation with President Claudio R. M. Costa of the South America North Area). Our missionaries have been so indoctrinated in contacting that this current transition to new material from the Missionary Department is experiencing a slow start.

Traditions of missionaries knocking doors for two years must end if we are to return to the effectiveness of earlier eras. The change has already been introduced by the highest of Church leaders, and only needs to be implemented by both missionary and member alike.

## **Conclusion**

Just as paradigms of social standings of Latter-day Saints among the world have been proven erroneous, so too have the paradigms that surround missionary work been shown to contribute to a decline in missionary effectiveness. The answer of improving our effectiveness is not in some new method or sensational story, but in the current teachings of Church leaders.

As 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionaries demonstrated, today's full-time missionaries are capable of much more than an appointment with one family at a time. Furthermore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century also records of intense member missionary service. Latter-day Saints need not fear sharing the gospel, for most of the Christian world is involved in the same work, and hearers of our message will not be nearly as nervous as we seem to be.

We can raise our sights and believe that there are yet more Wilfords and Brigham, more Almas and Ammons. And we can answer the call of the incomparable Brigham Young that we continue our missions just as though we are still in the field.

President Hinckley said it best: "So many of us look upon missionary work as simply tracting. Everyone who is familiar with this work knows there is a better way. That way is through the members of the Church.... Now, my brethren and sisters, we can let the missionaries try to do it alone, or we can help them. If they do it alone, they will knock on doors day after day and the harvest will be meager. Or as members we can assist them in finding and teaching investigators" (104). When members correct the traditions that missionary work is for the full-time missionary only, or even that a Latter-day

Saint must embark in some sensational bearing of testimony to win converts, then will we be able to experience, truly, the largest harvest of souls in sacred history. This can only occur when we no longer look upon missionary work as contacting.

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