

The Field is White: Growing the Kingdom in Augusta, Maine

Submitted by Elder Clayton Christensen, Area Seventy in the North America Northeast area.

In September 2002, I was assigned to assist Elder Glen L. Pace of the North America Northeast area presidency in reorganizing the presidency of the Augusta Maine Stake. As we sought to learn whom the Lord would have us call as the new stake president, we asked the men we interviewed how they had come to belong to the church. A startling number gave the same answer: “My parents were baptized into the Farmingdale Branch in 1963 when I was a boy.” After hearing this several times, we inquired what had happened – and were told that over 450 people had joined the church in that branch that year.

Before the general session of stake conference the next day, I was introduced to an elderly man and his wife in the audience, George and Karline McLaughlin. George had been president of the Farmingdale Branch at that time, and I subsequently returned to interview the McLaughlins in their home about their experience in leading the branch. George was in failing health, confined now to his bed in their attic bedroom of their humble home in Gardiner, Maine where they raised their eight children. As I listened to their memories, it became clear to me that I was in the presence of two of the humblest but mightiest missionaries in the history of the church; and that their story needed to be told.

Brother and Sister McLaughlin joined the church in 1951, due to a remarkable vision that her mother had had. Their marriage was sealed in 1955 in the Logan Temple. At the time there were five branches of the church in Maine. The McLaughlins attended a branch of ten active members in Litchfield, near Augusta. The branch had grown to over 20 active members by the early 1960s when George was called as branch president, and in 1962 the branch moved to a small building they had built in Farmingdale, another suburb of Augusta. Shortly after the move, George, who drove a milk delivery truck by profession, decided to fast and pray for two days in order to learn from the Lord how he should go about building the church in the vast area of central Maine that comprised the Farmingdale Branch. On the second day, George pulled his milk truck to the side of a country road and found a secluded spot where he poured out to the Lord his desires to build the Kingdom. As he returned to his truck, he came to understand through the spirit what he and the members of his branch needed to do.

The following Sunday in a Sacrament Meeting address, George described his plan to the branch members – a talk that Sister McLaughlin recalled as one of the most inspiring and spirit-filled she has ever heard. Following the meeting President McLaughlin called three of the families in the branch to serve as “proselyting families.” Their assignment was each to bring to another family to the church on the Wednesday evening ten days hence. At that meeting, which George called “U-Night,” he would show a movie about the church and then give a brief talk that concluded with his testimony. This was to be followed by the missionaries teaching a discussion to the family in their home later that week, and then by the missionaries teaching the next discussion to them at the church during the next Wednesday’s “U-Night.” They were to continue meeting with these families twice each week, once at the church and once in their homes, until the families were baptized or decided not to continue their investigation – at which points the proselyting families would need to find another family to bring to the next U-Night.

When the time of the first U-Night arrived, each of the proselyting families arrived with a family. In the interview I expressed surprise that these families had so faithfully accepted and delivered on this intimidating assignment from their branch president. Karline explained, “It was because of the talk George gave in Sacrament Meeting.” Each of the families they brought to the U-Night was baptized, and on the next Sunday George called each of these new families to serve as proselyting families as well.

When he had met Brother and Sister McLaughlin shortly after arriving in 1963 to preside over the New England Mission, President Truman Madsen told George that if they baptized someone in the

Farmingdale Branch, he would like to attend the service. A few weeks after the U-Night process had started, George invited President Madsen to a baptismal service, but was told that his schedule would not permit it. When George reminded President Madsen of his promise, he countered, “How many are being baptized?” as if to test whether it was worth the three-hour drive from Boston. “I’m not going to tell you. Just come,” was George’s reply.

When President Madsen walked into the back of the Farmingdale chapel he counted 28 people sitting in white clothes waiting to be baptized. Tears came to his eyes. “George, I’ll never see anything like this again in my life,” he said in a hushed voice. “Yes, you will,” was George’s reply.

As more and more people were baptized and called to serve as proselyting families, the branch members had to alter their U-Night format. While the introductory film was being shown in the chapel, each of the missionary discussions was taught in a different classroom in the building – so that if a family had studied the second discussion the prior week in their home, on Wednesday night they went to the room where the third discussion was being taught at the church. That year 451 people were baptized into the Farmingdale Branch; and the next year, 190 people joined.

“With so many people coming into what had been such a tiny branch, how did you keep them in the church?” I asked.

“We had to teach them how to be Mormons,” was Karline’s reply. “You need to understand who these people were,” she continued. “Most of them were poor and had little schooling.” She and George reminisced about one family that literally lived in a log cabin with rags stuffed in cracks to keep the wind out. “They stayed faithful, and eventually all four of their children graduated from college.”

“My job as branch president was to teach them how to give talks and teach lessons in church. I had to teach them how to teach the gospel to their children. My counselors ran the branch. I trained the new members to become strong members,” George added.

In the framework of retention that President Hinckley subsequently taught, these hundreds of new members had friends. They were brought to the church by friends, and then they brought friends. They had responsibility. The Sunday after they were baptized they were called as proselyting families – a simple, clear call to bring another family, and then another, to the next U-Night. And they were nourished in the good word of God, as they continued to learn and help teach these concepts again and again while helping their friends study the gospel with the missionaries.

Five years later, in 1968, Elder Harold B. Lee of the Quorum of the Twelve organized the Augusta Maine Stake. Ten of the twelve members of that original high council had been baptized into the Farmingdale branch in 1963-64.

George McLaughlin, whose vision and faith had launched the church in Maine on this trajectory, was not called to be the stake president or one of his counselors. “Someone came up to us in the congregation and asked if we felt badly not to have been called to lead the stake,” Karline recalled. George broke in, “I told her that I was quite happy to sit with the people we loved and let others take the lead. That’s why we did it – to bring others to Christ, not to bring any honor to us.”

The contributions of many of the great missionaries in the early days of the restored church have been broadly published. I was struck that in contrast, one of the greatest missionaries of this dispensation was living the final portion of his noble life unheralded, in that small home in Gardiner, Maine. As we finished our conversation, however, I could sense that the deep spirit of peace that I felt in that room came from angels who were there – patiently waiting so that, whenever the time came, they could escort Brother George McLaughlin, the milk truck driver, to a hero’s welcome in heaven.