

Lighting a Fire Under the Winchester Ward

“I thought we had this member missionary thing solved!” groused Brian Poulsen, ward mission leader of the Winchester Ward of the Middlesex Massachusetts Stake, after a frustrating Ward Council Meeting. Sensing that his wife Amy seemed to be in a mood to listen, he continued, “Six months ago things were going *so* well. We agreed on a vision for the ward, and set goals for increasing sacrament meeting attendance, for baptisms and for finding people for the missionaries to teach. *Every* member of the ward council seemed to have bought into the goals, and each organization contributed a building block to the ward mission plan, just like it says we should. Everybody seemed so excited to be involved in missionary work. But *nothing is happening. Nothing.* And nobody seems to care that nothing is happening! What can I do? It’s like pushing a string to get people to do what they said they’d do!”

Background

The Winchester Ward was the most average ward in the stake. Sacrament meeting attendance averaged 140 people – a diverse mix of life-long members and local converts. Typically three or four people were baptized each year, and the ward had been on these plateaus of attendance and conversions for nearly a decade. Some communities within the ward, such as Winchester itself, were populated by prosperous people who seemed disinterested in religion. Most of the active members of the ward lived in these communities. Other neighborhoods in the ward were filled with people whose circumstances compelled them to be humble (Alma 32:1-14). It was easier for the full-time missionaries to baptize people from these communities, but the ward’s track record in keeping them active was poor.

Brian and Amy Poulsen had moved to the Boston area four years earlier. Brian had been serving as ward mission leader for eight months. When released from his full-time mission Brian resolved that he would become a great member missionary. But despite his efforts to live an exemplary life, none of his colleagues at work or his neighbors had expressed interest in or curiosity about the church. As a consequence, when called to be ward mission leader Brian was glad to have a calling that would require him to do what he had long known he should do – become a good member missionary.

Developing the Winchester Ward Mission Plan

Although Chapter 13 of *Preach My Gospel* and a letter from the First Presidency titled “Missionary Work in the Ward,” stated that every ward needed to develop and implement a ward mission plan, no units in the Middlesex Stake had done so until 2007, when a persistent high councilor finally got Winchester Ward Bishop Will Romney to do it. Bishop Romney had asked the prior ward mission leader to draft the plan, which the bishop then edited and approved. But few other members of the ward – even those on the ward council – knew that the plan existed, let alone explain what the plan was. It had little discernible impact on the pace of missionary work in the Winchester Ward.

Leaders of the Cambridge Massachusetts Stake prepared this case for training ward missionary leaders in how to implement their ward mission plans. Electronic copies may be downloaded from missionaryleaders.org.

Shortly after Brian's call as ward mission leader Clay Porter, the Middlesex Stake's high councilor for missionary work, met with Brian in two one-hour training sessions, talking through the concepts and methods in the booklet, "Leading a Great Ward Mission," page by page. As prompted in the booklet, Clay had asked Brian to prayerfully read the booklet and then summarize in writing what it meant for how he needed to serve in his calling. "Prayerfully reading that booklet not only taught me what I was supposed to do and how I could do it, but it helped me make commitments to the Lord that I truly have tried to keep," Brian reflected.

Shortly after these meetings with Clay, Brian summarized for Bishop Romney what he had learned about leading the ward mission, and secured Bishop Romney's commitment to read it as well. Bishop Romney quickly embraced the concepts, and asked each ward council member to read pages 7-12 on how to create and implement a great ward mission plan. He announced that they would begin creating a plan in the next ward council meeting.

At that ward council meeting, the Bishopric presented their vision for what the ward should become five years hence; and after discussion and word-smithing, the council approved the statement as the foundation of their ward mission plan: "In 5 years we want to have become large and strong enough that our ward will be divided into two wards, each of which is as strong as the Winchester Ward is today." (The complete ward mission plan is included in the appendix.) The bishopric next proposed for discussion three goals for the coming year: growth in sacrament meeting attendance, the number of people the members would seek to find for the missionaries to teach, and the number they planned to baptize.

This discussion did not go nearly as smoothly, because some felt that striving for numerical goals was antithetical to the "focus-on-the-one" mindset that they wanted to bring to their callings. Brian then read President Monson's statement that is quoted in *Leading a Great Ward Mission*:

"When we deal in generalities we shall never succeed. When we deal in specifics, we shall rarely have failure. When performance is measured, performance improves. When performance is measured and reported, the rate of improvement accelerates."

In the end, the Ward Council agreed to the three goals recommended by the bishopric: grow Sacrament Meeting attendance from 140 to 164; find 70 people for the missionaries to teach; and baptize 15 new members.

In the last portion of that ward council meeting, Brian described the concept of "building blocks" that each organization in the ward should contribute to the plan. Brian gave some examples, noting that a great building block had three characteristics:

1. It transforms things that we already are doing into missionary opportunities;
2. It occurs repeatedly, so that doing it becomes habitual; and
3. Specific people need to have a specific responsibility for doing each of these initiatives.

Bishop Romney assigned each priesthood and auxiliary leader on the council to meet with their presidencies to discuss and decide upon one or two building blocks that their organization would contribute to the ward mission plan. The bishop then said that a special ward council meeting would be held two weeks hence. At that meeting they were to discuss each organization's building block; recommend improvements so that each would clearly meet the above criteria; and assemble them into a plan that they would unitedly implement. Bishop Romney also announced that the first

half of every ward council meeting was going to be dedicated to a “return and report” on each organization’s progress in implementing its building block.

After the ward council finished assembling the plan at that special meeting, Bishop Romney remarked, “When we wrote our first plan I didn’t understand the purpose. It is not an administrative exercise. Rather, each organization in the ward has one or two tangible things we have committed to do that will contribute to accomplishing our vision and goals. It puts us all on the same page, pulling in the same direction. I’m excited to see what happens!”

Implementation of the Ward Mission Plan

“I remember how excited you were after that meeting,” Brian’s wife Amy recalled sympathetically. “Sit down and tell me more.”

“Well, nothing has happened, basically,” Brian responded. “For example, if you remember, the Primary’s building block was to transform baptismal services into missionary opportunities. The idea is that when our children are baptized, we print invitations to the baptismal service. The missionaries personally deliver the invitations in our behalf to eight or ten families of our kids’ friends; and the missionaries attend the service, so that they can welcome these families. Rather than an adult giving the talk on baptism, the child being baptized gives the talk, explaining the covenant she is going to make. The friends’ families see this, and then see her father baptize and confirm her and give a father’s blessing. A few days later, the missionaries visit each family that came, giving them a thank-you note from the child’s parents for attending and asking, ‘Do you have any questions about what you saw there that we could help with? Well, two weeks ago the Carlisles baptized their daughter Emily. There wasn’t a single non-member there!

“I pulled Sheila Mahoney (the Primary president) aside afterward and reminded her that her building block in the plan was to have the families in the ward invite non-members to baptismal services. Sheila said, ‘I told them about the idea, but they just didn’t feel comfortable with it. They have lots of extended family members in the area who are active in the church, and they had always felt that baptisms should be family events. What else could I do?’”

Despite Sheila’s urgings, a baptismal service a month later for another boy in the ward yielded the same result: No non-member friends were invited. “The idea seemed to be such a good one,” Sheila Mahoney confided to Brian. “But so far, the families in the ward just want to stay in their comfort zones. Our Jewish friends invite us to their Bat Mitzvahs. But we can’t convince our members to invite non-member friends to our baptismal services!”

“Getting the other leaders to follow through on their building blocks has been like pushing a string,” Brian complained to Amy. “The high priests said they’d get every new convert to the temple within two months of baptism, to do work for their ancestors. But because we’ve not baptized anyone the high priests don’t have anything to do. The Elders said they’d hold firesides that members could invite non-member friends to. They held one. About 30 members went, but none of them invited friends. They don’t have another fireside planned, and it looks like they’ve given up on this idea. And we have a new Relief Society presidency. I bet they don’t even know that they’re supposed to be involving non-member friends when they give compassionate service.”

“Is anybody doing their part of the plan?” Amy asked.

“Yeah, the Priests and Teachers are,” Brian answered. “They have been having what they call a ‘career night’ on the second Tuesday of each month to teach the boys about different professions. The advisers so far have had four of their non-member friends teach the boys about their careers, and it’s just been fabulous. One of these friends runs a welding shop, for example. He had prepared almost-completed steel frames for six bar stools, and he helped each boy weld on the last two pieces – and sent each of them home with a stool frame. The advisers say that the activities led by their non-member friends are *a lot* better than the ones that the members led. I wish I could get the others to be as committed as the YM presidency has been,” Brian lamented to Amy.

“What made the ward council meeting today so frustrating?” Amy queried.

“It was Brett (2nd counselor in the bishopric),” Brian responded. “I started the discussion with two statistics: In the first four months of this year the members needed to have found 23 people for the missionaries to teach, in order to be on pace to make our year’s goal of 70. We’ve only given them seven referrals. If we keep this pace we’ll only find 21 people – a third of our goal. Then I said that if we really want to lift sacrament meeting attendance to 164 by the end of the year, it needs to have increased from 140 to 148 by now. But basically, attendance is flat – no improvement.

“As soon as I said this, Brett broke in and said, ‘I’ve never been comfortable with setting numerical goals and then tracking the numbers. The church is about *people*. It’s not a business!’

“The meeting ran downhill from there,” Brian lamented. “Rather than hearing an exciting series of member missionary experiences resulting from doing the building blocks in the plan, we spent the time arguing about whether we ought to be measuring things.”

“It’s discouraging,” Amy sympathized. “It sounds like everyone was excited as long as they were talking about what they were *going* to do. But when it comes to *doing* it, everybody’s still stuck in the same rut! If I were you, I’d make this the only item on the agenda of your next correlation meeting with your ward missionaries. And you need to talk with the bishop about it. If you’re going to be a great ward mission leader, you’ve got to light a fire somewhere!”

Getting Things Going in the Winchester Ward

The next Saturday the missionaries and all five of the ward missionaries in the Winchester Ward came to the Poulsens’ home for their coordination meeting. After the prayer Brian began by saying, “We have problems with our ward mission plan.” He recounted the discussion he had had with Amy the prior Sunday, and then threw it open: “We need to figure out how to get this going!”

Melinda Sorensen, who served as a ward missionary with her husband Chris, was the first to speak up. “I’ve been thinking about this, too. I was reading a story in *For All the Saints*, a history of the church in the Boston area. It described a time in the Cambridge First Ward when missionary work was as moribund as it is in the Winchester Ward today. A missionary named Susan Fulcher was transferred into the ward. I brought my copy of the book to read you this story.”

On Monday, September 25, John Muir excitedly phoned the sisters. “Sister Fulcher, in church yesterday I got this feeling that I should call my classmate, Chip, to ask if he would like to learn about our church. So I called, and he said he would take all six discussions! Do you have time next Friday night to come and teach the first one?”

That discussion went very well. Although he didn't accept a baptismal commitment, Chip committed to read and pray about the Book of Mormon, and they agreed to meet every Sunday afternoon for the next six weeks.

The sisters stayed at the Muirs' apartment momentarily after Chip left. "This feels *so* wonderful," Jean Muir said. "We've had a special spirit in our home all week as we've prepared for this."

"Would you do me a favor?" Sister Fulcher asked. "Next Sunday could you bear your testimony in fast meeting about what happened here, and how it has made you feel?"

John agreed, and was the first to bear his testimony the next Sunday. "Last week in Sacrament Meeting out of the blue I got this thought that I should call one of my classmates to ask if he wanted to learn more about our Church. This thought was *such* a surprise because there's nothing about him that would have reminded you about Mormonism. But I followed the impression and called, saying that I was a member of the Mormon church, and it always had meant a lot to me. I said that before too much time passed in this school year, I wanted to invite him to our home and explain to him a bit about what we believed.

"To my surprise, he answered that he had wanted to learn about the Mormon Church for years, and knew I was a Mormon. He said he hadn't asked me about it because he was a little embarrassed, and knew how busy I was. I then told him about these great sister missionaries that are working in our ward, and how they have this set of six lessons designed to introduce people to the basics of our beliefs – and he signed up for all six on the spot. What I wanted to bear my testimony about is the spirit that has come into our home since we've been teaching him with Sisters Fulcher and Pingree. There is no peace in the world like the peace the gospel brings, when it is taught by the Spirit of God in your home. I am *so* grateful for this, and wanted to share this with you."

Two weeks later John Muir was sitting on the library steps at the Harvard Business School eating his lunch when an LDS classmate, Gary Crittenden, joined him. "John," Gary began, "You remember when you bore your testimony about studying with Chip and the missionaries? As I heard you I said to myself, 'Man, if John Muir can do that, I can do it. So this morning I asked this guy in my section if he'd like to come to our home this Sunday and learn about the church with the sister missionaries, and he said yes! He probably won't join the church – he has too much repenting to do. But I just had this feeling about him and then I thought of what you said to Chip. So thanks for the inspiration!"

Later that week another LDS student at the Harvard Business School, Marv Slovacek, invited one of his classmates to hear the missionary discussions, and *he* accepted.

After teaching the first lessons to these friends. Sister Fulcher stayed in Gary and Marv's apartments for an additional minute and asked, "Next Fast and Testimony Meeting, could you please bear your testimony about what it was like to ask your friend to study the gospel – and how it has affected your family? I just get a sense that a lot of wonderful people in the ward *want* to invite people, but are afraid. I think you could help them."

At the November Fast and Testimony Meeting, Gary Crittenden and Marv Slovacek both bore their testimonies. During the meeting three other women in the ward also remarked about experiences they had recently had, sharing the gospel with people they knew.

Soon, nearly all of the testimonies in these meetings centered on experiences in sharing the gospel. Enthusiasm for missionary work, and the courage to do it, spread. In the next four months members of the Cambridge First Ward found 35 people for the sisters to teach, and 14 of them were baptized.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” Melinda continued. “What triggered the explosion of member missionary work was one person who was willing to bear his testimony. We just need a few people who can bear testimony. For example, the Young Men’s presidency has been inviting non-member friends to lead activities, and they’ve had a great experience with it. In fact, I think that one of John Rogers’ friends is now studying with you elders, right?” After they nodded, Melinda continued, “We need to ask John to bear his testimony. Maybe it will inspire the others to start doing what they said they’d do in their building blocks of the plan.”

Chris Sorensen chimed in. “After reading the piece in *Leading a Great Ward Mission* about leading by example, I set a date for finding someone for the missionaries to teach, and have been fasting every Sunday that I could find someone for the missionaries. Just this week I was talking with a guy on the 2nd shift. One thing led to another. I invited him, and he said yes. I’ll talk about this at the next fast meeting.”

Brian then mused, “I think the Primary’s building block has great potential.” Looking at another of the ward missionaries, Denise Wood, Brian asked, “Your daughter Kelley will be getting baptized in a couple of months, right? Will you guys do this, and then talk in testimony meeting about what a great experience it was?” Denise agreed.

“I guess what this tells us is that nothing succeeds like success, and nothing fails like failure,” Melinda Sorensen summarized. “It is *very* important that when we try something like the Elders Quorum’s fireside, that we ensure that it is a success. It was a *great* meeting; and if we had helped the Elders’ presidency lay the right foundation so that people brought friends, they’d all be talking about how fantastic it feels to share the gospel!

“And it’s clear that the testimonies of a few members who are succeeding in sharing the gospel can be powerful motivators for others – and the enthusiasm can spread through the ward,” Melinda continued. “In fact, I have a proposal. Let’s set a goal that in every fast and testimony meeting, we want at least two testimonies to focus on an inspiring missionary experience. Towards the end of the meeting, if other members haven’t offered missionary-focused testimonies, we as ward missionaries will do so. We are the backstop. That means that we each need to have an inspiring experience in sharing the gospel every month, so that we’ll be prepared to testify about it, if necessary.” Each of the ward missionaries agreed.

Brian then asked, “We set a goal to increase sacrament meeting attendance from 140 to 164 this year, and we haven’t budged over 140. Any ideas about why we’re not doing better, and about what we can do to get things going?”

One of the full-time missionaries, Elder Spencer, pitched in. “It was in the plan to convene a quick meeting after church with a member from each presidency and the missionaries, to ask the question, ‘Who else could have been here today who didn’t come?’ One of us is then supposed to contact that person that day, telling them how much we missed them, asking if they’re okay, and inviting them to come next week – just like the Good Shepherd worried about the one sheep that didn’t return to the fold, rather than the 99 that did. That meeting just isn’t happening. I think the

reason is that the people who are supposed to come to the meeting don't feel like it's important. We did it for a few weeks at the beginning of the year when we were kicking off the ward mission plan. People would take assignments to contact people who didn't come, but I don't think that most of them ever made the contact. Then at the next week's meeting, Brother Steele (bishop's counselor), who runs the meeting, would never follow up on whether we contacted the people. We'd just make another list, he'd ask for volunteers to contact them, and then we'd leave. But never any follow-through. So people just didn't take the meeting or the assignments seriously, and things fizzled out."

"Here's what I'll do," Brian offered. "I'll ask the ward clerk to give me the attendance number right after sacrament meeting, and I'll update a graph every week, showing the pace we need to be at in order to achieve this goal, and what we've actually done. I'll give it to Brother Steele so that he can report it in that meeting. And I'll talk to him about accountability – returning and reporting. In fact, on Sunday evening he ought to call each person who got one of these "good shepherd" assignments, just to be sure they did it. Brother Steele has never served in a leadership position before, and I bet he just doesn't understand why follow through is important."

Denise Wood then spoke. "I know we're almost out of time, but I have an idea – something else we can do to get sacrament meeting attendance up. I got this from my brother who is in the New Canaan Ward in Connecticut. They decided to ask each person who is assigned to speak in Sacrament Meeting to invite three non-member friends to the sacrament meeting when they talk. Think about this – in any other church, delivering the sermon is a big deal – so this really is an easy invitation to make. People will come to hear you. The quality of the talks goes way up. And it helps with at least two of our goals. Sacrament meeting attendance automatically increases by 9 people. And in a year's time we'll have had 468 non-members come to our church meetings! Most of them will just see it as an interesting Mormon Church experience. But you know that some of them will feel the Spirit and want to know more. What do you think?"

Everyone in the meeting agreed with Denise that this would be a great addition to the ward mission plan. "I'll sell the Ward Council on it tomorrow morning," Brian concluded. He then thanked his fellow missionaries. "I'll tell you what I'm taking out of this meeting, in addition to some great ideas. It is that if we as a band of ward missionaries take our ward mission plan seriously – and if we take our goals seriously – it can go a long way to lighting a fire under the whole ward. I hope that our success with each piece of our plan is something that you think and pray about every day. I sure do. And if you wouldn't mind, I'll offer the closing prayer."

Appendix: The Winchester Ward Mission Plan

Our Vision for the Winchester Ward: In 5 years we want to have become large and strong enough that our ward will be divided into two wards, each of which will be as strong as the Winchester Ward is today.

This Year's Goals: This year we will grow Sacrament Meeting attendance from 140 to 164; we will find 70 people for the missionaries to teach; and we will baptize 15 new members.

We will do this by:

1. In every prayer offered in our ward meetings, we will God to put into our paths people who would accept our invitation to learn about the church.
2. The Relief Society will invite a non-member friend to lead a class at each Enrichment Night, and involve a non-member friend in every compassionate service effort.
3. The Primary will ask the family of each child being baptized to have the missionaries deliver invitations to the families of several of the child's friends to attend the baptismal service. The child will give the talk on baptism, and then the missionaries will follow through with the friends who attended, to see if any had questions.
4. The bishop will invite all adults and youth, ten people at a time, to attend a 3-week class on how to share the gospel.
5. The Activities Committee will involve a non-member friend in the work of preparing and managing each ward activity.
6. The high priests will ensure that each new convert visits the temple to perform baptisms for his or her own ancestors within two months of their baptism.
7. The YM/YW advisers will invite a non-member friend each month to lead a youth activity
8. The Elders Quorum will hold a consistently outstanding fireside each month to which members can confidently bring friends.
9. The missionaries, a member of the bishopric, and a member of each priesthood and auxiliary presidency will confer after meetings each Sunday to list those members who ought to have attended but didn't come. We will contact each of them that day to say that they were missed, to express concern for their well-being, and to offer to help them attend church the next Sunday.