

How to Help our New Members Become Strong, Committed Latter-day Saints

Prepared for the Hartford Connecticut, Boston Massachusetts, and Manchester New Hampshire Coordinating Councils

Whenever one group works on a piece of a project and hands it off to another to continue the work, defining how the two groups must work together is crucial. If the first group does not do its work well, then the second needs to fix what the first should have done before they can begin their job. Even when both groups feel jointly responsible for producing a successful result, frustration reigns if no one has clearly defined how the work of the two groups must fit together. The first group often works hard on things that don't matter. The second blames the first for the problems and gets tired from re-working what they think the first should have done.

We see interface problems like this in education, where first grade teachers hand kids off to the second grade who can't yet read. Toyota sees (and has solved) this problem in the myriad steps involved in designing and manufacturing cars. There are hand-off problems in athletics, where one runner gives the baton to the next; and in medicine, when surgeons deliver patients to critical care nurses. And we encounter this challenge when missionaries hand off newly baptized members to the leaders of our wards.

A key reason why many of our new members fall away from the church after baptism is that we have inadequately and inaccurately defined the interface between investigation and membership. We are wrestling with problems that would not arise if we were to design the work of members and missionaries to interface properly at the point of baptism. We do not correctly measure whether we are succeeding. Nor do we hold missionaries or members accountable for doing this work well. It is no wonder that only a fraction of new members are still fully active five years after baptism. "Working around" the problem caused by this poorly defined interface is frustrating and ineffective. And it allows the problem to persist.

The good news is that if we define more clearly and accurately what must be done before and after baptism, we can be much more successful without requiring more work by members and missionaries. It is quite possible that doing these things will *increase* the number of people who are baptized.

The Interface Between Investigation and Membership

President Hinckley has defined the elements of the interface between investigation and membership: "A friend, a responsibility, and nourishing with the good word of God."¹ We have not translated this specification into the required changes in the way we work with investigators and new members, however. There are two sides to each of these elements. It is not enough to say that the members need to nourish new converts. Converts must understand how to be nourished. It's not enough to say that members must give responsibility to converts. If this is to work, converts must be ready to accept responsibility. Investigators must be prepared to receive these things and members must be prepared to give them.

Members *and* missionaries are *jointly* responsible for improving what we do on the investigation *and* membership sides of the baptismal interface. We're all responsible for getting it right: "The work of proclaiming the gospel will move forward more powerfully when full-time missionaries and members coordinate their efforts and work in unity together."² "It isn't enough for people simply to come into the church. They must come to stay."³

Nourishment in the Good Word of God

If new members are to be nourished in the good word of God, it means that before baptism we need to teach them *how* to be nourished. And upon baptism, we must be prepared to continue providing the needed nourishment without interruption. Conversion is an ongoing process in which missionaries and members are partners.

Teaching Investigators How to Be Nourished

I will illustrate how we must do a better job teaching investigators how to be nourished by describing how Fred Bittner, a friend, accepted the gospel. Fred had been raised in a Christian home. At the end of the first lesson the missionaries gave him a Book of Mormon and invited him to read and pray about it. At the beginning of the second and third lessons they asked if he had read any of it, and if he had been praying. When Fred said "Yes," the missionaries seemed pleased and quickly got down to the business of teaching him the lesson. At the end of each lesson they again asked if he would continue reading and praying. Fred said he would.

At the beginning of the fourth lesson, the light of the gospel that we normally see in the face of those who are discovering the truth just wasn't radiating from Fred's. In fact, he looked troubled. So when he told the missionaries again that he had been studying and praying, I interrupted and asked, "Fred how are you praying, and what are you saying in your prayers?"

Fred looked relieved that I'd asked, and answered, "I guess I really don't know how to pray." We had assumed that because he was raised in a Christian home and had heard us offer prayers at the start and end of the lessons, that he knew how to pray in private. But he did not.

I then offered, "Let's kneel down, and I'll demonstrate how I pray. Then I'll ask my wife to pray, and then Elder Hoffman. Listen to what we say and how we say it. Each will be different, but listen for patterns in what we say. Then let's sit in our chairs and you can ask us why we said what we said. We'll do our best to explain." We did this.

We then discussed the concerns and challenges in Fred's life that had prompted him to accept our invitations to come to these discussions. We suggested how Fred could pray for God's help with these concerns. Then I asked Fred to pray aloud, and we gave suggestions on how he could make his prayers even more effective. We also explained that during and after his prayers he could receive responses from God. We described what these felt like, and said that when he prayed privately it was very important not just to speak, but to listen for words in his mind and feelings in his heart.

I then asked Fred how much of the Book of Mormon he had read. He confessed that he had only read the introduction. “I’ve been busy and it’s been hard to get into it,” he explained.

“You don’t read this like you read novels when you were in school,” I offered. “To show you how to do it, I’m going to give you a simple homework assignment. Read Moroni, chapter 8. Then write a two-paragraph answer to each of these two questions.” I wrote them down: 1) Why does it make God angry when people baptize infants? And 2), What is the process by which your sins are forgiven?

I then said, “Before you sit down to read this chapter, kneel and pray aloud, asking God to help you answer these questions. Then read the chapter and write a draft of your answers.

“Then pray again,” I continued. “Explain to God what you’ve written, and ask, ‘I’m going to read this chapter one more time. Please help me understand this even more clearly.’ Then, based on what you learn from this second reading, revise what you’ve written into the final draft of the homework assignment that you’ll turn in to me when we meet next.”

“When this is done, I want you to pray a third time,” I said. We read Moroni 10:3-5. I explained two things about this scripture that are crucial elements of *how* to pray. “First, notice that we need to think about all that God has done for us. The reason why God wants you to reflect upon the things He has done for you is that doing this will help you realize how much He loves you. Second, it’s not enough just to ask for knowledge. Praying with *real intent* means that *you need to tell God what you intend to do with the knowledge you are asking him to give you.*⁴ So finish this exercise by praying one more time,” I said. “Thank God for helping you to understand the things in this chapter. Then ask him whether the things that you have summarized in your own words are true; and tell God what you intend to do if He tells you it is true. Then listen to how you feel in your heart.”

I finished by saying, “You’ll be tempted to short-cut this process by busily reading the chapter from beginning to end as fast as you can – the same way you read assignments in school. But remember that this is different. Back then, you just wanted to finish the book. Here, your objective isn’t necessarily to finish the book. It’s to find out if it is true.”

Fred did this. At the next lesson, Fred’s face had changed. He had only read one chapter, but because we had taught him *how* to pray and *how* to read the scriptures, he received more benefit from one chapter than he would have gotten had he read the whole book in the way he had learned to read novels. What subsequently happened in that lesson is exactly what God promised in D&C 50:17-22. The missionaries came prepared to teach through the power of the spirit, and Fred had come prepared to learn through the power of the spirit. We were edified.

We *should* give investigators an adequate understanding of the doctrines of the church before baptism. But in my experience, missionaries take *at least* 95% of the time in their lessons teaching doctrine. Instead, we must do a *much* better job teaching investigators *how* to study and *how* to pray in a way that brings spiritual nourishment into their lives.⁵ Learning the doctrine is a life-long process. Most of this can occur after baptism if they know how to be nourished and we nourish them.

Being Prepared to Nourish New Members

We have been asked to provide continued nourishment to new members in two ways: teaching the five missionary lessons; and taking them to the temple to be baptized for ancestors. We aren't doing it. In the system prior to *Preach My Gospel*, only 36% of those who were baptized in the Northeast were taught all six new member lessons.⁶ While the stakes in our temple district together baptize about 70 people each month, we see only a few new members each month in the temple baptistry.

Let me propose two mechanisms to help us provide this nourishment more consistently: asking ward missionaries to serve at regular times each week as home and visiting teachers to new members; and getting new members to the temple within two months of baptism.

Ask ward missionaries to serve on a regular rhythm

When we call ward missionaries, we should ask them to reserve the same times every week – Wednesday evening and Saturday afternoon, for example – when they will commit to serve as missionaries. Many other callings in the church entail regular service, and committing to serve on this regular rhythm will bring structure to ward missionaries' work. It will help the full-time missionaries know when to schedule appointments. More importantly, ward missionaries can then be called to *continue* serving as home teachers for new members for the first 3-4 months of their membership, and to visit them on this weekly rhythm. I use the word *continue* because they will already have been teaching the lessons with the missionaries before baptism.

Like it or not, home and visiting teaching occurs on a monthly rhythm if it occurs at all. It is a shock to new members to go from the daily nurturing of missionaries to monthly visits of home and visiting teachers. Assigning ward missionaries to be home teachers to new members creates a home teaching district in which these special home teachers serve on a weekly rhythm. A lot of important nourishment can be delivered in these weekly visits for 3-4 months. As noted next, getting the new member to the temple to be baptized for ancestors should be the top priority. When this is underway, then the weekly visits can be filled with teaching new member lessons, teaching the new members how to fulfill their priesthood responsibilities and ward callings, and so on. If the new member is struggling to overcome addictions, rhythmic weekly visits can be invaluable. Three to four months after baptism, we can turn most new members over to the monthly rhythm by which most home and visiting teachers do their work.

In small units where no ward missionaries are serving, bishops should assign the member who helped the missionaries teach the before-baptism lessons, to set this regular time aside every week to continue providing this nourishment after baptism without interruption, as the special home or visiting teacher.⁷

Nourishment in the Temple

On the first home/visiting teaching visit after baptism, this special home/visiting teacher should start helping the new member prepare to visit the temple within eight weeks to be baptized for his or her ancestors. Elder Packer asked us to do this in his December 2004 letter.⁸

I've heard from many sources that about 80% of new members who do baptisms in a temple within 3 months of their own baptism stay active. I have skeptically thought that this might be a statement of correlation and not causality – in other words, maybe the converts who remain worthy and willing to go to the temple are those who would have stayed active anyway. But after interviewing many new members who have done this and others who haven't, I've decided that, in three ways, visiting the temple soon after baptism exerts a strong *causal* influence on new members remaining active. The first is nourishment. Those who have gone to the temple report that after the spiritual high of baptism, they just needed another near-term spiritual goal and another deeply spiritual experience. The second is responsibility: Doing this work for ancestors helps them feel needed – because they *are* needed. The third is friends. They go to the temple with friends and they develop friendships with ward members who help them do their family history work. But perhaps even more importantly, those relatives who have accepted the gospel in the spirit world and have been waiting and praying for one of their descendants to accept the gospel on the earth, will surround and support this new member in ways that may be unseen, but profound.

Rather than it being the general responsibility of everyone to get new members to the temple, each ward's mission plan should give specific responsibility to the ward missionary who is the home/visiting teacher, who can tap the expertise of the High Priests Group Leader / ward family history specialist. They should begin working on this immediately after baptism.

When the bishop interviews new converts at the time of baptism, he should say, "In about two months you need to go to the temple to be baptized for some of your ancestors. Many of them already have accepted the gospel in the spirit world, and they've been waiting and waiting for one of their descendants on the earth to join the church. Now you've done it – you're an answer to their prayers. They are desperate for you to start doing this work for them in the temple. But to enter the temple, six weeks from now I'll need to give you a recommend. I can only do this if you can answer 'Yes' to these questions." He should then read the questions asked in a limited-use recommend interview, and continue, "Satan's going to tempt you to slide back on some of the commitments you've made. He'll tempt you not to come to church next Sunday; to use alcohol or coffee again; to skip paying your tithing, and so on. You've got to hang on. Don't give in. This is really important – and not just for you. Your ancestors are counting on you."

Responsibility

We must do a better job of connecting on *both* sides of the responsibility part of the interface – ensuring that when new members are baptized they are prepared to *accept* responsibility; and by our being ready to *give* them the right responsibility *at the time of baptism*.

Prepared to Accept Responsibility

The scriptures define preparedness to accept responsibility as a key qualification for baptism. We must be "...willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and ... willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8 - 9). We must be *determined* to serve Christ to the end (Moroni 6:3; D&C 20:37) How can we know before baptism that an investigator is indeed willing to accept responsibility to help others? There are two litmus tests.

Making and Keeping Commitments

The first test of investigators' willingness to accept responsibility is whether they have kept the commitments they have been asked to keep as they have studied with the missionaries. Making and keeping commitments is a repeated exercise of faith, repentance, and experiencing a forgiveness of sins. Missionaries' objective in preparing and teaching lessons should not simply be to help investigators understand doctrine. Rather, they should *teach towards commitments* – instructing in such a way that the investigators understand the nature of the commitment they will be asked to make and how to do it; inviting them to make the commitment; and inspiring them to do it.

Preach My Gospel instructs missionaries to "Help people qualify for baptism and confirmation by teaching them true doctrine and inviting them to repent and change their lives, through making and keeping commitments that build their faith in Jesus Christ." In my experience to date, however, our mission leaders and missionaries have historically so strongly emphasized helping investigators understand the doctrine that a tiny fraction of the time in most lessons is spent instructing, inviting and inspiring investigators to make and keep commitments.

I described above how our friend Fred hadn't been taught how to keep the commitment of scripture study and prayer. Here's another example. Of the many times that missionaries have taught people in our home and invited them to attend church, I never remember them having taught our friends *how* to keep this commitment in a way that would change their hearts. Missionaries should not just invite investigators to attend church. They should teach their investigators what it means to keep the Sabbath Day holy; help them define unholy things they habitually have done on the Sabbath that they should stop doing; give them ideas and assignments of holy things they can do to fill the Sabbath; teach them how to dress and how to prepare for and benefit from meetings; and so on. Latter-day Saints are a covenant-making people; and we need to teach our investigators how to make and keep covenants.

Our missionaries should generally budget 15 minutes in each lesson for teaching investigators what these commitments are; and how to make, keep and benefit from them. During this time they must inspire their investigators through testimony to accept the commitments; and follow through to ensure that investigators are benefiting from keeping prior commitments. This is how the new habits that characterize the life of a worthy latter-day saint are established.

Getting themselves to church

A second test of investigators' readiness to accept responsibility is their willingness to get themselves to church. I visited a ward recently where 62 people had been baptized in the prior

14 months. Only nine of those new members were at church on the day that I visited. Most of these new members were dependent upon members for rides to church. I suspect that when the missionaries first invited them to come to church, the investigators said, “I don’t have a car.” The missionaries responded, “That’s okay. We’ll have a member pick you up.” Many of these people had been baptized without ever having taken responsibility to get *themselves* to church. It is hard to imagine that investigators are prepared to accept responsibility to serve and strengthen others if they’re not willing to accept a simple responsibility such as this. The missionaries would help their investigators tremendously if they responded by asking, “Who do you know who has a car who could come to church with you?” If there credibly is no non-member friend or relative who can drive them to church, then bus, bicycle, and walking should be the next alternatives to explore (it was not that many years ago that walking five miles was not considered onerous).

“As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.” If we and the missionaries can inspire even the weakest and most tentative investigators to make and keep simple commitments first, and then more challenging ones, it will set a tone that carries forward. They will be better prepared to accept responsibility as members. Many missionaries assume that if we make it as easy as possible to meet the requirements, more people will be baptized. But man’s ways are not God’s ways. Because the Savior promised that those who lose their lives for the sake of His gospel will find their lives and that His burden will feel light when we take His yoke upon us, we can be confident that in preparing investigators to accept responsibility, *we will not deter honest people from baptism.*¹⁰ It requires faith; but doing what appears to be hard actually will make it easier to baptize and retain more people. Members should be willing to give rides; but this should be our last resort, not the first.

Prepared to Give Responsibility

Despite President Hinckley’s persistent call that we give new members responsibility, on average only 34% of new members ever receive a calling in the church.¹¹ Why?

One factor is the process of falling away. Many converts come to church after baptism and see most members wearing nice clothes and sitting in families. They listen to members speak and teach with confidence and competence. This triggers a feeling in many of them that “I’m not like these people.” *About 60% of new converts, as a result, begin attending only sporadically within four weeks after baptism.*¹²

A second factor is that the process of issuing a calling typically takes four weeks. It often starts when auxiliary and priesthood leaders ask the bishop if he can call a certain person to serve in their organization. Often those who are requested are not available. Through a process of negotiation, desperation and inspiration, agreement is reached, the leaders pray for confirmation, and the call is issued. The process takes four weeks. By the time bishops have decided upon a calling, therefore, they then find that most new members aren’t attending dependably enough that they can extend the calling and count on them to do it.

New members – especially those whose previous lifestyle doesn’t fit easily into the culture of our wards – need to know that they are needed in God’s Kingdom. And the data above suggests that they need to feel needed *right at the time of baptism.* The best way to do this is for

bishops to give ward mission leaders responsibility to tailor an ideal calling for each new convert, and to recommend this calling to the bishop a week *before* baptism. If the bishop is inspired to accept the recommendation, then he can issue the call at the time of baptism. Converts must be ready to accept responsibility, and we must be ready to give it when they need it most.

An ideal calling for new members embodies each part of President Hinckley's interface:

1. ***Friend***: Always serve with another member. It's okay if a calling takes a new convert out of Relief Society: Friendships are best built by working together, not by sitting together.
2. ***Responsibility***: The right responsibility has three characteristics:
 - Straightforward: The assignment must not be unstructured or open-ended.
 - Special: It helps the new member feel important and needed in the ward
 - Sunday: It requires attendance at church every Sunday
3. ***Nourishment***: Service in the calling helps the new member learn the gospel and feel the spirit while serving.

Very few standard callings have all of these characteristics. That is why ward mission leaders need to customize them. A calling as primary teacher, for example, satisfies some of the characteristics: It makes them feel important, requires Sunday attendance, and helps them learn the gospel. But is not straightforward. It can seem daunting and complicated to a new member; and it entails serving alone. A calling as *assistant* primary teacher, however, satisfies all characteristics. Another example: A calling as chorister is straightforward, requires Sunday attendance and helps the convert feel important. But if the new member were also asked to telephone a ward member each week and ask what his or her favorite hymn is so that the ward can sing it on the next Sunday, the calling would also build friendships.

Most bishoprics keep a list of standard callings in the ward, and know which of those positions are not filled. It seems easy to give one of these unfilled callings to a new convert. But often these callings aren't filled for a reason: they aren't very important. Most of these are not good assignments for new members. If they will think creatively and prayerfully, ward mission leaders can design callings that have all or most of the characteristics of an ideal calling. They can then recommend to their bishops a responsibility for each new member that is tailored to each person's capabilities. The normal process for issuing callings doesn't work for new members.

There are isolated incidents where new members have been driven to inactivity because their wards asked too much of them too quickly. But we must be very careful not to generalize from these exceptions. In the first place, 66% of new members never even receive a calling.

And second, callings that conform to the criteria listed above will energize, not discourage, new members.

Of the three elements of the interface between investigation and membership, responsibility is perhaps the piece that we do most poorly. Many new members are poorly prepared to accept responsibility, and we are not ready to give responsibility when it is most needed. Making the changes noted in this section will not require more work: we just need to change the way we work.

Friendship

The role of friendship at the interface between investigation and membership generally is framed as the need to substitute new friends for the old friends of new members – because the social system in which most new members previously lived involves too many temptations and attractions back into a lifestyle of sin. I'd like to address the friendship challenge in two parts: friends at home, and friends at church.

Friends at Home

The problem is friends at home, not friends at church – because many of the temptations to revert back to a convert's pre-baptism lifestyle arise at home. This means that full-time and ward missionaries must focus much more intently on baptizing groups of family members and friends. Whereas we historically have baptized most investigators individually and then faced the challenge of exchanging new friends for prior ones, we should do much more to help investigators bring others into the church with them. The table below shows what a profound difference friends at home can make. It summarizes data on new members that I collected from 3 wards – Lamoille Valley (Montpelier VT Stake), Jamestown (Jamestown NY Stake), and Gardner (Springfield MA Stake). In these wards in the past 3 years 181 people have been baptized. The left-most column characterizes the living environment in which these people were living when they were baptized, on a 1-5 scale where 1 = no support and 5 = strong support for living the gospel.¹³ Those judged to have enjoyed strong support were baptized with other friends or family members, or were living in a home at the time of baptism where family or roommates already were supportive members of the church. Those whose living environment was judged to be providing little or no support were baptized alone, in a living environment where there were no other active LDS members.

Note that of those who were baptized into supportive environments, 49% are today temple-worthy, and another 34% attend church at least three times per month. In contrast, of those who were baptized singly into environments where there was little or no support, only 9% are temple-worthy. Most are totally inactive. Clearly, *it makes a big difference when new converts bring friends and family with them into the church.* In each of these wards, the converts who became strong and those who fell away were exposed to similar efforts by members to be friendly. What made the difference was whether there were supportive LDS friends and family at home.

Nature of support from other members in convert's living environment (scale 1-5)	<u>Activity status of new members</u>				Total
	Temple-worthy	Attends \geq 3 times / month	Attends occasionally	Totally Inactive	
Strong support (4-5)	49%	34%	3%	14%	100%
Modest support (3)	20%	17%	40%	23%	100%
Little or no support (1-2)	<u>9%</u>	<u>16%</u>	<u>19%</u>	<u>56%</u>	<u>100%</u>
Weighted Totals	27%	23%	17%	33%	100%

This data reinforces the importance of asking investigators who don't have a car, "Who do you know who has a car who could bring you to church?" We have long suggested to missionaries that they should solicit referrals from investigators, but we have recommended this as a means of finding new investigators. Perhaps more importantly, we must do better at this because it heavily influences the probability of the investigator remaining active. Indeed, the scriptures state that a demonstrated willingness to stand as a witness of God (to friends and family, for example) is an important standard of qualification at the baptismal interface (D&C 20:37; Mosiah 18:9-10).

Is baptizing groups of people within our reach? President Hinckley recounted a ward in Brazil that suffered from typical problems of new converts falling away quickly. New members sapped rather than added to the strength of the ward. The bishop took ownership of the problem, and working through the missionaries and ward council, found ways to begin baptizing people as members of family groups, rather than individually. He reported that 85% of those baptized in family groups remained active – and that striving to baptize people in family groups did not reduce the total number being baptized. These numbers are stunningly similar to those in the sample above. President Hinckley urged us to adopt this practice as a standard – where the bishop and ward council take ownership of the problem – but we have not.

We certainly should not keep people who have no prospect of support at home from being baptized, because individual converts can become faithful, committed members. For example, in the early years of the church in Korea the vast majority of converts were baptized singly, under age 23. These have become the spiritually powerful, visionary leaders of the Korean church today. Why? Though they were baptized singly, they shouldered tremendous

responsibility as young, inexperienced people. The lesson: when we baptize people who do not bring friends at home into the church, we must be doubly careful to provide responsibility and nourishment, and be sure they are prepared to accept the same. But if the data above are generalizable, missionaries and church leaders must do everything we can to baptize people into situations where there is support at home. If an individual investigator appears on the progress report in ward council and PEC meetings, it should automatically trigger a problem-solving discussion: What can we do to bring friends and family of this investigator into the church as well?

The work of Elder and Sister George McPhee (George is a recovering alcoholic) and others in leading LDS Social Services to establish an Addiction Recovery Program, has given us another powerful tool to help new members stay strong. It is based upon the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. A key tenet is that overcoming addiction is not a matter of willpower. It is a process, not an event. It requires explicit, visible, frequent support from others who are recovering from their own addictions. These are crucial friends for new members. Approximately 100% of our new members must escape an addiction – and some suffer from multiple addictions. Most life-long members have little sense for what is needed; and as a consequence, most new members who were addicted before baptism, relapse into it afterward. Nine of the stakes in New England have an addiction recovery program functioning. We must integrate understanding of this process into the way we help our missionaries teach; into the way we home teach after baptism; and into bishops' training. Describing what must be done would take too much time in this paper; but this is a big deal, not a small one.

Friends at Church: Wards that God Can Trust

I mentioned above the importance of asking ward missionaries to set aside the same regular time each week to serve, to ensure that nourishment in the good word of God continues uninterrupted. This regularity and frequency is critical. For example, a couple of years ago we introduced the gospel to one of my students and her husband, who was a less-active member. When we baptized Clarissa I was concerned because her testimony seemed tenuous. But she wanted to be baptized, and we went ahead. We had no ward missionaries in our ward, but our wise ward mission leader set up a rhythmic system for teaching Clarissa the new member lessons. In 30 minutes on the Sunday evening before their baptism, he phoned six different families in our ward to have Clarissa and Alex into their home for home evening on the next six Mondays, to teach the sequence of new member lessons. He asked each to be sure that these would be deeply spiritual lessons filled with testimony and faith-building stories from their own lives. He gave the schedule to Clarissa and Alex, and as they went through these new member lessons, I saw the light of the gospel change Clarissa's countenance. The deep conversion that we had not been able to achieve in the pre-baptism lessons occurred in the post-baptism ones. What is more, Clarissa and Alex felt deeply loved, and grew to love, each of these families. All were with us on the first anniversary of Clarissa's baptism when they were sealed in the Boston Temple.

In my studies of how we can better build the Kingdom of God, I have come to know three wards whose cultures inspire their members to do many small things, especially for the least of their brothers and sisters – and where great things have resulted. While the wards surrounding them struggle to baptize a few people in a year, these three wards each baptize

twenty to thirty – and most remain faithful. The only way I can explain it is that God seems to trust these wards. When someone new walks into these three chapels, they report feeling instantly loved. There are not more “prepared” people living within the boundaries of these three wards than are living in neighboring wards. One ward is in Ireland; one in rural northern New England; and one in a comfortable suburb of a major eastern city. I think the difference is that God trusts these three wards. He knows that when His children pray to Him for help and guidance, He can put them in the path of missionaries and members, or prompt them to go directly to the church, knowing that they will feel His love and His spirit when they arrive.

A convert in one of these wards recalled, in fact, that the first time she walked into the foyer of the church a two year-old girl walked up to her with her arms outstretched and gave her a hug – mimicking what she so often had seen adults do when someone new had walked through that door.

How can we transform the culture of a ward where most members do not even notice investigators and new members, let alone express their love to them, into a ward that God can trust? It can be done in three steps. The first step is for the bishop to articulate this vision for his ward. He can remind ward members of Christ’s statement, “By this shall all men know ye are disciples: if ye have love one to another” (John 7:17). Here the Savior gave us the single most important way that we can distinguish His disciples from everyone else. He did not say that you can tell someone is His disciple if he pays his tithing or keeps the Word of Wisdom; and He certainly did not say that His disciples were those who indulged in skeptical speculation about doctrines that have yet to be revealed. Rather, He said we can tell who His *real* disciples are because they’re the ones who show love for one another.

Second, we need to repeat this challenge to transform ourselves into wards that God can trust over and over in our talks. It will give our members a sense of “true north” to guide their interactions in many ways. We can assign specific ward members to ensure that nobody ever sits alone in a meeting because when something is everyone’s responsibility it often becomes no one’s responsibility.

The third step is to convene a brief meeting of a small group of members at the end of each Sunday’s meetings, to ask the question, “Who could have been here today, who didn’t come?” They can then to make assignments to themselves and home / visiting teachers to contact each of those people that very day with a message like, “Are you okay? We missed you. Can I help with something? Can you come next week?” Good shepherds of the Lord’s flock don’t just count the number of sheep who returned to the fold on Sunday. They go out that very day and find the one sheep that did not return to the fold (Matt. 18)

Wards that do these three things can become wards that God can trust. God will know that if He moves upon people to walk through the doors of those chapels, He can trust the members to help them feel His love.

Accountability

In the past we have chosen measures of retention that are easy to collect or easy to achieve. One common measure of “retention” has been the percentage of males over age 12 who

have been ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood. Ordaining them is a good thing to do. But because we are supposed to ordain these people within a week of baptism, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that this percentage of converts has been “retained.” Another common measure of retention is the percentage of members baptized within the past 12 months who attended at least one meeting during the last month of the quarter. Someone who attends once per quarter can’t hold a calling in the church or contribute to its strength and growth. I have seen a draft of a new report form that will measure retention as the percentage of members who attend two meetings per month. Is this what we strive for? What good is accomplished by setting a standard that is inadequate for salvation?

False or inflated measures of retention breed complacent behavior. At a recent stake conference, for example, I offered to take some time during the Saturday priesthood leadership meeting to discuss the strengthening of new members. The stake president confidently replied that this wasn’t necessary – in his stake, retention consistently was above 70%. I subsequently learned that in each of the prior two years, about 40 adult men had been baptized in that stake; and yet only 5 adult men had been ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood during that time. The stake was doing a horrible job transforming adult male converts into worthy Elders; and yet the stake president was unconcerned because he was succeeding on the irrelevant metric the church had chosen to use.

The act of measurement often spawns behavior to maximize that metric. We should therefore use this measure of retention: Of those baptized within the last 24 months,

- 1) How many are known to the bishop as being temple-worthy?
- 2) How many are known not to be temple worthy?
- 3) What is the number whose temple worthiness is not known to the bishop?

We will likely be shocked when we first collect this true measure of how well we are transforming our new members into capable, committed, worthy latter-day saints. But taking this measure, and then holding ourselves accountable for improving it until every new convert remains temple worthy, is the best way to get the result the Lord and His prophet have asked us to deliver. It is within our power to begin using this measure now, within each of our stakes. There is no need to wait until the official quarterly report forms have been revised.

Implementation

We can’t prioritize everything. The Missionary Executive Council wants missionary work to be emphasized. The Priesthood Executive Council wants home teaching, tithing, pornography, reactivation and weakening families all to be addressed. The Temples and Family History Executive Council is concerned that we focus on temple worthiness and temple attendance. With each trying to push its priorities through the very congested pipeline of stake presidents and bishops, we compromise by mentioning a little about many things in a typical conference or training meeting. Progress occurs incrementally as we do this, but we live with it because the trade-off seems immutable. It seems that we cannot push missionary work hard without asking temple work to sit in the back seat.

However, if we focus on the problem instead of focusing on the programs, the trade-off disappears. If we would focus for two years on implementing this solution to our retention problem – hold ourselves accountable and train our leaders how to do those things – we would see baptisms and referrals increase, sacrament meeting attendance and tithe payments improve, home teaching improve, ward council and PEC meetings become more productive and priesthood strength enhanced. The spirit would rest more strongly in members' homes as they bring missionaries in to teach their friends. More family history work would be done, and more worthy members would visit the temple more often. *Trade-offs that seem to be immutable when viewed from within the present organizational structure are not trade-offs when we change to focus on solutions to our problems.*

I suspect that the same result across the three missions of the church will occur if, as soon as we have momentum on retention, we turn our focus on helping our youth all become strong, active adults who have served missions. If we focus on the problem instead of focusing on the programs, the trade-off disappears.

Summary

President Hinckley has specified three points in the interface between investigation and membership: Friends, responsibility and nourishment in the good word of God. Because we don't meet up at these three points, this interface is a crevasse into which most new members disappear. Those who disappear are children of our Heavenly Father whom He loves. Christ loves them so much that he suffered for their sins in advance, in the hope that that they would accept him. Ours is, therefore, a failure of colossal and eternal proportions. While *we* may forget the names of these people a few months after they fall through this crack, God and Christ do not forget them. They sorrow. They know and love these people as much as they know and love us.

Doing the things outlined above won't take any more time and energy than we currently are expending to work around and fix and repair things at this broken interface. We need to make the specification clear, so that those who work on each side of the interface know what they need to do, when to do it, and how to do it. We need to train. We need to hold ourselves accountable. We will be able to do these things consistently when instead of relying exclusively upon sporadic individual initiative, we embed the doing of these things into structure and processes that will help the members of the church do what they want to do and know they should do.

Appendix: Possible callings for new members	Feel need ed & impo rtant	Requ ires Sund ay Atte ndan ce	Strai ght-forw ard; not unstr uctur ed	Serv e with anot her perso n	Learn the gospe l while servin g
Note: Those callings that are <u>not</u> ideal are written in regular type. Those that have been shaped to have the characteristics of an ideal calling for new members are written in <i>italics</i> .					
Gospel essentials class teacher	X	X			X
<i>Assistant gospel essentials teacher</i>	X	X	X	X	X
3 rd hour Primary teacher	X	X			X
<i>Assistant Primary teacher, 3rd hour</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Young men's or young womens' adviser	X	X			X
<i>Assistant Young men's or young women's adviser</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Set up chairs in classrooms		X	X		
Set up chairs in classrooms with another person		X	X	X	
<i>Set up chairs in classrooms with another person, and stock each teaching station with materials from media center that each teacher needs</i>	X	X	X	X	
Chorister for sacrament meeting, Relief Society or Priesthood	X	X	X		
Chorister; call up a different member each week to find our his or her favorite hymn & explain why in remarks just before singing	X	X	X	X	
<i>Chorister; call up a different member each week to find our his or her favorite hymn & explain why in remarks just before singing; read relevant scriptures & include those scriptures in the written program</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Home teaching companion to a dedicated, reliable home teacher who visits members that really need their home teachers' assistance</i>	X		X	X	X
Ward missionary					
<i>Ward missionary assigned as companion to another ward missionary, with responsibility to serve at a regular time each week helping to teach investigators and home teaching new members – teaching new member lessons, helping them get to the temple, sitting with them at church, etc.</i>	X	X	X	X	X

Sacrament Meeting door greeter – passing out programs & shaking hands		X	X		
Member of Activities Committee				X	
Membership clerk	X		X		

¹ “Converts and Young Men,” Ensign, May 1997, p. 47. See also Ensign, May 1999, p. 106; and Moroni 6:1-4.

² Preach My Gospel, p. 215.

³ Preach My Gospel, p. 221.

⁴ Preach My Gospel, p. 111.

⁵ The three locations in the scriptures that specify how we can tell whether an investigator is ready for baptism – Mosiah 18:8-10, Moroni 6:1-4 and D&C 20:37 are very consistent: None specify that knowledge of doctrine is a pre-requisite. In fact, Moroni 6:4 says that nourishment happens after baptism. This contributes to my belief that, while both are important, it is more important to teach them how to be nourished by the scriptures, than it is to teach them what the scriptures say.

⁶ I collected this data from twelve stakes in the North America Northeast Area between 2000 and 2003.

⁷ Only a fraction of our wards and branches have called any ward missionaries. The reason is that most ward missionaries languish in their jobs – not knowing clearly what to do, when to do it, and whether they have succeeded. As a result, most bishops aren’t motivated to call valuable members as ward missionaries, because they seem to do so little. Why do we see this? Many callings in the church are highly structured – and that structure helps members who serve in those positions magnify those assignments. For example, when we call a woman to serve as adviser to the 16-18 year-old young women, we don’t just say, “Your responsibility is to strengthen these girls,” shake her hand, and then let her wander off to do it. We create a structure around her that helps her know what to do, and when to do it. When she accepts this calling, she knows that she is signing up to spend every Tuesday evening from 6:30 to 9:30 with these girls, and that she needs to prepare in advance an activity for this time. She knows that every Sunday she’ll need to teach them a lesson from 11:10 to 12:00. A young womanhood award defines the path of progress that her girls are expected to follow. The structure doesn’t get in the way of her being inspired how to help these girls. It helps her tremendously.

In the face of this evidence that structure helps, what do we tell ward missionaries and home teachers of new members? “Your responsibility is to strengthen new members.” We then do little more than shake their hand and let them wander off to do it. We have lessons that new members should be taught. But that’s all the structure we give them. If we bring more structure to the work of ward missionaries in ways that are suggested here, I suspect that many more of them will feel good about, and motivated in, their callings. This is another reason why ward mission plans are important. They define a structure within which ward leaders and ward missionaries can individually assume responsibility for a portion of the missionary effort.

⁸ The idea of getting new members to the temple has been around for years, and various leaders have set goals to do this within 2,3,4 and as long as 10 months. The reason I urge two months is that most new members have lost their temple worthiness within 6 weeks. They need another near-term spiritual milestone towards which to work.

⁹ Preach My Gospel, p. 8

¹⁰ See Isaiah 55:8 Mark 8:35 Matt. 11:28-30

¹¹ This statistic is from the 14 stakes in the Northeast that I've been tracking since 2000

¹² This statistic comes from a survey done by one of the missions in the North America Northeast Area.

¹³ These judgments were provided by the bishops and/or ward mission leaders in these units.

