

The Mission of the Wilmington Ward

A Case Study

It was a beautiful September Sunday, and Bishop Kent Miner of the Wilmington Ward in the Middlesex Massachusetts Stake had just asked Mike Spencer, his best friend, to serve as ward mission leader. “Bishop, I’ve never declined a calling. If this is what you want, I’ll do it,” Mike responded. “But I am *not* a good missionary. I love the gospel, but I just have never been comfortable asking people if they want to learn about the church.”

Bishop Miner answered,

I know you’re a mixed bag, but that’s why you’re the man we need. President Southwick is concerned that we’re not baptizing enough people. Many converts fall away; and he senses that fewer members are engaged in finding people for the missionaries to teach. As you know, bishops and ward mission leaders now have direct responsibility for the vitality of the ward mission. The stake presidency and bishops have fasted about this, and we’ve committed to doubling the number of people who join the Church each year, and to keeping *all* of them active. Because bishops are already so busy, President Southwick told us to call the best man in the ward as ward mission leader. That’s the first reason I want you to do this, Mike.

Second, I want you because you’re *not* a natural missionary. Most of us are afraid or too busy, and like you, feel like it is something they just aren’t good at. I want every member to feel confident that they can do missionary work successfully. Mike, if you have the courage to become a *leader*—someone who inspires the rest of us by your spirit and example—you can have a tremendous impact. People will say, “If a guy like Mike Spencer can do it, I can do it.”

“I’m not sure if that’s an insult or a compliment,” Mike responded. “But you know me. So what do you want me to do? Where do I start?”

Mike, who previously had served as the Wilmington Ward bishop himself, had a lot on his mind on the drive home that day. “Missionary work is the dimension of my spiritual life that I just haven’t done much about,” he thought. “Either Bishop Miner is desperate, or this is a signal from the Lord that it’s time for me to grow. I suspect that both are true.”

Setting the Groundwork with the Bishop

When they met the next Sunday, it was clear that Bishop Miner had thought deeply about the ward’s missionary situation. After kneeling with Mike in prayer, he summarized his reflections:

This document was prepared by members of the Massachusetts Boston mission presidency to be used in training bishops, ward mission leaders and other ward council members how to become effective leaders of their ward members’ missionary efforts. It is a synthesis of the actual experiences of the leaders of three wards in Massachusetts. Outlines of the member missionary class lessons mentioned herein can be found on missionaryleaders.org.

You know where we need to begin, Mike. We need to get the ward council together, and agree on our vision for what we want the Wilmington Ward to be five years from now. Then we can set specific yearly goals for how we'll use missionary work to strengthen the ward, so that in five years we'll have achieved our vision for what we want the ward to become.

I've got to take a lot of responsibility for so few members being engaged in missionary work – because quite frankly, I haven't been engaged. I'll give you an analogy. My father was our bishop when I grew up. He was a wonderful bishop. But he had a problem with profanity. He was raised in a rough environment, worked for the railroad, and spent his days with some crude people. When things didn't go right at home, I'd sometimes hear him swear. He knew it was a bad habit, but with all of the other good things going on in his life, he never seemed to get around to changing in that one area. I never remember him giving us a lesson on avoiding profanity. He just couldn't convincingly ask others to do something he wasn't doing himself. He lived most principles of the gospel perfectly, and he spoke of those often. But I never heard him give a talk about profanity.

I'm in an analogous situation. I have never, as bishop, given more than lip service to member missionary work because I've just been too busy to do it myself. Without consciously choosing, whenever I have talked with or to ward members, I have chosen some other topic that I could address without feeling like a hypocrite.

I decided that if I can't change myself, I can't change the ward. I might be the busiest person in the ward. But if I exempt myself from being a member missionary because I'm so busy, it opens the door to everyone else exempting themselves because they're so busy. So I'm committing to you right now, Mike, that by the end of the year I will have found someone for the missionaries to teach. I read 1 Nephi 3:7 last night, and I'm going to do likewise.

Bishop Miner then paused, lifting his gaze from some notes on his lap to see how Mike was reacting. "So why are you looking at me like that, Bishop?" The bishop did not respond, so Mike broke the silence. "I guess what you're asking me to do is to make the same commitment."

Mike, it's obvious, once you think about it. A leader simply cannot ask people to do something he is not willing to do himself. If we are serious about inspiring our members – and I really am – then this commitment is the only place we can start. You weren't called to be a ward mission administrator. This is a leadership problem, not an administrative problem.

"We're in this together, Bishop," Mike said with a smile. He then described what he had learned from studying the ward mission pages in the General Handbook of Instructions.

The manual summarizes the administrative responsibilities – correlation meetings, getting people to teach with the missionaries, and so on. It tells us what we need to do. But how to lead this work – like how to inspire the ward members to find people for the missionaries to teach ... it strikes me that they're leaving much of the how part of the job to us. I come out where you are. There isn't an administrative solution to the Wilmington Ward's missionary problems. We need to be leaders – you, me, and our entire ward council.

The following weekend at stake conference, President Southwick invited Matt Jenson, a counselor in the full-time mission presidency, to speak. Brother Jenson recalled that despite his desire to be a good member missionary, he had repeatedly failed in sharing the gospel – because, he decided, he had come to follow what he termed "false principles" about missionary work. He

suggested that most church members were being guided by the same falsehoods. As he had come to understand what he called “true principles” for sharing the gospel, Brother Jenson reported that inviting people into his home for the missionaries to teach had become a joy and not a burden. He then told a series of inspiring experiences of how he and his wife had invited people into his home for the missionaries to teach.

Mike took careful notes of Brother Jenson’s talk, and summarized them in his own words in his journal that evening. The talk struck powerful chords in Mike’s heart because it helped him see that he had found missionary work to be daunting for precisely the same reasons as Brother Jenson. A tight web of false reasoning had kept him from being a good missionary. He wasn’t sure how he would do it, but decided that somehow as ward mission leader, he needed to teach these principles to the Wilmington Ward members because he sensed that they, too, were adhering to the same false reasoning. Mike’s summary of Brother Jenson’s talk is reproduced in Appendix 1 at the end of this case.

Enrolling the Ward Council

To enlist the entire ward council as leaders of the Wilmington Ward’s missionary efforts, Bishop Miner and Mike Spencer decided to dedicate two ward councils to the effort. In the first, the ward council members had been asked to come fasting, so that they could agree upon a vision for where they wanted to lead the ward that was consistent with what the Lord wanted. After considerable discussion, agreed upon a statement of their vision for what the Wilmington Ward would become five years hence. It was, “In five years there will be two wards in the area that now comprises the Wilmington Ward; and there will be greater leadership strength in each of these two wards than we have in the Wilmington Ward today.”

The council concluded that if they were going to achieve this ambitious vision, they needed to pull into the center of the ward many inactive and occasionally active members; that the number of people joining the Church needed to increase; and that many of these converts needed to come from member referrals. Growing the ward simply could not be delegated to the full-time missionaries. They agreed that in the first of the next five years, they needed to increase sacrament meeting attendance from the present number of 136 to 160 by the end of the year. And they set a goal of finding 70 people for the missionaries to teach in the coming year.

The bishop then explained for the entire council what he had said to Mike – that they all needed to become leaders of this effort. He asked Mike to review the six principles from President Jenson’s talk, and bore his testimony that each of the leaders in the room, if they followed these principles, could indeed find someone for the missionaries to teach during the coming year. He pledged that he would lead the way by finding someone by the end of the current calendar year.

The Root Causes of the Wilmington Ward’s Member Missionary Malaise

As luck would have it, the next two days Mike attended a seminar in quality management in which his employer had enrolled him. The premise of the course was that in solving a problem, it is crucial *not* to jump immediately to solutions. The instructor advised that it was better first to define the root cause of the problem. If the problem is defined insightfully, she argued, the solution often becomes obvious. By rushing to supposed solutions, many managers solve the wrong problems, or address only the symptoms of a deeper root cause. She taught that problem-solvers must not assume that the obvious deficiencies are the real root causes of the problem. Instead, they must keep asking “why” – likened to peeling layers off of an onion – to get at the core, root reason for the problem.

As he learned the technique in the context of his employer's problems, Mike increasingly could see how an exercise like this might unite the entire Wilmington Ward Council around a plan to lengthen members' missionary strides. He and Bishop Miner consequently dedicated an entire ward council meeting where, joined by the ward and full-time missionaries, they worked to define the root reasons why ward members weren't finding enough people for the missionaries to teach.

The group decided that six factors contributed to this problem:

1. We are timid – afraid to invite others to meet with the missionaries.
2. We know we *should* do missionary work, but we don't know *how* to do it.
3. We are too busy with other priorities.
4. All of our friends are LDS, and those of other faiths whom we know aren't interested.
5. We have too few reliably attractive events where we can comfortably introduce others to the Church.
6. Some missionaries are immature and don't win the love and trust of members.

They then kept asking, "Why are we timid?" and "Why don't we know how to do the work?" to get at the root causes. An illustration of how they traced their way to the root cause of these contributing factors can be seen in the third factor: Members' other commitments pre-empted the time to do missionary work. The group had to ask, "Why is it that other forms of work and worship pre-empt the sharing of the gospel? Why doesn't sharing the gospel pre-empt these other things?" The group hypothesized that other aspects of worship and service had regularity and deadlines. Sacrament meeting started at 9:00. Youth activities had to be prepared before Tuesday at 7:30. Many members had created similar "deadlines" for themselves by trying to attend the temple at least once a month. In contrast, most members felt that missionary work could always be postponed until tomorrow if today were too busy.

Mike then forced the council to ask "Why?" again. "Why don't we have deadlines in sharing the gospel?" The group started to converge upon an explanation that missionary work was just unpredictable – you just couldn't schedule a time when someone would be interested. But then Bonnie Ford, one of the ward missionaries, said. "I agree that whether someone accepts the gospel is out of our control. It's their free agency, not ours. But inviting someone to learn about the gospel is within our control. The reason we don't have deadlines for inviting is that we just haven't created deadlines. The reason you guys all do your home teaching on the last day of the month is that somebody said it had to be done by then." The discussions about the root causes of other main contributing factors to the problem proceeded in a similar manner. At the end of the meeting Tony Kimball, high priest group leader, pulled Mike aside and said, "That was a great Ward Council meeting. Most of these meetings are consumed with calendar issues and updating ward news. This was the first time the whole group got engaged in solving a problem. We had a lot of energy."

As the causes of the problem became clear, it was apparent that many of the solutions would need to be implemented in other organizations in the ward. "This needs to be the ward's mission plan, not the missionaries' program," Mike Spencer thought to himself. That's why it's wise to have done this with the Ward Council. The whole ward leadership needs to agree on the reasons why we have these problems. We can then come up solutions.

Solutions to the Problems: The Wilmington Ward Mission Plan

Having agreed upon the problems that they needed to tackle, Bishop Miner then decided that they would dedicate one of their twice-monthly Ward Council meetings to brainstorm how they could effectively address each of the root problems. Mike described these solutions, which they called the “*Wilmington Ward Mission Plan*,” as “*A set of goals, initiatives, and activities that we have committed to undertake to address the reasons why we don’t find enough people for the missionaries to teach.*”

“We didn’t feel an urgency to nail the whole plan down in a couple of weeks and laminate it in plastic,” Mike reflected. “It should be a living plan – something that we revisit every time we meet in missionary correlation and as a Ward Council. The problem-definition exercise gave us a sense of “true north” – the objectives toward which we want to lead the ward. As we implemented these initiatives, some things in our plan led us in that direction, and some didn’t work. Month after month we just kept discussing how to do better, canceling things that weren’t working, and replacing them with better ideas.”

Bishop Miner noted,

There was a huge benefit to our ward council of revisiting the ward mission plan every month. Before this we’d just go around the room and ask each person if they “had anything.” All we did in the meeting was make announcements to each other and schedule events on the ward calendar. Our meetings now have become problem-solving meetings. We work together as a group to solve problems and help the ward move ahead. We don’t come into the meeting thinking that we’re representing the interests of the Primary, the Young Men’s program, and so on. We’re united as leaders of the ward.

I was reading Doctrine and Covenants 9:7 the other day, where it says “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.” It struck me that prior to this, we had been giving no thought to how we would solve this problem. We had just been praying that somehow we’d find missionary success. Now, as we go through this process, we come up with what we think is the right solution for us, and then we pray to ask God if our plan is right.

As the specific elements of the plan became defined, Mike or Bishop Miner, as appropriate, gave a ward missionary or ward council member specific responsibility for its success. This was a breath of fresh air to Brent Mansfield, who recalled, “I was a ward missionary for two years before we had a ward mission plan. It was the worst experience I’ve had in the Church because there wasn’t any structure. I had no way of knowing whether I was magnifying my calling. Now with a ward mission plan I know exactly what I’m in charge of, and what other people are in charge of. We are much more specific about what we need to do, and we can help each other because we know what everyone else is supposed to do.

The detailed Wilmington Ward mission plan is included in Appendix 3, but the following paragraphs highlight several elements of the plan – a member missionary Sunday School class, leading by example, asking friends of other faiths to serve in the Church, high-quality missionary events, and the use of baptisms and ordinations as missionary events.

1. Member Missionary Class

To address members' sense that they didn't know how to share the gospel, the ward initiated a three-week member missionary class that met during the Sunday School hour. Bishop Miner invited members aged 12 and older, as individuals and families, to take the class, about ten people at a time. Ward missionary Bonnie Ford was assigned to teach the class and worked with Brother Jenson to develop three lessons that conveyed his principles. Bonnie also prepared for the Bishop's signature letters of invitation to attend. In cases where invitees had responsibilities to work in Primary or Sunday School, Young Men or Young Women were asked to serve in their place so they could attend Bonnie's class.¹

In addition to teaching the principles of member missionary work, Bonnie's charter was to inspire those in her classes to accept Elder M. Russell Ballard's challenge not to pick a person, but to set a date. Elder Ballard had promised that if members of the Church would pick a date and then commit to the Lord that they would have conversations about the Church with as many people as possible, that God would bless them by that date to intersect with a person who would accept their invitation to meet with the missionaries. The Ward Council charged Bonnie to inspire, not pressure, each person who took the class to set a date. Setting a date addressed the problem that there were no deadlines in missionary work.

2. Leading by Example

A second element of the plan was that in each fast and testimony meeting, at least two ward missionaries and/or ward council members would recount a faith-building experience in sharing the gospel they had had during the prior month. "I volunteered to be the backstop," Mike recalled. "If the end of the meeting was approaching and at least two people had not testified about the spirit that had come into their lives as a result of sharing the gospel, I was committed to bear testimony myself. This was good, because it meant that I needed to have an inspiring experience every month, just in case!" As in Bonnie Ford's class, the group explicitly decided that none of them would attempt to motivate members by pushing them from behind, or making them feel guilty. Leading by example was the way to solve the problem that members of the ward were timid about inviting people.

Christine Quinn, the Relief Society President, visualized the reason why the example of the ward council members was so critical. "Picture the members of our ward walking together on a big glacier, and we come upon a deep crevasse. They're all huddled at its edge, fearing its depth and afraid to jump across. If we as leaders come up in the rear and push them, saying that it's their duty to be courageous, they'll stiffen up and resist. But if we jump across ourselves and then turn around and say, 'This was actually easy, and it felt great,' many more of them will make the leap in sharing the gospel."

3. Asking Non-Members to Serve

The group developed an innovative solution to the problem that members were too busy with other church obligations to do missionary work. Each priesthood and auxiliary organization committed to involve at least one non-member in serving in that organization each month. For example, the Relief Society would ask a non-member to teach one of the mini-classes in its monthly enrichment meetings. The compassionate service leader committed to ask non-member neighbors to join Relief Society sisters in preparing meals for those in need. The elders quorum committed that when they helped a family move into or out of a home, they would ask one or more non-members to help. The teachers and priests quorum advisers committed that once each month they would ask a non-member acquaintance to invite the ward's young men to their place

¹ A copy of Sister Ford's lessons is available in electronic form from cmc@hbs.edu or at missionaryleaders.org.

of business, to explain what they did in their careers. The activities committee committed that they would always involve at least one non-member in planning and producing each ward activity. Rather than simply invite friends to attend the annual Halloween party, for example, they would ask friends to help decorate the cultural hall. And the director of the family history center took an interesting challenge.

The group committed, in particular, to finding an appropriate calling or opportunity to serve for every non-member spouse of an active member.

Involving friends of other faiths in church service addressed the problem that members were too busy, by enabling them to do missionary work while they served in their other assignments. Because most people in the Wilmington Ward's boundaries lived in relatively comfortable circumstances, this initiative addressed Brother Jenson's assertion that prosperous, happy people had a deeper need to give service than to receive help. It also squared with the ward leaders' sense that whenever they had been able to convince a member whose faith was weak to begin serving in the Kingdom, the service had strengthened his or her faith. They reasoned that the blessings stemming from service were available to non-members as well. Bishop Miner gave responsibility for this element of the ward mission plan to Bill Lane, his executive secretary. Sharing results and brainstorming new plans for involving non-members in the work of the Church became a standard item on the agenda of every ward council meeting.

4. Consistently High-Quality Events

The group also tackled the lack of consistent, missionary-quality events to which members could bring acquaintances. Elders quorum president Dave Coppins recalled the superb talk that a sister in the ward had given in the previous week's sacrament meeting. "I just sat there thinking, 'Why didn't I bring a friend to this meeting?'" And there have been other times when I've brought a friend to a meeting and sit there thinking, 'Why was I so unlucky to have brought my friend to this meeting?'"

Bishop Miner described, "We decided that the only reason for asking a different person to speak every time we had a missionary fireside was to provide variety for the members. But the firesides weren't for members. So we decided to design a great fireside that introduces people to the Spirit, and to reproduce exactly the same fireside every month. We asked Charles Smith to do this. You might say that Brother Smith is the 'Richard G. Scott' of the Middlesex Stake. He has such a deep, sincere, comforting and convincing way of teaching and testifying. We asked Brother Smith to give the same talk in my home on the second Sunday of every month. We even serve the same refreshments. It is just working out great. Members go without a friend once just to get a feel for what Brother Smith says. Then they can with confidence bring acquaintances to this meeting to introduce them to the Spirit that we feel in our Church." Ben Ball, another ward missionary, had responsibility for these firesides. Members who invited a friend to one of these firesides would call Ben, who in turn would invite a set of other members who had something in common with the friend to attend – ensuring that a critical mass of the right people would be at each event.

5. Baptisms and Ordinations as Missionary Events

During a meeting when the ward council was puzzling about how to inspire more members to share the gospel, Primary President Nancy Bittner spoke up. "Let me tell you what we're going to do for our son Daniel's baptism. He turns eight in two months. The missionaries are going to teach Daniel simple versions of the discussions. Then we're going to print invitations to the baptismal service, and the missionaries will deliver them to the families of several of Daniel's friends – just saying on the doorstep that we asked them to deliver these invitations. The missionaries will welcome everyone at the door at the service. Then a few days after the baptism

the missionaries will just go back to each friend's home, thank them for coming, and ask, 'Do you have any questions about what you saw or heard that we could help you with?' We suspect that most won't, but I bet some might invite them in to answer to a question. If this works, maybe we could make this part of the ward mission plan – something that we invite every family to do when a child is baptized."

The missionaries delivered ten invitations to the families of Daniel Bittner's friends, and eight of them came to the baptismal service. "As you can imagine," Bishop Miner recalled, "The Bittner family made sure that this was the most inspiring baptismal service in history!" When the missionaries subsequently visited those families' homes to see if they had questions, two of the families invited them in, and one began taking the discussions. The ward council then made this practice a part of the ward mission program, giving Nancy Bittner responsibility to invite the families of each child being baptized to do this. Subsequently, the Young Men's organization instituted a similar practice when young men were ordained to new offices in the Aaronic Priesthood. This part of the ward mission program addressed the problems that members felt too busy to do missionary work, and that most of the people they knew were already members of the Church.

6. Prayer

Inspired by a challenge that Elder Dallin H. Oaks gave in a general conference address, the ward council resolved that in every prayer offered in their ward – in sacrament meetings, classes and leadership meetings, as well as in family and personal prayers – they would ask God to put into their paths people who would accept an invitation to learn about the Church. In the discussion leading to this decision, Tony Kimball, high priests group leader, recalled, "Remember in the 1970s when President Spencer W. Kimball asked us all to pray that God would open the doors of nations so that our missionaries could enter? A lot of us made this a habit. And sure enough, the Iron Curtain opened and the missionaries went in. We need to do what Elder Oaks said. It will work – but this time we need to pray for ourselves, not some distant missionaries." Accordingly, council members resolved that when people were called upon to pray in any of their meetings, they would be reminded to do this until all ward members habitually remembered.

The Results

In the January fast and testimony meeting, Bishop Miner and Mike Spencer each recounted his version of having challenged the other to find someone for the missionaries to teach. Bishop Miner told how he hadn't been successful in engaging anyone in a serious conversation about the Church during the months of September and October. By mid-November as he began to fear that President Southwick was going to have to release him, he pinned his hopes on a particular work associate, who he thought was sure to be willing to take the discussions. He seemed open-minded, and his values seemed to mirror those of our Church. It took several weeks for Bishop Miner to build the courage and find the right situation to extend the invitation. But when he invited the friend to come to his home to meet with the missionaries, the friend appreciatively declined, citing satisfaction with his present church. Bishop Miner was devastated, and spent the remainder of the day unproductively in his office, wondering how in the world, with the busy Christmas holidays approaching, he was ever going to find someone else.

As Bishop Miner prepared to leave for home that evening, an employee of the firm that cleaned his company offices, Jose Gutierrez, knocked on his door and asked permission to empty the trash. "Just then I got this feeling that I should talk to Jose," Bishop Miner said. "I asked him to sit down for a second, and asked how his family was. He expressed a real sadness that he was

here in America alone, while his parents were in El Salvador. I told him that I thought he might be interested in the Church I attend, because for many of us it constitutes a family-away-from-family, and just point-blank I asked him if he'd be willing to come to our home and let our missionaries introduce it to him. He said he'd love to; and we set an appointment on the spot."

Bishop Miner continued, "Driving home that night, I just couldn't stop crying. I realized that I'd been quite judgmental in deciding who would and wouldn't be interested in the Church – and quite frankly, Jose had never even crossed my mind. Another reason I couldn't stop crying is that I was so stunned that God actually kept His promise. Somehow I had come to expect that as a plain old member of the Church, I would not see miracles in my life. I bear you my testimony that God keeps his promises. I set this date as a commitment to the Lord, just like Elder Ballard asked, and I did my part, by trying to open the door to a conversation about the gospel every time I could. What I learned is that we can't predict whom we will find, but we can predict that God will help us find someone. The wonderful, peaceful spirit that comes into our home as the missionaries teach Jose and testify of Christ stays there all week. I am so grateful to Jose and to the missionaries for bringing this into our lives."

In February's Fast and Testimony meeting two members of the ward council, and three other ward members recounted inspiring experiences they had had in inviting someone to learn about the gospel. One of them said, in fact, that when he had heard Bishop Miner's testimony the prior month, he thought, "If a man that busy can make this commitment, surely I can too." The trend continued in subsequent months. Inspired by the examples of their fellow ward members, the courage to invite people into their homes to meet with the missionaries spread. The spirit that these experiences brought into their homes was evident in many ways.

Measuring the Success of the Wilmington Ward Mission

In the March Ward Council meeting, Mike Spencer wondered aloud, "Last year only two people were baptized in the ward. I wonder how many baptisms we'll have this year." Already, one young woman, a friend of a Laurel in the ward, had been baptized. Jose Gutierrez had also been baptized, though he attended the Spanish language ward in Somerville.

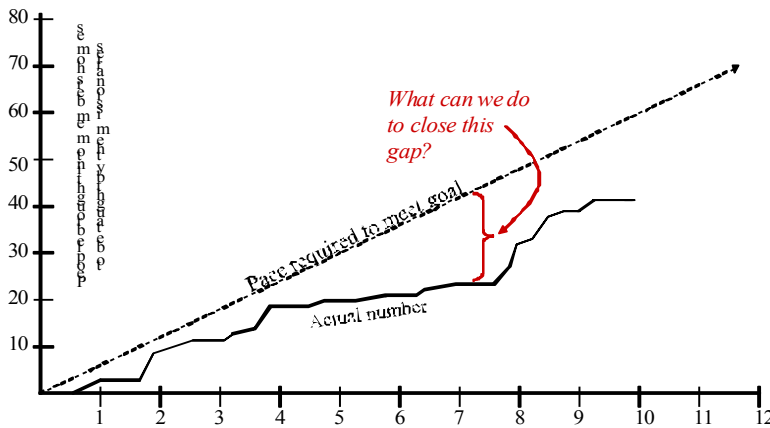
Bishop Miner broke in. "I hate to 'manage by numbers.' But I do think that success breeds success, and it's important to be able to measure whether we're succeeding. I don't think baptisms are a good measure of the success of a ward mission, though. Many factors that influence baptism are beyond the ability of our members to influence. Jose's baptism, for example, got recorded in the Somerville Spanish Ward and not the Wilmington Ward. Which of these ward missions succeeded? And Mike, the guy you invited to meet with the missionaries last December quit after the third discussion, if I remember. Did you fail? I don't think so. You succeeded in giving him the opportunity, and he failed to make the right choice. I think the right measure of our success is the number of people that members of our ward introduce to the missionaries to be taught the gospel. Furthermore, we succeed when we keep doing the things in the ward mission plan, week after week – because it is those things that inspire members and give them the opportunities that lead to referrals. The ward mission plan is the process that leads to the result we want. Lots of good things are happening in the ward. Baptisms will follow."

Accordingly, Mike began keeping a chart, reproduced below, on which he measured the ward's progress. The ward council had set a goal to inspire ward members to find 70 people for the missionaries to teach during the year. The dotted line on Mike's chart traced the number of people the members needed to have found at any point, in order to be on track to meet the year's goal. For example, it meant that by the end of June, they needed to have found 35 people, in order to meet the year's goal of 70. Then every week during his correlation meeting with the full-time and ward missionaries, Mike added the number of new member referrals the missionaries had been able to teach that week to the previous total (this became the solid line on the chart).

Mike would tape the chart on the bishop’s office wall at the beginning of each monthly ward council meeting, and the discussion focused around what more could be done to close the gap between what the ward council’s goal was, and the number of people that members of the ward actually had been able to find to that point. “This was a very, very valuable tool,” Mike reflected. Without this, nobody would have known how we were doing. This forced us to return and report to ourselves every month.” Each month Mike also showed the ward council a similar chart that mapped their progress in increasing sacrament meeting attendance.

One significant modification was made to the ward mission plan in June, when Mike’s chart showed that in May and the first two weeks of June there were significantly fewer referrals to the missionaries than in the prior months (as shown by the flattening of the solid line in his chart). “I’m afraid the low-hanging fruit has been picked,” he noted. “The most courageous members have already found one or two people, and are feeling like their job has been done for the year. We still haven’t reached 70% of the members. We need somehow to make sharing the gospel a way of life, not some sort of ‘program’ that has a beginning and end.”

Our progress in finding missionaries to teach:
the mission of the Wilmington Ward



“I’ve worried about the same thing,” noted Christine Quinn, the Relief Society President. “We need to call a special ward fast – on a Sunday other than Fast Sunday – to call down the blessings of heaven on our efforts. Bishop, you should send a letter to each family a few days before the fast, reminding them that we are not fasting for the success of the missionaries. We are fasting for ourselves, that we can be better missionaries. Making this a way of life for all members of the ward is a hard problem. We as leaders have done all that we can. I honestly believe that. We need to fast.”

The Council agreed, and one of the ward missionaries sent the reminder letter over Bishop Miner’s signature. In sacrament meeting on that Sunday, Katie Spencer, Mike’s youngest daughter, spoke about how it had made her feel to listen to the missionaries teach discussions to her father’s friend in their home. Bishop Miner invited Jose Gutierrez to visit the Wilmington Ward, and he spoke next. Christine Quinn concluded. She recounted how graciously her non-member neighbor had accepted her request to prepare a dinner for a ward member who had just had twins. “I asked her very apologetically, saying that I was too busy and really needed her help. She made me apologize for being apologetic! After she delivered the dinner she came over and asked if our Church always did this. When I said yes, she said, ‘I understand now why every

Mormon I meet seems so happy – because you’re always helping someone.’ She then made me promise to involve her every time we did this.”

Within a few weeks of the fast, several members who had not previously done so, invited the missionaries into their homes to teach someone. It required another fast in November, but that year members of the Wilmington Ward found 69 people for missionaries to teach. Convert baptisms in the ward rose from two in 1994 to six in 1995. In addition to those six, another three people who were referred to the missionaries by Wilmington Ward members were baptized in other wards.²

The Ward Council continued to implement and improve the ward mission plan, true to Mike Spencer’s desire that it be a living mechanism for addressing the reasons why members weren’t finding enough people for the missionaries to teach. The next year, ward members brought 74 people into their homes for the missionaries to teach, and the number of people baptized in the ward increased to twelve. Mike Spencer was called to the stake High Council after serving for two years as mission leader.

Lessons Learned

More than two years into the effort, President Southwick asked Mike Spencer and Bishop Miner to describe in a stake training meeting what they had learned in creating and implementing the Wilmington Ward mission plan. Mike spoke first. He depicted the plan as a pyramid with three parts, as shown in Appendix 2. It was built upon a foundation comprised of three layers: a vision of what the ward would become, annual goals for leading the ward towards that vision, and a commitment by ward council members to lead by example. The middle section of the pyramid was comprised of “building blocks,” contributed by each of the priesthood and auxiliary organizations in the ward. Each of these defined an activity or initiative that the organization would undertake as its contribution to the missionary effort. The third section of the pyramid – its capstone – was the system of having the ward council return and report to itself every month on the ward’s progress towards achieving the goals its leaders had set. “Without a foundation like this, and without a system for returning and reporting to yourself, a ward mission plan is just a hollow administrative exercise,” he said.

The following comments are taken from President Southwick’s notes of Bishop Miner’s presentation:

We haven’t lost momentum when the ward mission leader or other ward leaders have been replaced. Because we have a plan that we’re checking up on in every meeting, we keep doing better.

The Spirit has changed our homes. Those of us who have had the missionaries into our home to teach people a few times now just can’t live without it. There is nothing that a parent can do that sets a stronger, more positive example for children than this. This has been an immeasurable blessing to our ward.

The greatest leverage came not from taking more time, but from using the time in our Ward Council meetings more effectively. We previously used these meetings to go around the room asking each person in turn if he or she “had anything.” When it came

² Mike knew that some ward members would find people who lived beyond the ward’s boundaries, who accepted an invitation to meet with the missionaries. To collect this information, “We as ward missionaries just had to keep our ears to the ground, and kept asking members about their efforts to share the gospel.” Mike felt that keeping track of the work that ward members were doing with people outside the Wilmington Ward’s boundaries was critical to keeping his ward missionaries and the members feeling that they were succeeding in the work.

his turn, the ward mission leader typically told us the names of a few of investigators in the missionaries' pipeline, and asked us to look out for them if they came to church. At best we were reactive. Now the ward mission plan provides a structure for discussion and problem solving. The ward leaders used to get involved when an investigator came to church. Now when the missionaries have taught a couple of discussions to someone, the Relief Society, Elders, or YM/YW president will take an assignment to visit the investigator and invite him or her to church.

I actually did need to find extra time in my crowded bishop's schedule to be a more active leader of the missionary effort. But my advice is to use that extra time personally to be a good missionary – to lead by example. The reason we've not been baptizing more people is not that we've lacked ward mission administrators. We need ward mission leaders, who have the faith that despite the limits on their time and bandwidth, they can find people for the missionaries to teach. The message you give to the members is, "If the Bishop or Relief Society president can do it, we ought to be able to do it. It does take a lot of faith for busy leaders to commit to find someone for the missionaries to teach. But aren't we men and women of faith?"

Once I fully understood the principles that Brother Jenson taught, inviting people to learn about the gospel became much less intimidating, and far less time-consuming, than it had seemed before. I really do think that many of our fears stem from believing what Brother Jenson called "false principles." Teaching his principles to our members was one of the most effective – I would almost say *liberating* – things we have done.

Appendix 1:

Principles for Sharing the Gospel: A Summary of Brother Jenson's Talk

When the Prophet Joseph Smith was once asked how he governed such a widespread, growing organization, he explained that he strove to “teach the people correct principles, and then let them govern themselves.” This has indeed been a key to the Church’s strength and growth. In contrast to the situation in other areas of church practice, however, most members of the Church do not understand the correct principles by which they should conduct their member missionary efforts. In fact, most members approach opportunities to share the gospel as if the following six things are true:

1. We can judge in advance who is likely to be interested in learning about the gospel, and who will not be interested;
2. If we become close friends with someone, it will increase the likelihood that he or she will accept an invitation to learn more about the Church;
3. People have chosen to attend or belong to their church because its doctrine makes the most sense to them;
4. Most people feel like they need help in important dimensions of their life;
5. If we do not convince another person to join our Church, we have failed as missionaries to that person; and
6. If we’re too busy to share the gospel today, we can do it tomorrow when we’ll be less busy.

After a moment’s reflection we can see that these statements cannot be true; and yet most members act as if they are. Most of us choose one or more people or families (people whose lifestyles and values seem similar to ours), and then “work with” them – trying to deepen a relationship – as a prerequisite to inviting them to learn about the Church. In so doing, we choose not to “work with” others, whom we judge less likely to be interested. When asked, “Tell me about the Mormon Church,” most members will describe our most important doctrines, and then describe how much the Church will help the person who inquired. Because we approach sharing the gospel in a wrong-headed way, missionary work has become an uncomfortable, time-consuming, frustrating and unproductive experience for most members. We know we should do it, but it seems daunting and time-consuming, and we are not confident that we can succeed.

If members are taught *correct* principles and share the gospel accordingly, however, missionary work can be a delightful, non-threatening experience. Brother Jenson proposed these “true” principles” that should guide our missionary efforts.

1. *No one can tell in advance who is and is not prepared to receive the gospel. Only the Lord knows this.* This means that we need to discuss the gospel in an honest, open and non-judgmental way with many people, in order to find those who will accept our invitation. Often, people who currently don’t look or behave like “ideal” Mormons are likely to be interested. Their interest is driven by the circumstances in their lives. This means that people who decline at one point can become interested at another.

2. The notion that we should prayerfully select someone and then deepen our relationship with that person as a prerequisite to inviting him or her to learn about the gospel is false, deceptive and time-consuming. There are no pre-requisite social engagements that must precede invitations to learn about the gospel. You should be friends with people you naturally want to be friends with; and you should invite everybody to learn about the gospel of Jesus Christ. The friendships that

help new converts to remain active are often cemented *during* the missionary discussions. They need not be in place beforehand.

3. Most people know and care little about the specific doctrines of the church they attend. They select a church for social reasons – its youth ministry or its choir, for example. Others choose a church because they want to feel a deeper purpose in their lives; and some are motivated to solve a personal or family problem. When we have the chance to tell people about our Church, therefore, we should save our instinctive doctrinal response until the missionary discussions. Initially, we should instead describe the sorts of benefits our Church offers that align with what most people are seeking.

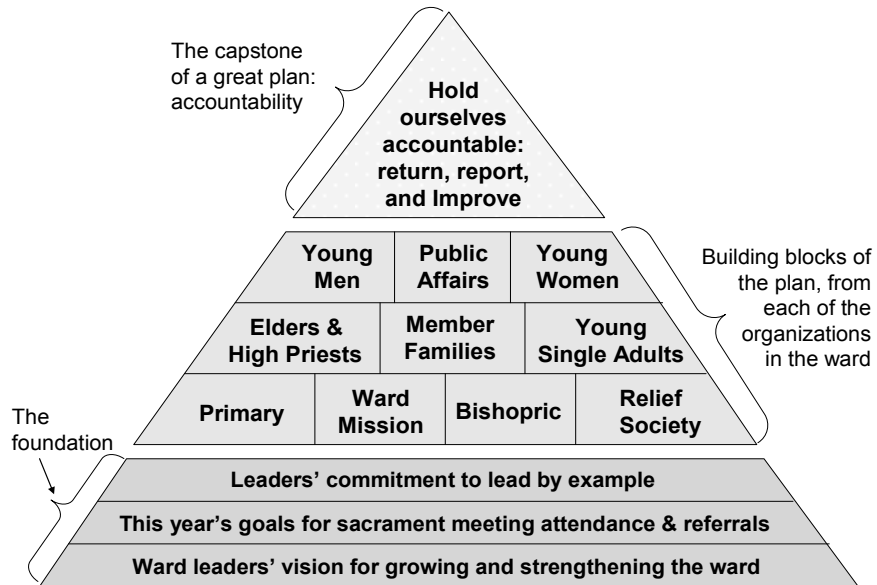
4. Most people are quite comfortable with their lives because they don't know what they're missing. Therefore, when we try to interest them in the Church by asserting that it will make them happier, it doesn't connect with what they feel that they need. Many "comfortable" people have a deeper need to *give* help than to receive it. One of the most effective ways to introduce the Church to them is to invite them to work or serve with us in the Church or in one of its activities. For members and non-members alike, service builds a sense of being needed. Because we feel the Spirit when we serve in God's kingdom, this can help non-members see that something has been missing from their lives.

5. Success in *member* missionary work isn't baptism. We've succeeded when we've given someone the opportunity to feel God's love and our love, and to feel the Spirit. *Their* job is to accept the truth. Everyone has free agency, but they can't exercise it unless we give them the opportunity. It's easy to use LDS-related words in most conversations. These serve as a signal that we're LDS, and they that create opportunities for people we're speaking with to choose to have a conversation about the Church. Most people won't pick up on the opportunity, but a few will. A few of these will accept an invitation to learn more, and a few of these will be baptized. When we create these opportunities for others to choose, we have succeeded.

6. Deadlines are a big help in causing us to do what needs to be done in church service. This is why Elder M. Russell Ballard asked us to set a date regularly as a commitment to the Lord. He challenged us not to pick a person (consistent with principle #1 above), but to set a date, and then to commit to God that we will speak about the Church with as many people as we can. Elder Ballard said that when we do our part, God will bless us to intersect with someone before that date, who will accept our invitation to hear the missionary discussions. We should set a date in this way at least once each year. In the other two parts of the Church's three-fold mission, we set deadlines for ourselves. We do home and visiting teaching by the end of the month. Even without an official church mandate, many members have found that setting a personal goal of attending the temple one or more times per month, helps them fulfill that responsibility more faithfully. We need to do this with the missionary dimension of our Church's mission.

Appendix 2:

The Structure of the Wilmington Ward Mission Plan



Appendix 3:

The Wilmington Ward Mission Plan

Our Vision for the Wilmington Ward: In 5 years we want to have *two* wards in Wilmington, not one. Each ward will have in it more strong, capable leaders than our present ward does today.

This Year's Goals: This year we will grow Sacrament Meeting attendance from 136 to 160; and we will find 70 people for the missionaries to teach.

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.
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 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. A member of the bishopric, of each priesthood and auxiliary presidency and the missionaries 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.
10. In each fast & testimony meeting, at least two ward missionaries or members of the ward council will bear testimony about an inspiring experience they have recently had in sharing the gospel.