

Who are the members of the Waltham Ward? (A)

INSIGHTS INTO SHARING THE GOSPEL

Some time ago Ken Martin, ward mission leader in the Waltham Ward in the Middlesex Massachusetts Stake, was sitting on the stand next to his Bishop, Brent Mehr, in the few minutes before the sacrament meeting was to start. Ken was new to the ward *and* newly-called to his calling. He had been asked to give a 15-minute talk that morning. In response to Ken's question of how many members were in the Waltham Ward, Bishop Mehr responded, "We have 273 members. Of these about 160 of them attend regularly."

Just as Bishop Mehr stood to bring the meeting to order and everyone was looking forward at the bishop, a man wearing casual clothing came into the chapel unnoticed, and found an aisle seat near the exit. He quickly left when the meeting ended. When Ken asked Bishop Mehr who the man was, the bishop responded, "I don't know his name, but I know he lives in Waltham. I see him occasionally walking in the town center and at high school events. I'm quite certain that he isn't a member, though."

Ken Martin had fasted and prayed that day, asking for guidance about how to lead the missionary effort in the Waltham Ward. As he tried unsuccessfully to fall asleep that evening, he could not get the face of that man who was not a member of the ward, who had attended that morning. Ken then sat bolt upright and said to his sleeping wife, "That man might not have yet been baptized. But he certainly is a member of the Waltham Ward in *Christ's* church. Christ knows that man's name. He remembers him as one of those who volunteered to fight with Him in the war against Satan. When it was time to suffer for that man's sins, the Redeemer did not hesitate, wondering whether that man was worth the cost."

Then as clearly as if a person were standing next to him, Ken heard a voice within his mind that said, "If this man is not a member of the Waltham Ward, what ward is he in?"

For the next several days when no one else was there, Ken kept asking, "What is the size of the Waltham Ward?" Ken then reached his conclusion, "From the Savior's perspective, there are about 57,000 members: These are the people who live within the geographic boundaries of this ward. Of those, 273 so far have been baptized. And of those, 160 attend sacrament meetings."

Ken continued his logic: "Because wards were created in the 1840s to manage the election process in Nauvoo, leaders of each political party (Democrats, Whigs, and so on) tried to *include* as many members in their wards as possible in order to win the elections. It seems now that we try to *exclude* members in an attempt to simplify our lives in the church. Because we are so busy taking care of each other, many of us cannot give more than lip-service to bringing the "less-active" members, let alone "non-members," into the active "core" of the ward. Except for a few members in every ward, our busy lives and our fears about sharing the gospel essentially have placed missionary work to the "Do not disturb" list of most "active members" today."

Meeting with President Oliver

As soon as he could, Ken convened a meeting with the full-time mission president, Bob Oliver, to probe where this haunting realization might take him, as ward mission leader. “What if I really am the ward mission leader in a ward with 57,000 members? President Oliver, I’m sure you’ve thought about this before. What in the world does God want me to do?”

President Oliver responded, “As you know, historically the baptized members just assumed that the responsibility for the “non-members” rested with the full-time missionaries. Now you are imagining 160 member-missionaries focusing on this opportunity, rather than two missionaries. That is 80x the power that we historically had. But neither of us – the members or the missionaries – have made even a dent in the 57,000 who have not yet been baptized. Is it because we don’t teach them well? Because we have a reputation as people who keep themselves apart from others, and make them not feel welcome in our church?”

But let’s look at a few scriptures that I’ve been studying recently.

“The parable of the sower is straightforward enough,” President Oliver remembered. “A sower went forth to sow, and when he sowed, the seeds fell upon different kinds of ground. In the parable, the seeds represent the word and the various categories of ground represent different kinds of people who respond differently to the word. Some seeds fall by the way side, representing the people who hear the word of the kingdom, and understand it not. Then the wicked one comes, and catches away that which was sown in their hearts. Some seeds fall upon stony places, representing the people who hear the word, and anon (immediately or presently) receive it with joy. Yet, because these people have no root in themselves, they endure for a while: for when tribulation or persecution arise because of the word, they are offended. Other seeds fall among thorns, representing the people who hear the word, but the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and they become unfruitful. Finally some fall upon good ground: Those who hear the word and understand it. They bear fruit, but in different amounts – some an hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”

Ken Martin then responded, “There are two insights about missionary work here. The first is this: A friend at work came to my office a few months ago. His mission was to tell me that he could no longer believe in God. I then responded to him: “Can you please describe this God that you can no longer believe in?”

“Sure,” he said. My friend then recounted the characteristics of the God that the delegates had voted upon in Nicea. Then centuries of theology had added layer after layer of Karma to the concept of God. “It made God very complicated,” he said. “I just can’t believe that this is God.”

“As he walked away I realized that my friend had not rejected God” Ken said. He had rejected falsehood. Then I said to myself, “I’ve been thinking that in my profession I am surrounded every day by godless people. The parable observes that some of the seeds fall by the way side, representing the people who hear the word of the kingdom, and understand it not. Maybe, however, the seeds that fall by the wayside have been rejected by people who have rejected falsehood.

“A second thing I’ve been pondering about is about what drives conversion in this parable. It is not the quality of relationships between the sower (missionaries) and the soil (potential investigators). Rather, it is the relationship between the seed (the gospel) and the soil. This has profound implications in terms of how we focus and organize our efforts. As Preach My

Gospel's "purpose statement" explains, missionaries "invite others to come unto Christ by helping them *receive* the restored gospel" (PMG 1). It does not say that our purpose is to *teach* the gospel; our purpose is to help others *receive* the gospel. How can we help people receive the gospel? Elder Clayton Christensen has written quite convincingly that "preparing people" by deepening friendships with them as a step towards inviting them to learn about our church, is not productive – and often is deceptive. But given this, how can we help people to *receive* the gospel?"

"Is there anything else that we might do so that more of the 57,000 members might be ready to receive the restored gospel?" President Oliver asked.

After brainstorming potential insights on this issue for about an hour, they agreed to study what the scriptures say on these topics, and to meet again in another week.

Who are the members of the Waltham Ward? (B)

As Ken walked into President Oliver's office the next week he said, "I see that this is a hot topic. I invited our wonderful Bishop Brent Mehr to help us – and you invited your counselors (Presidents Baird and Wright) too!"

Each of them had been brought up to speed on the insights from the last meeting, and had been asked to study the scriptures for answers to Ken Martin's questions: *Does the Lord regard all of the 57,000 people in Waltham as unbaptized members? Does He regard us as accountable for helping them accept baptism and begin doing the work for their family in the temple?*

After beginning with prayer, Ken said, "Since I created this problem, I'd like to set the stage."

"Oddly," he began, "my image of a 'reaper' is the grim reaper who lurks in the background, eager to pull your life to its conclusion. I've viewed the sower/reaper in this parable in the same light: A nameless, faceless man who plays the same role in the same play year after year. He is not learning and improving.

"The interpretation of the parable focuses on inanimate objects," Ken continued: "Weeds, thorns, rocks, shadows, soils and seeds. There seems to be lots of seed: Even though the sower *could* target his throwing onto the pieces of soil that historically had yielded the highest returns, he doesn't. The seed gets thrown onto rocks and productive soil alike. The outcomes are probabilistic: 30, 60 and 100x returns from good soils. But the parable is a static, not a dynamic model: It assumes that season after season the sower does the same thing, and gets the same result."

Ken concluded by saying, "But there is only one sower. Doesn't the sower merit attention? As ward mission leader I am a sower. On every side in Waltham I see other of the fields of my master – uncultivated. They are overgrown by thorns and weeds because the missionaries and I just don't have the time to cultivate those fields.

President Baird responded, "I think that the Lord sees the same problem as you, Ken. In Matthew 9:37-38, it says, 'Then saith he unto his disciple, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.'"

Bishop Mehr then said, "This is a paradox. On one hand the Lord of the Harvest wants more laborers. There just aren't enough. But on the other hand, I am always thinking about whether my ward members are doing enough in their callings in the ward. I have *too many* laborers, not too few! The reason why I incessantly worry about this is this that the Savior said: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself (John 7:17); and "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it (Mark 8:34-35); and finally, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)"

"And yet," Bishop Mehr continued, "If I got another 20 active members in my ward, I wouldn't know what to do with them. The callings have all been filled."

“The fact that leaders around the world try to find callings for all active adult members of the church is their united testimony to the Savior’s teaching that we find our lives by losing ourselves in serving the Lord,” added President Baird. “Here’s some additional history that strengthens what you are saying. “The easiest way to give every member a calling is to assume the number of callings is fixed, and therefore divide callings into smaller ones. Calling four women to teach Relief Society, each doing it once each month, is an example of this. This practice is pervasive in singles wards. It ignores the Savior’s teaching that, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35); and signals to members that the Lord and His church do not need them.”

“A second way to help members lose their lives in service to our Savior,” President Baird continued, “Is to divide units into smaller ones, thereby creating more callings. This is how the church grew so rapidly in Queens, NY in the 1990s, for example. The leaders there divided branches when sacrament meeting attendance grew above 80. The result was that between 1991 and 1997 total sacrament meeting attendance grew from a total of 300 in four units, to 2,100 in 26 branches. Leaders in central Maine grew attendance from 25 in 1962 in one branch, Farmingdale, to more than 1,000 active members by 1967, when the Augusta Stake was organized.¹ On average in New England between 1992 and 2008, combined sacrament meeting attendance increased by 17% in the year following a division of a ward or branch.²

“Another way to help more members lose their lives for the sake of the Savior was illustrated in the BYU 16th Stake, between 1997 – 2007, where they creating multiple Relief Societies, Elders Quorums, and Sunday School classes within each ward,” President Baird said. “They reported that the members’ commitment to keeping the commandments and magnifying their callings increased dramatically.³”

“But help me with this paradox, Brethren! The leaders in these situations were each trying to find ways for their members to lose their lives for the sake of the Savior. So why does the Lord bemoan that there are too few laborers? Don’t we have the opposite problem – of not needing all of the members that we have?”

President Oliver added, “It is like Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” who complained that “there was water, water everywhere – and not enough to drink.” Yes, we have 273 members who have been baptized. It seems hard to find new investigators. But in a ward like Waltham there are scores of unbaptized members who have felt the Spirit in the context of the church. With a baptized member, they have attended a sacrament meeting, or discussed the gospel with him or her. Other unbaptized members are married to a baptized member or who have Church members in their family; people who have previously investigated the Church with the missionaries; friends of and relatives of people currently investigating the Church; and so on. These people, in particular, can be asked to help us as we serve the Lord. And just like baptized members, these members can feel the spirit, and know of the doctrine. If we regularly ask unbaptized members to help us as we serve the Lord, and work side-by-side with them, we can keep weeds away as the seeds take root.

Bishop Mehr concluded with this: “If we baptized or re-activated 2,000 people over seven

¹ The histories of how the Kingdom of God was strengthened in Queens and central Maine are in the book, *Everyday Missionaries*, Deseret Book, 2013.

² This was calculated by Elder Clayton Christensen.

³ Source: YSA-Leaders.org.

years in Waltham , as they did in Queens; or if we baptized over 1,000 over four years as they did in Maine, the Lord's view that the Waltham Ward has 57,000 members would not look as daunting to us as it does now, with our blinded perspective of having only 160 active members!"

WHAT IS THE SIZE OF THE WALTHAM WARD? (C)

After another week of respite, the same group met again. President Wright, counselor to President Oliver, said, “I’m trying to put together three ideas from this meeting and the last one:

1. There are 57,000 members of the Waltham Ward.
2. If we *do* his will we will know the doctrine is true. And we find our life if we lose ourselves for the sake of the Savior.
3. So why does the sower (e.g., Ken Martin) feel so lonely, as the only ward missionary in the Waltham Ward, even when the Lord of the Harvest wants more laborers?
4. Why are smart, capable bishops who are trying to build the kingdom, keep trying to create meaningful callings? It is as if the church, intrinsically, doesn’t create opportunities for many members to lose their lives for the Savior’s sake?

Ken said. “Maybe this is it: “*We need to ask unbaptized members in the Waltham Ward to help me to cultivate those fields.* I’m out here working myself to the bone. If we take the Savior at his word, we must say that the causal mechanism for finding our lives is to lose them. Just as He suffered for the sins for each member of the ward, He doesn’t want me and other *baptized* members to be the only members of the ward who are losing our lives for the sake of his gospel. He wants *all* to have the opportunity to do this.”

“We don’t believe this,” Ken observed. “We teach; the investigators listen. We give them rides to church because we don’t want to put too heavy a load onto them; and we baptize them whether or not they invited their friends and family to study the gospel; and on and on. Maybe this is one of the methods of man (Isaiah 55:8). Maybe one of God’s ways is for us to find ways for unbaptized and inactive members to lose their lives for the sake of the Savior, too. If they can serve others and the Lord within the context of the church, they will not just know that the doctrine is of God, they will find the Savior’s yoke to be easy. We need to ask unbaptized members of the ward to serve side-by-side with us, as we serve the Lord. This is what I’ve gotten out of this meeting, Brethren.”

“I support your idea, Ken,” President Baird offered. “It isn’t our standard way of doing missionary work; but I think the Lord agrees with you.

“The Lord also said, ‘For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward. Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward. But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned.’ (D&C 59:27-29).

Ken concluded, “I don’t think we’re talking about giving unbaptized members a calling to teach Relief Society. Rather, we need to teach that nearly *every calling in the Waltham Ward can be a missionary calling.* For most of us, magnifying our calling should entail asking unbaptized members to help us do a better job in our callings in the church. It entails asking our unbaptized friends to take upon the Savior’s yoke with us. Why would we not do this? These are members of the Waltham Ward, Brethren!

President Oliver then asked, “Brother Martin, have you read Brother Christensen’s book,

Everyday Missionaries?"

“No, I haven’t,” Ken responded.

“You should, Ken, because there is an entire chapter on exactly this topic. It is filled with examples of members that have done this. But it brings its own paradox. Great idea. Nearly always, the people that we ask to help us, give us an excited “Yes!” Good people are looking for ways to help others. Yet no ward I know in the mission has done it in a systematic way. Why?”

President Wright then added, “Let’s bring the blame closer to ourselves. We know that when an investigator becomes engaged in the work of salvation, he or she has a multitude of spiritual experiences including increased testimony, increased comprehension of spiritual things, increased spiritual gifts, forgiveness of sins and many others. To become spiritually self-reliant, our investigators need to invite family members and friends to hear the message. They also may go with missionaries to teach others (PMG 84). We and members of Ward Councils need to minister to these who already are amongst us. We hear of this happening here or there in the mission. But why do we not expect it regularly, whenever we set a baptism date with an investigator?”

President Oliver then posed the same puzzle. “Brethren, many of us ignore the same principle as it relates to the temple. We know that when a newly baptized member prepares and takes a family name to the temple, the Spirit of Elijah is powerful, and it helps them understand and embrace the gospel much more deeply (PMG 86-87). Again, why do we not do this every time?”

“When they meaningfully engage in these activities, they naturally realign their lives according to God’s priorities and avoid the choking effect that riches and the cares of the world can have.