

“Missionary Opportunities: The Courage to Open Our Mouths”

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ANN CHRISTENSEN: My father and I are very grateful to have been given the chance to reflect on what we have learned in our attempts to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Finding people whom we can introduce to share the gospel has become one of our family’s ways to thank the Savior for the gift of eternal life that He has given us. And having the missionaries in our home to discuss the gospel with our friends month after month, year after year, as my siblings and I were raised, filled our hearts and our homes with the Spirit of God.

At the beginning, being a missionary seemed daunting, and in fact scary. Gradually, step-by-step, by trying different things and by making some mistakes, we learned that the methods we were using to share the gospel were in fact part of our own problem. Thankfully, however, my dad is actually the kind of guy who likes to solve problems. And so as we failed in some of our attempts to share the gospel, we’d always review what happened. In home evenings and at the dinner table we developed hypotheses about why people actually rejected some of our invitations and thought through maybe what we could do differently next time. And the next time we had an opportunity to share the gospel, we tested these hypotheses on our friends and others around us.

One of the critical things that we learned is that we need not to rely on the thoughts of man as we share the gospel. Isaiah had warned us of this. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

What we hope to share with you this afternoon is a set of insights about how we can introduce wonderful people to the Savior, to His gospel and to His Church, in ways that are intuitive, fun, and not daunting at all.

Although we are taught very clearly in the scriptures that we should not judge whether someone will be interested in the gospel based on their lifestyle, habits or appearance, we often do it anyway. In Matthew 7:1 we are taught, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” In 1 Samuel 16:7, it reads, “But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or

on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for [a] man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

This is certainly one of the most important lessons that we have learned through our efforts to share the gospel. We simply cannot predict and should not judge who is likely to want to learn about the gospel and who will not. My parents always taught me this growing up, and I more or less believed them, but when I got to college I decided that it was my turn to start sharing the gospel on my own.

I attended Duke University in North Carolina, where in any given year there were 10 or 15 LDS students amongst a student body of about 6,000. I grew up in New England, so I was quite accustomed to being in the strong minority as a member of the Church, and in my first few weeks at Duke, I became close friends with a group of about 12 classmates, who to this day remain some of my dearest friends. We are all very different from each other, and none of them were LDS, but they certainly all knew that I was. We didn't talk about my church membership very much, except for the occasional passing joke about how strange it was that I actually got up and went to church on Sunday mornings, or other things that I did or did not do because of my church membership.

As we became closer in the months that ensued, I wanted to move the conversation beyond a few passing jokes to maybe a deeper conversation about the things that I actually believed. I wasn't quite sure how to do it, but I thought that maybe a safe place to start might be to give them each a Book of Mormon. So over the holiday break of one year at school, I sent them each a Book of Mormon with a letter explaining what the book meant to me, and highlighting some of my favorite stories. It felt a little like something out of a terrible seminary movie, but I was still a fairly shy and timid teenager and this was about all of the boldness that I could muster. Some of my friends I thought were fairly religious people and that they might be open to a deeper conversation. Others probably would not be interested, as they weren't really interested in religion at all, and I thought surely they would never read it. But if I gave it to one, I wanted to give it to all of them. And so I did.

Despite all of my hopes and good intentions, no one really responded to this gift. I got a few polite thank-yous, but that was about all I ever heard. And I didn't want to push too hard. But I definitely felt like a failure. My feeble attempt at sharing the gospel had yielded precisely no missionary discussions and no church attendance, and I was sure that there were bolder ways to share the gospel and better ways to approach distributing the Book of Mormon. But I mostly thought that maybe my parents had a talent that frankly I didn't.

Years later, much to my own surprise, I made a decision to serve a mission for the Church. I was called to serve in Mongolia, and that was a remarkable experience in many ways. One of the fascinating things about being a missionary in Mongolia is that the work there operated exactly the way I had been taught that it should. Which is to say that for us, it was not actually legal to proselyte door to door, so we couldn't do a lot of finding on our own. But the members of the Church were so proactive about talking to their family members and their friends and even strangers about the gospel that week in, week

out, our schedules were booked solid with discussions to teach with people who were interested in learning more about the Church. It was remarkable. I thought this was the way missionary work was supposed to work, and it made me often reflect on my experiences at Duke and wonder what I could have done that would have made me more successful.

Several months into that experience, I found myself in a small city kind of in the middle of nowhere in northern Mongolia called Darkhan. While I was there I actually received a letter from one of these friends from college whom I hadn't heard from in many months. This friend, we'll call him Dave, had been adamantly opposed to organized religion of any sort. He seemed like someone who would basically never be interested in the Church. In this letter, however, he explained that he'd been thinking that maybe a few things needed to change in his life, and in the midst of a bit of a process for him, some missionaries had knocked on their door. They looked tired, and he took pity on them, thinking that they were doing the same work that I was doing in a different part of the world. He let them in and let them have a seat, in hopes that someone would extend a similar mercy to me.

You can imagine the missionaries' surprise, when as they continued to talk, he in fact pulled out a well-worn Book of Mormon that had survived several moves and that he had explored rather extensively. And he shared with them several stories and several passages that in fact I had highlighted for him years and years before.

As he explained it, he had then begun to meet with the missionaries for many weeks. And I realized that this feeble invitation that I had made, that had seemed like such a failure to me for so many years, had actually been a success. Of the 12 people that I shared a Book of Mormon with, one eventually accepted my invitation. It took him years. But until I had that letter in my hand, I'd have thought of him as one of the last people on earth who would be interested in the gospel. My success was actually just making the invitation in the first place.

These experiences, both for sharing the Book of Mormon with my classmates and seeing the Church's growth in Mongolia, taught me that we never know who is going to be interested in the Church. What is asked of us is to create opportunities to share the gospel, and make invitations. We never know in advance who will be interested and who will not, so we just need to ask.

CLAYTON CHRISTENSEN: I just second what Ann said. If you look at all of the people that we've had the privilege of bringing into the Church, we couldn't have picked any of them out of a police lineup as potential Mormons. So if that's true—we actually cannot predict who's going to be interested in our gospel—how do we get a start?

There are some ways of doing this—finding people who are interested—that have been quite useful. For me the most useful and productive way is just in my everyday conversations. I try to use Mormon words in my normal conversation. So I'll talk about our children who are serving missions, or when I was a missionary in Korea, or

something about BYU, or almost always on Mondays I talk about how dead tired I am because I'm a Mormon and we have to do so much work in our church on Sunday and And whenever we use a Mormon word, it's as if we open a door to have a conversation. And most people see that we've opened the door and choose not to come in, and that's just fine. But on occasion, somebody will say, "Oh. You must be a Mormon." And my response is, "Yeah. It's a great church. Why do you ask?" And I thought I'd talk about the door that opens, if we think about it in the way that we recommend.

So a couple of years ago I was at an academic conference in the Boston area where we live, and I sat down in the audience next to a gentleman, Steven Elliott, who is roughly my age, unfortunately, and we just were making small talk as we were waiting for the session to open. And I was using Mormon words.

He said, "Oh, you must be a Mormon." And I said, "Yeah. It's a great church, actually. Why did you ask?" And he said, "Oh, nothing special."

And so we started to talk about other things, and then I said, "Were you raised in any particular religious tradition?" And he said, "Yeah, I was raised in Minneapolis, so of course I was a Lutheran."

I said, "Do you still go to the Lutheran Church?"

And he said, "I haven't been there in 25 years."

"Why?"

"Well, when I went to college at Caltech," he said, "I just started to accumulate questions. And so I went to the minister of my church in Pasadena, showed him the questions. He basically couldn't answer them, he said. So I went to the other churches in Pasadena and had meetings with their ministers to see if they could answer my questions. None of them could." And he said, "So I wrote off religion. And I've been trying science for 25 years, but science doesn't do any better than religion. And that's why I haven't been to church in 25 years."

And I asked, "Do you still have your questions?"

And he said, "Oh yeah. I still have the questions and actually quite a few more."

And I said, "How about this? I actually am interested in this stuff. Would you be willing to come to our home"—because he lives in the Boston area—"next week and bring a set, a listing of these questions, and let us see if we could give you at least Mormons' perspective on some of these questions."

And I explained that I'm an academic and so I can never give a pithy answer, but we have missionaries who are really good at short answers. And he said that would be just fine.

And so we had this meeting, and it turned out that Steven had 13 questions. So we talked about his questions, and then I asked the missionaries, "Could you just give the answer or our perspective on the first question?" And I listened as the elders taught or gave the answer, and I looked at Steven's response. And about 10 minutes into it, I noticed that he took the pencil and he lined it out. And I said, "Steven, why did you line out the question?" And he said, "You answered it."

And then we went to the second one, and so on. So we got through three. We were out of time. I said, "Would you like to do it again?" And he said, "Nobody's done this before." So we met the next week. I said, "Reorient them so that we're going after the most important remaining question first. And if you've got other questions, add it down." And so we did this week after week, taking his questions and then offering the answers as the missionaries did a great job with that.

And we learned a really important thing about this. If I had decided that because Steven Elliott didn't go to church he was not a religious person, he wasn't interested in religion, we would have done what Ann almost did, and in statistics you call it a type 1 error. That is, you reject something that is actually good. And if I had rejected him because he wasn't active in church, I would have defined the investigator the wrong way.

And rather than looking at what they do, a better way to frame it is, do they have questions? Because people will only learn when they're ready to learn, not when we're ready to teach them. And I need to understand, do they have questions? And if they do, then we meet with them to provide the answer. And as long as we provide the answer to their questions, and avoid what we often do, which is to give them the answers to *our* questions, we have found that it is much easier to find people for the missionaries to teach. Because we really are surrounded by people who have a lot of questions but haven't been able to get good answers.

I thought I would tell another experience in that vein. A colleague of mine made quite a public announcement that she could no longer believe in religion—er, I'm sorry, that she could no longer believe in God. So we asked, "Well, could you explain this God that you can't believe in?" And she said, "Sure." She described the God of the Nicene Creed with several other layers of karma added to it through centuries of theological contemplation. And she said, "I can't believe in a God like that. Especially I can't believe in a God whose existence was voted into existence at a convention."

And I looked at her and I said, "You know, if I thought that is who God was, I couldn't believe in Him either." And then I realized, my goodness, what she had just done is she had just rejected falsehood. She hadn't rejected God—she had rejected falsehood.

And then I realized, oh my goodness, Clayton Christensen, you're thinking that you're spending your whole professional life surrounded by people who are godless people. I think that's the wrong framing. I'm surrounded by people who have rejected falsehood. And the reason why they reject falsehood is when they begin to look for religion, what they see in front of them is a mural that Satan has painted. And they see that collage, and they just—it is impossible. And so they reject falsehood, thinking that they can't believe in God.

And that has been a very useful input for me and for our family. And that is, we think that there are not many people around us who are interested in God and interested in religion. In reality we're surrounded by people who have questions and have not been able to find the truth.

Now let me move ahead in the process. So what Ann pointed out is we actually can't predict. Therefore we have to engage in a lot of conversations with a lot of people to find people who have questions. There actually are a lot more of those around us than we think.

Now, how do we interact with our friends to be sure that they then get baptized? How can we help them get a strong commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and prevent them from dropping out of the process between their decision to learn and their decision to get baptized? And what I'd like you to remember about this element is that people don't like to do things that they don't know how to do. And most of our friends don't know how to get a testimony and therefore at some point they drop out because we never taught them how to get a testimony.

And what I'd like to do is tell you about a friend of mine, Brian Kruzak, and what we learned in bringing him the gospel of Jesus Christ, and then I'll turn it back to Ann. So this friend of mine, Brian Kruzak, I hadn't seen for 25 years. Some things had happened in his life. He decided maybe he needs to learn something about religion. So he called me up, and I said, "Brian, I'd love to have time to talk about our perspective on some of these things, but I don't want to frame it as 'Brian, come to our house, I want you to sit on that chair and I'm going to tell you everything that I think you need to know.' I need you to bring questions, and I'd like to have this conversation about your questions, Brian."

And so he agreed, and he brought 19 questions, in quadruplicate—two for the missionaries who were there for their short answers, because I can't do that. And anyway, so we talked about the questions to be sure that we were ready to go. And at the end of that discussion, one of the missionaries put out a copy of the Book of Mormon and said, "Brian, we'd like you to begin reading this book as we go through these questions." And Brian pushed it back to the elder and said, "Been there, done that. Somebody gave me a copy of the Book of Mormon years ago. I tried, but I just couldn't get into it."

And so I said—and I really felt like this was a piece of inspiration—I said, "Brian, I bet you the reason why you couldn't get into the Book of Mormon is because when you

learned to read in school, you were taught to begin at the beginning and to end at the end. But that's not the way we read the Book of Mormon. You study the scriptures by finding answers to your own questions. That's the way you have to read the scriptures. And so, I'm a professor. I have a license to give homework, and I'm going to give you homework."

And I said, "Let's take the first three questions on your list of 19." And these questions were, number one, why do we believe that we're born in sin and we have to get baptized when we're infants? Never made sense to him. Number two, why is God so obsessed with baptism? And number three, how do I get forgiven of my sins? Interesting questions, right?

So I said, "Brian, what I want you to do is, I want you to do a two-paragraph answer to each of these three questions. And you've got to turn that in to me next week when we meet again. Here are the rules: No shortcuts. This is going to take you two hours, so find a time in the evening or a weekend." I had a notepad and I wrote these down for him. "So step one, I want you to kneel down and pray out loud and explain to God what your friend Clay has asked you to do, and explain to God that you've got to read two chapters." And I had asked him to read Mosiah chapter 18 and Moroni 8.

"So explain that you've got to read these two chapters and ask God to help you understand what the scriptures are saying about the answer to your questions. So that's step number one. Two, then Brian, sit in the chair and read those two chapters, Mosiah 18, Moroni 8. Step three, write a rough draft of your answers, two paragraphs for each of the three. Number four, put your drafts down, kneel down and pray again out loud to God and explain to God that you've read these things, this is what you've written. 'I'm going to read these chapters a second time and I really need you to tell me whether the things that I have written are true.' And if [you] don't have it right, then pray to ask God to help as you read the chapters a second time to know what the answers really are. Then I want you to read the chapters a second time. Then go back to your essays and revise them, and then turn them to me."

And then I said, "Brian, I want you to do one more thing. And that is, when you've finished these revised essays, I want you to pray a third time, on your knees, out loud, and explain to God what you've written, and ask God to tell you if the things that you have written and the things that you have read are true."

Then we talked to Brian about how God gives you the answers to prayers like that. And I said, "Brian, I want you to ask God to give you that feeling in your heart if in fact what you've written is true." And I said, "Brian, will you do your homework?" And Brian said, "Yeah, I'll do your homework."

Turns out, he did his homework. So when he came back to our home the next Tuesday, Brian Kruzak was so excited! He had copied his answers four times for the missionaries and for me and Chris, and he said as we sat down in the living room, "Do you mind if I

read my answers out loud? Because I'd like to not just tell you what the answers are, but I'd like to explain how I got the answers from Mosiah 18 and Moroni 8."

And I still remember the way his first answer began. He said, "It actually makes God angry when people baptize infants because it trivializes the gospel of Jesus Christ." The investigator taught that to the missionaries and to the Christensens. And then he finished reading out loud the two chapters or two paragraphs of his first question, and it took 15 minutes to explain how he got to those answers. And he said, "How am I doing?" And I said, "You've done very well. Not many investigators teach the elders." And he said, "You know, Clay, I just hate to write. I hate to write. But thank you for making me write it down because I had to think about it."

So then we went into the second answer and then to the third. And it took Brian 35 minutes to teach the elders and the Christensens the first principles and ordinances of the gospel.

And then I said, "Brian, remember there was a number seven, which is I want you to pray a third time." And he said, "I did it. I asked God to tell me whether the things that I had written are true. And I felt the feeling in my heart that you said I would feel." And he said, "Clay and Chris, it really is true."

And I said, "What are you going to do?"

And he said, "I've got to be baptized." He said, "For a while I thought I can't be baptized because I have so many questions left. But look in my answer to question number two—the purpose of baptism is you make your commitment to God that you're going to do your best. I've got the rest of my life to get answers, but I need to make this commitment to God." And so Brian was baptized two weeks later.

What do we learn about this? Well, number one, we've got to start with questions because people will only learn when they're ready to learn, not when we're ready to teach them. Number two, he had been raised in two different Christian religions, and in neither church did he learn how to pray. He had learned memorized prayers, but this is the first time we laid it out in that detail, how to pray to get an answer. And then we asked him to write it down. And nobody had taught him about what does it mean to ponder the scriptures. And then we taught him how to know when God is answering your prayers, and that's where we decided that so many of us, whether we're full-time missionaries or member missionaries, we can initiate the process of teaching them the gospel. Most people don't make it to the end, and we've decided that the problem for that is us. We don't take the time to teach them how—how to read the scriptures, how to ponder what they mean, and how to pray to know whether they're right. And since we had that experience with Brian, of those who we begin to teach the gospel to, the vast majority of them actually join the Church—because we take the time to teach them how. And that's another important thing that we've learned in trying to be good missionaries.

ANN CHRISTENSEN: Another thing we've learned is the importance of asking people to serve with us as we try to serve the Lord. We're taught in the Church from a very young age that we can feel the Spirit when we provide service in the Church. We serve members of our wards. We serve in our communities. But interestingly, we often forget to ask the people around us to serve with us. But when they do serve with us, they actually have the opportunity to feel the Spirit of God just as we do. And then they often, we find, proactively seek out opportunities to continue to feel that Spirit.

Many have noted that when people live in troubled circumstances, that often that those circumstances compel them to be more humble, and that people then tend to be more receptive to the gospel. Today, however, we live in more prosperous times, and the comfort of our lives means that missionary work in our world requires perhaps a different perspective.

In Mark 8:35, the Savior explains, "But whosoever [will] lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it." By asking others to serve with us, we offer them the opportunity to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel in ways that they might not otherwise encounter.

Many of our friends and colleagues don't necessarily feel on a day-to-day basis the need for religion in their lives. But almost all of them feel a need to help other people. I think the first time that I saw this was actually when I was a child. Some of you are familiar with this story, but my father was a home teacher to an elderly woman in our ward, and her name was Julia. And it was in the middle of a hot August, or a hot July summer in Boston—so it was about 90 degrees, it was in the middle of a heat wave and about 110 percent humidity. It was absolutely miserable outside, and my dad decided he should probably stop by and check on his home teachee.

And he walked into her house and he said, "Julia, I don't know how to tell you this, but I think something has died in your house. It smells terrible in here." Julia had lost her sense of smell and she had no idea, and so she just kind of followed him through the house as he sought out the source of this terrible smell.

They got down to the basement and they found this old refrigerator, and he opened it up, and inside there was this moldy box. And he asked her what it was, and she said, "Oh. My son lives in Florida, and he sent me a case of oranges over the holidays and I put it in here and I forgot about it. And a few months ago they had a commercial on the television about how you can save energy by unplugging unused appliances, and I unplugged the fridge about four months ago." So they made the very quick decision that in fact they needed to get the refrigerator out of that basement as soon as possible, and get it on out of there to a dump.

And so my dad went home and he started calling everyone on the ward list. And it was the middle of July, a lot of people were on vacation and nobody was available. And so he looked around the neighborhood and he decided to go knock on the door of a neighbor named Jim. And my parents can't help themselves—they love sharing the gospel, and so

they've asked just about everyone in our neighborhood whether or not they're interested in learning more about the Church. And Jim and his wife had flat-out refused many times. But when my dad showed up actually needing some assistance, Jim was actually really delighted to help, despite the heat, humidity and everything else.

So they went over to Julia's house. And getting this fridge out of the basement was just really not an easy task. It involved getting up a rickety, narrow set of stairs with two 90-degree turns in it, and in hindsight I think they're pretty sure that that fridge was made out of cast iron because it was very, very heavy.

So about an hour into this delightful experience, feeling very tired and rather miserable, and my dad thinking, "Jim is never going to speak to me again," Jim says, "So, Clay, tell me a little more about this Mormon Church." And my dad, a little bit shocked by the question, leaned on the fridge and said, "Well Jim, this is it." And he explained to Jim the programs of home and visiting teaching and how the Church actually provides an opportunity for us to look after each other and care for each other.

Jim was a little bit shocked by this. He said, "You know in my church I just go to church. I hear the sermon, and I don't actually have any idea if anybody needs my help. Or for that matter, no one has any idea if I need some help. But I love this kind of thing, so you know, if any of you Mormons ever need some help again, why don't you go ahead and give me a call."

None of my parents' attempts at engaging Jim and his wife in conversations about religion had moved the needle at all for Jim. But in fact, asking him to serve alongside with him allowed Jim to actually feel the Spirit, and he ended up taking up my parents on the offer to learn more about the gospel.

In another example, in another ward in New England, a woman whom we'll call Nancy had a Primary lesson to teach. And she had kind of an unruly class, and she looked at the schedule and she saw that there was a lesson coming up on the Good Samaritan. She felt like that was a really important lesson and that there was just kind of no way she was going to get through this lesson without a second set of hands. And she thought about how she could get help, and she decided to call a friend named Susan.

"Susan," she said, "you are one of the finest Samaritans I know. And I teach this class of nine-year-olds, and they're kind of an unruly crowd, and I could really use someone to help me teach that lesson. Do you think you could teach a lesson on the Good Samaritan?" And Susan, though not a member of the Church, was a Christian and thought that she could actually help.

And so they worked together to prepare the lesson, and Nancy explained to her that in fact, "Usually at the end of the lesson I do this thing which in our tradition we call 'bearing our testimony,' where I tell the children about why it is that I believe that the things that I've taught them are true. So when you finish teaching I'll probably jump in

and teach that part, and you're welcome to do the same if you'd like." And Susan said, "You know, if it'll help the kids, I'd be happy to help." And so she did.

The lesson went beautifully. Nancy shared her testimony at the end. And then Susan joined in and very tearfully also shared her testimony with the children.

As they cleaned up and walked out of the class at the end of the class, Susan said, "Nancy, I don't really know what that was. I don't really ever show a lot of emotion. Does this happen to you too?"

And Nancy responded, "Well, yes. What you're feeling is the Spirit of God. It is the way that God tells you that in fact the things that you just said are true."

Susan said, "Well that was an amazing experience, and if you ever need help again, please feel free to call me."

Susan really learned a lot about our church that day. She learned that this is a church that cares a lot about children. She learned that the children are raised by a community of loving people that care about their welfare. She learned, and felt also, that God lives and that He knows Susan and He knows what she does, and He expresses His love and gratitude for the good that she does in the world. Of a truth, she learned more about our church and about God that day than she ever would have learned through passively sitting through a class or a sermon.

I've seen a lot of examples of people putting this principle to work and asking their friends and neighbors to serve with them. I watched a friend recently invite a number of friends and neighbors to help prepare food and decorate for a ward activity—who were all not members of the Church. I had a sibling invite some professional colleagues to participate in a panel in a YSA conference that he planned.

We can invite our friends and neighbors to participate in musical numbers for us for church meetings and for meetings held by the Church that the community is invited to. We can ask neighbors and friends to help us cook a meal for someone who is suffering or for someone who is grieving, or provide compassionate service in some other way. I should clarify that I really don't mean that we're creating work or circumstances for our friends to serve with us. We're looking for real service, and asking our friends and our neighbors to help us accomplish things that we are already trying to do, and helping them understand that we need them, not just that they might need us. Through these acts of service we actually allow them to feel the Spirit of God, and in so doing allow them to feel perhaps what they didn't know they might be missing.

CLAYTON CHRISTENSEN: I think what Ann has described has just played itself out over and over again in my life. Every calling that I've ever had I could frame as a missionary calling because in fact there was so much to be done for me to magnify my calling that needed the help of my friends with all of their capabilities. It's been a wonderful thing.

I postpone stuff to the last minute. And thank goodness there are set deadlines and goals that I need to meet. So for example, somebody, who knows what it was, said that home teaching has to be done by 12 midnight on the last day of the month. Had they not done that, I would continually plan to do my home teaching next week. Thank goodness somebody said you've got to show up at sacrament meeting at 9:00 a.m. in Belmont, because with that commitment and that time, I have to deliver.

It turns out, though, that there are no deadlines for sharing the gospel, and as a consequence the vast majority of the members of the Church plan to be good missionaries next week. And what changed my life—it truly did change my life—was in 1984. Elder M. Russell Ballard, who at the time was a member of the Seventy, gave a talk in general conference where he asked us to commit to set a date by which we would find somebody for the missionaries to teach. And he very specifically said, “You can't predict who, but you can commit to a date.” And if you commit to a date, Elder Ballard said, the Lord will bless you to find somebody.

And for me, general conference is wonderful. I always can remember how I felt when I listened to the talks. It's hard for me to remember what they actually said after a week or two. But this one from Elder Ballard just stuck in my mind. And that evening I made a commitment to the Lord that I would find somebody for the missionaries to teach. And given that I am who I am, I set the date about 11 months hence. And that allowed me not to do anything for a long time. My commitment was January 31st back in that era. And I got to November, and I said, “If I'm serious, I'd better be serious.” And so I started to talk to people, and by using Mormon words—and I've got to tell you, there was nobody in the northeast quadrant of North America who had any interest in the Church. And I tried harder and harder to find somebody to have more and more conversations. Nobody was interested.

So then I started to fast and pray every Sunday and tell the Lord, “I made a commitment that I'm going to find somebody.”

And then I looked at the calendar ahead and I had to go to an academic conference on the 20th of January in Hawaii, unfortunately. And I said, “I just can't see any other time when I could meet somebody who I haven't already invited. So if you wouldn't mind, would you please cause somebody who would be interested in the Church to sit next to me on that flight? And I promise I'll invite them to learn about the Church.”

So I kept fasting and praying, and got on the plane that day. And then my seatmate came in, and oh my gosh. This guy was from Hartford. He was a stonemason. He had shorts, a Hawaiian shirt open to the sternum, and a curly Italian head of hair that just was billowing out, and several necklaces.

And I introduced myself, and I said, “How come you're going to Hawaii?” And he described four women that he knew, and he saves up his money for 11 months of the year so that he can go to Hawaii and hang out with these four women for a month. And I think, “I fasted every Sunday! And this is who you sit by.” You know?

And so I wrote him off, and started to do—I had a lot of work to do. And then when they brought the dinner, I had to put my work down, and so we started to have conversation. And he said, “Have you ever been to Hawaii?” And I said, “Well, not really. I was a missionary for the Mormon Church, and they told me I had to go to Korea on my mission, and so we stopped in Hawaii because our church has a college on the north shore of Oahu. And I was there for two months, but I just was in, you know, I had to learn Korean and I didn’t experience Hawaii at all.”

And I remember that man put his fork down, and he said, “So you’re a Mormon, huh?” And I confessed. Then he said, “I’ve got to tell you, I have had no interest in any religion anytime in my life, but for some reason in the last several months I have just been obsessed with the Mormon Church. Could you tell me what you guys are about?” And it was like a cocoon came into this plane, and for four hours we talked about the Articles of Faith. Then we finished, and I thanked him for his interest. And he said, “Oh, my thanks to you. This has been wonderful.”

Then we started to go, and in my mind’s eye, just like Ann said at the beginning that we can’t predict, I had written off that guy. But until we landed, about every 20 minutes he’d pat me and ask, “I’ve got another question for you,” or “Thanks for telling me about what you guys believe.”

And then as we were landing, I said, “You know, there’s some missionaries from our church in Hartford. When you go back home, if you’d like I could get these missionaries to look you up.”

And he said, “Don’t you have any missionaries in Honolulu?”

And I’m so grateful that I set that date because had I not been desperate I wouldn’t have found that man to teach the gospel to.

And it turns out that that has been my experience every time. And from the time Elder Ballard told us to set a date, I have set a date once, and then twice, and now three times every year, a commitment that I’ll find somebody for the missionaries to teach. And every time God hangs me out there to the very end.

So this happened a couple of years ago, and I was desperate, and a doctoral student came in to talk to me and I invited him, and he said sure, he’d like to know more.

So over dinner that night I just groused out loud, “Why can’t God just help me find somebody like two months before the date so that I don’t have to fast and all these things?”

And our son Spencer said, “Dad, look. I’ve seen this happen often enough. I know what’s going on. If it’s too much time between where you are and your date, you’re just too relaxed, and God can’t trust you that if He puts somebody in your place, your path, that you’re going to invite them. But as the time gets shorter and shorter, Dad, you become

progressively more desperate. And when you're desperate, God can trust you. Whoever He puts in your path, He can count on you inviting them, and that's why He does this to you."

And we call that Spencer's Principle of Desperation, which I think is actually a general principle in the gospel—it's not just related to missionary work. But I wanted to offer this to you. It really has helped me find people for the missionaries to teach by setting a date. I've got to tell you that not too many years ago we convened the whole family and I said, "I want all of us to set a date, individually, and just let me know the date that you picked." And so everybody committed to do it. About six weeks later I called each one and said, "What's your date?" And then I called our son Michael, and he said, "I baptized her already." And he brings conversations to the end in this way a lot. He actually does stuff. But I'm grateful that we have members of our family who will make these commitments to the Lord.

ANN CHRISTENSEN: Spencer's Principle of Desperation is a real favorite in our house. But there's a reason that it's worth it to actually go through all the hassle of setting a date and finding people to teach. My companion when I was serving in that small city in northern Mongolia shared with me a favorite scripture, which is 2 Timothy 1:7, in which Paul teaches, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." This scripture's taught me that the reason that many of us fail in our attempts to share the gospel is that we fear. But that fear doesn't come from God. God in fact actually wants us to succeed in sharing the gospel. And as we work to engage our friends and those around us with the gospel, using the love of our fellowman, we will actually make invitations quite naturally and without restraint, just as so many of the Saints that I admired in Mongolia did, and others around us that we tend to identify as natural missionaries.

The scriptures are full of promises of blessings for those who engage in missionary work. In the D&C, in fact, we learn that many of the problems that fester in our hearts and homes will be healed through the blessings that come from sharing the gospel. A few of them include: you shall stand blameless before God; you will be lifted up at the last day (my parents also taught me how to cry); you will be given a testimony of the words of the prophets; you will have revelations; your sins will be forgiven; you will have great faith; you will be able to keep God's laws.

Many verses also offer power and strength: none shall stay you; ye shall receive great strength such as is not known among men; He himself will go with you and be in your midst; nothing shall prevail against you; power shall rest upon you; He will go with you and be before your face; your enemies will not have power over you; the Lord will stand by you; no weapon formed against you shall prosper.

Yes, we share the gospel because it makes us better, happier people and we want to share that same joy with those around us that we have found through following the Savior. But there are great blessings that come back to us for sharing the gospel, and they are truly priceless. What bishop or Relief Society president wouldn't want these promises fulfilled

in their lives and in the lives of their ward members? What parents wouldn't want these blessings for their children? And who among us wouldn't love these blessings for ourselves?

And it's my testimony that sharing the gospel does not need to be a scary and difficult experience—that it actually can come in the course of our day-to-day lives by doing very simple things and engaging in conversations, with love, with those around us, to share the gospel.

CLAYTON CHRISTENSEN: To close let me just tell something that I think will convey to you what sharing the gospel has done in our family.

A number of years ago one of my students and I had talked, and I invited him to learn about the gospel in our home. At the end of the first lesson—and the missionaries did a wonderful job—I bore my testimony to my student, and Christine bore hers, and one of the missionaries gave his testimony, and I then asked the other missionary if he wouldn't close with prayer.

As I did that, our son Spence, who at the time was just 11 years old, had been sitting on the piano bench. And he stood up and he raised his hand and he said, "Dad, can I say something before the prayer?" And Spencer looked at Sunil with just the purest gaze, and he said, "Sunil, I just want you to know that the things the missionaries taught to us tonight are true. I want you to know that I know that God lives, that you and I are sons of God and we're brothers." And he closed that in the name of Jesus Christ and sat down. And as Spence did that, a beautiful feeling came into the room.

Well the next day, Sunil sent me an email thanking me for the good job the missionaries had done. But then he said, "You know, when your son Spencer said what he said, a feeling came into the room that I've never felt before." And Sunil said, "Is that what you mean by the Spirit of God?"

When I read that, I realized that I would have paid a million dollars for an experience for Spencer half that good.

That has been the great blessing in our lives—the missionaries come to our home to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is in our home every day, and that is a wonderful blessing. And with Annie, I want to close with this, with our testimonies and in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.