

Turning the MTC into a Review, Not a Revelation
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I am here today to add my witness to that of President Julie Beck of the general Relief Society presidency when she said:

*Mothers who know are always teachers. Since they are not babysitters, they are never off duty. A well taught friend told me that he did not learn anything at church that he had not already learned at home. His parents used family scripture study, family home evening, mealtimes, and other family gatherings to teach. Think of the power of our future missionary force if mothers considered their homes as a pre-missionary training center. **Then the doctrines of the gospel taught in the MTC would be a review and not a revelation.***
(“Mothers Who Know,” p. 76, *Ensign* Nov. 2007.)

When I served as a stake president, we had the wonderful blessing of being in a stake with many youth. That meant lots of missionaries coming and going. We had as many as 150 missionaries in the field at one time during my seven years in the presidency, and our stake averaged about 130 missionaries serving at any given time. That means I interviewed and set apart over 400 missionaries.

During the first eleven months of our service, we had nine missionaries sent home early from their missions. When a missionary returns home early, there is often trauma for the missionary, the family and many others, so that was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. I felt that if we kept having missionaries sent home at that rate, I'd never make it for the typical nine or ten years most stake presidents serve.

We decided we had to do something about the problem. As a presidency, we counseled together, and after much effort we determined there were some things we could do to reduce the number of missionaries from our stake who were sent home. We met with our bishops and parents of prospective missionaries and did a lot of teaching about preparation for serving full time missions.

Things improved. We had fewer missionaries come home in the last six years of our presidency than during that first year, reducing the number of missionaries coming home early to about one a year. While that number still wasn't ideal, we noted the change and value of early preparation.

On the other end of missionary preparation, Sister Clayton and I had the wonderful blessing of welcoming and sending home over 400 missionaries during the time we were on our mission. It wasn't very long after we arrived in Missouri that we could tell—often from the very first night in the mission home—which new missionaries would struggle and which ones would do well.

If there is one thing I hope you remember today from today's presentation, it is this: Sister Beck was 100 percent correct when she suggested that preparation in the home is overwhelmingly the greatest influence on whether missionaries succeed in the mission field.

May I repeat for emphasis: **preparation in the home is the overwhelming, single-most important factor in missionary preparation.** Priesthood, Primary, Sunday School, Young Men, Young Women, and sacrament meeting are helpful, but they cannot do what parents—and particularly mothers—can do in the home.

Oh, how I pray that women and families in the Church would catch Sister Beck's vision! The impact on missionary work would be breathtaking.

A good starting place in understanding the importance of mission preparation is a statement issued by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve on missionary work in December of 2002. In part it states:

Full-time missionary service is a privilege for those who are called through inspiration by the President of the Church. Bishops and stake presidents have the serious responsibility to identify worthy, qualified members who are spiritually, physically, and emotionally prepared for this sacred service, who can be recommended without reservation. Those individuals not able to meet the physical, mental, and emotional demands of full-time missionary work are honorable excused and should not be recommended
(First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, Statement on Missionary Work)

Perhaps there was a time that going on a mission as a young adult was looked upon as a right of passage that all young men and a few young women go through as part of the process of becoming an adult. The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have made it clear that is not the case. No young man or young woman has the right to go on a mission. It is a privilege, and that privilege should only be extended to those who are prepared to meet the physical, mental and emotional demands of missionary work.

I remember when the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve held the first World Wide Priesthood Leadership training session via satellite. I listened in the stake center in Independence, Missouri and remember so well when President Hinckley followed-up on the First Presidency statement as he addressed priesthood leaders worldwide. He repeated the previous statement and added that the brethren had learned that when a missionary went into the mission field with problems, those problems had a tendency to grow and get worse rather than better.

There are some who believe that, “if I can just get my son or daughter on a mission, the problems he or she has been having will disappear and he/she will overcome those issues.” While miracles happen in the lives of missionaries, for the great majority of them who come into the field with health, emotional or physical problems, those problems do get worse. Sister Clayton and I saw that over and over.

This is why my message to you mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters here today is that missionary preparation for the young men and those young women who go on missions ought to begin very early on, so that the MTC experience is a review and not a revelation.

May I suggest to you some things we learned about what makes missionaries successful on their missions?

1. Remember: missions are hard. They are hard and wonderful at the same time. Learning how to work is valuable preparation for a mission. Here is a great statement made by President Hinckley at a general priesthood meeting:

Now, my dear young friends, I hope all of you are pointed in the direction of missionary service. I cannot promise you fun. I cannot promise you ease and comfort. I cannot promise you freedom from discouragement, from fear, from downright misery at times. But I can promise you that you will grow as you have never grown in a similar period during your entire lives. I can promise you a happiness that will be unique and wonderful and lasting. I can promise you that you will reevaluate your lives, that you will establish new priorities, that you will live closer to the Lord, that prayer will become a real and wonderful experience and that you will walk with faith in the outcome of the good things you do.
(President Gordon B. Hinckley; *Ensign*, November 1998, p.51)

Some of you may know that missionaries are expected to write a letter to their mission president each week. Every Sunday afternoon, when we were not on assignment somewhere, I sat in the mission home and read president’s letters. I took excerpts from some which I thought captured the essence of missionary work. This is an excerpt from one such letter:

I am starting to discover just how hard being a missionary really is. Satan knows just what frustrates me, and it seems like he tries to pile it all in my path. I guess before my mission I just assumed that missionaries are all just spiritual robots

without feelings, just testimonies that automatically pop out when needed. Boy, was I wrong. I was surprised to discover that I get lonely, sad, afraid, impatient and all those other normal things. . . . I really do love my mission; I just wish I was better qualified for it. . . . Before my mission I put all my effort into avoiding uncomfortable situations, but now it seems I work hard to get into uncomfortable situations. What a change.

When missionaries serve, they encounter situations that they never expect to experience. From another letter:

This week was a downer of sorts . . . The second-to-last person we had drop out of our finding and teaching pool was one of the most disheartening. When we talked to him a week ago, he sounded interested in reading the Book of Mormon. But when we came for our appointment, he had not read the book at all, and had several scriptures that he thought proved our church wrong. Then his father-in-law just happened to stop by at the same time (he is the preacher of the church they attend) and just happened to be carrying his Bible! By the way, he also brought his pistol, and it was in its holster. I guess he thought the argument was going to get heated. So we proceeded to leave, testifying to him of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, and telling him he would someday find these things to be true, whether it be in this life or the next. He replied the Book of Mormon was of the Devil, and that and Elder A and I were both going to hell. Not wanting to get shot, we left immediately!

Imagine those two wonderful Elders, looking that preacher in the eye and with humility and boldness testifying as they left!

2. Spiritual preparation is essential: There is only one way to be effective as a missionary: seek and follow the Spirit. The most powerful influence on young men and women is personal spiritual experience. Personal spiritual experience is more powerful than a bishop, a wonderful quorum advisor or a seminary teacher. And personal spiritual experiences are best taught and acquired in the home.

When my son was serving in the Canada Montreal Mission, he worked closely with the president and had an opportunity to observe many missionaries come into the field and return home. I asked him what was the most important thing he could discern that helped missionaries have better missions. At the time, his answer surprised me. Now, after being a mission president, it does not. Sister Clayton and I, as well as my son, learned that missionaries who come from homes that have consistent family home evenings, family scripture study, and family prayer are much better prepared than those who don't.

For those of you who's don't have perfect family home evenings and scripture study, don't give up. I'll never forget one evening when Sister Clayton and I were talking to our oldest son, who was married with children, telling us how much he'd learned from our family scripture study when he was young. We used to have our scripture study in the

morning before the oldest child had to leave for school. This boy was the one who always had his head on the table and seemed to be sleeping.

3. Faith is the very heart of missionary work. A young man or woman who has been taught in a home where he or she heard her parents plead with the Lord for blessings and recognizes the Lord's hand when those blessings came will enter the mission understanding how faith works. If fasting and prayer are a part of a young man's or young woman's family life, he or she will have a great advantage when pleading with the Lord to help find that person who has been prepared to hear the gospel or to help that investigator commit to baptism.

Here is one of my favorite parts of a president's letter:

Tuesday we had one of the most wonderful experiences I've had on my mission. We were tracting in Garnett (Kansas). We had run into some really rude people who wanted to bash with us. It had been really discouraging, so we decided to sit on the curb, read a verse from the Book of Mormon and say a prayer to get the Spirit back. Not 30 seconds after we had opened our eyes, a mini-van pulled over across the street and the girl driving waved at us. I thought perhaps she was a less-active that I hadn't met yet. We introduced ourselves, and she introduced herself, and finally confused, I asked her, "So what prompted you to pull over?" She replied, "I don't know . . . I just saw you sitting there. I'm looking for a church." And now she is set for baptism.

Can you see in your minds eye, these two sister missionaries in their conservative, long skirts sitting by the road side reading the Book of Mormon and bowing their heads in prayer and pleading with the Lord for help? I surely can.

The faith that these two sisters exercised that day is best learned at home, from faithful parents who trust in the Lord and teach their children to do the same.

4. Having a Testimony of the Book of Mormon is Essential. It's interesting to observe missionaries getting off the plane from the MTC. Some are ready to go, a few are crying, some miss their girlfriends to the point that they can't be effective, some seem lost, and some are not only ready to serve, but they radiate the Spirit.

One of the keys to that radiating spirit is a testimony of the Book of Mormon. Every missionary knows that it is the Book of Mormon that leads to conversion. Every day every missionary in the world studies the Book of Mormon.

When our missionaries arrived, we'd visit Liberty Jail, the temple site in Independence, and then have them come to the mission home for dinner. At dinner, Sister Clayton asked a series of questions which we'd prayerfully thought out to become better acquainted.

One question was, “How do you feel about the Book of Mormon?” We quickly found a 100-percent correlation: if a missionary couldn’t say with real conviction that the Book of Mormon was true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet, challenges were ahead.

Prior to our mission, while serving as stake president, we did two things with respect to missionaries and the Book of Mormon. First, I told every bishop that I wouldn’t interview a potential missionary to submit missionary papers unless he or she had read the Book of Mormon.

All the parents in the stake were told of this expectation. Second, when a missionary met with me for his final interview, I requested again that the candidate re-read the Book of Mormon. I also sent a letter to the parents, telling them that I wanted their son or daughter to read the Book of Mormon from cover to cover between the time we sent in the papers and the time the missionary left for the MTC. I asked every bishop to frequently meet with the missionaries under call. The impact on missionaries leaving our stake was powerful.

Sisters, read the Book of Mormon as a family. Bear your testimony to your children of its truthfulness. Share with them how the Book of Mormon has helped you. Let them know how you love its pages. If you love the Book of Mormon and show it, your children and future missionaries are much more likely to feel the same way. It’s impossible to be an effective missionary if you can’t bear strong witness of the Book of Mormon and of Joseph Smith.

5. Obedience is the foundation of missionary work. Missions are not rocket science. All missionaries can be successful if they’re worthy, have a testimony of the Book of Mormon, work hard, and are obedient. Everything else will take care of itself.

In our permissive culture, the home is about the only place where a missionary can learn obedience. Obedience takes a life time of work and surely is not something a young person can learn six months before a mission.

Teaching a child to be obedient, follow rules and understand that obedience and disobedience have their own consequences will help your missionary lay the foundation of obedience—which is the foundational law of the plan of salvation. If a missionary is not obedient, they will not receive the endowment of the Holy Ghost necessary for a successful mission.

Here is another excerpt from a president’s letter:

I found out by the Spirit that to be an effective missionary you simply have to follow the rules and do it honestly and sincerely. The spirit isn’t going to tell you what you already know. I’ve wanted to have the spirit give me more revelation before I had digested the ones I already had. But I realize now that it really works. I love my mission. I love this work. I love the Savior—the sacrifice He

made for us. I love it! It is the true joy and peace that I've been searching for all of my life, and it was right there at my finger tips the whole time.

Here is another experience of a missionary that shows the blessing of obedience:

The Spirit is something I'm just beginning to recognize as it leads and guides me. One experience was late on Sunday evening around 8:30 PM. We had no appointments, and I didn't know what to do, and we were in a neighborhood in which plans had fallen through. I felt impressed we had come here for a reason, and the Spirit told me to go to one house and knock it. I ignored it at first and drove off, but it kept telling me to go back, so I went back and knocked on the door and said, "The Spirit of the Lord told me to come here, and we'd like to come in for ten minutes and share a message with you about Jesus Christ and his church."

He said, "Well, come in." We ended up staying 45 minutes and challenging him for baptism. It was a wonderful experience. The Spirit is awesome, and I love to obey.

These missionaries learned what every missionary has to learn to be effective: obedience is the key to receiving the spirit. These missionaries learned it by being obedient.

Obedience is best taught in the home.

I hope no one leaves today with an impression that to be a good missionary that your son or daughter, brother or sister has to be some type of super-spiritual person. That surely is not the case. Missionaries grow and learn and change in wonderful ways.

When we picked up our son from his mission, his mission the mission president—a close friend of ours—invited Sister Clayton and me to the final testimony meeting of those going home. We'll never forget the testimony of one elder.

Our son had told us through letter how this elder had wanted to go home from the MTC and how the district made it their project to keep him there and get him into the mission field. We listened to this young man's testimony and felt his sweet spirit. He said, "The most important convert on my mission was myself."

I looked at my son, who had tears rolling down his cheeks. That was indeed a miracle.

Sister Clayton and I saw the same miracle happen again and again as we spent time with our departing missionaries. We never got over the contrast between the missionaries coming from the MTC and those going home. In our mission, the missionaries arrived early Wednesday afternoon.

They were a lot of work to take care of. Some were homesick or frightened, and almost all had to be told what to do, where to go, what time to get up, what time to shower, and what time to be ready to to be ready to leave for their assignments.

In contrast, when our departing missionaries came to the mission home, it was pure joy. They knew what to do. They pitched in with dinner, set the table or did whatever was necessary to help. When they were in the mission home, the spirit was as strong as the spirit you feel in the temple. The house felt like a temple on those days.

Our daughter Julie, who was 15 when we came to the mission and graduated from high school in Missouri, always wanted to stay home from school on the days the departing missionaries came. She'd help in the kitchen or with the laundry, but more importantly, she wanted to feel that powerful spirit that permeated the house.

Our final testimony meeting with each group took place at Adam-ondi-Ahman just before we took the missionaries to the airport. We stood in a circle, I'd tell them about Adam-ondi-Ahman, and they'd bear their testimonies. We closed with the hymn "Adam-ondi-Ahman," and I offered a blessing upon their heads. Never have I ever felt the spirit as I did at that sacred place with these well-worn, spiritually-proven servants of God.

Miracles had occurred in their lives. All that President Hinckley said would happen, *had* happened. The promised blessings came.

The contrast between the arriving and departing missionaries was remarkable. Don't any of you think that your son or daughter or brother has to be perfect to succeed on a mission. What it takes is willing heart, obedience and hard work, but a prepared missionary will have greater success than one who is unprepared.

I will end where I started. Sister Beck was right: if mothers will catch the vision of the power of training up a missionary in the home—so that the MTC is a review and not a revelation—the impact on the missionary work of the Church will be truly wonderful.