

One Convert at a Time

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I am honored to speak to you today. I am most grateful to Brigham Young University for giving me the privilege of working for almost 30 years in an environment of both faith and scholarship where I have been allowed to teach about Latin America and assist in the development of the library—not the library building, but a collection of more than three million books and other media that makes it feasible to research and study almost any topic one may desire. The collection of the Harold B. Lee Library is a genuine treasure of this university and the Church. My responsibility in that collection has been to bring to this campus the books that reflect the ideas, creativity, and scholarly production of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world, as well as of Africa.

Three years ago I attended the funeral of a very dear friend. It was like most funerals—both a time of rejoicing for a life well lived and of sorrow as those in attendance realized how much they would miss this majestic person. We were saying good-bye to one of the truly great women of the Church in Latin America. As a young teenager, Flavia Garcia Erbolato was one of the first six to be baptized in the interior city of Campinas, Brazil. For more than 50 years she had remained faithful to the Church. After marrying her husband, Oscar Erbolato, and

spending a couple of years in the early 1950s here at Brigham Young University, they returned to Brazil and worked and served in numerous positions in São Paulo. Flavia's last job was as the director of translation for the Church in Brazil. Among many other things, she supervised the recent monumental task of retranslating the Book of Mormon into Portuguese. At the viewing, her influence in the Church in Brazil was exemplified by the presence of General Authorities, General Authorities emeritus, past mission presidents, and other leaders of the Church. There were also many others like myself who had benefited from her many quiet and mostly secret Christian acts of kindness.

The quiet hum of whispering normal at a viewing dissipated with the appearance of an elderly gentleman, Norton Nixon. As he stopped at her casket to pay his regards, he struggled both physically and emotionally. His body was showing the long-term effects of the diabetes that had already taken much of his sight and ability to walk. The physical effort to be at the viewing was considerable,

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and he probably should not have come. But this was something he would not miss. He wanted to pay his respects to one of his dearest friends. Flavia had been his only convert during a two-and-a-half-year mission to Brazil in the early 1940s that included much hard work, some time in jail, and little feeling of success. Yet his joy was great over this one soul who did come into the Church.

Watching this beautiful act of expression of love has caused me to contemplate the special link that exists between a missionary and a convert. It is a relationship that is unique in the Church. It has also led me to marvel at how these individual experiences have combined to impact the history of missionary work in the Church during the past 100 years. At the beginning of the 20th century, the number of baptized members was just over 271,000—almost all from the western part of the United States. This number is less than the size of the Church in present-day Argentina. Even by the end of World War II, the number of members had only increased to just less than a million, with the majority still in the United States. However, by the end of this past century, our numbers had grown manyfold, reaching a total of 10,753,000, with the majority living outside of the United States and 36 percent alone from Latin America. (See *Deseret News 2001–2002 Church Almanac* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2000], 580–85.)

Scholars of religion are becoming interested in the recent growth of the Church, primarily because of the large numbers who have been baptized. At a time when many traditional religions are undergoing declines in membership and attendance, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has experienced the opposite. Scholars are suggesting a variety of social theories, attempting to explain the attraction to a religion that in the past has been seen in a negative light by those who study religion. Their theories are interesting, but for the most part they inadequately explain what is happening,

because they fail to examine the spiritual aspect of the experience of conversion.

Those of us in the Church should understand how that growth has occurred. The Church's growth has been the result of a unique program of sending into the world as missionaries mostly young 19- to 26-year-old single men and women who have had limited training in religious topics and have a minuscule understanding of conversion techniques. These young missionaries perform their work by walking the streets of the world, contacting potential converts through a variety of methods, and asking to teach mostly skeptical investigators their message. We have not grown because of media efforts or grandiose events. Members have come into the Church one convert at a time. They have joined because missionaries have entered their homes and given testimony of the Atonement of Christ and the restoration of the Church, allowing the Spirit of the Lord subsequently to touch their hearts and testify of the veracity of the gospel.

This program is unique in the history of religion. Never before has such a large group of full-time missionaries been assembled. Ask marketing experts about the advisability of sending young men and women out into the world—many of whom are still teenagers with limited knowledge and experience—and these experts will likely suggest the program is destined for failure. Even we parents of these young missionaries have our doubts. We have watched our children grow and know that often the most significant decision they have made to that point in their lives has been whether or not they will eat broccoli. We often doubt they can become a missionary with the ability and confidence to testify and convince sophisticated adults to change religions. There are probably few missionary parents who have not questioned the authorship of that first letter from their missionary child that describes changes they have experienced or feelings they have developed. Our response as parents is

often, “There is no way my son or daughter could have written that letter.”

The missionary program of the Church has few proponents with the exception of ourselves. In fact, most outside of the Church look upon it with scorn and disdain. Some may admire the fact that young men and women are willing to leave home to give two years of service at this time in their lives. There are many who admit that our young missionaries gain valuable experience through work and service and that they develop maturity by seeing diverse cultures and learning new languages. But these few admissions are overshadowed by negative feelings toward what the missionaries actually do. We as faithful members and ex-missionaries occasionally show a lack of understanding of missionary work ourselves through portrayals of the negative or even humorous. I have often wondered if the Brigham Young University Department of Zoology is not losing a great opportunity to build a most amazing collection of cockroaches from all parts of the world by just spending a few weeks following our missionaries. The descriptions I hear at missionary homecomings and firesides of the astounding size and furiousness of cockroaches they seem to encounter on a regular basis would surely result in a collection unequalled in the world. I have noticed, however, that the descriptions of those seemingly regular bug companions of our missionaries increase in dimension when their mothers are present.

But marketing experts and concerned parents often fail to understand the purpose of the Lord in missionary work or recognize the methods and processes of conversion He uses. We generally focus too much on the missionary when our thoughts should be on the convert. We see how much our sons and daughters have changed instead of understanding what happened to those they have contacted. The conversion story of King

Lamoni by the missionary Ammon—one of the four sons of Mosiah—illustrates how the process occurs.

First, the missionary prepares him or herself to become worthy of the Spirit. Ammon and his three brothers

journeyed many days in the wilderness, and they fasted much and prayed much that the Lord would grant unto them a portion of his Spirit to go with them, and abide with them, that they might be an instrument in the hands of God to bring, if it were possible, their brethren, the Lamanites, to the knowledge of the truth. [Alma 17:9]

Second, the Lord grants unto the prepared and worthy missionary His Spirit, and the missionary in turn develops the desire to preach repentance. “And it came to pass that the Lord did visit them with his Spirit, and said unto them: Be comforted. And they were comforted” (Alma 17:10).

Therefore, this was the cause for which the sons of Mosiah had undertaken the work, that perhaps they might bring them unto repentance; that perhaps they might bring them to know of the plan of redemption. [Alma 17:16]

Third, the missionary finds a way to talk to the person about the gospel. After a series of events that I will not describe and that are fortunately outside the experiences of our present-day missionaries, Ammon gained the confidence of King Lamoni and taught him the gospel in his own tongue and with an understanding of the king’s culture.

Fourth, after the teaching and testifying, the Lord touches the heart of the investigator. After Ammon explained the Atonement of Christ, a spiritual experience occurred to the king:

And it came to pass that after he [Ammon] had said all these things, and expounded them to the king, that the king believed all his words.

And he began to cry unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, have mercy; according to thy abundant mercy which thou hast had upon the people of Nephi, have upon me, and my people.

And now, when he had said this, he fell unto the earth, as if he were dead. [Alma 18:40–42]

It was during this period of unconsciousness that the king was converted, as were many of the people of his kingdom.

Fifth, the investigator then joins those who are believers.

And it came pass that there were many that did believe in their words; and as many as did believe were baptized; and they became a righteous people, and they did establish a church among them. [Alma 19:35]

Notice that the scriptures say very little about how much Ammon changed or matured. The scripture talks about the conversion of King Lamoni. Also note the terminology of Ammon to describe how he wanted to be used in the conversion process: “that they might be an instrument in the hands of God.” Missionaries do not convert, they are mere instruments that allow the spirit of testimony to enter into the heart of the investigator. One recent missionary to Latin America has described this role in the following manner:

There is nothing I have ever done to this point of my life easier than missionary work. Physically and mentally it was demanding—even draining at times. However, the process of conversion was the easiest thing I have ever been associated with, and that is because I had nothing to do with it. I did nothing. It was the Spirit which worked that great change in the hearts of so many wonderful people. [Anthony Grover, Missionary Homecoming Address, Grove Ward, Pleasant Grove Stake, June 1998]

In examining this process, it becomes clear the way conversion occurs. Missionaries have

the responsibility to become worthy of the Spirit through fasting, prayer, obeying mission rules, and working hard. Thus prepared, when the missionary enters the home of an investigator, the Lord uses that righteous vessel or instrument to bring His Spirit into that house. The Spirit enters the soul of a person and begins the process Alma has described as “a change of heart” (Alma 5:26). That is why we do missionary work. We hope and expect that our missionaries are changed by being part of this process, but the importance of the experience is that the investigator feels not what the missionary has given them but the Spirit of the Lord. We don’t send our sons and daughters out into the world in the prime of their lives and spend thousands of dollars to support them just so they will be trained as leaders or perhaps gain cultural experiences or learn a language.

The history of the growth of the Church throughout the world is a story of how that process has occurred millions of times in every corner of this planet. I am moved to think of the many millions of homes that have been tracted, the hundreds of millions of lessons that have been given, and the millions of times our missionaries have borne testimony of the Atonement of Christ and the truthfulness of the gospel. Every one of those brief moments of expression of testimony forms part of a sacred and righteous blanket that is covering the earth with the testimony of truth and spirit.

Nowhere has this process been more striking than in Latin America during the past 50 years. At the end of World War II, missionaries could be found in only three countries of Latin America. There were just over six thousand members, most of whom lived in Mexico. By the end of this past century, a total of 8,859 congregations (wards and branches) had been organized, and almost four million had been baptized members of the Church of Jesus Christ in Latin America. More than 60 percent of all new converts to

the Church speak Spanish or Portuguese. Obviously not all continue as active members, and there are serious challenges of retention and activation—as there are throughout the Church—but even with these challenges this story is one of amazing proportions.

The great missionary stories of the 19th century in America and Europe were often those of apostles such as Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, or John Taylor teaching and converting large numbers of members. Apostles who served as missionaries in Latin America did not have comparable success. Parley P. Pratt went to Chile in 1851 and returned after four months without a single convert. Apostle Moses Thatcher went to Mexico City in 1879 and baptized a few—many of whom soon left the Church, following a disgruntled branch president into apostasy. Elder Melvin J. Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve and Elder Rey L. Pratt of the Seventy spent six months in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1925 and 1926 and baptized seven—six of whom came into the Church the week after they arrived, having been taught and prepared by members baptized in Germany who had recently immigrated to Argentina. Elders Ballard and Pratt distributed more than 11,000 pamphlets and fliers during those six months, and Apostle Ballard described his mission as “the most difficult piece of missionary work that I have undertaken” (CR, October 1926, 38). His comment just prior to leaving Argentina was surely prophetic. At a testimony meeting on July 4, 1926, in Buenos Aires, he said:

The work of the Lord will grow slowly for a time here just as an oak grows slowly from an acorn. It will not shoot up in a day as does the sunflower that grows quickly and then dies. But thousands will join the Church here. It will be divided into more than one mission and will be one of the strongest in the Church. The work here is the smallest that it will ever be. The day will come when the Lamanites in this land will be given a chance. The South

American Mission will be a power in the Church. [In Bryant S. Hinckley, *Sermons and Missionary Services of Melvin Joseph Ballard* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 100; see also *Melvin J. Ballard . . . Crusader for Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 84]

We owe a great debt of gratitude to the early missionaries and converts from Latin America who accepted the gospel and struggled to maintain their faith. Those early missionaries had few if any converts and endured difficult and trying circumstances. It was not easy for their few converts to remain in the Church. Early-19th-century members from the United States and Europe joined under trying times and because of the call to gather to Zion experienced the difficult trip to Utah, but when they arrived they joined a people who believed as they believed and had similar goals and desires. Early converts in Latin America went through similar persecutions when they joined the Church, but, unlike their 19th-century predecessors, they remained in their countries for the most part and confronted continuous persecution, working in small branches trying to create their own small piece of Zion far away from the security and comfort of the Church in Utah. Creating that Zion was not easy and took many years. Their pioneering experiences were different but no less heroic than the experiences of those who crossed the plains of the United States.

Milton Soares, the first convert in northeastern Brazil, realized the less-than-sympathetic reaction he was to get from family and acquaintances when shortly after his conversion he informed a few of his close friends that he had been baptized into the only true church on the earth. They asked him how many members belonged to the Church in the area.

“Only me,” was his reply.

His friends couldn’t stop laughing. “Only you? How could a church be any good if you are the only member?” (See Mark L. Grover,

“Milton and Irene Soares: Mormon Pioneers of Northeastern Brazil,” in *Pioneers in Every Land*, eds. Bruce A. Van Orden, D. Brent Smith, and Everett Smith, Jr. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 102.)

Last December Milton and his dear wife, Irene, were privileged to be in attendance at the dedication of the Recife Brazil Temple, an event marked by the rejoicing of many thousands of members in northeastern Brazil, all of whom had joined the Church since Milton’s baptism.

Often the price paid for membership in the Church was great. Jesucita Mera de Monroy was a widow and mother of four children. In 1902, after the death of her husband, she moved to the town of San Marcos in central Mexico, where she worked in a governmental position and operated a small grocery store. In March of 1913 Elders W. Ernest Young and Willard Huish visited San Marcos to conduct a funeral service for the only member in the town, Jesús Sanchez. After the funeral Señora Monroy approached the missionaries and asked them to come to her home and teach her family the gospel. After close to three months of studying, she and several members of her family, including her adult son Rafael, were baptized. This family became stalwarts in the Church, and they were influential in the development of a strong branch in the region.

Mexico was then in the midst of a civil war in which its citizenry, including members of the Church, often became innocent victims of violence. Two months after the baptism of the Monroy family, the American missionaries left Mexico because of concern for their safety. The members were left on their own. Rafael was put in charge of the small San Marcos branch. Unfortunately, in July 1915, because of a misunderstanding concerning his political activity, Rafael Monroy; Vicente Morales, his first counselor in the branch; and three of Jesucita’s daughters—Natalina, Jovita, and Guadalupe—were imprisoned by one of the revolutionary

groups in the region. Their religious affiliation with the Church played a part in their arrest.

Jesucita was frantic as she tried to satisfy the demands of the leaders of the group and convince them that her children were innocent of any crime. After two days of interrogation and torture, Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales were executed by a firing squad. Jesucita had the terrible and lonely task of recovering the bodies and organizing their burial, since most in the village, including members of the Church, distanced themselves from her and her family. Her trials continued, and she found it necessary to move from the town for a while. Her letter to Rey L. Pratt, then president of the Mexican Mission, shows her strength and faith in the gospel: “Our sorrows have been grievous, but our faith is strong, and we will never forsake this religion” (quoted in Walter Ernest Young, *The Diary of W. Ernest Young* [Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1973], 121). Her promise was kept, and she and most members of her family remained faithful to the Church. (See Mark L. Grover, “Execution in Mexico: The Deaths of Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 3 (1995–96): 6–28.)

Jesucita Mera de Monroy’s example is but one of many stories of early converts in Mexico who weathered the hardships and struggles of being members of the Church and became a strong foundation for a Mexican membership that may soon surpass a million baptized members.

These faithful members came into the Church with the help of equally faithful and obedient missionaries. One example from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, shows the important role of the missionary. Valentina Alexandre was a young mother of three children going through a crisis. Her husband, José, had passed through a difficult experience that resulted in the loss of his means of supporting the family. To make ends meet he had begun driving a taxi seven days a week, 12 hours a day.

Valentina was desperate. Christmas was close, and there would be no presents for her children. One morning after a difficult experience with one of her daughters, Valentina went to her knees and in desperation pleaded for help from the Lord. After leaving her bedroom she began cleaning the floors of her house. Someone knocked on her door. Outside were Elders Charles Allison and Paul Hindmarsh. In her despair, the last thing Valentina wanted was to talk to a couple of Americans, and she asked them to leave—which they did. She returned to cleaning her floors. A few minutes later she heard the same knock on the door, and again the two American missionaries were standing there. She was even more upset. This time Elder Allison apologized and explained to her that as he was walking down the street away from the house he felt a strong impression that he needed to return. In desperation, knowing of no other way to get rid of them, Valentina asked what they wanted. Their request was simple. They desired a few minutes to leave a blessing on the house. As these two missionaries knelt on a partly cleaned floor and began to pray, Valentina had this statement come clearly into her mind: “You asked for help, and I sent it.” The entire family was soon baptized, and most have remained true and faithful to the Church. (See Valentina Alexandre, *Oral History*, interviewed by Mark L. Grover, April 24–25, 1990, Provo, Utah. Copy in possession of the author.)

Notice the way this experience unfolded. Because of difficult times in their lives, a young family was ready and prepared for the gospel. Valentina had pleaded for help, and the response of the Lord was to send the missionaries to their house. The activities of the missionaries interest me. Elder Allison told me that he has very little memory of that day. He doesn’t remember anything different or special that they did prior to coming to her door. Why were they in that neighborhood at that exact time? He doesn’t know. How

much of the coincidence of their presence was due to the fact that two worthy and faithful missionaries arose from their beds at six a.m. that morning, had scripture study, and prayed to the Lord to be guided to the homes of those who were prepared for the gospel? But, most important, as they were walking away from that house and received the inspiration to return to a place from which they had just been turned away, they responded and did as they were inspired to do. I have no doubt that had they not been worthy or had not followed the Spirit that day, the Alexandre family would have somehow been guided to the Church in another way. But Elders Allison and Hindmarsh would not have had the privilege and honor of being the instruments of the Lord through which a worthy family joined the Church. I wonder how many times we have not been privileged to be an instrument because we were not worthy to receive or willing to follow the spirit that whispered to us, “Return to that house.”

Conversion to the Church is not something that occurs easily. It requires faith, prayer, fasting, and work on the part of the missionary. There is also often a long and difficult period of preparation in the life of the convert. I am moved when I watch our young missionaries get their calls and listen to their farewell addresses, knowing that at that very moment people are being prepared and readied for that exact missionary.

Walter Guedes de Queiroz was an energetic and active young man. He was also very serious and had a strong desire to serve the Lord. That desire encouraged him to enter the ministry and become a pastor in a Methodist Church in São Paulo, Brazil. In the 1950s, while enrolled in a Protestant school of the ministry, his study of the Bible led him to a serious conflict with the Protestant doctrines of infant baptism and priesthood authority. Those issues were of such importance to Walter that eventually he made the decision

to leave the school and the ministry and begin a search for a church that taught the doctrines he considered to be biblical. His search took him to all the major religions in Brazil, but none of them could satisfy him in his search.

Fortunately three other colleagues in the school had the same concerns and had joined him in a search for the truth. These four friends would get together to read the Bible and talk. In one of these sessions they decided to use the telephone book and go through the names of the different churches listed. They came across the name of a church with which they were not very familiar: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the four, Hélio da Rocha Camargo, made contact with the missionaries and asked a simple question: “Does your Church have apostles and prophets? If so, we would like to talk to you.”

When Walter met with the missionaries, his request was the following: “I don’t want you to ask me any questions, because I am the one searching for answers. I am after a response so important that it is a matter of life and death to me. I want you to tell me the story of your prophet, and then I will determine if he is a true or false prophet.”

The missionaries could barely contain their excitement, realizing they had the most golden of all contacts. They asked Walter if he had at least 40 minutes for them to tell the story. At the end of a discussion on the Apostasy and Restoration, Walter was able to say with a conviction that has never left him, “Joseph Smith was a prophet of God.”

The next time he saw his friend Hélio da Rocha Camargo, he exclaimed, “I have finally found that for which I have been looking. I no longer need to search.” During the next few months three of the four—Walter, Hélio, and Saul Messias de Oliveira—joined along with their families and became stalwarts of the Church in Brazil, all serving as bishops, stake presidents, and mission presidents.

Elder Camargo became the first Brazilian General Authority of the Church. Few in the history of the Church have been so well prepared to accept the gospel as those three men. (See Walter Guedes de Queiroz, Oral History, interviewed by Mark L. Grover, April 16, 1982, Pôrto Alegre, Brazil, 3–4. A published version of these conversions is found in “A Trilogy of Truthseekers,” in *No More Strangers*, eds. Hartman Rector and Connie Rector, vol. 2 [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973], 103–122.)

In this story, as in all I have recounted, there are important lessons to be learned for those of us who are members of the Church. Our initial conversion is an essential part of our experience in the Church. But conversion does not occur only once in our lives. It is an event that should happen often and become an integral aspect of our Church experience. Regardless of the logic of its organization or attraction of teachings and doctrines, we become and remain members of the Church through a conversion experience and maintain our faith through a constant process of spiritual renewal. That process is beautifully described in the masterful discourse of Alma to the members of the Church in Zarahemla. In this treatise he presented the concept of being spiritually born of God and receiving His image in our countenances. After explaining the importance of that experience, he then turned his attention to the members who have been spiritually born of God:

And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?

Have ye walked, keeping yourselves blameless before God? Could ye say, if ye were called to die at this time, within yourselves, that ye have been sufficiently humble? That your garments have been cleansed and made white through the blood of Christ, who will come to redeem his people from their sins?

Behold, are ye stripped of pride? I say unto you, if ye are not ye are not prepared to meet God. Behold ye must prepare quickly; for the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand, and such an one hath not eternal life. [Alma 5:26–28]

As Alma suggested, those of us who have had that experience at least once in our lives have need of constant renewal. That renewal is obtained by prayer, fasting, reading of the scriptures, Church attendance, and service to others. Our paths will be laden with trials and tribulations and often sin. The anguish of repentance and the relief of forgiveness are important steps through which we all pass. Then, on a regular basis the Lord will visit us with His quiet yet powerful spirit of conversion in which the depths of our souls will be touched and we again will “sing the song of redeeming love.” With that assurance we will have the strength to continue on the path toward salvation. Those spiritual experiences thus become the reasons for continued activity in the Church. Armed with the Spirit, we will do as the missionary does: strive to become an instrument of the Lord to do His work.

With such preparation we hope and expect to be in the right place at the right time so that the Spirit of the Lord will inspire us and use us as His instrument.

I return to the story of Flavia Erbolato and Norton Nixon. A little over a year ago Norton finally succumbed to the disease of diabetes and passed away. I can only imagine the joy he and Flavia must have felt as they greeted each other on the other side of the veil. Flavia’s conversion though a very personal and private experience will always be connected to a young man who gave up two and a half years of his life to serve the Lord. One of Norton’s greatest joys that overshadows all of the trials and tribulations that came to him in this life was the privilege to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord and witness the conversion of such a daughter of God. He would surely proclaim, as did Alma, “The Lord doth give me exceedingly great joy in the fruit of my labors” (Alma 36:25).

It is my prayer that we will always make the renewal of our conversion an integral part of our lives and strive to be worthy to be an instrument in His hands to further His work. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.