

# Preparing Emotionally

## FOR MISSIONARY SERVICE

*What Prospective Missionaries and Their Parents Need to Know*

By Robert K. Wagstaff

Preparing for missionary service is much different today than it was in 1830, when Samuel Smith was set apart to be one of the first full-time missionaries. He had no training, no money, and no living quarters. Today prospective missionaries prepare extensively for their missions. Doctor visits, missionary preparation classes, patriarchal blessings, prayer, scripture study, and temple endowments are among the ways they get ready to go into the world to share the gospel. I believe that today's missionaries enter the mission field better prepared, both physically and spiritually, to teach and bear testimony of the gospel than ever before.

But another aspect of preparation for missionary service is equally vital—emotional preparation. Speaking to future missionaries, Elder L. Tom Perry explained: “Missionary service is emotionally demanding. Your support system is going to be withdrawn from you as you leave home and go out into the world. . . . There will be days of rejection

and disappointment. Learn now about your emotional limits, and learn how to control your emotions under the circumstances you will face as a missionary.”<sup>1</sup>

As a former mission president and president of the Philippines Missionary Training Center (MTC), I have noticed that most missionaries leave the MTC confident about their ability to teach the gospel and bear testimony. This is because of the excellent training they receive in the MTC, as well as at home, in seminary, and at church. However, I have also observed that many missionaries deal with some of the following concerns:

- Finances
- Homesickness
- Living with a different person and in a different culture
- Adjusting to missionary rules, schedule, and lifestyle
- Learning a new language
- Personal weaknesses



## How Can Future Missionaries Prepare Themselves Emotionally?

1. *Work part time or full time before the mission call.* This experience helps potential missionaries learn how to manage money so they will be prepared to live within their budget in the mission field. Also, in my experience, missionaries who pay at least part of the cost of their mission are often more dedicated and have fewer concerns about money while in the mission field.

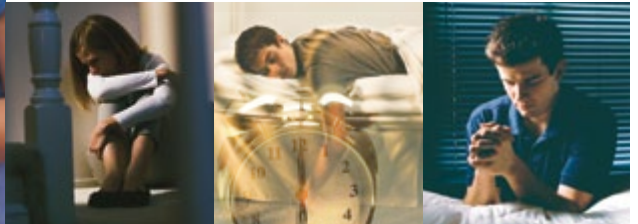
2. *Live away from home for a period of time before leaving for the mission field.* Whether future missionaries go away to college or for work, living away from home helps them adjust to the necessary independence of being a missionary. This also provides opportunities for them to wash their own clothing, clean their own living areas, prepare food, and be responsible for their own safety and well-being. Even if future missionaries cannot live away from home, they can be more independent by taking on these responsibilities.

Generally, a young person who has been allowed to take responsibility and develop appropriate independence will have an easier time adjusting to missionary service. This means that it is important for parents to nurture their children in such a way

Each of these concerns is normal, and almost every elder or sister experiences at least one of them. Such concerns do not make missionaries unworthy or disobedient, and most often they successfully overcome their worries.

However, some missionaries have difficulty coping with these kinds of emotional challenges to the point of debilitation. According to Judi Moore, a doctor and former medical adviser in the South America South Area, stress may contribute to many of missionaries' most common physical complaints, including headaches, back pain, heart palpitations, insomnia, fatigue, stomach problems, dry mouth, and even frequent sore throats. For some, stress can also lead to panic attacks, anxiety, depression, and difficulty functioning. Because of these challenges, it is important that future missionaries do all they can to prepare emotionally for full-time missionary service. The following advice will help.

*Among the things prospective missionaries can do is to work part time or full time, learn to care for themselves, and practice talking to others.*



*Daily exercise, living away from home, resolving emotional concerns, sleeping from 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m., and learning to rely on the Lord to strengthen personal weaknesses are some ways young people can begin preparing to serve a mission.*

that encourages independent, responsible decision-making skills founded on gospel principles.

*3. Practice meeting and talking to others.*

Missionary work involves meeting and interacting with new people daily. This can be a significant source of anxiety to missionaries who are naturally shy. Many young people today are used to interacting via text messaging or social networking sites on the Internet rather than through face-to-face interaction. Future missionaries can prepare themselves for tracting and other missionary activities by challenging themselves, in an appropriate and safe manner, to talk with people they do not know well and by striving to be friendly, courteous, and respectful to others.

*4. Resolve emotional concerns before submitting mission papers.* Some young people suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, depression, or eating disorders before they enter the mission field. Dr. Moore recommends that parents take notice of symptoms of emotional distress and take actions to help. Most young people will not overcome such problems in the mission field. In fact, these problems often become exacerbated under the stresses of a mission. Counseling and medical treatment may be beneficial to stabilize these conditions before applying to serve a mission. LDS Family Services and family doctors are excellent sources of help, as are local priesthood leaders—particularly your bishop.

Dr. Moore points out that the rigors of missionary service may cause unresolved issues from the past to resurface. For example, several months before an elder entered the mission field, his father passed away. After his father's death, the young man took on heavy responsibilities to help keep the family financially afloat and to comfort and support his mother. But he never dealt adequately with his own grief. Halfway through his mission, the elder began to have serious difficulty functioning. Under his mission president's guidance, the elder visited a counselor and was able to recover and successfully complete his mission.

*5. Practice living a balanced life.* Missionary life is structured and intense. Learning how to live by a schedule and keep appointments is critical to success. For a period of time before entering the MTC, a prospective missionary may want to follow the missionary schedule of going to bed at 10:30 p.m. and arising at 6:30 the next morning. Using a day-planning system and taking part in extracurricular activities can help young people learn to manage time and meet deadlines. Examples include holding a job or participating in activities such as sports, drama, clubs, student government, or community service.

*6. Find appropriate outlets for stress.* Before their missions, many young people relax by playing video games, watching TV, hanging out with friends, surfing the Internet, or participating

in other recreational activities. In the mission field, such activities are not an option, so missionaries need to find new ways to cope with stress.<sup>2</sup> Taking advantage of 30 minutes each morning to exercise, as outlined in *Preach My Gospel*, can be a tremendous stress reliever. Adequate rest, exercise, and turning to the Lord for guidance rather than comparing oneself to others also help.

Sometimes it just helps to talk about things. As a mission president, I noticed that missionaries who shared their concerns with another person—a missionary companion, district leader, or the mission president—often found their concerns diminished. On the other hand, missionaries who kept concerns bottled up usually felt that their concerns seemed larger and more difficult to manage.

7. *Learn to view personal weaknesses with proper perspective.* Some conscientious missionaries have great difficulty when they feel their efforts are imperfect or less than “the best.” They may worry excessively if they feel inadequate in mastering a language or in achieving some missionary goals. They may feel distressed when the demands of being a missionary show them weaknesses they had never encountered before. But, as the prophet Ether taught, recognizing our weaknesses can teach us humility and reliance on the Lord and success in overcoming our weaknesses (see Ether 12:27).

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) told of two missionaries he met as a young man on his own mission: “One was a superstar. He was educated. He was bright. He was quick. He was a little arrogant. We had another who was a sign painter. . . . with very little education, but he knew his inadequacies and he relied on the Lord. When he prayed, you knew he was talking with the Lord. . . . That young man accomplished wonders while the other young man went through the motions. The power that was in the one and the absence of power in the other was so apparent.”<sup>3</sup>

8. *Learn to put trials in the proper perspective.* Occasionally, accidents, serious illnesses, and other traumas happen in the mission field—just as they do in regular life. They are not a sign that a missionary is unworthy or that the Lord is not watching over him or her. Ammon, one of the great missionaries of the Book of Mormon, faced serious

trials on his mission. Recording the Lord’s words to him and his missionary companions at a time of deep discouragement, Ammon wrote: “Now when our hearts were depressed, and we were about to turn back, behold, the Lord comforted us, and said: Go amongst thy brethren, the Lamanites, and bear with patience thine afflictions, and I will give unto you success” (Alma 26:27). Success came for them—and will come for faithful missionaries after they patiently persist in doing the work they have been called to do.

### Becoming a Supportive Missionary Mom or Dad

Parents, your influence in the lives of your children doesn’t stop after they enter the Missionary Training Center. It does shift, however. Here are some ways you can support your son or daughter in your new role as a missionary parent:

1. *Let your missionary be responsible for the success of his or her mission.* Parents who insist on being informed about every detail of their son or daughter’s mission unintentionally place a great burden on the missionary. Missionaries must take personal ownership of their own missions. Every missionary fulfills his or her mission under the direction of the mission president, not under the direction of parents.

2. *Allow your son or daughter to live on the missionary budget.* Parents who send extra money so missionaries can eat fast food rather than cook their own food not only detract from one of the great learning experiences of

**TYPICAL MISSIONARY DAILY SCHEDULE\***

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 6:30 a.m.   | Arise, pray, exercise, and prepare for the day.                                 |
| 7:30 a.m.   | Breakfast.  |
| 8:00 a.m.   | Personal study.   |
| 9:00 a.m.   | Companion study.  |
| 10:00 a.m.  | Begin proselyting. Missionaries learning a language study for 30 to 60 minutes. |
| Schedule lunch and dinner to fit best with proselyting. |   |
| 9:00 p.m.   | Return to living quarters. Write in journal, prepare for the next day, pray.    |
| 10:30 p.m.  | Retire to bed.  |

\*See *Preach My Gospel*, page viii.



*Parents can support their missionaries by praying for them daily, communicating by letter or e-mail once a week, and only speaking to them as is outlined in the mission rules.*

the mission, but also encourage missionaries to break mission rules. This “assistance” reduces the spiritual growth of the missionary. It also prompts missionaries to criticize the missionary program.

*3. Communicate properly with your missionary.*

This means sending a letter or e-mail no more than once a week. Your communication should emphasize spiritual and faith-promoting experiences. Details about family problems burden and discourage missionaries. Likewise, it is inappropriate for the missionary to ask parents for a solution to a missionary problem over which the parents have no control. Parents who call their missionary at times other than Christmas and Mother’s Day are encouraging him or her to break mission rules.

If a serious accident or a death should occur in a missionary’s family, the family should notify the mission president by calling either the Missionary Department in Salt Lake City or the local Area President. This enables the mission president to personally notify the missionary of the event. The mission president can then help the missionary with any serious emotional concerns. If appropriate, the mission president will authorize the missionary to call home. Such emotional care is essential for the well being of the missionary.

*4. Trust in the Lord to watch over and bless your missionary son or daughter.* As President Thomas S. Monson has explained, the Lord has promised His blessings on the missionaries. “Each missionary who goes forth in response to a sacred call becomes a servant of the Lord, whose work this truly is. Do not fear, young men, for He will be with you. He never fails. He has promised: ‘I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and

on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.’”<sup>4</sup>

Just as missionaries rely on the Spirit for guidance in the work, you can also rely on the Spirit to guide you in the best ways to support your missionary.

*5. Pray in faith for your missionary daily.*

President Gordon B. Hinckley also described the role of daily prayer in a missionary’s life: “Every morning . . . missionaries should get on their knees and plead with the Lord to loosen their tongues and speak through them to the blessing of those they will be teaching. If they will do this, a new light will come into their lives. There will be greater enthusiasm for the work. They will come to know that in a very real sense, they are servants of the Lord speaking in His behalf.”<sup>5</sup> As missionary parents join their prayers each day with those of their sons and daughters, they will share in the blessings of missionary service.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the world an army of faithful young men and women are helping fulfill the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who foresaw a day when “the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country.”<sup>6</sup> Prospective missionaries need to prepare themselves emotionally, as well as spiritually and physically, to fulfill their part in this great work. Then, as they share the gospel of Jesus Christ with their brothers and sisters throughout the world, they will have some of the sweetest, most richly rewarding experiences of their lives. ■

**NOTES**

1. L. Tom Perry, “Raising the Bar,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 48.
2. See “Raising the Bar,” 48.
3. *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, (1997), 469.
4. Thomas S. Monson, “Your Eternal Voyage,” *Ensign*, May 2000, 48.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Missionary Service,” *First Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, January 11, 2003, 20.
6. *History of the Church*, 4:540.