

Raising the Bar

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Be certain that you easily clear the minimum standards for service as a missionary and that you are continually raising the bar.



I was privileged last month to be assigned to attend a seminar with the mission presidents from the North America West Area. Among the mission presidents in attendance was my son, Lee. He had been called to serve before I had completed my yearlong assignment in the Europe Central Area Presidency. It had been three years since I had spent any time with my son, other than a few short visits while passing through his area on other assignments.

After a get-acquainted dinner with all of the mission presidents and their wives, Lee and I, with our wives, went to my hotel room for a visit. Our conversation, of course, centered on missionary work. Lee explained what had happened to his missionaries since President Hinckley asked us to raise

the bar on qualifications for missionary service. He reported a decided improvement in the preparation of the missionaries arriving in the mission field. The conversation led us to recall an experience Lee and I had while he was attending high school.

Lee was a member of his high school track team—he both sprinted and high-jumped. During the 1968 Summer Olympic Games held in Mexico City, the world became enamored with a little-known high jumper named Dick Fosbury. He had experimented with a new high-jumping technique that involved sprinting diagonally toward the bar, then curving and leaping backward over the bar. It came to be called the Fosbury flop.

Like many others, Lee was intrigued by this new technique, but until the new school year started, he didn't have a place to practice it. I came home one evening to find him practicing the Fosbury flop in our basement. He had set up two makeshift standards by stacking chairs, and he was jumping over a broomstick set on the chairs, using a sofa to cushion his landing. It was very clear to me that the sofa would not hold up under such treatment, so I called a halt to his indoor high-jumping. Instead, I invited him to go with me to a sporting-goods store, where we purchased some foam padding to use for landing and high-jumping standards so he could move the activity out of doors.

After experimenting with the Fosbury flop, Lee decided to return to the western-roll technique that he had used previously. Still, through the end of the summer into the fall, he practiced high-jumping for many hours in our backyard.

One evening as I returned home from work, I found Lee practicing his jumping. I asked, "How high is the bar?"

He said, "Five feet, eight inches."
"Why that height?"

He answered, "You must clear that height to qualify for the state track meet."

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I can clear it every time. I haven't missed."

My reply: "Let's raise the bar and see how well you do then."

He replied, "Then I might miss."

I queried, "If you don't raise the bar, how will you ever know your potential?"

So we started moving the bar up to five feet, ten inches; then to six feet; and so on, as he sought to improve. Lee became a better high jumper because he was not content with just clearing the minimum standard. He learned that even if it meant missing, he wanted to keep raising the bar to become the best high jumper he was capable of becoming.

Remembering this experience with my son brought to mind the message Elder M. Russell Ballard gave at the priesthood session of the October 2002 general conference, in which he challenged the young men of the Church to become the greatest generation of missionaries. He announced that the bar for the minimum standard of missionary service had been raised. He instructed the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood to prepare themselves more vigorously to reach this new and higher minimum standard. He also gave instructions to fathers, bishops, and stake presidents about helping young men prepare to serve



In Mérida, Mexico, these young boys reflect the growing strength of the Church worldwide.

full-time missions. (See "The Greatest Generation of Missionaries," *Liabona and Ensign*, Nov. 2002, 46–49.)

In his concluding remarks at that same priesthood session, President Hinckley commented on Elder Ballard's talk. He said: "Elder Ballard has spoken to you concerning missionaries. I wish to endorse what he said. I hope that our young men, and our young women, will rise to the challenge he has set forth. We must raise the bar on the worthiness and qualifications of those who go into the world as ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ" ("To Men of the Priesthood,"

Liabona and Ensign, Nov. 2002, 57).

Soon afterward, in a letter dated December 11, 2002, the First Presidency instructed Church leaders about the principles of eligibility for full-time missionary service. The instructions stated: "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 and who can be recommended without reservation.

Those individuals not able to meet the physical, mental, and emotional demands of full-time missionary work are honorably excused and should not be recommended. They may be called to serve in other rewarding capacities.”

The bar was raised by the leaders of the Church, and now the minimum standard for participating in missionary work is absolute moral worthiness; physical health and strength; intellectual, social, and emotional development. In every high-jumping competition there is a minimum height at which the competition starts. The high jumper cannot ask to start at a lower height. In the same way, you should not expect the standards to be lowered to allow you to serve a mission. If you want to be a missionary, you must be able to clear the minimum standards.

But once you reach those minimum standards, shouldn't you try to keep raising the bar? I ask you the same question I asked my son many years ago: “If you don't raise the bar, how will you ever know your potential?” My challenge to you is to recognize that a minimum standard exists—and you must reach it to serve as a full-time missionary—but don't stop there. The greatest generation of missionaries will not reach its full potential unless it keeps raising the bar.

Let me offer a few suggestions about what each of you can do to raise the bar even higher as you prepare for missionary service.

The minimum physical standard for full-time missionary service refers to a potential missionary's physical health and strength. For example, one of the questions on the missionary recommendation forms asks if you “can work 12 to 15 hours per day, walk 6 to 8 miles per day, ride a bicycle 10 to 15 miles per day, and climb stairs daily.” Missionary work is hard, and full-time missionaries must be in good physical condition to serve.



Raising the bar to a higher physical standard could involve further physical conditioning.

It also could include improving your physical appearance. A missionary is expected to dress a certain way, projecting a clean-cut appearance that includes an appropriate haircut; being clean shaven; wearing a clean white shirt, a tie, and a well-pressed suit—all the way down to a good shoe shine. Start now to prepare for a full-time mission by adopting the appearance of a full-time missionary.

Raise the bar higher in your intellectual preparation. Take your schooling seriously. It is important to be able to read, speak, and write with intelligence. Expand your knowledge of the world around you by reading good books. Learn how to study. Then apply your improved study habits to learning the gospel of Jesus Christ. Consistently and regularly read from the Book of Mormon.

Don't neglect the opportunity of attending seminary and institute classes. Participate and gain all you can from the scriptures taught in these great religious-education settings. They will prepare you to present the message of the restored gospel to those you have opportunity to meet. Study from *Preach My Gospel*, emphasizing the basic doctrines taught in

chapter 3. Each time you are asked to speak in church or to teach a family home evening lesson, focus on these basic doctrines.

In Doctrine and Covenants 11:21, the Lord tells us, “Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men.” The pre-missionary age is an ideal time to set the bar higher as you prepare your mind by acquiring the light and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You must recognize that 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. Many of the ways you use now to cope with emotional stress—like hanging out with friends, going off by yourself, playing video games, or listening to music—are not allowed by the rules of missionary conduct. 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. By doing this, you raise the bar to greater heights and, in effect, fortify yourself against emotional challenges during your missionary service.

While President Hinckley did not mention this, prospective missionaries also must be prepared with the social skills needed to serve a mission. More and more, young people are isolating themselves from others by playing video games; wearing headphones; and interacting through cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, and so on instead of in person. Much of missionary work involves relating face-to-face with people, and unless you set the bar higher in the development of your social skills, you will find yourself underprepared. Let me offer a simple suggestion: get a job that involves

interacting with people. As an increased motivation, set a goal to earn enough money from your part- or full-time work to pay for at least a significant part of your mission. I promise great blessings—social, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual blessings—to every young man who pays for a significant part of his mission.

Personal worthiness is the minimum spiritual standard for serving a mission. This means that you are worthy in every way to make and to keep sacred temple covenants. Do not disqualify yourself from the blessings bestowed on those who serve in this very special calling by committing acts of transgression which will make you ineligible to serve.

Please recognize that while your teaching as a missionary may be persuasive, only the Spirit converts.

Preach My Gospel gives a good description of what missionary work is all about. It states, “As an authorized representative of Jesus Christ, you can teach people with power and authority that ‘redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah,’ and that no one ‘can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah’ (2 Nephi 2:6, 8)” ([2004], 2).

We remind you that where much is given, much is required. We issue the call again for all spiritually, physically, and emotionally qualified young men to come forth prepared to become missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ. Be certain that you easily clear the minimum standards for service as a missionary and that you are continually raising the bar. Prepare yourself to be more effective in this great calling.

May God bless you that this will be your desire as you leave this priesthood session of general conference and start now to prepare yourself for the glorious service which is ahead of you as a missionary of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■