Finding and Sharing the Gospel Online

BY MICHELLE STOCKING
Church Magazines

Members who share the gospel through the Internet are realizing they can make a difference, one conversation at a time.

After years of harboring bitterness and anger, Derick Fitch of Indiana felt as though he had hit a dead end. He decided he had enough and wanted to change. That decision led him to do something he had never done before: search for God.

So Derick did what he typically did when he wanted to find information: he went to the Internet. Not only would that give him quick, easy access to information, it would also allow him to conduct his search privately, without making any commitments. Derick decided to begin his Internet search by looking for information on "the Mormon Church" because of a television commercial he remembered from his teenage years.

"My search led me to an LDS-related site that had exactly what I was looking for—a message board where I could confidentially post questions about the Church," Derick says. He took a deep breath and registered with the site.

Using the site's message board, Derick received answers to his questions from Latter-day Saints and learned that he could read the Book of Mormon online by clicking on a link at www.mormon.org. "The words in 1 Nephi penetrated the cold, hard shell around my heart," he says. "I started to think about my life and my relationship with God."
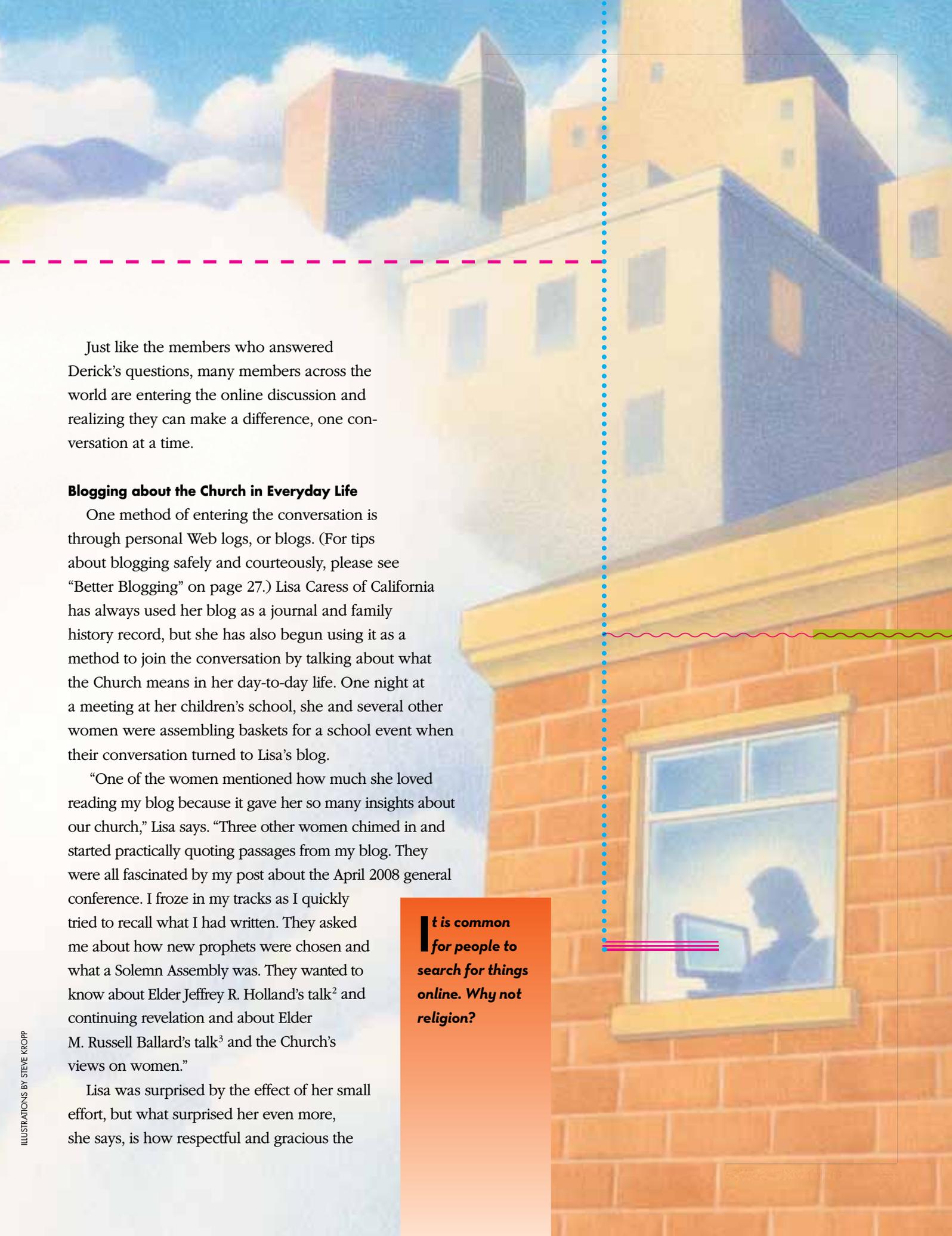
Soon Derick obtained a printed copy of the Book of Mormon from the local missionaries and agreed to attend church services. Less than four months after Derick had decided to search online for information about religion, he was baptized and confirmed a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"I am so thankful that I was able to start reading the Book of Mormon online," he says. "I am thankful that I was able to find LDS Web sites, ask questions about the Church, and receive wonderful answers."

For Derick and many others who have questions about the Church, the natural place to turn is the Internet. There, Derick received answers to his questions from everyday Latter-day Saints—and those answers touched his heart.

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has encouraged members to join in the ongoing conversation around the world about the Church.

"We cannot stand on the sidelines while others, including our critics, attempt to define what the Church teaches,"[1] Elder Ballard said in a 2007 commencement speech delivered at Brigham Young University–Hawaii.

Just like the members who answered Derick's questions, many members across the world are entering the online discussion and realizing they can make a difference, one conversation at a time.

Blogging about the Church in Everyday Life

One method of entering the conversation is through personal Web logs, or blogs. (For tips about blogging safely and courteously, please see "Better Blogging" on page 27.) Lisa Caress of California has always used her blog as a journal and family history record, but she has also begun using it as a method to join the conversation by talking about what the Church means in her day-to-day life. One night at a meeting at her children's school, she and several other women were assembling baskets for a school event when their conversation turned to Lisa's blog.

"One of the women mentioned how much she loved reading my blog because it gave her so many insights about our church," Lisa says. "Three other women chimed in and started practically quoting passages from my blog. They were all fascinated by my post about the April 2008 general conference. I froze in my tracks as I quickly tried to recall what I had written. They asked me about how new prophets were chosen and what a Solemn Assembly was. They wanted to know about Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's talk[2] and continuing revelation and about Elder M. Russell Ballard's talk[3] and the Church's views on women."

Lisa was surprised by the effect of her small effort, but what surprised her even more, she says, is how respectful and gracious the

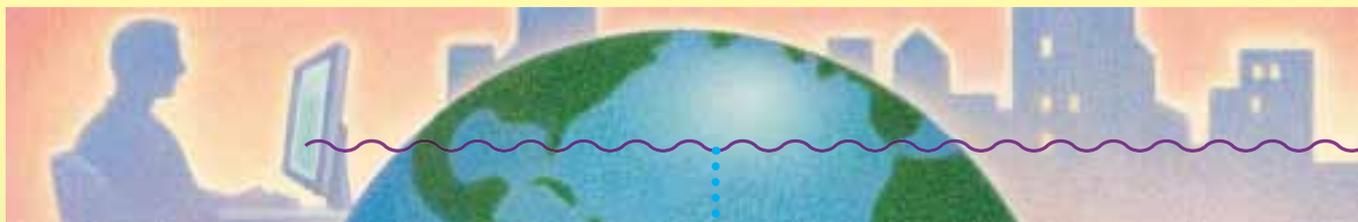*It is common for people to search for things online. Why not religion?*

women were. "They acted like I was doing them a favor by answering their questions." From this experience, Lisa learned the effect that sharing her testimony and her day-to-day experiences as a member of the Church can have. This opened the door for her to answer further questions and share her testimony at the request of her friends. "You never know who is reading," Lisa says. "But truth and sincerity will win the day."

Using Language Skills and Developing Computer Skills

After hearing Elder Ballard's BYU–Hawaii commencement speech, Neil Birch of Utah decided to create a blog where he could discuss gospel principles using the Book of Mormon. Although Neil had never blogged before, he did not let that stop him. With the help of a friend, he set up not just one but three blogs, each in one of the languages he speaks. Neil realized that doing so was easier than he thought. He says, "I'm 77, and I didn't grow up with computers. But you don't have to have been born in the computer era to learn how to use them. Anyone can do it!"

Neil is enthusiastic about the possibilities, and he loves contributing to the online conversation about the Church. "I have received a growing number of responses to my blogs, which have been read in 49 countries," he says. "I am

BE A BLOGGING MISSIONARY BY DELORES DEVICTORIA

With increasing interest in the Internet, opportunities for missionary work have also increased. Here are some suggestions that I have found helpful in being a blogging missionary:

• Remember that you're speaking as an individual sharing personal perspectives. Don't leave an impression that you are speaking officially for the Church. It's your own experiences that will be insightful and interesting.

• When you write a post, keep it relatively short. Most people who surf blogs are looking for posts that are easy to read. In addition, remember the old adage, "milk before meat." Don't delve into the mysteries. Rather, write about subjects that are basic such as faith, repentance, Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon, and so forth.

• Tell how you feel about a gospel principle. People may be able to argue a

principle, but it's more difficult to argue how you feel about it.

• Check out other blogs and read what others have to say. When you find an interesting blog, comment and let the author know what you think. Usually when I have commented on someone's blog, they have come to check out my blog and have left a comment. This has helped me get acquainted with new people.

• When you read other blogs, read the comments too. Then check out the blogs of others who are leaving comments. This is a great way to find interesting information and make new Internet contacts.
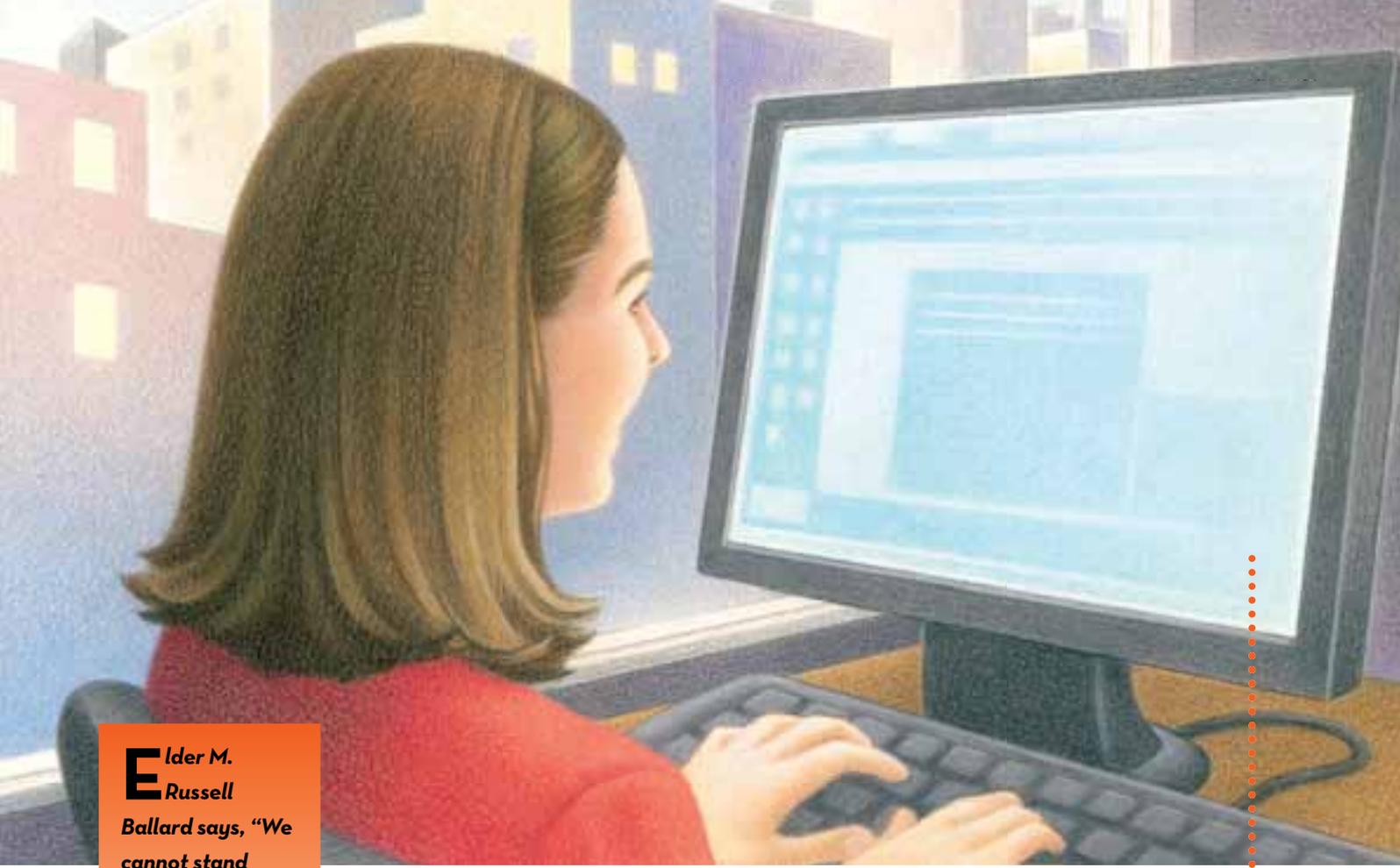
• Know when to walk away. Elder Ballard reminds us that "every disciple of Christ will be most effective and do the most good by adopting a demeanor worthy of a follower of the Savior. Discussions focused on questioning, debating, and doubting gospel principles do little to build the kingdom

of God. . . . There is no need to argue or contend with others regarding our beliefs. There is no need to become defensive or belligerent. Our position is solid; the Church is true," ("Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet," *Ensign*, July 2008, 63).

Because the Internet doesn't force the same commitment as meeting in person, it can be viewed as a safe haven for those who are questioning but aren't ready to invite the missionaries into their home. If they can find answers and have the Spirit touch their hearts, they may be more willing to accept the missionaries later.

We have entered a new age of technology, so we have new avenues of missionary work open to us. With a little creativity and boldness, we can help others to learn more about the gospel. ∎

Additional helps can be found online at http://newsroom.lds.org/onlineguidelines.

determined to continue writing and posting."

Creating Blogs about Full-time Missionaries

Like Neil, Kevin Miller and his son Richard have also created blogs. The Millers create blogs for the families of the full-time missionaries serving from their stake in Las Vegas, Nevada, prior to the missionaries' departure. The families then maintain those blogs throughout the rest of their missionary's service. Some of these blogs include short videos of the missionary sharing his or her testimony recorded prior to entering the Missionary Training Center, photos, excerpts from the missionary's e-mails from the mission field, journal entries, and other things the family deems appropriate. (Of course, e-mails and other communication should comply with guidelines for missionaries.)

Kevin says these blogs "provide a great tool for families to share the blessings of serving a mission with their friends, neighbors, co-workers, and others. Missionary blogs
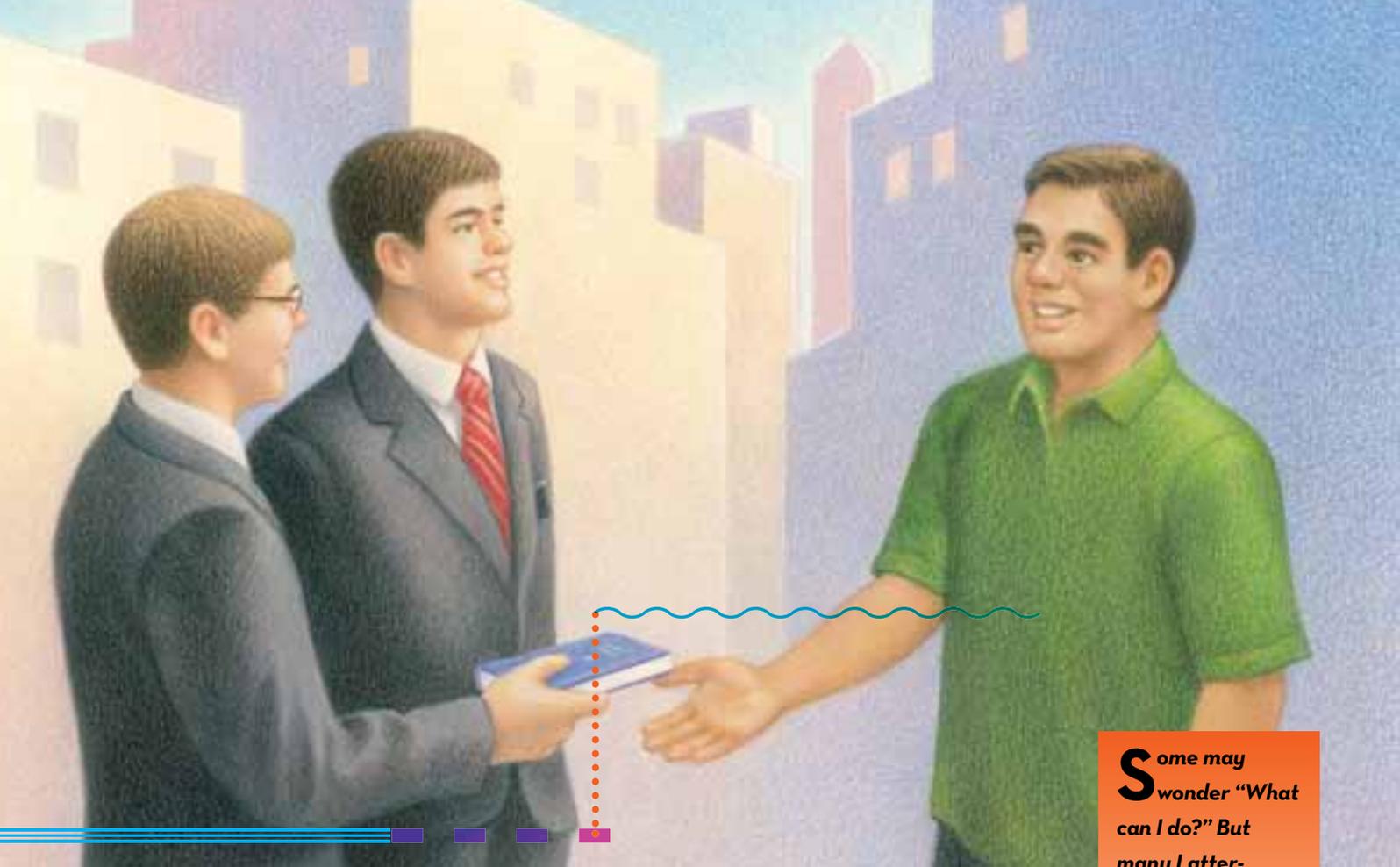
maintained by families allow those who are not of our faith to gain a greater understanding of the love, sacrifice, and blessings that accompany full-time missionary service."

Using Other Online Forums

Blogs are not the only way that members are sharing the gospel online. Sheryl McGlochlin of Utah created a Web site where she organizes outdoor adventures, enabling her to connect with people who share her love of the outdoors.

"I love the Internet!" Sheryl exclaims. "It has enabled me to reach hundreds of people from all parts of the world. It's been wonderful to connect and form relationships with others. I'm extremely grateful to the Lord that I can help and serve others in this way."

Sheryl makes safety a priority both in her online interaction and in her in-person group meetings. When she's corresponding with a group member, for instance, she makes sure that her tone is professional. She often asks her husband to review her e-mails for a second opinion to help prevent possible misunderstandings with those she corresponds with. When she's meeting people for an event, she makes a point

of including a core of people she already knows, meeting in public places, and never being alone with just one other group participant. Practical, sensible safety precautions like these help keep Sheryl—and others she meets—safe so that they can focus on their common interests.

Sheryl has found that as she and her new friends engage in outdoor activities, she has opportunities to bear her testimony. "I've shared with them what I've learned in general conference, in Relief Society, and in sacrament meeting," she says. "As I spend time with them, I've been able to share my knowledge and feelings about the temple, food storage, forgiving others, the Book of Mormon, the importance of family, the power of prayer, the blessings of living the Word of Wisdom, missionary work, keeping the Sabbath Day holy, and much more."

A Strong Medium for Sharing Testimony

Members of the Church like Lisa, Neil, Kevin, Richard, and Sheryl are discovering the power of the Internet in sharing testimony and answering questions other people have about the Church. And in doing so they're discovering that it's not as difficult as they might imagine to respond to Elder Ballard's challenge to "join the conversation by participating on the Internet to share the gospel and to explain in simple and clear terms the message of the Restoration."[4]

Of course, blogging is just one way to share the gospel; there are many others. Some may wonder how one Web site or one blog can make a difference, but as Elder Ballard reminds us, "While some conversations have audiences in the thousands or even millions, most are much, much smaller. But all conversations have an impact on those who participate in them. Perceptions of the Church are established one conversation at a time."[5]

And just as it did for Derick Fitch, one conversation can make all the difference. ∎

NOTES
1. "Using 'New Media' to Support the Church," Brigham Young University–Hawaii commencement address, Dec. 15, 2007; see also M. Russell Ballard, "Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet," *Ensign*, July 2008, 61.
2. Jeffrey R. Holland, "My Words . . . Never Cease," *Ensign*, May 2008, 91.
3. M. Russell Ballard, "Daughters of God," *Ensign,* May 2008, 108.
4. Ballard, "Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet," 62.
5. Ballard, "Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet," 61.

Better Blogging:

TIPS FOR SAFETY AND COURTESY

Do you want to start a blog? You can keep in touch with friends and family or share the gospel by blogging. (Remember that you are speaking only for yourself and not the Church.)

BLOG SAFETY

Avoid Specifics

Chelsea Belton, who blogs to keep in touch with family and friends, never posts personal information online. She avoids mentioning addresses, birth dates, anniversaries, and other details that would make it easy to locate her family. Some bloggers also use partial or fictional names or general phrases like "my son" or "our friend" when referring to individuals in blog posts.

Moderate Comments

David Habben, who maintains both personal and business blogs, says that reviewing comments is an important part of safe blogging. While an author's original post may be harmless, comments from readers may be less innocent. Some entities also use blog commenting to advertise or disseminate unwanted information. David uses a security feature that informs him by e-mail when someone wants to make a comment. He can then review each comment and delete those that are inappropriate or unwanted before they appear online.

Selectively Post Pictures

"Once I posted [a photo of] a birthday party invitation I had made [for my son]," says Rachel Davis, creator of a group blog for LDS women. "I used photo editing software to blur out the location of the party because I just didn't want [to take a] chance. It was a small thing to do, but it made me feel safe." Be aware of information you may be giving inadvertently in the photos you display on your blog. Wisely screening photos will allow you to share ideas while protecting yourself and your family.
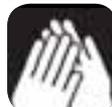
BLOG COURTESY

Think before You Post

Search engines are the "conscience" of the Internet. They can call up almost any Web site from any period of time. So assume that what you post on your blog is permanent. The pictures of your children doing silly things as little kids may be funny or cute right now, but imagine those same pictures appearing when your children are 12 or 45. Carefully consider the pictures you post and the things you write.

Be Positive

"I have been surprised when . . . ward members or even old friends from high school read my blog," says Kacy Faulconer, who writes personal and group blogs. Blogs should not be a "forum to complain or criticize people behind their backs," she says. Instead, keep your comments positive. You never know who may be reading.

Respect Others' Work

Sue Anderson, who began a blog because she loved reading her daughter-in-law's, says it's important to respect other bloggers' work. Instead of copying and pasting something from a blog you like, "send friends a link to the blog itself." She also recommends that "if you want to use something on your blog from someone else's, [including photos], ask them first." This protects others' work and keeps you honest. ∎