



HELPING YOUTH HAVE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

No one can force youth to have spiritual experiences, but as these parents and leaders discovered, there are lots of ways to foster experiences that lead to conversion.

When Vyacheslav and Zoya Gulko of Ukraine began investigating the Church, their 13-year-old daughter, Kira, wasn't thrilled. She refused to participate in missionary lessons, and when she knew the elders were coming to their home, she "demonstratively shut the door of her room," her mother remembers.

Brother and Sister Gulko, who decided to join the Church, suspected that if they could just provide an opportunity for Kira to feel the Spirit, her heart might be touched. Because Sister Gulko's own testimony had begun when she attended another person's baptism, she asked Kira to come to *her* baptism—just to help her change into dry clothes afterward. To Sister Gulko's surprise, Kira agreed.

"It happened!" Sister Gulko remembers. "Heavenly Father was working in a very miraculous way." Kira *did* feel the Spirit, and a week after her parents' baptism, she agreed to meet with the missionaries. She began reading the Book of Mormon. A few weeks later,

Sister Gulko noticed a piece of paper hanging above Kira's desk; written on it were the words of 2 Nephi 2:25. Two and a half months after their own baptism, the Gulkos attended their daughter's baptism. Now, 20 years later, Kira is married. She and her husband, Dave, have been sealed in the temple and are raising their two sons in the gospel. She has served faithfully in a number of callings and has remained active in the Church.

Through that experience, Zoya says she learned a crucial lesson that is as applicable to parents who are lifelong members of the Church as it was for her and her husband as new members: parents and leaders cannot force their children into the gospel, but they *can* invite them to places and create experiences where youth can have spiritual experiences of their own. Those experiences can, in turn, lead to conversion.

But just what is the best way to go about creating these kinds of experiences? Parents and leaders from around the world share what has worked for them.

Give Youth Opportunities to Serve

The Granja Viana Ward in the São Paulo Brazil Cotia Stake had a high activity rate among its young men. But their leaders noticed that some of them were facing personal

Relate modern-day examples to the word of God and to the lives of the youth.



challenges and having difficulty fulfilling their priesthood duties.

After the bishopric and Young Men leaders counseled together, they decided to focus more of their activities on service and not as many on entertainment or amusement. This included visiting less-active quorum members, participating in proselyting with the full-time missionaries, and administering the sacrament to homebound ward members. These activities gave the young men an opportunity to act on the principles they were learning in seminary and on Sundays (see 2 Nephi 2:26).

Over time, “these spiritual activities made all the difference,” reports one priesthood leader.

“We were amazed when on a particular fast Sunday, all of our young men bore their testimonies,” he says. “As they did so, many of them recalled in tears the good spirit they had felt on those occasions. One young man shared the experience of administering the

sacrament to an older member of our ward who has been bedridden for three years. His wife, a faithful sister, received our young men with joy and hope. After the ordinance, she shared with them the happiness she feels in her life because of the gospel despite the huge problems and challenges she faces. They felt the Spirit and realized the difference the gospel makes in people’s lives. This experience was so powerful that they will recall it for years to come—perhaps for their entire lives.”

He notes that he had never seen that kind of response from any “football game or funny Mutual night.” Rather, he says, the experience taught him the importance of promoting the kinds of experiences in which youth can feel the Spirit.

“Social activities are important,” he continues. “But spiritual experiences are critical in helping youth build their own testimonies.”

Each Sunday in the Rennes Ward, Angers France Stake, Sister Delphine Letort, as Young Women president, provided a card to each young woman in attendance and asked her to select a peer who wasn’t at church and write to her. The young women wrote about the lesson that week—what they learned or what inspired them—as well as a friendly, personal note. Then Sister Letort or one of her counselors sent the cards in the mail to those who weren’t at church.

The activity was simple but effective, she says, not only as a way for those who weren’t attending to know that they were remembered but also for those who were writing the notes to be more mindful of each other.

“By small things great miracles come about,” she says (see Alma 37:6). “We have seen it manifested. The young women have

Teach using the words of living as well as ancient prophets.

been encouraged, and this experience has contributed to increasing their testimonies.”

Connect Youth with the Word of God

Alma taught that the preaching of the word of God has a powerful effect (see Alma 31:5). David Elmer, a Young Men leader in Texas, USA, knew this and wanted to provide the young men he led on a high-adventure Scouting trip with a meaningful experience that would help prepare them for the future.

Brother Elmer prayerfully considered what he might share and felt directed to a talk by Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. On the trip, Brother Elmer taught from that message, including the story Elder Andersen shared of Sidney Going, a New Zealand rugby star who put a sports career on hold to serve a mission. “Your mission will be a sacred opportunity to bring others to Christ and help prepare for the Second Coming of the Savior,” Elder Andersen said.¹

The experience was powerful, Brother Elmer says, because he taught from the words of a living prophet. At the end of the devotional, all of the young men and leaders signed their names on rugby balls as a pledge to serve missions and as a tangible reminder of what they had learned and felt. Many of the fathers and leaders stayed up that night talking with the young men about how their missions affected their lives.

“Ours is a personal God; He knows His youth,” Brother Elmer says. “He is aware of their lives and challenges and of what is going on with these kids. You never know how



He’s been working in their lives. So we as leaders prepare and provide the atmosphere for them to feel the Spirit. You can do that through the scriptures and through the words of the prophets, but it’s the Lord, not us, who is working in their hearts.”

Be Consistent

Brother Elmer says he wants the young men to remember something else about the trip: their gospel study was consistent.

“I felt that part of my responsibility was to give them experiences to feel the Spirit, and if I wanted that to happen, I had to do my part to plan for it,” he says. “Elder David A. Bednar has taught about creating spiritual patterns in our lives, patterns like scripture study and prayer and family home evening.² And as we were gone that week, we maintained our spiritual patterns. We had prayer as a group. We assigned young men to share a 10-minute devotional in the morning, and their leaders and fathers prepared devotionals for the evening.

“The point was that even though we were away from

TEENS AND RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

To read studies about the influence of religious behavior in teens’ lives, please see these two articles, available online:

- Brent L. Top and Bruce A. Chadwick, “Helping Teens Stay Strong,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1999, 26–34.
- Jamshid Askar, “‘Sacred Sacrifices’ Bless Religious Youth,” *Church News*, Nov. 28, 2009, 14–15.

Find natural teaching moments in everyday activities.



home and our activities were different than they normally are, our spiritual patterns didn't get interrupted. The young men may or may not remember specific lessons, but I hope they'll remember the pattern we maintained of having devotionals and prayer and scripture study."

Myra Bocobo Garcia of the Philippines also knows the value of consistency, and she knows teaching it begins at home. Sister Garcia and her husband, Edwin, have three sons and six daughters ranging in age from 8 to 22, each involved in various good activities. While that can mean lots of people going in a lot of different directions, the family works hard to consistently eat dinner together.

"Cooking and happily preparing food and eating together is one of the best ways we gather our children," Sister Garcia says. She notes that mealtime is a time to refresh, connect with each other, and acknowledge the Lord's blessings.

Tap into Existing Opportunities to Teach and Listen

Jocelyn Fielden of Nova Scotia, Canada, says that the most crucial lessons she learned from raising six children, who now range in age from 20 to 30, have to do not only with direct teaching but also with "creating an environment where children can learn truths for themselves."

"Don't be quick to make all their choices or answer all their questions," she says. Instead, she recommends directing children "to the scriptures or counsel from our prophet for guidance and answers." She adds, "And be ready to discuss their findings." In addition, when she gets questions from her children, she sometimes answers by asking a question of her own: "What do you think you should do?"

"Have confidence that they will make right choices," she says. "When we help our children learn to recognize the Spirit in their lives during the many teaching moments we have every day with them and when they know what the Spirit feels like, it will be a catalyst for them to seek for more spiritual experiences, thereby strengthening their testimonies of the reality of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. It causes a ripple effect: the more they feel the light and comfort the Spirit brings, the more they will desire it and strive to do the things that will make the Spirit more abundant in their lives."

She is quick to point out that the principles that have been effective in family life for her are the ones that Church leaders have repeatedly taught. For instance, she says what while some teaching can occur during formal discussions like the ones that happen in family home evening, family scripture study, and family prayer, parents can be guided by the Spirit to watch for teaching moments.³

How I Stayed Strong in the Gospel

By Tua Rogers

I was baptized when I was 12, and for many years I was the only member of the Church in my family. That wasn't always easy, but fortunately I was blessed with good leaders who helped me in my journey of learning the doctrines of the gospel and using those doctrines to strengthen and improve my life. Because of my decision to stay true to what I believed, I have seen great blessings come into my life and, much later, into the lives of family members as well.

Here are some things that helped me stay strong:

- Stay close to Heavenly Father through activities like prayer and scripture study. He is aware of the situations we face. Staying close to Him helped me remember who I am.
- Follow the counsel of Church leaders. I have seen in my own life the truth of counsel from the prophets and apostles.
- Know that living the gospel creates a better life now and eternally. This has helped me

maintain my standards and faith. Leaders encouraged me to attend the temple, which helped me envision eternal life.

- Surround yourself with good friends who share your standards. I was blessed with good friends who made it easy to make good decisions and keep my faith.
- Stay close to your family. I loved my family and wanted to build strong relationships with them.
- Live the life. Follow the standards and participate in Church programs. They will help you exhibit faith and make good choices. Good choices often make life easier, and they always make life happier.

“Going for a walk, driving to activities, shooting some hoops [playing basketball], having family mealtimes, working together, singing, and serving others are just a few of the activities where gospel teaching has taken place in our family,” she says. “Talking about gospel topics often happens naturally when we are engaged in other activities.”

Work Together toward a Common Goal

Soon after graduating from Brigham Young University–Hawaii, KaYan Danise Mok returned home to Hong Kong and received a calling as Young Women president. While she adjusted to being home, starting a career, and continuing with graduate studies, she prayed earnestly for inspiration to help the young women she worked with develop testimonies to prepare them for the future.

One Sunday while she was teaching about eternal perspective, Sister Mok recognized a prompting to read the Book of Mormon with a particular young woman, who happened to be the only one at church that day.

“My counselor and I responded quickly by setting goals to complete the Book of Mormon as a team with the young woman,” Sister Mok says. “She accepted the challenge without hesitation since we would be completing the goal together.”

Since that time, Sister Mok, her counselor, and this young woman have set up a “buddy system” on Facebook and via text messages to remind each other of the reading and to share with each other what they are learning.

Sister Mok says she saw evidence of remarkable change in this young woman’s life stemming from her scripture study. And as Sister Mok read the scriptures on her daily commute on the train, she too found blessings for herself. “I also felt the Spirit and received answers to my prayers as I continued to move forward in life,” she says.

“In my experience, some youth worry and feel unsure about whether they can receive a testimony and have spiritual experiences as others have,” she continues. “By working together, we assure them with our action that this works and that we’re there to support them every step of the way.” ■

NOTES

1. Neil L. Andersen, “Preparing the World for the Second Coming,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 50.
2. See David A. Bednar, “More Diligent and Concerned at Home,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 17–20.
3. See, for example, Robert D. Hales, “Our Duty to God: The Mission of Parents and Leaders to the Rising Generation,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 95–98; David A. Bednar, “More Diligent and Concerned at Home,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 17–20.