

By Richard M. Romney

Church Magazines

When they followed the Duty to God instruction to “invite all to come unto Christ,” these young men in Immokalee, Florida, found their efforts quickly added up.

Sharing the gospel is about people, not numbers. So what happened in Immokalee, Florida, began just as it should have, when Junior Reyes invited one of his friends to come to church.

Little did he know what he was starting.

2+1=26

At the time, there were only two Aaronic Priesthood bearers in the Immokalee Branch: Junior and another young man named Jorge Caceres. Jorge was born in the Church but had become discouraged because for a long time he had been the only Aaronic Priesthood bearer in the branch. So Junior, a convert, was the only one who went to stake firesides.

“Every time I’d go, I’d see the other branches and all the youth in the stake, but from our branch, it would just be me,” Junior says. “Finally, I said, ‘Why am I the only one here from Immokalee? I’ve got to open my mouth.’”

“The way I was raised, I was taught not to be scared,” he continues. “When I talk to my friends about Jesus Christ and the restored gospel, I’m not afraid; I’m happy. I know what I’m telling them can help them make their lives better.”

So Junior invited his friend Wedner Daly to come to church. “I said, ‘You learn a lot of things and you get a lot of blessings, and it’s worth it.’”

Wedner accepted.

“I didn’t think anything special about it at first,” Wedner says. “I thought it would be like other churches. But when I got there, it was the day that everybody shared their testimonies, so I got to feel the

Milsont Pierre (front) and Junior Reyes (back) diagram how a simple invitation, then another and another, caused their Aaronic Priesthood quorums and their branch to grow and keep growing.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD M. ROMNEY

DO

INVITE ALL

The *Duty to God* booklet encourages Aaronic Priesthood holders to invite all to come unto Christ. It says:

"Think about family members and friends whom you could invite to come unto Christ. Write down their names and what you will do to help them (such as inviting them to a Church activity or giving them a copy of the Book of Mormon or a Church magazine)" ([2010], 28).



THE MATH

Spirit when I first came. That was different for me. I had never been to a church where people shared their testimonies and felt great about their church. That's one of the reasons that I liked it."

So Wedner invited his friend, Milsont Pierre. Milsont started coming to weeknight activities and then to Sunday meetings, and then the missionaries started teaching his family. He remembers vividly, "I felt the Spirit, over and over again, especially during the sacrament prayers. I knew this was the true Church." Milsont and his three brothers were baptized and confirmed, as well as a cousin, a nephew, and four of Milsont's friends.

Multiplying Tree

From there, the Aaronic Priesthood in Immokalee just kept multiplying. "It was like a tree," Junior says. "It just kept growing and growing."

"One person invited another person, who invited another person, who invited another," Milsont says.

Some of Junior's friends from the football team came. Others invited relatives, fellow students, or long-time friends. The full-time missionaries received lots of referrals and taught and taught and taught—often accompanied by young men from the branch. Attendance at Wednesday night and Scouting activities averaged about 30, with almost as many in attendance on Sunday. Today there are 26 active young men in the branch—and one of them is Jorge Caceres, the one who had previously been discouraged about having no other young men with whom to associate.

"I became friends with Junior, too," Jorge says, "Then when he started inviting his friends to church,

I became friends with them. Every week new people kept coming."

And Jorge noticed something. "Once they started getting to know the Church, they changed." The gospel was changing them; getting to know Christ was changing them. "When I saw that, I started to take church more seriously. I worked on my own testimony, and now I know the Church is true."

Fellowship Factor

What has made the difference in Immokalee? Some things you would expect. "One thing that helped me a lot is reading my scriptures and thinking about it, asking questions and praying," says Esperandieu Andfils. "When you do that and feel the Spirit, there is no denial."

Wilnick Louis says witnessing his older brother Milsont's baptism made a difference for him. The baptism was held on Sunday after regular meetings, so Wilnick decided to come to church first. "I'd been to activities, but that was the first time I'd come to church on Sunday," he says. "During the meetings, and then at the baptism, I felt something good. When the missionaries asked me if I'd come again, I said, 'Yeah, I'll keep coming.'"

Sergio Andres says hearing the testimonies of the other young men his age made a big difference for him, and so did hearing the testimony of the full-time missionaries. "You have to share your testimony," Sergio says, "because if people don't know there's a true Church, they won't be able to find it."

But one of the biggest factors in the growth of the Church in Immokalee appears to be the attitude the young men here have toward each other.

Palm trees (previous page), pine trees, and orange groves prosper in southwestern Florida, and so does missionary work as young men share the desirable fruit of the gospel with family and friends and strengthen each other in quorums.



ADDING THE SPIRIT

Julian Vallejo's example is making a difference, right in his own home. His mother, Marylou V. Navarrete, and his little brother, Sebastian, who are LDS, and his stepfather, Antonio Navarrete, who is not a member of the Church, all say they are proud to watch Julian growing up in the Church and grateful for the example he sets for the family.

"I like having the Spirit of the Savior in our home," Julian says, "and at church we learn about the Savior. We take the sacrament and promise always to remember Him. Then we try to live as He would live, and that includes how we live at home." Setting an example by following the Savior yourself is also part of inviting people to come unto Christ, Julian says.

The Christlike spirit Antonio feels his wife, his son, and his stepson bringing into the family may be part of why he attends the Immokalee Branch. "I come with them all the time to support them," he says, "and to learn a little bit." He also helps the branch leaders, offering opinions and suggestions when asked.

That's a good reason, Julian says, for him to be proud of his stepfather.



26

Never Divided

“We are always together,” Wedner says. “There’s a strong feeling that we’re all brothers, and I love my brothers.” Esperandieu echoes the same feeling: “I can count on them.”

That’s what Young Men leaders have noticed, too.

“They’re friends everywhere they go,” says Michael “Bo” Browne, newly sustained Immokalee Young Men president. “It’s not a situation where if they’re in school, they avoid eye contact. They’re friends and brothers outside of the Church as well as inside, and I think that’s the key.”

“They have taught me a lot of things,” says a previous Young Men president, Frank Fernandez. “But their love for each other is the best example I’ve received. That’s the kind of love we should have toward everybody. Because of that love, they are fearless. They’re not afraid to open their mouths and talk to their friends about the gospel.”

“We’re all counseled to bring our friends and relatives unto Christ,” says recently released Immokalee Young Men president and Scoutmaster Clark Robinson, “and we feel like we should do it because we’re hearing people tell us we should. But these young men do it because they found peace here, and they’re eager to have those they care about feel what they feel and know what they know. It reminds me of Lehi’s dream, when he partakes of the fruit of the tree and immediately wants to share his happiness.

“The Lord has asked everyone to take what we have and add to it. So do the math. A willing spirit plus the correct principles equals a happy, large quorum and a growing branch or ward in the Church,” Brother Robinson says. **NE**

Wild grass stalks near Immokalee remind young men of the growth of their branch, of their own growth in the gospel, and of the scripture that says, “the field is white already to harvest” (D&C 33:7).

NEmore

Watch a video about the young men of Immokalee on youth.lds.org.

