

THE MEMBER- MISSIONARY

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Church growth has accelerated in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas as members have discovered the joy of sharing the gospel.

Members in some South Texas stakes are learning two important things about missionary work: it is much easier than they thought, and they enjoy it.

Raquel Taylor, for example, was surprised at how quickly her stake president's promise about missionary work came true. Sister Taylor was the sign language interpreter for a conference of the McAllen Texas Stake in February 2008 when the then-stake president, Marco Araya, made members a promise that focused their attention instantly on their missionary responsibility: if they would properly prepare themselves to share the gospel, "people will come to *you* to ask you to teach them." After the meeting ended, Sister Taylor



Effect



went to greet a group of friends who are deaf or hearing impaired. A young man visiting with them asked if missionaries could teach him—beginning immediately.

The McAllen Texas Stake was divided in September 2008, at least partly because of member involvement in missionary work. Baptisms have increased in the neighboring Harlingen Texas Stake as well. And Texas McAllen Mission president Gary F. Miller reports that efforts by members to share the gospel have also been increasing in the Corpus Christi Texas Stake, about 150 miles northeast on the Gulf Coast.

Preparation and a Promise

Sister Taylor interpreted for the missionaries as they began to teach Dario Gaytan, the young man who had approached her. After a couple of lessons, Elder Wayne Fletcher, who is fluent in sign language, was transferred into the area and began to help with teaching Dario, but Sister Taylor remained involved in the fellowshipping. Dario was not the only person touched by the missionary lessons. He had been living with the family of a friend who was a member but not active in the Church. That family was activated as Dario was being taught, and Dario's friend baptized him.



Jenny Chamberlain (left) introduces friends to the gospel with a gift—the Book of Mormon. Above: Leaders in the Mission Second Ward plan missionary efforts. Bishop L. Brice Chandler, right, was later called as president of the new McAllen Texas West Stake. Top: Tropical flowers cultivated in the Rio Grande Valley.

Elder Fletcher helped activate other members who are deaf or hearing impaired, and Sister Taylor began teaching classes in sign language.

Raquel Taylor learned that she had also been teaching by example. An old friend called her, asking for counsel about marriage. The friend wanted to know how to apply in her life the principles that Sister Taylor and her husband live by in their marriage. The friend also needed help

teaching the children in her church, so she bought the full range of Primary materials from the LDS bookstore that Sister Taylor owns with her husband, Nephi.

José and Esthela Rodriguez have also learned that how they live the gospel affects those around them. José, bishop of the Spanish-speaking La Joya Ward, McAllen Texas West Stake, was baptized in 2000 after he had met Esthela and she had introduced him to the gospel. The Rodriguezes have lived next door to a young unmarried couple. That couple has watched how Bishop and Sister Rodriguez treat each other and treat their children, and the woman has inquired about the principles that guide the lives of the Rodriguez family. The man has begun to court his partner, hoping to persuade her to marry him.

Bishop Rodriguez, with his counselors, has developed a ward mission plan. It includes having husband and wife pairs go out with the missionaries. “Right now,” he says, “the missionary work is a bit difficult in our area.” But the examples of individual members and families continue to draw attention to the Church.

The Member's Role

Robert Lyle does not wait for people to come to him to ask about the gospel. He seeks opportunities to share, tailoring his approach to what he knows of each individual. It may be an interest they have in common. On the Gulf Coast, for example, he has many opportunities to go fishing. His conversations with other fishermen often turn to conversations about families and the gospel. Over the past few years, about two dozen people have responded by accepting the gospel and being baptized.

Brother Lyle, formerly a counselor in the presidency of the Harlingen Texas Stake, now serves as the Young Men president in the McAllen stake. (His ward was moved with the stake division.) But regardless of where he serves, he has taught the same approach to missionary work. "The member's responsibility is to go out and identify those who are potentially interested in the gospel by giving them a chance to say yes or no. The main thing members can do that they're not doing now is open their mouths—not be afraid but ask anyone and everyone if they might have interest in some

Jeff and Michelle Merwin are dedicated member-missionaries. Brother Merwin has found *Preach My Gospel* valuable also in personal study. (See "Relying on *Preach My Gospel*," page 21.)



Missionaries in the Texas McAllen Mission have benefited from the efforts of local members in sharing the gospel.

principle of the gospel." Members need to know gospel principles well enough, he emphasizes, to pique people's interest and prepare them to meet the missionaries.

Jenny Chamberlain, a member of the McAllen stake's Weslaco Ward, takes this same kind of bold approach. A transplant from Southern Utah, she came to Texas as a teacher. Eventually, she developed a schedule for inviting some of the families she had met in the community to her home for dinner on Monday nights. A returned missionary, she introduces them to the gospel plan as explained in the Book of Mormon, pointing out that Moroni 10:5 teaches how they can know the truth of all things about God. "I try to present it as a gift—something I know and they can find out for themselves." She keeps stacks of the Book of Mormon in her home, in several languages, to share with her guests and others. So far, no one has turned down one of her dinner invitations, and several people have been baptized.

"Sharing the gospel is an incredibly powerful experience." She says that sometimes members are fearful, thinking, "This is scary! But it's so easy! The Lord blesses us."



Missionaries serving in the area say that many times people have approached them and asked to learn about the gospel. Sister Danielle Loftus recalls that on the street one day, a girl of about 10 ran up to her and her companion saying, “Hi. I know you.” The sisters realized they must have knocked on the family’s door about a week earlier. As a result of that conversation in the street, they were able to teach the girl, her grandmother, and her brother.

Sister Andrea Roberts says the spirit of missionary work seems to be strong among members because many are converts who still remember what it was like to discover the gospel. “As they pray in the morning, ‘Heavenly Father, please help me be a missionary,’ He is going to help them recognize missionary opportunities they haven’t seen before.”

The Field Is White

Some members in McAllen remember a visit by President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, a few years ago when he was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. After his visit, missionaries shared with the members something Elder Eyring had told them: he was impressed that many people he saw in the area were prepared to receive the gospel and eager to know its truths. Remembering his words, many local members have set personal goals; they want to find all those people who are ready to receive gospel truths.

President L. Brice Chandler of the new McAllen West stake says that in addition to planning and coordinating missionary work, leaders frequently retell member missionary success stories to help everyone feel they can be part of the work. “We’re trying to make [missionary work] something members can get excited about.” When members pray for the Lord to send people to them and those people are baptized, he explains, new converts will likely stay active because they already have a friend in the Church.

Presidents of both McAllen stakes say member retention

has improved. President Larry B. Wilson of the McAllen stake says, “I’m focusing on retention.”

Federico and Francisca Beltrán of the McAllen stake’s Edinburg Ward are among those members who have long enjoyed missionary work. Their ward has averaged about five baptisms per month, partly because of several families like the Beltráns who are active in fellowshipping and ready to work closely with the missionaries. Brother Beltrán was formerly ward mission leader. He says that each Sunday in the ward’s missionary coordination meeting, there was instruction

from the Church’s missionary guide, *Preach My Gospel*, as well as practice in role-playing and in giving new-member discussions.

Why are the Beltráns so involved in missionary work? “We have five children,” Sister Beltrán explains. “We want to set an example for them.”

The Lord frequently leads missionaries to families prepared to hear the gospel—people like Erasmo Esparza and his wife and children.

Sister Esparza was a member but not active when the missionaries knocked on their door. Brother

Esparza explained to the missionaries that she was ill and that the house needed cleaning, so he could not let them in. They asked if they could return later. They did, and he is grateful now that the missionaries offered a blessing to his wife. She accepted, and the missionaries began teaching the family.

The Esparzas faced opposition from extended family members and friends who urged them not to abandon their religious tradition. But in the end, Brother Esparza says, he decided he had to do what the Holy Ghost told him was right. Jeffrey, the Esparzas’ oldest son, also faced opposition from friends at school who argued about doctrine. “But I shrugged it off,” he says. “I knew what was right.” He quotes the words of Paul: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ” (Romans 1:16).



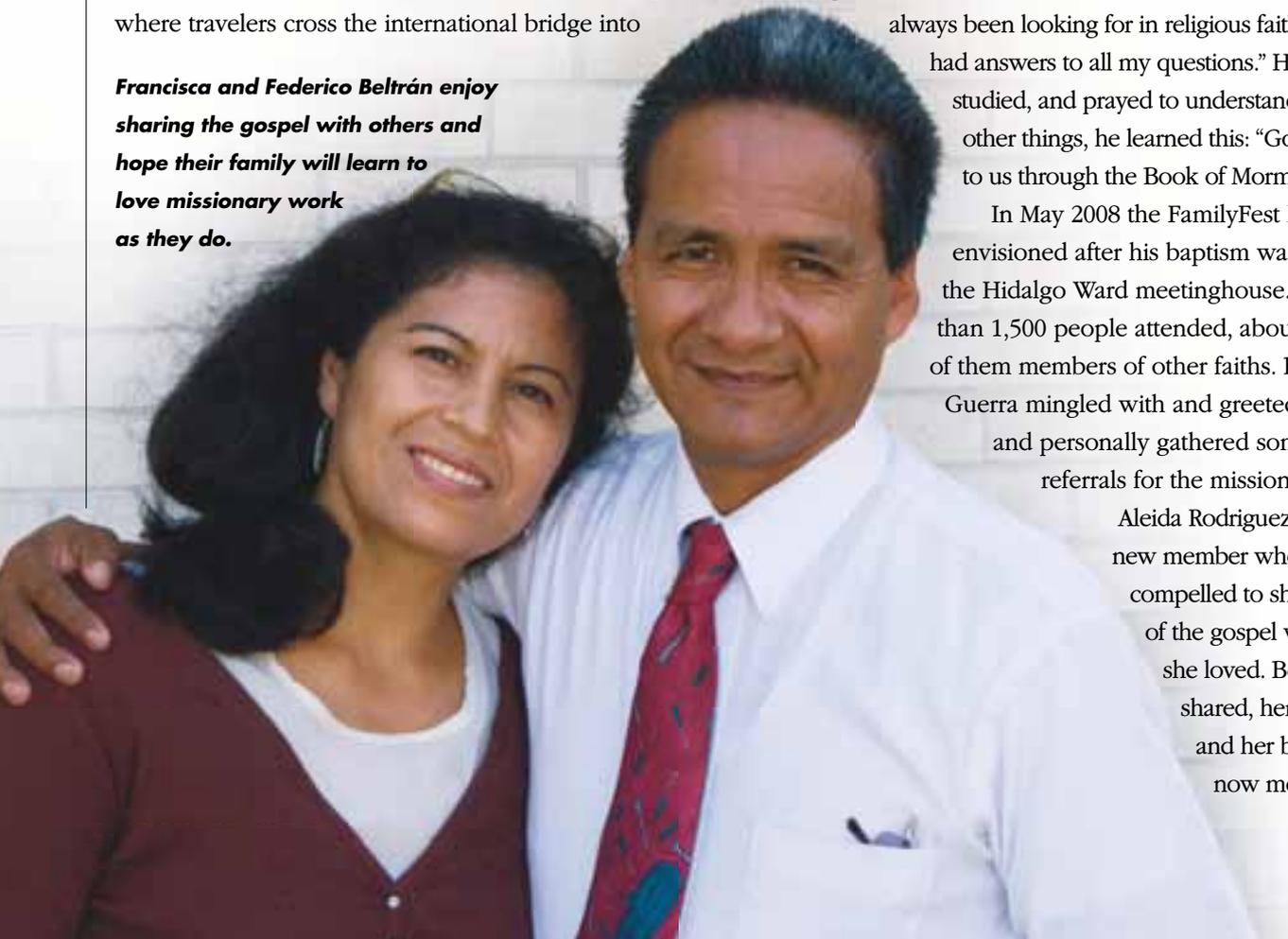
Bishop José Rodríguez and his wife, Esthela, of the McAllen West stake’s La Joya Ward learned that personal example helps others want to learn about the gospel.

When Jeffrey and his father were baptized in 2007, Sister Esparza began going to church again. (The Esparzas' youngest son, Joseph, was not yet eight.) "Even after we were baptized, we were still hit with a lot of opposition," Brother Esparza recalls. But they persevered in the gospel and were sealed as a family in the San Antonio Texas Temple in July 2008. Brother Esparza points out that every Latter-day Saint is familiar with James 1:5, the scripture that motivated Joseph Smith to walk into the Sacred Grove and ask God about truth, but there is great comfort in the rest of that chapter of scripture, which teaches about patience and perseverance amid trials.

Sharing the Joy

Many new members look immediately for ways to share the joy they have found in the gospel. Ramiro Guerra is one of those. He is well known in the city of Hidalgo, where travelers cross the international bridge into

Francisca and Federico Beltrán enjoy sharing the gospel with others and hope their family will learn to love missionary work as they do.



The Esparzas' faith carried them through opposition to their conversion and activity in the Church. They were sealed in the temple in July 2008.

Mexico. Brother Guerra was one of the organizers of BorderFest, an annual celebration that draws thousands of visitors to Hidalgo for entertainment, cultural events, and ethnic food from many nations. After he was baptized in 2007, he conceived the idea of a similar family festival in the ward meetinghouse.

Brother Guerra had made a promise to God as a boy that if he could be helped with a physical disability (difficulty in speaking), he would dedicate his life to his Father's service. He received the help he requested, and he set about to fulfill his promise. As an adult, he studied to qualify

for an important lay position in his church, but after completing his studies, he never sought the formal appointment; he could not feel the doctrine of his church was true. He had been acquainted with LDS missionaries for many years and had even received personal help from them. When he finally

agreed to let them teach him, he found what he had always been looking for in religious faith. "They had answers to all my questions." He read, studied, and prayed to understand. Among other things, he learned this: "God speaks to us through the Book of Mormon."

In May 2008 the FamilyFest he had envisioned after his baptism was held in the Hidalgo Ward meetinghouse. More than 1,500 people attended, about half of them members of other faiths. Brother Guerra mingled with and greeted guests and personally gathered some 200 referrals for the missionaries.

Aleida Rodriguez is another new member who felt compelled to share the joy of the gospel with those she loved. Because she shared, her mother and her brother are now members.

RELYING ON *PREACH MY GOSPEL*

Two missionaries who worked extensively with local priesthood leadership in the Texas McAllen Mission report that member participation is a key to missionary success. Elder Jordan Driscoll said that wards where mem-



bers are excited about missionary work “are progressing in everything.” Elder Richard Perry noted that when members are familiar with *Preach My Gospel* (Item no. 36617000), the missionary guide, missionaries and members work together much more effectively.

For them, Jeff Merwin would be a missionary’s dream.

Jeff and Michelle Merwin of the McAllen Third Ward have been missionaries all of their adult lives. Both share the gospel freely, and both have been instrumental in bringing others to the gospel. But Jeff says that *Preach My Gospel* changed his life. When one missionary reviewed with him what is written about personal prayer in the missionary guide, Brother Merwin found himself reevaluating his own prayers. After pondering how to make them more effective, he changed his expressions of gratitude and his petitions so they come more fully and consistently from his heart.

He also made a commitment to go out with the missionaries once a week. He wrote his own personal missionary plan in his copy of *Preach My Gospel*, where he can review it regularly. He frequently uses *Preach My Gospel* as a scripture study guide, emphasizing how the scriptures prepare him better to share the gospel.

As a young missionary, he learned to love this opportunity to share. “I always made the statement that as a full-time missionary you don’t appreciate what you’ve got until you don’t have it anymore.” But since he has focused on using *Preach My Gospel*, he reflects, “I have gotten it back.

“When we engage ourselves with others and help and assist them in coming unto Christ, we experience joy that is almost immeasurable—some of the greatest joy we can feel in this life.”

So too are her father, stepmother, and their children.

Sister Rodriguez had been planning to serve as a missionary for another church. In the course of her employment distributing items door to door, she felt impressed to knock on the door of the LDS missionaries. The name of Jesus Christ on their name tags seemed to draw her to hear what they said. She wanted to learn about Him and His teachings because her church did not focus on His mission. “I couldn’t reject the missionaries because of what I felt.”

She found spiritual reassurance in the fact that they did not teach of a reformation but of a restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ, and that this restored church was directed by a living prophet. She was impressed that missionaries and members were able to answer her doctrinal questions from the Bible, and when she read the Book of Mormon, she came to understand that both books are testaments of Jesus Christ and His work.

Aleida had long wanted to know Jesus Christ. Now, Sister Rodriguez is testifying of Him as a missionary in the Chile Concepción Mission. As the missionaries taught her, she found something that she and so many others have sought as they tried to understand the meaning of mortality; she learned about the possibility of celestial life. This has given new purpose to her own day-to-day living—a purpose that can be a lifelong guide. “Our goal,” she says, “should be the celestial.” ■



After her baptism, Sister Aleida Rodriguez shared the gospel first with those she loved most—her family. Now she is sharing the gospel as a missionary in Chile.