

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR FAITH

By **Michael Otterson**

Managing Director, Church Public Affairs Department

I had been a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints just a few days when a casual conversation among a group of friends turned to my recent conversion.

Some were intrigued, even fascinated. A few were indifferent. One young woman my age simply and uncompromisingly refused to believe I was Christian.

It was my first taste of trying to explain my beliefs to those who did not share them. I remember feeling utterly frustrated as I tried to penetrate a mind so tightly shuttered that no amount of reasoning could pry it open.

As the Church grows it will face increasing scrutiny, like any major faith, and that will lead to many more face-to-face or online conversations between our members and their families, friends, and associates who don't share our faith.

Paying attention to some basic principles can help members respond to questions or comments with more confidence.

Live Your Religion

One of the great advantages that faithful Church members have

is that our faith encourages us to “live our religion.” There is a sense of authenticity that comes as friends and associates see the connection between what one says and what one does.

If a Latter-day Saint's life is his or her best sermon, then our conversations ought also to be open, genuine, and engaged in with a spirit of kindness, even if people ask inappropriate questions or adopt a cynical tone. Our claims to be followers of Jesus Christ are most convincing when our actions are in harmony with our beliefs. When we are answering questions or even criticisms, there will be times when we need a thick skin. We may also need a sense of humor.

In 2007 at a commencement ceremony for BYU–Hawaii graduates, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, “If you live the principles of the gospel [rather than] just study them, that special combination of knowledge will allow you to feel comfortable and prepared to teach what you know to be true—in any setting.”

Set the Context

When we are addressing questions or comments about our faith, it is important to establish some context from the outset.

Rather than simply responding to a series of random questions, it might be helpful to first take 30 seconds to establish a foundation. That can be as simple as explaining that we embrace Jesus Christ as our Savior and accept the Bible's teachings about His birth, life, ministry, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. We also believe that the Christian world departed from the truths Jesus taught in the Bible and that the Church He established needed to be restored.

Laying out the foundational beliefs of the Church in this way supplies a reference point as the discussion turns to other tenets of the gospel.

Connect the Dots

As members listen to questions, they can discern the gospel principle at the heart of the question and connect the answer back to the Savior.

For example, why do we send missionaries to Christian countries? Because in His day Jesus sent His messengers two by two “into all the



Sharing personal experiences can be a more effective way to answer questions than reciting memorized answers.

world.” And we do the same today. Why do we frown on cohabitation before marriage? Because Jesus and His Apostles taught the sanctity of marriage and all that goes with it.

We do not need complicated, sophisticated secular arguments when the principles we try to live by come from the Son of God.

Share Personal Experiences

Answering our friends’ questions is not about reciting memorized

answers. Sharing genuine, personal experiences can invite the Spirit to bear witness and carry the message into the listener’s heart.

One of the greatest hindrances to sharing our faith is being afraid we don’t have the answers. Few people in other churches are experts in their own history or doctrine, and studies show that Latter-day Saints are incredibly well educated in their own faith by comparison.

When someone asks a question

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Church has created online resources that can be helpful for members to share with those who have questions.

Mormon.org

Mormon.org/Jesus Christ

Mormonnewsroom.lds.org

LDS.org

Liahona.LDS.org



When answering friends' questions, be yourself. Who you are is often the reason they asked you the question.

about the Church's doctrine or history that we don't know, it's okay to say, "I don't know." But we can all share personal experiences to explain how we feel about our faith.

If we relate our own experiences about prayer or fasting or communicating effectively with our families, those experiences can't be challenged. They are ours, and no one understands them better than we do.

Be Aware of Your Audience

Some people won't approach a member with questions because they fear being roped into a half-hour lecture. If they ask a casual question, be sensitive to their interest, comfort, and level of understanding. Signaling our sensitivity at the outset can put

those who are curious at ease.

Understand that the same conversation isn't going to work for everyone due to differing backgrounds—religious, secular, and otherwise.

Sharing What We Believe

Members of the Church have an unprecedented opportunity to be a force for good in helping clear up misconceptions about what we are not and to increase others' understanding of who we are and what we believe.

As people learn more about Latter-day Saint beliefs, they may see some distinct differences and yet find some unexpected common ground on which to build better relationships. ■

Helpful Hints

Assume the Best

It can be intimidating when someone asks probing questions about our faith. However, for the most part, people are just curious. Don't be defensive.

Listen Carefully

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught that the gift of discernment operates best when we are listening. To really understand the question and the intent, ask clarifying questions and be prepared to do as much listening as you do talking.

Honor Agency

All people have God-given moral agency. So we may invite or even persuade—but we should not pressure or coerce.

Avoid Church Jargon

Avoid Latter-day Saint terminology or jargon that can sound foreign, like "ward," "family home evening," or "Word of Wisdom." If you use these terms, explain them without waiting to be asked.

Use the Church's Full Name

Whenever possible, use the full name of the Church at least once, and early in the conversation. There is a power in the name of the Church, so explain it. It says a great deal about who we are.