

**Ethnography: The life and work of Mormon Missionaries in
Hawaii**

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a faith which is always somehow distinctly differentiated from the various other Judeo-Christian sects. What makes this so? Who are the purveyors of this oft-caricatured religion, the missionaries? How do they demolish and encourage stereotypes of their particular brand of faith? How does one go about encouraging individuals to undertake as monumental a decision as changing faiths? In answering these questions, I informally interviewed former and current Mormon missionaries about their motivations, their work, and whatever else came to mind during the course of our discussions.

Informants consisted of whoever could be contacted under the phonebook entries for Mormon missionaries, as well as a former missionary, Brother "Carlos", who I know personally but whose knowledge I primarily employed for clarification and confirmation. My primary informants, an Elder "Andrew" and his companion, Elder "Baker", were two young males (both twenty years old) whom I contacted through the telephone, and whom I invited over to my home for several interviews. The title "Elder" will be used many times throughout this paper. "Elder" is an honorific signifying one's role in the church, and is reserved for members of the Melchidezek Priesthood. The Melchidezek Priesthood primarily consists of full-time missionaries, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and the First Quorum of Seventy, which are distinct organs with bureaucratic and spiritual authority within the hierarchical structure of the Latter Day Saints church (refer to table 2 for a graphic representation of Mormon hierarchy). Elder Andrew was a 20 year-old man who had been on his mission approximately 18 months, out of a mandated 24. Elder Andrew converted from the Methodist faith only several years ago, and was partnered with an Elder Baker (companion, in Mormon parlance), who had been on his mission approximately 15 months and who had been raised in the Mormon faith. Both generally give the impression of very articulate, well-educated men who fervently believed in that which they preach..

It has been said that it is best to "begin at the beginning", so first this paper will examine the process of becoming a Missionary of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in chronological procession. As explained by Elders Andrew and Baker, Males are eligible to become missionaries at the age of 18, for a mandated period of 24 months. Females, admittedly rather more rarely seen in missionary positions, are eligible at the age of 21 for a Mission, for a mandated period of 18 months. The process of becoming a Mormon missionary begins at home. The local authorities, local branch presidents and bishops, originate the petition for a missionary prospect to be selected, which is then forwarded to Latter Day Saints (LDS) headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. Elder Andrew stated that the selection criteria used by evaluators (the

aforementioned local authorities) is subjective and objective, such as how you are perceived as well as your activities in and out of the church. He also said that prayer was the primary determining factors. Apparently, the evaluators pray for guidance about the suitability of the candidate for a mission, and if they feel a “burning in their bosom” or other such wonderful feelings, they will deem a candidate suitable for a mission. Elder Andrew said this in such a way as to imply that the guidance received from the divine during the prayer session is the single most important determinant among the particular selection criteria. This also evinces a recurring theme one will encounter during any discussion with missionaries, they inevitably and invariably coach explanations of policy, such as budget allocation and personnel assignment, in scriptural or religious terms.

The second step in becoming a missionary of the LDS Church involves one’s particular mission assignment. Elder Andrew and Elder Baker described a sense of anticipation in regard to receiving one’s assignment. As Elder Andrew described it, “It’s the most exciting and nerve-racking experience you’ll ever have.” This, along with the tone and sense of excitement conveyed by the missionaries, attests to the importance that Mormons, especially males, ascribe to missionary work. One’s particular mission assignment, that is, the part of the world to which one is being sent, comes in the form of a letter mailed directly to the home of the aspiring missionary, said letter being sent from LDS headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah after a period of weeks or months after the initial application is received. The newly minted, but untrained missionaries are then ordered to report to a Missionary Training Center (MTC) for missionary training. All American and Canadian missionaries train at the primary Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, which is directed jointly by the Brigham Young University and the LDS Church’s missionary authority. However, Missionary Training Centers for non-Americans do exist, with the first of these foreign missionary training centers having been established in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and with 12 others operating in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific, all in close proximity to large Mormon population centers and Mormon temples.

Missionary training largely consists of helping missionaries to learn teaching methods, as well as intensive study of the religious material that they are to teach to the “gentiles”, the term (quixotically, perhaps, depending on the individual) usually reserved for non-Jews but appropriated by the LDS Church to refer to non-Mormons. A Jew in Utah or Idaho, then, could find himself being referred to as a “gentile”. Another element of Missionary training involves language training, the methodology of which was adopted from the U.S. Army and allows a candidate with average aptitude to sing, converse, and teach religious material in the target language in an average of 8 weeks time. Language training accounts for a large portion of the

lengthy duration of training for foreign missionaries, although cultural inculcation is also prescribed. For missionaries operating within the U.S. and Canada, religious study takes up the majority of one's time at the MTC.

Following mission training, newly trained missionaries ("Green" missionaries, in the words of Elder Baker) are sent to their assigned areas of operation. As Elder Baker described it, a missionary's general area of operation during the entire period of a mission is nearly always within the boundaries of the same "stake", but a missionary is assigned to various wards within that same stake during the course of a mission. A "ward" is the LDS term for an administrative sub-region roughly analogous to a municipality or borough, the geographic boundaries of which are determined by said region's population. The LDS church employs a multifarious variety of terms to describe their complex hierarchy and various administrative regions. (Refer to tables 1 and 2 at the end of this paragraph for a brief graphic description of the LDS organization.) Upon arrival at his or her assigned mission, the missionary is assigned a "companion", which, as described earlier, is Mormon vernacular for a missionary partner. The missionary will spend up to several months with one particular companion, after which point either the companion or the missionary is (or may be) moved to a new area of operation during a periodic reassignment phase, called a "transfer" in Mormon terminology. Typically a new missionary ("Greenie") is assigned a more experienced companion as a tutor and guide, usually someone who is nearing the end of his period as a missionary. Although, according to Elder Baker, this is not always the case, and two brand new missionaries might be paired together. Elder Baker described the relationship between companions as a "learning experience". Although, he did laughingly describe tensions between companions, one is forced to spend twenty-four hours a day with his companion, and he might or might not be able to get along well with this person, but one must also learn to cope with and work with this individual, because it's a requisite of the job. While further describing the trials and tribulations of living in extremely close quarters with a single person, he jokingly gesticulated a strangling motion to describe what people living in such conditions sometimes feel for one another. Elder Andrew, however, did state that companions often do form a close bond, and that many former companions opt to remain in touch over the years, despite whatever personal difficulties they might sometimes encounter. Elder Andrew and Elder Baker had been together about a month when I first met them, and seemed to enjoy a fairly close and friendly bond. However, as missionaries are periodically ordered to undertake a transfer to new haunts, they will before too long have to learn to relate to a new person and personality with whom they must deal during every waking minute. Adding to the stress, Elder Andrew stated that one never knows until the day of transfer where, or even if one is going to be sent to a new location.

TABLE 1: ADMINISTRATIVE SUB-REGIONS OF THE LDS CHURCH		
REGION NAME	LEADER NAME/RANK	FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENTS
Area	Area President	U.S. State/Greater census Region
Stake	Stake President	U.S. State/County
Ward	Bishop	Municipality/Borough
Branch	Bishop	Municipal district/Neighborhood

TABLE 2: LDS LEADERSHIP	
LDS POSITION	FUNCTIONAL LDRSHIP EQUIV.
Jesus Christ	Jesus Christ
First Presidency (Prophet & 2 counselors)	President and Departmental Secretaries
Quorum of 12 Apostles	Departmental Secretaries
Quorum of 70 (consists of Area presidents and bishops)	Congress
Area President	Territorial Governor
Ward leader (Bishop)	Mayor/Borough President
Branch president (Bishop)	State House Member
LDS Church Members	Citizens

Elder Andrew described the LDS approach to missionary work as a teaching and mentoring role. Missionaries individually tailor their message based on interaction with their prospective convert. One might say that the “Complete Proselytizing Package” includes describing the ideal Mormon way of life and the Mormon philosophy as well as delivering a religious message with Jesus Christ as the central theme. Perhaps surprisingly, Elder Andrew stated that the majority of converts come from “referrals”, that is, friends and acquaintances of

people who are already members of the Church. Elder Andrew quoted the statistics by saying “I think the statistics are something like one out of a hundred people who open the door will let you into their homes, and one out of a hundred of those will convert. It’s really kind of a numbers game.” Elder Andrew stated that the Mormon focus on the family unit and community (in fact, the Mormon term for members of the Church is “Family Members”) is often a strong-point in gaining conversions. The Mormon Church even has an internal welfare system for those members who find themselves in need, evincing the socialist provider role that the Church can play in the lives of members, much like the government in the lives of citizens. Elder Baker also stated that the Church’s overriding emphasis on emulating the life of Jesus Christ is also a central theme that distinguishes the LDS Church from other Christian sects. Another aspect of Mormonism which distinguishes it from mainstream Christianity is the Book of Mormon, which is marketed as an addendum to the Bible, rather than a different book entirely, such as the Quran or Torah, although, the first “Prophet”, Joseph Smith, did provide his own translation of the Bible (the Joseph Smith Translation). In respect to door-knocking, the Elders had the following to say in regards to the reception one might receive: Elder Baker and Elder Andrew stated that while they did often get doors slammed in their faces, the majority of people on whose doors they knocked politely declined to speak, and that outright rudeness was rather the exception. Elder Andrew has spent some of his time doing missionary work in a rural part of the island of Hawaii (a redundancy, perhaps). Elder Andrew said that there is a rather clear distinction to the way in which he did Missionary work in urban Honolulu and rural Hawaii. He stated that he encountered outright rudeness much less frequently in (the island of) Hawaii and that individuals were considerably more willing to talk than in Honolulu. This did not, however, lead to a marked increase in the probability of successful conversion among those approached, and is, as Elder Andrew stated, based on cultural imperatives. He also stated that living in rural Hawaii proved to be rather a culture shock, whereas living in Honolulu hadn’t been markedly different from living in his suburban town in the Midwest, “except”, he grinned “for the sunshine.”

On their attitudes about being on a mission in general, the Elders were overall very positive. Elder Andrew described it as “the best feeling in the world”, and Elder Baker stated that “I sometimes feel that I’d like to do this forever”. They spoke of the things that they had left behind, such as family, friends, girlfriends, school, but they both stated that they felt as if they were “doing the Lord’s” work. While the restrictions are many, such as no outside entertainment (books, tv, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines), being limited in contact with friends and loved ones (missionaries are allowed one two-hour call home per year, and must otherwise correspond by mail), both Elder Andrew and Elder Baker expressed a deep passion for their work,

and seemed quite sincere in their belief that they would return home deeply satisfied with their experience, and better people for it. Elder Andrew had the following to say about the leadership roles that one might expect a former missionary to undertake upon homecoming. He said “It’s not automatic. We might someday be called to serve, it isn’t like “Oh, you return from your mission, then you move on to be a bishop, then a stake president, and so on.” We could be bishop one week, and then the next week be the Sunday school teacher.” He said that there was no “corporate ladder” to be ascended. “Whenever we meet with our Mission President, he always says “I know that when I look upon all of you, I’m seeing future stake presidents, future apostles.” It always makes me proud.” The elders also expressed their hopes for the future. Both Elder Andrew and Elder Baker intended to attend Brigham Young University, Provo, where they had both been former students. Both also responded that they wanted to start a family upon homecoming. Elder Andrew said “I can’t wait to have a family.”

One finds not caricatures in these men, but rather just normal people who seem to sincerely believe in that which they are, literally, preaching. As one can see, it’s all a bit more complex than simply “go forth unto the world and preach.”