

## A MISSION TO HEAL

RECOVERING FROM THE TRAUMA OF EARLY RETURN

RESOLVING PROBLEMS FOR  
MISSIONARIES WHO RETURN EARLY

By Levi S. Peterson

**M**Y GENERAL INTEREST IN THE PROBLEMS facing missionaries who return early derives from the fact that I attempted to return early from my mission in French-speaking Belgium during the summer of 1955. Crippled by doubt, anxiety, and depression, I wanted desperately to go home. However, unable to foresee anything but a painful readjustment in a thousand former relationships if I turned up early at home, I finally decided to stay. I was far from happy, feeling coerced by my mother and the mission president as well as anxious and depressed. I am pleased to say that my emotions eventually stabilized, and the final months of my mission proved pleasant, so I judge now that I did well by remaining. But I hadn't been wise to go on a mission in the first place. I see that I was an unlikely candidate for a mission.

During the winter of 2002, my interest in the early return of missionaries was heightened by a discussion on AML-List, an email discussion group sponsored by the Association for Mormon Letters. I was surprised by the number of participants who commented on the disillusionments of mission life and on the ostracism facing those who return early even for justifiable reasons. The eye-opening fact for me was that the early return of missionaries is a social problem of major proportions. I therefore organized a panel on the topic for the 2002 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium that was attended by a standing-room-only crowd. The panel was titled, "Ostracize, Condole, or Congratulate? What to Do When Missionaries Come Home Early." I was astonished and pleased that the *Deseret News* subsequently ran a detailed and favorable summary of the panel. I have drawn many ideas from my colleagues on this panel.<sup>1</sup>

My fund of ideas on this subject also grew through my passive participation in another online group, LDS Early Released Missionaries E-group,<sup>2</sup> to which I was directed by a niece

whose son had just returned unexpectedly from Brazil for medical reasons. Most of the participants in this group are mothers of missionaries who have returned early. Their grief and sense of personal failure have touched me deeply, mostly, I suppose, because of the guilt I felt—and continue to feel—over having disappointed my own mother, not by coming home early, but by marrying outside the Church, an even greater calamity for her. I have gathered close to a hundred email postings from the participants in this group. I will refer to several of these messages in the following discussion, which I hope will illuminate some of the problems associated with the early return of missionaries and help point to ways these missionaries and their families can be reintegrated more quickly into conventional Mormon life.

**U**NDoubtedly the physical or emotional ailments that send some missionaries home early would have emerged regardless of their whereabouts. But there is no question that the stress of missionary life triggers many such ailments. It makes some companions even more incompatible than they would have been under normal circumstances. It fuels nervous breakdowns and psychotic breaks. It feeds depression and feelings of worthlessness. It induces psychosomatic illnesses of the body.

The problem begins long before the missionary reaches a field of service, first in an unrealistic expectation as to the nature of missionary life. New missionaries enter the MTC with vast hopes for two years of beatitude and bliss. Immediately an unpleasant militaristic discipline is imposed on them which, unlike boot camp, will last throughout their service. Another consideration is the guilt screw that is tightened down at the MTC, eliciting confessions of hitherto unadmitted sexual sins, for which the new recruit, usually male, is summarily sent home for a period of overt repentance. Once in the field, missionaries encounter culture shock. Furthermore, they quickly learn that they spend most of their time in a disappointing search for someone who will take their message seriously. Perhaps their greatest disillusionment is the unrelieved stress of incompatible companions bound to them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.



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One would expect that missionaries who return early for justifiable medical or psychiatric reasons would find a good deal of comfort and support among their friends and neighbors at home. Evidence, however, shows otherwise. If anything, an aborted mission seems worse than none at all. Young Latter-day Saints have been taught to view their mission as a test of their devotion to the Lord; now they feel they have failed that test. Furthermore, the shadow of a dishonorable release hangs over them. Their honest explanations ring hollow. They feel their friends suspect them of lying in order to cover a more shameful reason for an early return. They themselves wonder whether they should have stayed on, ignoring their physical symptoms more resolutely or exercising greater control over their anxiety and depression.

**A**MONG THE GRIEVING mothers on the early returned missionaries email group is one whose son had returned early from Brazil with bleeding from the bowels. She comments on the embarrassment that his appearance of full health gave:

It seems that the general public sentiment is

if the returned missionary isn't confined to a bed, in a wheelchair, waiting for a major operation, etc., [he] shouldn't be home on a medical release. Anyway it gets difficult to explain sometimes, and many times it just sounds like excuses. So I just state the facts (He's home on a medical release. He has chosen not to go back out. He is going to school at the University of Arizona) and let the people take it from there.

This embarrassment appears to have something to do with the fact that most missionaries who return early for health reasons do not resume their missions, although most of them intend to do so when they first arrive home. Several puzzled mothers commented on this quick loss of motivation. In response, a missionary who had returned because of unexplained headaches posted the following explanation:

To be right in the middle of it, to be pulled out of it, and to have to deal with all the people asking you why are you home, what did you do to get sent home, what your parents think, what you are going to do in the future, if you want to go back, if you are going to go back, if you enjoyed your time as a missionary, and all the other repetitive questions that I know I've been asked—it is too frustrating to even think about a mission right now.

The emphasis upon missionary service is so great that

rank and file members easily assume serving a mission, like baptism and the temple endowment, is an indispensable step toward exaltation, as one mother in the email group made clear. This woman's son had elected to return from his mission for surgery, without the approval of his mission president, because the doctors available in his mission would not define his ailment as serious enough to justify surgery. Although offered the option of returning to his mission, he chose to marry. Trying to encourage another struggling mother, she wrote:

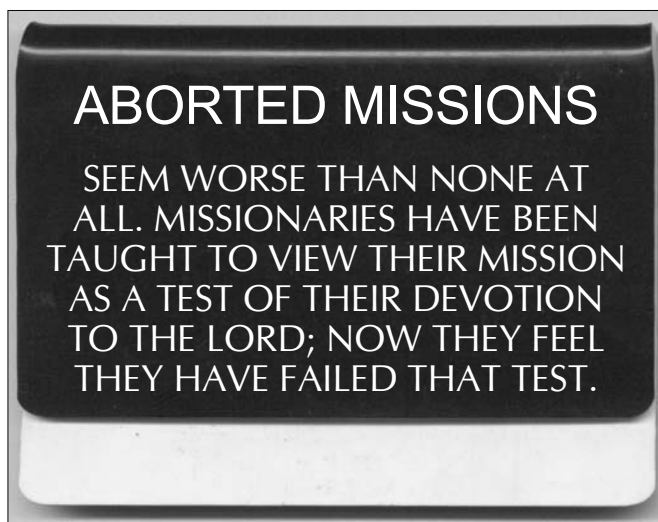
At first it was painfully horrible to deal with the shame and heartbreak that comes from a mission cut short. . . . I will always have a pain in my heart for [his] decision to get married instead of finishing his mission, but it's his choice. . . . Another thing that was told me [by way of comfort] was that a mission is not a saving ordinance. Temple endowments and sealings are, but a mission isn't. That didn't seem to help

me much then or now, but at least remember that in the back of your mind. What your son does from here on is the important thing.

Despite this mother's inability to derive comfort from the idea that a mission is not one of the saving ordinances, others in the email group took it up eagerly. One wrote:

I was glad to get the message about a mission not [being] a saving ordinance. . . . I'm going to pass that along to my daughter. I know sometimes she still feels that she failed us, failed the Lord in some way, failed our ward, and most of all herself. And she did nothing wrong but catch something.

Even greater difficulty faces missionaries who are sent home early for disciplinary reasons, something universally viewed as unjustifiable among Mormons. Those sent home for failing to confess sexual sins before going out or for a serious infraction of mission rules, as in the recent case of seven missionaries who were sent home as a group for acquiring tattoos as a prank, are often given a term of probation following which they can resume their mission. In essence they are disfellowshipped. Missionaries who commit serious sexual sin while in the field are ordinarily excommunicated. The problems of resuming a normal Mormon life confronting any disfellowshipped or excommunicated person are exacerbated for missionaries because their early return makes their disgrace so



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public. The compulsion to conform is so unremitting among Mormons that we have a hard time knowing how to relate comfortably even with those known merely to smoke and drink, let alone with persons known to have been disfellowshipped or excommunicated. So the attempt of early returned missionaries to explain their unexpected presence is bound to be embarrassing, sometimes exceedingly so. They and their relatives offer abbreviated and evasive explanations to which friends and neighbors respond with a not always tactfully suppressed skepticism.

Relatives of such missionaries predictably respond with a high degree of shame and grief. A mother whose son had been sent home after only three days in the MTC reported that, after four months, her son still had no plans to return:

The hardest thing for me is to be patient with him. Most of the time I want to shake him. He isn't doing bad things like smoking, drinking, and that kind of thing, but he just won't go to church. He seems lost, angry, bored, tired, indifferent. It kills me to think how he sparkled on the day of his farewell.

Another mother, reporting that her son had been sent home from the MTC only three days before his scheduled departure for a foreign mission, wrote:

I really feel like someone had died. I have lost both my parents, and I think their deaths were easier to handle. I cry every time it gets quiet, when I go to bed, or I see a missionary on the street, or when I look at my son's mission pictures. The two months while he was at the MTC, and even while we were getting him ready, were the BEST days of MY life. A wonderful emotional HIGH, I have never felt before. Now I feel at ROCK BOTTOM. My son has gone on with his life. He is back to work, he goes to church (but with his friends in another ward), he has bought a car and is moving on. He does not want to go back.

The mother of one of the seven missionaries sent home early for getting a tattoo—considered a grave violation of mission rules even though the tattoos were small and inconspicuous—reported that her son, though feeling his punishment had been unjustifiably harsh, had managed to swallow his pride, express contrition, and return to fulfill his commitment in another mission. However, she noted that he was the only one of the seven to do so:

The others were so devastated, they were angry and didn't want to hear anything more about the mission, and in some cases, the Church. We were very afraid

[our son] would feel this way, and for a while he did. However, we helped him get above those feelings by talking it out with him.

**W**HAT MIGHT BE done to ameliorate the problems facing early returned missionaries and their relatives? The following ideas might prove helpful, particularly if they were preceded by a general change in attitude among Church members.

One improvement would be to disentangle missionary service and social stratification within the Church. At present, a successful mission of a son or daughter bolsters a family's status within a ward and stake, so much so that, until a recent First Presidency directive stopped the practice, families made missionary farewells high-scale social events comparable to temple weddings, dictating the program for their offspring's farewell sacrament meeting and providing a sumptuous open house for relatives and ward members. The recent directive ending family-dominated missionary farewells is encouraging evidence of a growing recognition that the status factor in missionary service has gotten out of hand.

A second improvement would be to establish a more effective screening of missionary candidates in order to better anticipate who might be predisposed to physical, emotional, and spiritual inadequacies. To be truly effective, such an endeavor implies a general acceptance among Church members that the missionary force will be reduced and a fuller recognition that there are other ways besides a mission for young men and women to demonstrate commitment to their religion. Church leaders would have to stop giving such strong emphasis to the every-worthy-male-member-a-missionary theme. Parents would have to resist the temptation to use a mission as a device for stabilizing recalcitrant sons.



" THEN I SAID TO MYSELF, WHAT WOULD THE SAVIOR DO?...  
..AND I FORGAVE HIM. THEN I ASKED MYSELF, WHAT WOULD  
PORTER ROCKWELL DO? AND I SLUGGED HIM."

Screening for physical debilities during the required physical examination is presumably already as effective as it can get. Certainly I'm in no position to say that a more ruthless screening of physical ailments is in order. As for emotional ailments, one member of the early returned missionary panel, Kathy Tyner, whose son had received an honorable early release because of a paralyzing phobia of making door presentations while tracting, recommended a much more thorough psychological probe of prospective missionaries. Louis Moench, a psychiatrist on our panel, pointed out that trained psychologists would have to verify the results of a standard personality inventory by interviewing each of the two thousand persons who apply for a mission each week—a prohibitively cumbersome and costly process. However, he believes a few questions related to emotional health on the present medical questionnaire could, without prohibitive cost, be more consistently utilized in screening applicants for missionary service.

Elder M. Russell Ballard's address to the priesthood assembly of the October 2002 General Conference announced what could be a new determination on the part of the Church to scrutinize more thoroughly the spiritual preparation of prospective missionaries, which would presumably reduce the percentage of those who return early. Elder Ballard warned the youth at that assembly, the Church "cannot send you on a mission to be reactivated, reformed, or to receive a testimony. We just don't have time for that." He also informed bishops and stake presidents that theirs is "the responsibility to recommend only those young men and women whom you judge to be spiritually, physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared to face today's realities of missionary work."<sup>3</sup> Whether this address represents an authentic long-range shift in Church policy on screening potential missionaries or is simply a standard (though extraordinarily compelling) general conference speech aimed at motivating young Church members to be more fervent and obedient remains to be seen.

While a more thoroughgoing screening of prospective missionaries by those who must approve their applications is desirable, I for one believe that self-screening will prove more effective. That is, an improved orientation about the nature of missionary work will allow individuals to better judge their own fitness for a mission. One way to implement such a policy would be to establish probationary periods of service, at the end of which a candidate for a mission could elect to return home with honor. The first week in the MTC could be defined as such a period, for example, and the first month's service in the field as another. Or two-year missions could be segmented into six-month blocks, with missionaries being given a chance to return home honorably at the end of each block.


Less radical, perhaps, would be simply to encourage throughout the Church a more realistic lore about the nature of a mission. The hardships and frustrations of a mission would be more candidly recognized, and it would be more

widely acknowledged that missions are not for everyone. For example, teachers and ecclesiastical leaders could emphasize the difficulties of a mission even as they encourage the young to aspire to missionary service. Firesides featuring candid discussions by both regularly returned and early returned missionaries could help those pondering a mission make up their minds about the risks.

A third improvement would be to allow missionaries who confess hitherto undisclosed sins after they arrive in the MTC to work out their repentance with the mission president without being automatically sent home. The present practice needlessly cuts willing missionaries from the available proselytizing force and condemns a large percentage of them to future inactivity or apostasy. So deeply ingrained is the present practice, however, that I view this recommendation as unlikely to receive serious consideration.

A fourth improvement would be to expand the non-proselytizing options available to missionaries. Most, if not all, missions should offer, besides traditional proselytism, service in disaster assistance, public building projects, literacy programs, and interfaith welfare projects. A number of the cases I read about on the email list involved missionaries whose physical or emotional disorders might have proved adaptable to service other than traditional proselytism. It would seem feasible for the Church to expand to other missions the non-proselytizing opportunities already available in a few missions along Utah's Wasatch Front.

A fifth improvement would be to expand Church social services for early returned missionaries and their families and to make the availability of these services more generally known to local leaders and the membership at large. Given the apparent inconsistency with which stake presidents and bishops help early returned missionaries resume a conventional ward life, a methodology for dealing with them should be a standard part of the orientation of a stake president or bishop. There is some evidence that the Church is headed in this direction, unfortunately at a very slow pace.

Given the tardiness with which changes of policy and attitude occur among Latter-day Saints, perhaps the most productive endeavor for those seeking reform in the present matter is simply to publicize the problems through discussing them, as my colleagues on the recent Sunstone panel did, and as the mothers who subscribe to the early released missionaries e-group are doing on an ongoing basis. 

## NOTES

1. The panel included, besides myself, Kathy Tyner, writer of children's stories and essays; Christopher Bigelow, marketing copywriter and editor of *Irreantum*, magazine of the Association for Mormon Letters; Gae Lyn Henderson, instructor of English at Salt Lake Community College; Thom Duncan, playwright and theatre entrepreneur; and Louis Moench, psychiatrist.

2. This group may be accessed at <ldsearlyrelease@ourldsfamily.com> or at <<http://emailgroups.ourldsfamily.com>>.

3. M. Russell Ballard, "The Greatest Generation of Missionaries," *Ensign* (Nov. 2002): 46–48.