

## “Knocking on People’s Computers:” Missionary work in the Digital Age

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### Introduction

The missionary purpose of bringing souls unto Christ will never change, but the methods of sharing it will. Over 50 years ago, President Harold B. Lee taught that “the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ are divine. Nobody changes the principles and [doctrine] of the Church except the Lord by revelation. *But methods change as the inspired direction comes to those who preside at a given time.*”<sup>1</sup> In a recent *Church News* podcast, Elder Brent H. Nielson, General Authority Seventy and recent executive director of the Missionary Department, reminded us that “no matter the method we use to do missionary work—whether it’s a smartphone, whether it’s finding someone on a bus or finding someone on the street—our purpose never changes. we invite others to come unto Christ. that’s [our] purpose ... and it doesn’t change because [we] have a smartphone. Our purpose is the same.”<sup>2</sup>

Whenever the Lord and his prophets, seers, and revelators provide inspired direction on new methods for doing missionary work, it is up to the parents and gospel instructors to teach these methods to their youth. Two groups of teachers in the Church are especially invited to do more to teach these inspired and updated methods of doing missionary work to the youth: parents and seminary or institute teachers. As for the parents, Elder David A. Bednar said, “The ultimate

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<sup>1</sup> Harold B. Lee, “God’s Kingdom—a Kingdom of Order,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1971, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Elder Brent H. Nielson (2022) *Church News Podcast Episode 75: Elder Brent H. Nielson on the expansion of missionary work in a digital age*. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/podcast/2022-03-22/church-news-podcast-episode-75-elder-brent-h-nielson-expansion-of-missionary-work-in-a-digital-age-247198>

missionary training center is in our homes.”<sup>3</sup> and Sister Julie B. Beck stated, “...if mothers [and fathers] considered their homes as a pre-missionary training center ... the doctrines [and methods] taught in the MTC would be a review and not a revelation. That is influence; that is power.”<sup>4</sup> To seminary and institute teachers, President M. Russell Ballard lovingly suggested, “Yes, [seminary and institute teachers] could do better...to prepare missionaries better.”<sup>5</sup>

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Traditionally, missionary work was accomplished by tracting, or knocking on people’s doors. In 1999, President Gordon B. Hinckley, speaking at a Churchwide satellite broadcast directed to members and full-time missionaries, said, “So many of us look upon missionary work as simply tracting. Everyone who is familiar with this work knows there is a better way.”<sup>6</sup> In further support of this need to update missionary methods, President Dallin H. Oaks said at the mission leaders seminar in 2017 that

the most important thing I can say to you by way of introduction is that we are in an unusual and extremely important transition in our missionary work in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We now have significant advancements in the technology available to accelerate our work, but we haven’t yet learned to use them effectively. These technological advances are beginning to be used in the work of the Lord, and we are *overdue* [emphasis added] in finding ways this can be done to advance the effectiveness of our missionary work.<sup>7</sup>

Just three years after President Oaks' instruction to use technology to update missionary methods, and with the world battling a pandemic, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf mused at the 2020 mission leaders seminar that “the recent pandemic may have been a ‘divine reset.’” He then underscored the need to change missionary approaches not just because of the pandemic but also because of the “challenges of gated communities, secured apartment buildings and shifting feelings about home privacy and on-street approaches.” He then concluded by inviting “mission leaders to embrace new possibilities and promote the use of approved, appropriate technology” while warning against “the temptation of going back to the ‘old ways,’ [when public restrictions

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<sup>3</sup> Bednar, David A. (2019). “Prepared to obtain every needful thing,” Ensign, May 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Julie B. Beck (2007). “Mothers Who Know,” Ensign November, 2007

<sup>5</sup> M. Russell Ballard, Chad H. Webb, and Paul V Johnson, “1.3.3 Preparing the Youth for Their Missions,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2013-02-1790-133-preparing-the-youth-for-their-missions?lang=eng>.

We Have Not Come This Far to Only Come This Far. Seminary and Institute Annual Training Broadcast. Accessed on March 12, 2022 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/auxiliary-training/2020/06/11webb?lang=eng>

<sup>6</sup> Hinckley, Gordon B. (Feb 1999). Find the Lambs, Feed the Sheep. Ensign.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1999/04/find-the-lambs-feed-the-sheep?lang=eng>

<sup>7</sup> Oaks, Dallin H. cited in Nielsen, Brent F. “Using Technology” Podcast #21

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/missionary-department-podcasts/using-technology?lang=eng>

are lifted again]. . . . We need to ‘go back to the future’ — a very bright future with new and exciting opportunities that will move us forward and upward.”<sup>8</sup>

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Most recently (2022), in an interview with *The Church News*, President M. Russell Ballard reflected on how the Church pivoted to different missionary methods during the pandemic. He explained, “[Missionaries] found creative ways to share the message of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it wasn’t wise for them to be out on the streets knocking on doors, [so] they started to knock on people’s computers. They are using technology. They are using ways the Lord has provided.”<sup>9</sup>

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This article will identify some of the "creative ways" and new methods mentioned by President Ballard that missionaries used to “knock on people’s computers.” The authors acknowledge the input of other mission leaders who are colleagues with the author (Howell), who serves at the time of this writing as an ecclesiastical leader in the MTC, and those returned missionaries who served during the pandemic and were enrolled in the author’s (Howell) religion class at BYU<sup>10</sup>. Those returned missionaries in the class who responded to the informal, two-question survey represented 23 missions and shared their experiences using technology and social media during their missions, and their recommendations for what future missionaries should know about the same before they begin full-time missionary service.

### Three Approaches to Preparing Future Missionaries to “knock on computers”

Many continue to ask mission leaders and missionaries who served during the pandemic of 2020-22, what some of these “new methods,” “creative ways” and “many means” (Jacob 7:24) are that missionaries used to do missionary work. Really, how did the missionaries do it? What did President Ballard mean when he said that missionaries (and members) need to be creative and learn how to use computers to help with missionary work? And then, what is it we should teach our youth—the future missionaries—so they are better prepared to use these new, “overdue” technological approaches to missionary work?

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These conversations with recently returned mission leaders, and the informal survey distributed to recently returned missionaries, helped the authors identify three recommendations from those missionaries who just emerged from serving during the pandemic and used social media and

<sup>8</sup> Scott Taylor, “Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf at Mission Leadership Seminar: ‘Making Disciples’ and the Wise Use of Technology,” *Church News*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2020-06-29/elder-dieter-f-uchtdorf-mission-leadership-seminar-technology-disciples-president-kimball-187808>.

<sup>9</sup> (<https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2022-01-06/covid-19-pandemic-two-years-president-ballard-message-of-optimism-238887>)

<sup>10</sup> Recently returned missionaries from 23 different missions responded to these two questions in the survey: “What did using technology as a missionary allow you to do that you otherwise would NOT have been able to do?” and “What do you wish you knew about using technology BEFORE leaving on your mission?”

technology to accomplish their missionary purpose. The first recommendation is titled, “The Basics of Using Social Media,” which includes a subsection called, “Creating Content to Share with Others;” the second is “The Safeguards of Using Technology,” and the third is “The Importance of Using Church Apps.”

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## 1. The Basics of Using Social Media

Throughout the standard works and the history of the modern Church, different practices, tools, and methods were used to assist in the gathering of Israel. In these “last days” missionaries have used some of these methods: tracting, or “knocking on doors” as referenced earlier by President Ballard; standing on a collapsible soapbox<sup>11</sup> on a busy street in England and teaching the gospel to those who would listen; meeting with people in cottage meetings;<sup>12</sup> using film projectors;<sup>13</sup> using flannel and flip charts;<sup>14</sup> memorizing scripts;<sup>15</sup> and most recently utilizing the missionary guide, *Preach My Gospel*. While some of these methods are still used, others are being replaced by newer methods introduced through modern revelation and innovation. The recent introduction of social media and technology is the latest of tools “reserved for the youth of this generation to gather in Israel in these final days.”<sup>16</sup> Youth of all ages are invited, even *encouraged*, to begin early to familiarize themselves with their generation’s gathering tools (of technology and social media) and learn how to use them—not just as a means to gather virtually with friends and family—but to also gather in scattered Israel, which is “the most important thing taking place on the earth today.”<sup>17</sup>

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Since technology and smartphones are now used by missionaries in all missions,<sup>18</sup> future missionaries will benefit from learning how to create and maintain a Christ-centered social

<sup>11</sup> Kerr, W. Rolfe, “Soapbox Convert” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2004/06/soapbox-convert?lang=eng>

<sup>12</sup> Sheridan R. Sheffield, R. Scott Lloyd, and Mike Cannon. “Some Things Uniquely LDS,” *Church News*, January 25, 1992, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/1992-01-25/some-things-uniquely-lds-145415>.

<sup>13</sup> Sandau, Jannalee, (December 31, 2018), You Know You Were a Latter-day Saint in the '80s and '90s If . . . Accessed on March 22, 2022 <https://www.ldsliving.com/you-know-you-were-a-latter-day-saint-in-the-80s-and-90s-if/s/89824>

<sup>14</sup> Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, Deseret Book Company, pp. 567–68.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis A. Wright and Janine Gallagher Doot, “Missionary Materials and Methods: A Preliminary Study,” in *Go Ye into All the World: The Growth & Development of Mormon Missionary Work*, ed. Reid L. Nielson and Fred E. Woods (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 91–116. Accessed on March 22, 2022 at [https://rsc.byu.edu/go-ye-all-world/missionary-materials-methods#\\_edn69](https://rsc.byu.edu/go-ye-all-world/missionary-materials-methods#_edn69)

<sup>16</sup> Bednar, David A., accessed on March 16, 2022 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2014-01-105-your-fingers-have-been-trained?lang=eng>

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, Russell M., accessed on March 16, 2022 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2018/06/hope-of-israel?lang=eng>

<sup>18</sup> During a special broadcast, President Nelson asks California members to seek truth, make and keep covenants, gather Israel accessed on March 11, 2022 <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2022-02-27/president-nelson-california-devotional-invitations-seek-truth-make-and-keep-covenants-gather-israel-244077>

media presence and profile to share meaningful messages with others even *before* beginning their full-time service. One recently returned missionary said, “I would encourage [the youth] to . . . make their accounts look 'normal.' I didn't have any social media before and it would have been helpful to already have accounts that made me look like a real, relatable person.” Another said, “Honestly, just learning how to feel comfortable talking to random people over texting, posts, [and] video calls and making them feel important. . . [to] be real, [and] connect with people,” would have been valuable skills to have learned earlier.

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Once the youth of the Church create their own social media accounts they may follow the apostles and other Church leaders who now post on their Facebook or Instagram “public figure” accounts monthly. Another missionary said, “. . . If they [youth] could learn how to . . . follow and turn on notifications for the Church and its general authorities, . . . they would be much more prepared to use their own social media in the gathering of the Kingdom.” As they “follow the prophet” using social media they will receive more inspired and prophetic news feeds to their account since the algorithm used by the social media company to determine what shows up next on a user’s feed is informed by one’s past searches and likes. A recently returned missionary recommended that youth “unfollow unnecessary pages and friends . . . and not create another account” when they become a full-time missionary. If future missionaries follow the apostles and prophets “in their youth,” including on social media, they will be better prepared to become their virtual companions<sup>19</sup> when they formally join them in their apostolic responsibility of taking the gospel to “all nations” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The first step to creating a social media account is to become familiar with the various platforms—especially Facebook, which continues to be the most used of all social media applications. In a recent study (January 2022), the most popular social media platforms worldwide, listed in descending order by number of subscribers in billions, are Facebook (~3 billion), YouTube (~2.6 billion), WhatsApp (~2 billion), and Instagram (~1.5 billion), followed by WeChat, TikTok, Facebook Messenger, etc.<sup>20</sup> It is almost guaranteed that all future missionaries, upon arrival to their field of labor, will be expected to create a Facebook account to be used in their service if they have not already done so.

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A colleague in the Missionary Department who helps train missions and missionaries in the use of social media shared this observation about using Facebook:

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<sup>19</sup> Elder D. Todd Christofferson, a current apostle, “. . . says to them frequently, we see the full-time missionaries as our companions.” See Jason Swensen, “Inside the Quorum of the Twelve: The Divine Calling Apostles Share with Missionaries,” *Church News*, July 13, 2018. Inside the Quorum of the Twelve: The Divine Calling Apostles Share with Missionaries <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/inside-the-quorum-of-the-twelve-the-divine-calling-apostles-share-with-missionaries?lang=eng>.

<sup>20</sup> Statista Research Department, (March 8, 2022). Global social networks ranked by number of users 2022, Accessed on March 16, 2022 at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

It is important that youth overcome the preconceived notion that Facebook is only for elderly people and get a headstart on knowing how to effectively use it. Also, it is important to note that Facebook is outperforming all other social platforms when it comes to important key indicators. While it may be easier to gain a following or earn a lot of likes on other platforms, such as Instagram or Tiktok, these likes and views are not yet translating as readily into lessons, church attendance, and baptisms.<sup>21</sup>

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Youth are also encouraged to follow their local mission and stake-maintained social media pages (usually on Facebook)—this way they may learn more about how the local missionaries are using social media to gather scattered Israel in their own community.

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The following section will cover more about how future missionaries can apply safeguard principles in their daily technology use. However, it is important to emphasize to the youth that whatever content they interact with now will leave a virtual footprint for others to see in the future, including the social media companies, that also informs what all will see in the future.

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This shadow continues to follow users, even into their full-time missionary service. It is recommended that future missionaries actively *like, save, send, repost,* and *spend time* looking at Church-related content long before they begin full-time missionary service. If they do this, their feeds will be filled with more Church-related content, rather than that of the world. This exact process of what social media algorithms do in determining what to send users is described in scriptural language (D&C 50:23-25): “And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness. That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day. And again, verily I say unto you, and I say it that you may know the truth, that you may *chase darkness from among you...*”

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Once the social media account is created and the feed filled with uplifting and faith-inspiring content, including that from the Church’s Apostles and General Authorities and Officers, the challenge of completing one’s social media profile remains. A social media profile is really a collection of one’s favorite memories and best moments. In short, it acts as an individual’s personal highlight reel to the world and to future inquirers who want to learn more about the missionary and the Church they represent. The profile should include meaningful and appropriate pictures of family, friends, Church leaders, and other personal interests so that others who are trying to find out more about the missionary will quickly discern how normal, happy, and exemplary this missionary, and the Church and message which this missionary represents, really are.

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Larsen, Messenger direct message to author, January 20, 2022.

For members and future missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, social media profiles should be seen as a means of doing missionary work, as well as staying connected with family and friends. Using social media to share the gospel should not be superficial, forced, or unnatural, and it certainly does not require a nametag. Sister Sharon Eubank of the General Relief Society Presidency said, “Use your voice and your power to articulate what you know and feel—on social media...”<sup>60</sup> The Church has even created a website for members, with ideas on how to use social media to “love, share, and invite” their friends to “come and see, come and help, and come and belong.” This helpful website is found at [www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share](http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share). If youth live and embrace the gospel standards found in the “For Strength of Youth,” then their social media profile will showcase the light of Christ in a “natural and normal way” through the pictures, videos, stories, and captions posted on their social media account.

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Elder Bednar gave the following suggestions for using social media as a “light to the world.” He said,

We should not exaggerate, embellish, or pretend to be someone, or something we are not. Our content should be trustworthy and constructive. Our messages should seek to edify and uplift, rather than to argue, debate, condemn, or belittle. Be courageous and bold, but not overbearing, in sustaining and defending our beliefs, and avoid contention. As disciples, our purpose should be to use social media channels as a means of projecting the light and truth of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup>

The youth of this Church have the power to truly be a beacon of light to the world using their gifts and talents brought with them from the premortal world and further developed in their youth. Elder Bednar said, “young people are so familiar with a wide range of information and communication technologies. [Their] fingers have been trained to text and tweet to accelerate and advance the work of the Lord—not just to communicate quickly with [their] friends. The skills and aptitude evident among many young people today are a preparation to contribute to the work of salvation.”<sup>23</sup> What an opportunity it is for educators of youth to encourage and support their youth in using social media to “accelerate and advance the work of the Lord!” Our youth need not wait until they are called to serve as a full-time missionary, but may start today to “let [their] light [found in social media accounts] so shine before this people, that they [all] may see [their] good works and glorify [their] Father who is in heaven” (3 Nephi 12:16). And as they do so, they and their social media account will be well prepared for full-time missionary service.

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<sup>22</sup> David A. Bednar, “Apostle Offers Counsel about Social Media,” *Ensign*, January 2015.

<sup>23</sup> David A. Bednar, “The Hearts of the Children Shall Turn,” *Ensign*, November 2011.

## Creating Content to Share with Others

In an address given by Elder Bednar in August 2014, he exhorted all “to sweep the earth with messages filled with righteousness and truth— messages that are authentic, edifying, and praiseworthy—and literally to sweep the earth as with a flood.” This invitation emphasizes just how important it is that the youth of this Church know how to create and share genuine and uplifting content. This is a skill that is needed and will be used beyond the 18 months or two years of full-time missionary service, and one that should also be developed by members of the Church.

Missionaries, future and current, should be committed to creating an account filled with pictures, videos, and captions that reflect who they are as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is accomplished as they learn how to share gospel principles in "personal story" form. Some of the most touching and faith-building stories told by General Authorities, local leaders, seminary teachers, youth conference speakers, etc., are personal stories that emphasize the impact of a gospel principle in their life. Youth, including future and full-time missionaries, are encouraged to do the same as they consider what to post on social media.

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In this same address, Elder Bednar advised, “We need not become social media experts or fanatics. And we do not need to spend inordinate amounts of time creating and disseminating elaborate messages.” As many youth already know, creating content is easy. And it only becomes easier when supported with the many free apps and resources readily available to youth and full-time missionaries as they create and edit content. These free apps—Canva<sup>24</sup>, Adobe Lightroom<sup>25</sup>, Pexels<sup>26</sup>, and Snapseed<sup>27</sup>—are among those most used by missionaries today as they create quality and inspiring content. As future missionaries keep in mind that their content should really represent their best self, they should also learn how to produce and edit content pleasing to the eye and acceptable to the social media community. Similar to how missionaries are expected to maintain a higher dress and grooming standard, as representatives of the Lord and his apostles, their social media profiles are also held to this same high standard. In the “Dress and Grooming Standards” section of the Missionary Standards the following statement is made: “As you are an authorized representative of Jesus Christ and His restored Church, your appearance [social media profile] is often the first message others receive. It should be consistent with the sacred message you are called to share. Throughout your mission, make sure that your appearance [social media profile] and behavior help others focus on that message.”<sup>28</sup>

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People want to know who we really are. They are accustomed to going online to learn more about their doctor, dentist, or pastor (for another Church), and to evaluate products they are

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.canva.com/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.adobe.com/products/photoshop-lightroom.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.pexels.com/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://snapseed.online/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/callings/missionary/dress-and-appearance?lang=eng>



shopping for on Amazon.com and other commercial sites. The Church has a website called, *Share Online*<sup>29</sup>, with many ideas and suggestions for creating meaningful social media content. Introducing this information to future missionaries, in your home, at mutual, in seminary or institute, or at a youth or FSY conference, etc. would be well received and a great preparation for future missionary service. This advice from the section, “Uplifting Content,” is one example of the helpful information available: “You can help others feel God’s love by sharing about what you are grateful for, people you love, positive experiences and media that inspires you.”

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As people consider a visit from the missionaries, some will explore the missionaries’ social media profile to determine if they are willing to trust them to share more about the Church. They also want to know more about these young missionaries and their families, personal interests and hobbies, pets (if any), and any other evidences or “fruits” of the gospel in the life of the missionary, and their family and friends. Truly the missionaries’ pictures, videos, stories, and profile are some of the “fruits” by which the Lord’s Church and his representatives will be known (Matt. 7:16-20).

## 2. Teach the Safeguards for Using Technology<sup>30</sup>

At a recent (2022), broadcast to members of the Church in California, President Nelson restated that “our youth need to learn to be masters of technology, and not become slaves to it.”<sup>31</sup> Also attending this broadcast was Elder Brent H. Nielson of the Presidency of the Seventy, who recently served as the executive director of the Missionary Department. He said that during the pandemic, the Church “. . . continued to learn and to grow and to figure out ways that our missionaries could find, teach and baptize using the internet while also becoming masters of technology.”<sup>32</sup> One returned missionary who responded to the survey counseled future missionaries, “to allow their mission to change how they use technology for the rest of their life.”

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Just four years before the pandemic began, while speaking at the annual mission leaders seminar (2016), Elder Bednar helped mitigate the fears of new mission leaders about the recent introduction of smartphones and other technologies into missions. The reporter for the *Church News* said that Elder Bednar helped place this development into perspective by telling the mission leaders that “fears about the pitfalls and problems of cars, telephones, ballpoint pens, and perhaps copy machines were voiced by some mission presidents and their companions as

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share/share-light-through-social-media?lang=eng>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/safeguards-for-using-technology/contents?lang=eng>

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Jane Weaver, “During Special Broadcast, President Nelson Asks California Members to Seek Truth, Make and Keep Covenants, Gather Israel,” *Church News*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2022-02-27/president-nelson-california-devotional-invitations-seek-truth-make-and-keep-covenants-gather-israel-244077>.

<sup>32</sup> During special broadcast, President Nelson asks California members to seek truth, make and keep covenants, gather Israel <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2022-02-27/president-nelson-california-devotional-invitations-seek-truth-make-and-keep-covenants-gather-israel-244077>

these innovations were incorporated into missionary work. Some abuses always will occur, but we should not allow a fear of mistakes to hold us back from receiving the great blessings these tools can provide.”<sup>33</sup>

It was in this setting that Elder Bednar introduced the *Safeguards for Using Technology* booklet.<sup>34</sup> In the *Church News* article reporting on this talk, a photo was shared of Elder Bednar holding this new manual for all to see. He then “told the new leaders that the experience of many missionaries with technology before their missions was unstructured, compulsive, and time consuming.” He then proceeded to say, “We have a responsibility to help them learn to use these digital tools appropriately now and for the rest of their lives.”

As soon as future missionaries create their social media accounts, it is important they learn how to properly use them. One returned missionary said that future missionaries need to “control it [social media usage], not the other way around.” Elder Bednar stresses the importance of missionaries—future and current—learning how to responsibly use social media. He said, “We have a responsibility to help them learn to use these digital tools appropriately now and for the rest of their lives.”<sup>35</sup>

It is true that there can be so much negativity on the Internet; however, as Elder Uchtdorf said, “The Internet can be a friend to us when we use it correctly.” It was Elder David F. Evans who said in the *Safeguards for Using Technology* booklet, “The only really effective filter for lifelong technology use is the individual heart and mind of the individual young person.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sarah Jane Weaver, “Please Do Not Fear technology,” Elder David A. Bednar Says at 2016 Seminar for New Mission Presidents,” *Church News*, June 30, 2016, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/2016-06-30/please-do-not-fear-technology-elder-david-a-bednar-says-at-2016-seminar-for-new-mission-presidents-25549>.

<sup>34</sup> This booklet is available in the Gospel Library app by going to the folder, “Handbooks and Callings” and then to the “Mission Callings” folder where the “Safeguards for Using Technology” is situated.

<sup>35</sup> Richman, Larry. March 21, 2018. Elder David A. Bednar. Apply Key Messages from “Safeguards for Using Technology” Booklet in Your Home. Accessed on March 23, 2022 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/apply-key-messages-from-safeguards-for-using-technology-booklet-in-your-home?lang=eng>

<sup>36</sup> There are many different filters and methods to keep the content clean and appropriate, including a multitude of parental controls that can be activated on the various profiles and devices themselves. There are also ways to work the algorithms of the various social media apps to one’s advantage. Knowing and understanding that the Internet itself is not the enemy, but how one chooses to use it, can encourage parents and youth alike.

The goal of each social media app is to keep the user coming back, and one of the primary ways this is accomplished is by learning the preferences of the user and displaying content that is likely to gain more of his or her time and attention. Knowing this feature, youth should be conscious and careful regarding the content that they give their time and attention to. For example, if a user likes, follows, or even spends time looking at accounts that publish Church-related content, they will start likely seeing even more faith-promoting posts filling their feeds. On the contrary, if the user interacts with content that is crude or offensive, then their feed will be met with more content that fits this same criteria.

Some of our missionaries who struggled with technology-related addictions [or from complete technology avoidance altogether at either their parents or their own insistence] were surprised when we encouraged them “[to] not fear technology. [To] not take counsel from [their] fears. [To] embrace these inspired tools.”<sup>37</sup> And for the “power” users of technology, they were taught that it was time to “put away childish things”<sup>38</sup> and use social media and technology more effectively. They were also assured that by following the safeguards, with the help of their ever present and watchful companion (and the additional protections—filters<sup>39</sup>—placed on their phones by the Missionary Department) that they would gain the strength to overcome fears and addictions and thereby prepare themselves for more effective use of these tools as missionaries, and ultimately as returned missionaries.

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Some missionaries are so changed (and protected) by following the Church’s “Safeguards for Using Technology” while serving as missionaries that they determine to use the safeguards when they return home. One missionary said he plans to teach the safeguards to, and use them with, his younger brother; another missionary stated that he was planning to continue following the safeguards with his roommate (a former missionary companion) at college. This returned missionary then summed it up with this advice to future missionaries: “Discipline yourself! Don’t use it just because you’re bored.” ... “Use it with a purpose.” ... “[Learn] how to properly manage your time while on your phone.”

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What are the safeguards that missionaries and our youth—the future missionaries—are encouraged to adopt? The four technology safeguards are: (1) Be in tune with spiritual promptings; (2) Be focused on your missionary purpose (or as a young future missionary, have a meaningful purpose for getting on to your device), (3) Be disciplined, and (4) Be one. This booklet also includes a section called “What Should I Do If I’m Feeling Vulnerable or Susceptible?” The three suggestions are (1) Be aware and acknowledge, (2) Choose to act, and (3) Learn and improve.<sup>30</sup>

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At the 2019 Mission Leaders Seminar, Sister Bonnie Cordon, General Young Women’s President and a member of the Missionary Executive Council, told the mission leaders while speaking about the Technology Safeguards that she was “fully committed” to helping young women understand and follow similar principles so they are better prepared to use technology in the future. At this same seminar, Elder Bednar said that we must teach missionaries to “develop

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<sup>37</sup> Weaver, Sarah Jane. Elder Bednar Tells 2016 Mission Presidents Not to Fear Technology. Accessed on March 23, 2022 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/elder-bednar-tells-2016-mission-presidents-not-to-fear-technology?lang=eng>

<sup>38</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11

<sup>39</sup> At the time of this writing the Missionary Department employs the use of an IBM tool called, “MaaS 360 Inventory” on all smartphones used by missionaries to help filter content. See <https://www.ibm.com/docs/en/maas360?topic=devices-managing-in-maas360-device-inventory> for more information.

safe and appropriate lifelong technology habits that will enable them to chase darkness away.”<sup>40</sup>  
The teachers of our youth are invited to help them become “masters” of technology so they may chase darkness away not only on their missions but for the rest of their life.<sup>41</sup>

The more that religious educators, parents, and youth familiarize themselves with these safeguards and start teaching them, the more protected, and better prepared, future missionaries will be to serve.

### 3. Use Church Apps and Tools

In May of 1829 the prophet Joseph received a revelation directed to his brother Hyrum that continues to speak to missionaries of all ages: “first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men.” For missionaries of today, and the future, “obtain[ing] my word” should include becoming familiar with the means by which the Church spreads the “good word.” In today’s technological world, dissemination of information (the word) is done more and more using “applications,” or “apps”<sup>42</sup> for short.

A recent study entitled *25 Mobile App Statistics To Know In 2022*<sup>43</sup>, helps underscore the importance of mobile apps in today’s world, and especially for missionaries. Some of the highlights of this study include the following:

- “The average person spent 4.8 hours a day on their mobile phone last year [2020]—up 30% from 2019.” And “nearly 90% of mobile internet time is spent in apps.” This means most people are spending about five hours a day on their phone using mobile apps like social media, news, entertainment, etc.
- There are almost 8 million apps available today across the Android and Apple platforms and over 100,000 new apps are added to these app stores each month. “Most users have more than 80 apps installed on their phones. ... [And] 92% to 96% of apps are free.”
- “Smartphone users between the ages of 18 and 24 are the heaviest mobile app users.”

<sup>40</sup>Scott Taylor, “Why MTC Presidents, Managers are Off to ‘A Good Start’ after the 2019 MTC Leadership Seminar,” *Church News*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2019-01-24/why-mtc-presidents-managers-are-off-to-a-good-start-after-the-2019-mtc-leadership-seminar-5444>.

<sup>41</sup> At a recent broadcast the current executive director of the Missionary Department, Elder Marcus Nash, “Now what if a missionary learns this [the safeguards] and goes home with that? Then you can see the protection and strength that will thrive, and they’ll continue to wield as an instrument to help people.”

<sup>42</sup> “An app, which is short for “application,” is a type of software that can be installed and run on a computer, tablet, smartphone or other electronic devices. An app most frequently refers to a mobile application or a piece of software that is installed and used on a computer. Most apps have a specific and narrow function.” Accessed on March 24, 2022 at <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/what-is-an-app>

<sup>43</sup><https://mindsea.com/app-stats/>

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- “Not only are social apps the most frequently downloaded, but they are also where smartphone users are spending the biggest chunk of their time (50% of total usage time, to be exact). In second place are video and entertainment apps.”

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It was Elder Dallin H. Oaks, referencing the writings of Elder Clayton Christensen (a former Area Seventy who wrote the book *Everyday Missionaries*), who said that “people learn when they’re ready to learn, not when we’re ready to teach them.” He then went on to say,

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What we are interested in, like the important additional doctrinal teachings in the restored Church, usually isn’t what others are interested in. Others typically want the results of the doctrine, not the doctrine. ... Therefore, we must carefully and prayerfully seek discernment on how to inquire about others’ interest to learn more. This will depend on various things, such as another person’s current circumstances and our relationship with him or her.<sup>44</sup>

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This counsel from Elder Oaks reminds us of the Lord’s declarative: “by their fruits ye shall know them.”<sup>45</sup>

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The Church is aware of this worldwide trend to shift access of information and services to mobile apps and is now developing its own smartphone apps for members, missionaries, and friends of the Church.<sup>46</sup> Teaching the youth about the following apps helps prepare them to “knock on computer doors” as full-time missionaries and become effective member missionaries upon their return. One returned missionary said, “The upcoming generation of Saints will relate far better to technological resources. ... I STRONGLY recommend missionaries stay familiar with them [church apps].” Another missionary shared, “I would encourage young missionaries to employ these apps as part of their ministry.”

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A description of [Church apps selected by the authors of this article](#) are listed below in alphabetical order:

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<sup>44</sup> Oaks, Dallin H. (2016) [https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/10/sharing-the-restored-gospel?lang=eng&adobe\\_mc\\_ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.churchofjesuschrist.org%2Fstudy%2Fgeneral-conference%2F2016%2F10%2Fsharing-the-restored-gospel%3Flang%3Deng&adobe\\_mc\\_sdId=SDID%3D164864937C6022BB-24A19D9A1ADD1F4A%7CMCORGID%3D66C5485451E56AAE0A490D45%2540AdobeOrg%7CTS%3D1648151139](https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/10/sharing-the-restored-gospel?lang=eng&adobe_mc_ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.churchofjesuschrist.org%2Fstudy%2Fgeneral-conference%2F2016%2F10%2Fsharing-the-restored-gospel%3Flang%3Deng&adobe_mc_sdId=SDID%3D164864937C6022BB-24A19D9A1ADD1F4A%7CMCORGID%3D66C5485451E56AAE0A490D45%2540AdobeOrg%7CTS%3D1648151139)

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 7:20

<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/mobile-applications?lang=eng> and <https://www.thechurchnews.com/living-faith/2021-08-16/book-of-mormon-app-gospel-library-familysearch-214465>

*Book of Mormon App.* The missionaries found more success sharing the Book of Mormon app with people they met during the pandemic than they did a hard copy of the scripture, and what was nice was that this copy of the *Book of Mormon* went wherever the smartphone of the person went. The audio feature of this app was especially appealing to busy people and to the one out of five people in the United States who struggle to read and write (literacy rate in the US as of 2022 is 79 percent).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, just the offering of a free book download by the missionaries “ignited the righteous curiosity”<sup>48</sup> of many people.

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*Church Pamphlets App.* This app was a tremendous blessing and asset to the missionaries and the people they were teaching during the pandemic. Most of the lessons introduced in chapter three of PMG are featured on this app, but with professional-looking images and videos. One missionary said, “The Pamphlets app proved to be a great help on my mission. It was an app I didn't even know about until partway through my mission, but it was so helpful while teaching lessons online and in person. The pictures and videos provided made for very effective and spirit-filled lessons.” It was surprising how few of the missionaries even knew this Church app existed, and at how much it blessed their ministry once they started using it and inviting those they were teaching to also download the free app. In the opinion and experience of these authors, this is one of the greatest tools in the technology toolbox of missionaries today.

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*Church News App.* This app was recently approved for missionary use during the pandemic. It enabled full-time missionaries to keep current with Church events, and particularly the work of the apostles whom they represent as full-time missionaries. It was important for these missionaries to stay current with what the Church was doing, especially when those they were teaching had questions about something they heard in the news concerning the Church. Missionaries told the author how much they enjoyed reading the *Church News*, any many for the first time, and how much they were strengthened by inspiring stories and experiences. It also helps prepare them for when they return home from their mission to stay current with news from the apostles and other church leaders.

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<sup>47</sup>A recent study by ThinkImpact revealed in 2022 that 21 percent of adults in the United States are considered illiterate. See “Literacy Statistics,” ThinkImpact, <https://www.thinkimpact.com/literacy-statistics/#:~:text=The%20literacy%20rate%20for%20adults%20across%20the%20U.S.%20averages%2088%25>.

<sup>48</sup> Holland, Jeffery R. Read the rededicatory prayer offered by Elder Holland for the Memphis temple. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/temples/2019-05-07/elder-holland-memphis-temple-rededicatory-prayer-154600>

*Doctrinal Mastery App.*<sup>49</sup> This app was most helpful to missionaries as part of their gospel study. It helped them review and memorize scriptures of their choosing (usually from *Preach My Gospel*) and even create virtual flashcards of scriptures they desired to memorize. Most missionaries are unaware of this app and were delighted to discover it and start using it.

*Family Tree and Memories App.*<sup>50</sup> Of increasing interest in the world are genealogy and genealogy-related websites and apps. At a recent MTC devotional,<sup>51</sup> Elder Kevin S. Hamilton, a General Authority Seventy and executive director of FamilySearch, encouraged the missionaries in the MTC to use this app more throughout their missions and even showed a video of Elder Bednar using it to contact 12 people on the streets of England. (Elder Bednar asked random people they met on the streets about their family and then used the “Find a Person” feature in the FamilySearch app to look up one of their deceased relatives using what limited information the person remembered.) Any conversation about the free FamilySearch apps goes well, and most times the new friend will download the app immediately.

One recently returned missionary who used the app frequently said, “The FamilySearch [app] helped connect people with their ancestors. . . . The app fosters people’s interest in their families: it leads to a normal and natural conversation concerning the Lord’s doctrine of eternal families.” Missionaries will have the opportunity to teach many members and youth how to use this app while serving, so it is helpful for future missionaries to spend some time with the app, preferably before they begin their full-time service.

*Gospel Media App.*<sup>52</sup> This app is invaluable to all Church members, including future and full-time missionaries. This app includes copyright-free Church photos, graphics, songs, and videos to use in personal study and in teaching others. Those who use it can even make presentations within the app itself using any combination of multimedia included in the app. Most returned missionaries will say this app was most helpful, and the one they most used while preparing lessons and creating content to use on social media.

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/si/seminary/new-doctrinal-mastery-app?lang=eng>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/familysearch-tree-mobile-app-enriches-lives-and-makes-family-history-work-easier?lang=eng> and for a comparison of the two related apps see <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/what-is-the-difference-between-the-family-tree-app-and-memories-apps>

<sup>51</sup> The author was in attendance at this March 29, 2022 MTC devotional by Elder Kevin Hamilton

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/gospel-media-app?lang=eng>

*JustServe App.* This app was designed by the Church for members and nonmembers alike. In many missions this app is a source for missionaries in finding local service opportunities in the communities to which they are assigned, under the direction of their mission leaders and Area Presidency. This app is also used by young men and women classes and seminary or institute programs to help find local service opportunities. Also, some missionaries use the app to introduce people they are teaching to service opportunities even if they are not interested in learning more about the doctrines of the Church at the time. The Church published, “People naturally want to help others; often, they just need an invitation! Every community is in need of volunteers, and every act of service—both big and small—can bless the lives of those around you.”<sup>53</sup> The teachings of King Benjamin about “when we are in the serve of our fellow man we are in the service of our God” (Mosiah 2:17) and the example of the great missionary Ammon in the *Book of Mormon* serving the King of the Lamanities by tending his horses (Alma 17) are reminders of the importance of missionaries performing service for others as part of their ministry.

*Member Tools App.*<sup>54</sup> It would help if each future missionary was comfortable using the Member Tools app, especially under the missionary section, which allows members to submit missionary referrals. One missionary said, “I wish I had known more about the uses of Member Tools before I left on my mission, especially the referral tool. This is such an easy way to get in contact with missionaries and ask them to reach out to your friends in a normal and natural way.” Many members just don’t know how to send a referral and this new feature is something missionaries can teach members to do and in turn receive more and more referrals from members. Those missionaries who shared this feature with up to three member families usually received at least one referral. The missionaries also learned how to submit names to the temple prayer roll at times of need for themselves, family members, friends, and even those they were teaching using this feature under Temples.

*TabChoir App.* Music is known as the “universal language of mankind”<sup>55</sup> and The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square remains one of the best ambassadors and missionaries for the Church. A former president of the United States referred to the choir as “America’s Choir.” Others consider the choir “an American icon, a symbol of freedom, a holiday tradition, [and] the greatest choir in the world.”<sup>56</sup>

As missionaries meet with people who love music, many already know about the choir and are excited to learn from the missionaries that there is a mobile app featuring music from the choir, past episodes of Music and The Spoken Word, weekly organ concerts, special Choir performances videos (e.g., Easter, Christmas, and Pioneer), etc.<sup>57</sup> The missionaries may also enjoy listening to the Choir’s music and videos at appropriate times during their mission, if approved by their mission leaders.

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## Conclusion

As one mission leader said while serving during the pandemic, “The work continues — differently, but better.”<sup>60</sup> The teaching of future missionaries by parents, seminary, and institute teachers must also be different, but better. Elder Uchtdorf taught, “We learned that moving back to old ways is not enough. We learned that we need to add more effective ways and thereby embrace and adapt to the Lord’s way. That we need to move ‘Back to the Future.’”<sup>61</sup> Some of the “more effective ways” recently added include using and creating content for social media, adopting technology safeguards, and sharing the fruits of the gospel with the help of Church-created mobile apps.

Some of the missionaries in the informal survey added their own testimony to the need for future missionaries to adopt, and adapt to, new missionary methods. One recently returned missionary reported that “[technology] allowed [him and his companion], to build a relationship with people through social media that would have been [otherwise] difficult to reach.” Another said that “[technology] allowed [him and his companion] to reach people” in the more remote parts of their large area. One more stated that technology and social media “allowed [him and his companion], to TEACH people whose schedules were incredibly busy! By opening up lesson options to Zoom calls, personalized videos, and teaching short principles over messages, those who were once difficult to get ahold of were now thriving in the gospel because of technology.”

Elder Uchtdorf at General Conference in October 2020 said, “In the past, we might have been so tied to traditional approaches that it took a pandemic to open our eyes. ... Of necessity, we are now learning how to use a variety of methods, including technology, to invite people—in normal

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share/invite-a-friend-to-come-and-help?lang=eng>

<sup>54</sup> Some other features of this app are discussed in this article:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/help/support/about-member-tools-application?lang=eng& r=1>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.today.com/tmrw/experts-prove-music-universal-language-spiritual-healing-t202182>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.thetabernaclechoir.org/watch-listen/mobile-app.html>

<sup>57</sup> “Members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir – the choir, orchestra and staff – are set apart as missionaries,” Brother Christensen said. “They are one of the greatest tools that Father in Heaven has right now to open doors and build the kingdom.” <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/2009-07-03/a-deeper-purpose-70881>

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, Scott (May 28, 2020) ‘Survive, strive and thrive’: How missions in Europe are working — and succeeding — during the COVID-19 pandemic Accessed on March 11, 2022 at <https://www.thechurchnews.com/members/2020-05-28/covid-19-pandemic-mission-presidents-europe-italy-germany-romania-hungary-185095>

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/28uchtdorf?lang=eng>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2021-06-26/elder-uchtdorf-mission-leadership-seminar-conclusion-217725>

<sup>60</sup> Sharon Eubank (2017) Turn on Your Light. November 2017 Ensign

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/10/turn-on-your-light?lang=eng>

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and natural ways.”<sup>59</sup> And Elder Nielson reaffirmed that “what we teach is the same. So all that has changed is the method and the manner.”<sup>62</sup>

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Missionary work is not a choice between traditional or modern approaches but a melding of both, and knowing which approach to use when, and with whom. May the parents and religious educators of our youth help prepare their youth to serve faithful missions by teaching them gospel fundamentals s as well as a little more about how social media and technology will prepare them to “knock on computer doors” during this digital age.

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<sup>62</sup> Elder Brent H. Nielson (2022) Church News Podcast Episode 75: Elder Brent H. Nielson on the expansion of missionary work in a digital age. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/podcast/2022-03-22/church-news-podcast-episode-75-elder-brent-h-nielson-expansion-of-missionary-work-in-a-digital-age-247198>