

CHANGE AGENT ACTIVITY

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a worldwide religion of over 12 million members, organized in the northeast United States during the early 1800s and is currently headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. Despite its beginnings in America, as of 2000 more than 50% of the church's membership lives outside of the United States. In large part, this is due to the extensive missionary program throughout the world. Currently, there are over 50,000 Latter-Day Saint (LDS) missionaries serving voluntary two-year assignments worldwide, most of them young men between the ages of 19-21.

While each one of these missionaries could be considered an example of a change agent, I am specifically going to write about my own experience as I served as an LDS missionary assigned to the Hawaiian Islands from 1993-95. In this instance, the agency was the LDS Church and I was a bridge to the population of Hawaii, specifically those people who may be searching for more meaning in their spiritual lives. In preparation, I underwent an intensive training program at the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah for 3 weeks. Missionaries going to parts of the world where they will need to know a foreign language train in the MTC for 2 months.

According to the text, the first role of a change agent is to develop a need for change. As a missionary representing a religion, this was a tricky step because it was not our intention to make people feel like we believed that their beliefs were wrong or to condemn those who didn't share our faith. The best we could do was to find out people's problems and propose possible solutions or perspective changes according to our faith. Quite often, the adoption process would end at this point because many people were content with their faith and had no desire to look at various alternatives.

However, with those individuals who were interested in learning more about our faith and point of view, we were able to move on to the second role of a change agent: establishing a relationship of information exchange. This was something they taught us specifically how to do while training in the MTC, though they called it "building a relationship of trust." Still, it involved the exact same principles outlined in the textbook: getting to know people, sharing a bit about ourselves, and discussing things we have in common. We would begin meeting with our "clients" several times a week, teaching lessons, sharing stories, and answering questions. I would have to say that this was where the third and fourth change agent roles came in, diagnosing problems and creating an intent to change in the client. In this situation, we would try to encourage individuals to change anything in their lives that may be out of harmony with the teaching of our faith and help them to make a commitment to be baptized into the church. This, of course, is a very personal process for people, and we would never use persuasion, pressure, or coercion. Rather, we would help people to reflect on the things we teach, make them a matter of personal study and prayer, and then help them to follow through if they felt like joining our faith was the correct decision.

Once the people we were working with made a decision to join our faith through baptism, we would have to help them make that decision become a reality. We would do this by maintaining frequent contacts, addressing any concerns or frustrations that may arise, and most importantly,

introducing them to other members of the church who live in the area. After the baptism, we would move directly into the sixth change agent role by helping to stabilize the adoption and prevent discontinuance. Local church members are critical in this step because the “clients” are now part of a new community and for them to feel like they “belong”, they must have some strong interpersonal relationships with other members of the community. This also led us into the seventh and final change agent role: achieving a terminal relationship. Since missionaries get transferred from area to area every 2-5 months, the new church members would have to be able to stand on their own once the missionaries who had worked with them were gone. If this final step was not achieved, along with strong relationships with local church members, the adoption would almost surely be discontinued and the new members would fall away from the church community.

To give an example of one successful change effort I experienced while serving as an LDS missionary, I immediately think of one “client” named Kelvin. Kelvin was an African-American man born and raised in the southern United States who had been only been married a month before being deployed by the Navy to Pearl Harbor. His wife, Vanissa, had not yet arrived in the islands. Kelvin was definitely the type of person we were looking for; deeply spiritual with an enormous amount of faith, but who had some questions about religion to which he had never been able to receive satisfactory answers. He had grown up Southern Baptist; therefore, he came from a background with some very different theological positions than those we were presenting. Even so, we became very close to Kelvin very quickly. He had many questions, several of them very challenging to answer, and some on which we could only speculate. Nevertheless, we helped him begin on a path that led to his being baptized into our faith. When I eventually left the area, Kelvin had a strong circle of friends in the local church unit. He even started to become a change agent himself, eventually convincing his wife to be baptized as well once she arrived in the islands. It has been several years since I have talked to Kelvin, but the last I heard, he was still a very active member of the LDS community in Hawaii.