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Honors Thesis

MISSIONARIES AND MANIPULATION: EXPLORING VULNERABILITIES AND  
SAFEGUARDS FOR YOUNG MISSIONARIES IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF  
LATTER-DAY SAINTS

By

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for  
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Family, Home, and Social Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

MISSIONARIES AND MANIPULATION: EXPLORING VULNERABILITIES AND  
SAFEGUARDS FOR YOUNG MISSIONARIES IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF  
LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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Family, Home, and Social Sciences

Bachelor of Science in Family Life

This project aims to better understand the vulnerabilities of missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as they relate to emotional abuse stemming from companions, mission leaders, and those they teach. It compiles the current research on relationship abuse and draws connections between these issues and missionaries. Emotional abuse is defined. We review various elements of missionary life, including the age of missionaries, religious pressures, pressures inherent in missionary life, and cultural naiveté. Each of these is tied to potential weaknesses in which emotional abuse can impact the life and relationships of a missionary. Suggestions for safeguards are given, and ideas for future research are presented.

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Thank you to my husband for believing in the best of me, and to my parents for teaching me to stand up for injustice. This is a tribute to the missionaries of the world who are sacrificing sleep, family time, work, and education to help others feel God's love for them. May we learn to be better at supporting and loving you.

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More than 53,000 missionaries are currently out serving all over the world from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Missionary Program). They are ages 18-25, from all different backgrounds and countries, but share the same mission: to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world. These missionaries are fueled by a zeal and love for their God, and the sheer exuberance of youth, which enables them to serve for 18-24 months teaching, meeting, and serving people in the places they are assigned. Many must adjust to culture shocks as they settle into countries and peoples far different from their own. These missionaries often have a positive influence on the world around them—providing hundreds of thousands of hours of community service, free English classes, and more—but there is more nuance surrounding the influence that the world has on them, especially considering the challenges of living in a new country, being with another person all the time, and navigating the pressures of the missionary lifestyle.

Unfortunately, some of these challenges have contributed to missionaries, myself included, experiencing unhealthy interactions with those they work with, and this can even become abusive. President Russell M. Nelson, leader of the Church, recently addressed members about this challenge, saying: “Abuse constitutes of influence of the adversary. It is a grievous sin...any kind of abuse of women, children, or anyone is an abomination to the Lord...those who perpetrate these hideous acts are not only accountable to the laws of man but will also face the wrath of Almighty God” (Nelson, 2022).

While plenty of much-needed attention is being placed on physical abuse, there are other aspects of abuse that many people, particularly young adults, fall victim to. One of these is emotional abuse. It is more than merely bullying or being unkind: it is demonstrated in the forms of gaslighting, manipulation, love withdrawal, name-calling, and other damaging behavior. Since this form of abuse can be more subtle, and admittedly, more subject to refutation, it has the

potential to be even more insidious than physical abuse because it sometimes goes without acknowledgement. This is generally due to scholars having difficulty defining and measuring it (Momtaz et al., 2022). This makes sense because while in some circumstances, some behaviors are appropriate—such as teasing between friends or jokingly making fun of another—in other contexts they can be damaging. However, for young people, it can be particularly damaging because it can inform other intimate relationships they will experience over the course of their lives, including marriage (Beyarslan & Uzer, 2022). It can also corrupt young people's understanding of the gospel and erode their faith, which is the opposite of what missionary service should do (Anderson, 2022, p.61).

Missionaries are at a particularly vulnerable position to suffer from the effects of emotional abuse. The intersection of many different demographic and personal circumstances such as young adulthood, religious pressure, naiveté about cultural practices and the world in general are all factors that can lead to greater vulnerability. Because there is little current research on these issues, there is a need to fill this significant research gap with a better understanding of these factors in order to protect our young missionaries. This review will explore studies on romantic relationship abuse because there is virtually no research on missionary relationships, and these romantic relationships can be similar to those of missionaries. Through this lens, I will describe the various factors in missionaries' susceptibility to abuse mentioned earlier and will make suggestions for future research.

### **What is Emotional Abuse?**

Emotional abuse can be defined in several ways, but most commonly it is characterized as a pattern of behavior, including controlling, demeaning, or isolating behavior, as well as jealousy or paranoia, constant criticism, rejection, or gaslighting (Anderson, 2022, p.11; Momtaz

et al., 2022). Frequently, there is also a power dynamic in which the abuser is in a position of power or authority over the victim. For example, a senior companion, mission leader, or even one who is investigating the gospel could be in a position to manipulate or bully a missionary.

Verbal abuse can play a strong role in emotional manipulation because it changes the narratives we tell ourselves (Anderson, 2022, p.48). Even small remarks can become earworms and erode our self-confidence, making spiritual practices very difficult. Conflict is normal in close relationships, but it can be approached with compassion (Anderson, 2022, p.50). This idea will be explored later.

Emotional abuse is damaging and can have long standing effects in victims' lives, potentially causing sleep problems, mental health challenges, even physical illness and suicide ideation (Ditch the Label, 2019; Hess, 2022; Momtaz et al., 2022). Any form of abuse at all is damaging and must be taken seriously, especially considering that “the vast majority of all allegations of abuse turn out to be true” (Anderson, 2022, p.47, 58). These verbal and emotional assaults are particularly challenging for young missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for a variety of reasons that will be explored in this paper.

## **Why are Missionaries Particularly Vulnerable?**

### ***Young Adulthood***

The stage of life that missionaries are in is called Emerging Adulthood, which includes the ages between 18-24, in which individuals are seeking to discover identity and establish their place in the world. This period is characterized by a variety of factors, including increased risk-taking behaviors (Kent, 2022; Park et al., 2022) and higher rates of depression and anxiety (Advantage Mental Health Center, 2022). These can contribute to vulnerability to abuse because greater risk-taking behaviors can be associated with higher emotional volatility. Higher rates of



depression and anxiety have a similar effect, as those suffering with mental health issues are less likely to stand up for themselves and advocate for their wellbeing.

Additionally, emerging adults are taking their first steps away from the safety net of home (Kent, 2022; Park et al., 2022). For many young missionaries, this is their first time living away from family. This can be a very exciting time, but also very scary. These young adults will seek for support from their friends and leaders, but this can also lead to unhealthy attachments, where a young adult may feel obligated to please or over function to ensure that another person approves of them.

Since emerging adults do not have very much life experience under their belt yet, they often lack resiliency (Advantage Mental Health Center, 2022). Resiliency is the ability to navigate challenges with strength and not be overwhelmed by the difficulties of life. It is developed through life experience, and learning to make choices for one's own well-being. However, since most young adults have not yet had the chance to develop resilience, this makes them more likely to be negatively impacted by the hardships of emotional abuse.

Overall, because of a lack of life experience and the presence of mental health challenges, young adults can be particularly vulnerable to being emotionally abused.

### ***Religious Cultures***

While religion is often a protective factor against abuse (Verghese, 2008), in combination with other factors like those listed in this paper, instead it can contribute to it. Some naively assume that because of shared beliefs and values about kindness and goodness then abuse would not happen. Although religion has been found to be a protective factor in some kinds of relationship behaviors, it is no guarantee of model behavior, and indeed, religious doctrines or norms can be used against others in unhealthy ways. Some of these ways include an abuse of

power, which can cause psychological and spiritual harm (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; Ellis et al., 2022). For example, LDS religious hierarchy can be misused in a relationship where a leader might use gender or power to insist their version of something is the morally superior one. Additionally, it is difficult to see unhealthy behavior in others in a community one cares about (Whiting et al., 2019). This makes it hard to report abuse when it might reflect badly upon the church.

Another challenge that comes up in close-knit groups is the myth of the “evil perpetrator.” This fallacy includes the belief that a person who is otherwise nice and helpful in public could not be capable of harmful behaviors in private. The truth is many of these perpetrators are actually charismatic (Anderson, 2022, p.19). For example, a mission leader may have a hard time believing that a certain missionary could be mean to their companion at home because they are an otherwise excellent Elder or Sister. Often, abusers are people that are popular and well-liked, and even can be placed in positions of power within a church, including Mission President, Zone Leader, Sister Training Leader, and more. The myth of the evil perpetrator can keep abuse hidden and rationalized (e.g., “it can’t be that bad, or they wouldn’t be in that calling”) and keep victims from speaking up (Whiting et al., 2019).

Another aspect of a religious culture is the presence of standards and commandments. Many religions, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contain a code of behavior expected of members. If the abuse occurs when the individual is not following the rules, this can create victim- or self-blame, both of which take the focus off of the true perpetrator (Whiting, 2019). If a missionary was out past curfew visiting an investigator, and then something happened where they felt hurt or uncomfortable, they may not want to admit that to their leaders, even if it would mean getting help and support.

Other religious doctrine can be misconstrued to the benefit of an abuser—even Christian ideals, such as forgiveness. Sometimes religious individuals will put up with abuse much longer than they ought to under the mistaken belief that they just need to forgive that person, and then everything will be okay (Talley, 2020). Some perpetrators of aggression or control will use this doctrine in this way, pressuring someone they have hurt to just forgive them and move on, instead of taking responsibility and changing the problem. When a survivor of abuse is pressured to forgive, they may neglect their own discomfort and needs in favor for what they believe that God would have them do (especially if told that by someone in power). It is important to differentiate abuse from life’s challenges because it can help religious people understand the importance of getting help rather than merely “enduring to the end.”

### ***Pressures of Missionary Life***

Life for missionaries is also very unique. Generally, missionaries will arise at 6:30 am, exercise for 30 minutes, and get ready for the day (Lloyd, 2017). After that, they plan out their day, study the scriptures independently, and then leave to proselyte at 10:00 am. They are generally out for the rest of the day until 9:00 pm, at which time they return home, wind down, and go to bed at 10:30 pm. This strict schedule can be a source of stress due to physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as the challenge of living up to high expectations.

Generally, missionaries spend all day with their assigned companion, somebody whom they most likely have never met before the mission. While for many individuals this leads to deep friendships and abiding love for their companions, this isolation from other people can create a space in which abuse or bullying can thrive (Cravens et al., 2015). Spending 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with somebody can change your view of the world significantly, and if the relationship is an unhealthy one, it can be problematic, especially for new missionaries with little

experience. Abusers can use this time to isolate their victims and act very differently alone than in public, as well as misrepresent their companions to others to make them look bad (Anderson, 2022, p.54). In this, they try to justify their actions by shedding the worst possible light on their victims.

Missionaries also engage in a “companionship inventory” once a week. During this conversation, missionaries will share with each other ways that they can improve, as well as praise each other for good things that they have done throughout the week. They also may seek to resolve conflicts, share goals, and commit to work toward them together (*Preach my Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*). While this is a wonderful opportunity to bring companions closer together, it can also be an opportunity for missionaries to demonstrate emotionally abusive behavior toward their companions. Sometimes missionaries will take this time to unload a liturgy of things that their companion has done wrong throughout the week, sometimes causing deep pain.

Power dynamics are a reality of missionary life. As mentioned, church hierarchy necessitates positions of power. These are necessary for organization, but can be conducive to emotional abuse because they create a dynamic that the inferior individual must bow to the ideas of their leader (Hartz). Particularly in missions that utilize the junior/senior companion dynamic, in which one missionary makes the major decisions and the other must follow him, this can create environments for abuse. Also, because missionary work within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not meant to be easy, there is an underlying understanding that as a missionary, you will face challenges (Hartz). Because of this, missionaries can feel like they cannot say no to people when they ask for help or favors, even at their own expense (Neff, 2007; Whiting, 2020a; Whiting 2020b).

Because missionaries spend almost all their time in the service of other people, they can engender the philosophy that they must give their everything for those around them. Because they believe that their work is so important, they sometimes buy into the same idea that women who stay in abusive relationships do: they can save their abuser (Cravens et al., 2015). For example, there may be an investigator who pushes boundaries, treats the missionaries poorly, criticizes them, or engages in other of inappropriate behavior. But instead of setting boundaries or cutting off contact, a missionary may feel like they just need to keep trying and the person will learn and change.

Another factor of missionary life that can add to stress is family expectations (Cravens et al., 2015). Often missionaries will come into the field with stories of their parents, grandparents, even great-grandparents' missionary service, and the expectation that their mission will be the same. As a result, missionaries who struggle may feel inadequate and not reach out for help when needed, for fear of familial judgement or repercussions.

Each week, missionaries must keep records of their "key indicators," including people baptized and confirmed, people with a planned date to be baptized, people who attended church, and new people being taught. They then share this information with their leaders, who keep track of their progress with the goal of helping them with the work (*Preach my Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*). Even though the reasons behind this practice are innocent, they can lead to increased pressure. Missionaries may feel pressure from their leaders to do more, be embarrassed about a rough week, or fear that they are being judged by others due to low numbers. If leaders use these numbers to scold or pressure, it may be damaging instead of encouraging (Cravens et al., 2015).

Finally, there is an overall lack of resources for missionaries in the field. Many missions have assigned therapists, but not all do. Even if the mission has a therapist, missionaries might be nervous to get help or feel like it's wasting important proselyting time. The *Adjusting to Missionary Life* pamphlet, given to all new missionaries, can be very helpful, but is limited in scope, only addressing mental and physical health issues and not abusive interpersonal relationships (*Adjusting to Missionary Life*). In the future it may be helpful to include more information on healthy relationships, setting of boundaries, or how to address power abuses. Better information could help missionaries learn how to identify emotional abuse and advocate for themselves.

### ***Cultural Naiveté***

Another aspect of missionary life that can lead to increased vulnerability is lack of familiarity with the local culture. Many missionaries will leave their country of origin and live on an entirely new continent. They are often immersed in a new language, culture, traditions, food, and more. This can lead to culture shock, also known as acculturative stress (Pacheco, 2020). This often manifests itself as anxiety due to a lack of familiarity of one's surroundings, stress, helplessness, and even paranoia—if you cannot understand what people are saying, you can never know that they are not talking about you behind your back.

In the process of trying to adjust to a new culture a missionary could have harmful interactions, but not realize there is something wrong (Whiting, 2016; Whiting et al., 2012). They could write off their companion, mission leader, or investigator's hurtful behavior as just normal for the culture, and possibly even blame themselves for being 'too sensitive.' As such, they can be targets for unfair responsibilities, bullying, and other abusive behavior because they hesitate to push back.

## Suggestions

These truths are hard to hear, and possibly scary for parents and friends sending out their loved ones off on missions. However, there are several ways to counteract these vulnerabilities and make missions a safe place for young people.

One suggestion is to encourage housing at least two companionships per apartment. This can counteract the isolation suffered by many missionaries and provide them with a support network (Cravens, et al., 2015). This helped me in my first area. My trainer was very controlling and often critical of me, but the other missionaries I lived with were so important to me because they helped me know that I was not crazy.

Second, train mission leaders, both the President and his wife, and the young mission leaders (North, 2022). Zone and District Leaders, Sister Training Leaders, and Trainers can be influential in helping missionaries recognize that the behavior of their companion, leader, investigator, or other individual is unhealthy. Additionally, they can help gently guide and correct missionaries that are exhibiting emotionally abusive behaviors (MacLelland, 2022). When I was teaching an emotionally abusive individual, I wish that one of my leaders had been able to identify what was wrong in the situation and guide me to know what to do.

Part of this training can be in MTC classes, similar to pre-marital classes young couples often take, which highlight topics such as conflict resolution, giving constructive criticism, identifying controlling behaviors, and possible interventions for abusive individuals. Additionally, these can easily be featured in mission resources, such as *Adjusting to Missionary Life*, which has good information on managing physical and emotional stress. Having these resources available can help missionaries understand the line between somebody being unkind, and when it is abuse and they need to get help.

Third, teach missionaries that they do not need to be brutally honest in companionship inventory (Whiting, 2022). Being brutally honest is just that: brutal. If missionaries are having trouble being patient with a companion, provide training and guidance to help them understand their role in building up and helping them. My hardest companion continually tore me down under the guise of companionship inventory, and every time I thought I had the strength to get back on my feet, she would push me down again. If she had held her tongue rather than sharing every thought that came to mind, I may have gained the confidence to overcome the challenges that she was so frustrated with me for having. Studies have shown that when constructive criticism is given with an attitude of care and that the receiver knows that it is well intentioned, this type of interaction can be beneficial (Fong et al., 2018). Instead of trying to fix their companion's problems, missionaries should be prepared to accept influence, care about their feelings, and be respectful (Anderson, 2022, p.50).

Fourth, believe and provide help for victims who come forward (Hess, 2022; MacLelland, 2022). Much abuse is not reported because victims are scared that they won't be believed, and this is concerning since the majority of reports are true (Anderson, 2022, p.180). Additionally, leaders ought to look for solutions to the abuse, rather than for the individual (Anderson, 2022, p.42). Even well-meaning leaders will suggest increased scripture study, fasting, praying, or other spiritual practices, but this sends the message that the problem is the victim, rather than the abuser. These are important and helpful, but not the solution to the issue. If mission leaders, including ward mission leaders, were more available and trained to support victims, they could be bastions of hope for those that are struggling.

Fifth, teach missionaries to honor their worth and their boundaries (Speed et al., 2017). Part of being a missionary is claiming the power and authority of Jesus Christ. As such, there is



inherent worth in their calling, not to mention their eternal worth as children of God. If missionaries are taught to set firm boundaries and that they have the power of Christ to support those boundaries, they can have strength to resist those who would push them down.

Sixth, seek for more resources. If you have returned from your mission and realized that you have suffered abuse, you do not need to unpack it alone. Therapy is proven to be very effective to help individuals recover from damaging experiences, minimizing post-traumatic stress and other mental health challenges (Kim & Kim, 2020). Additionally, post-mission groups, firesides, and other social gatherings can help you connect with others who may have had similar experiences. There is power and healing when you reach out to others.

Finally, draw strength from religious beliefs. Research shows that religion can help individuals heal from trauma (Seballo, 2012; Verghese, 2008). Remember that even though humans are flawed, Christ is not, and He will not do anything to make us feel unloved (Anderson, 2022; Hislop, 2020). Missionaries are not the first to suffer abuse, nor will they be the last (Hess & Gourley, 2022). Healing is a spiritual practice, and even as important as research is, it cannot replace the healing power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

These issues are incredible nuanced and challenging to address. Solutions to emotional abuse are inextricably tied to culture, location in the world, member support, individual missionaries and leaders, and more. As such, is it so hard to create a one-size-fits-all solution to this issue. For this reason, it is imperative that we do further research to better understand this problem and create support for those who have suffered and are currently suffering.

Scholars could look at a variety of variables. They can search for more information about the range and intensity of abuse experiences, showing the frequency of all forms of unkindness, from small remarks, bullying, all the way to abuse. They could also study prevalence of emotional abuse and topics featured in verbal attacks, such as language mastery, missionary skills, or body shape and size. All of these factors could also be examined under a lens of gender differences, location of missionary service, socioeconomic status, and other demographics. For scholars interested in this area of study, there is a whole, untouched world to explore.

### **Conclusion**

Even though missionaries may be placed in physically and emotionally dangerous situations, they are filling an important place in our Church. They are also having wonderful, faith-inspiring, character-building experiences that they will look back on for the rest of their lives. While emotional abuse is still a problem among missionaries, there are many things that we can do to approach it. As we seek for truth and healing, it can and will be found.

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