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Same Purpose, New Approach: A Case Study of the North Dakota Bismarck Mission using Social Media during COVID-19

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Title: Same Purpose, New Approach: A Case Study of the North Dakota Bismarck Mission using Social Media during COVID-19

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Introduction

This is the story of how one mission in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church) adapted its approach, but not its purpose, to invite all to come unto Jesus Christ during the first 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 to July 2021). The North Dakota Bismarck Mission (NDBM hereafter) covers all or parts of the states of North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, and Nebraska, and, like the other 404 missions¹ throughout the world, traditional approaches to missionary work were significantly disrupted by the effects of COVID-19. No longer were missionaries able to find and teach people on the streets, at the doorsteps, in the homes, or even at the meetinghouses as they were required to physically distance themselves from everyone except their own companion.

Many missionaries like to recite a paragraph from Joseph Smith's Wentworth Letter, with emphasis on this phrase: "The Standard of Truth has been erected; *no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing*; . . ." ² While the NDBM was no exception, its missionaries also like to recite a similar scriptural phrase which is personal to them since the Missouri River courses through four of the five states comprising the boundary of the NDBM: "What power shall stay the heavens? *As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty. . .*" ³ (The mission president and his wife drove newly arrived missionaries from the airport to the mission home on a roadway alongside the Missouri River just to illustrate the significance and symbolism of this scriptural promise.) This vision of no "unhallowed hand" or "puny arm" interfering with what President Nelson called the ". . . the greatest cause, and the greatest work on earth. . ." ⁴ was never more needed by all members of the Church, especially its missionaries, than during the pandemic of 2020 when ". . . a desolating sickness [covered] the land. . ." ⁵

This article is organized into three sections. The first two sections are considered a literature review of sorts. The first section captures selected statements from scripture

and modern-day prophets about the future role of technology in missionary work, up until the pandemic began in March 2020; the second section focuses on statements made by Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, chair of the Missionary Executive Council just before and during the pandemic, about new approaches to missionary work for missionaries and members, including the use of social media.

The final section describes how the missionaries in the NDBM responded to the times and followed the counsel of Church leaders during the first 16-month period of the pandemic. This section is arranged in chronological order by quarters of the year, starting with the first quarter of 2020 and ending with the second quarter of 2021. Each quarter is then divided into three sections wherein three participants (the three authors) provide their perspective of what happened during that quarter and how the adaptation of new approaches evolved and built upon each other from quarter to quarter. The three perspectives are provided by the former mission president (MP); the online teaching center trainer assigned to this mission from the Mission Training Center (MTC); and a former missionary and social media specialist for the mission (Missionary).

- I. Selected statements from scripture, modern-day prophets, and general authorities/officers about the same missionary purpose with different approaches, including technology. (*Italics used by authors for emphasis.*)

Doctrine and Covenants 58:64-65

The unchanging purpose and importance of missionary work was revealed by the Lord to the young prophet, Joseph Smith, on August 1, 1831 at a religious service.

“For, verily, the sound *must go forth* from this place into all the world, and *unto the uttermost parts of the earth—the gospel must be preached unto every creature*, with signs following them that believe. And behold the Son of Man cometh. Amen.”⁶

How then will the work carry on when societies and cities no longer welcome traditional missionary work to their streets, doors, and even living quarters? So many live in gated communities, remote regions, and are on lockdown in their city, state, or country for political, health, pandemic, and other reasons.

Isaiah 29:14 and 3 Nephi 21:9

Isaiah recorded the words of Jehovah to him about the last days: “For my sake shall the Father work a work, which shall be a *great* and a *marvelous* work.”⁷

These two adjectives “great” and “marvelous” truly describe missionaries and missionary work during the pandemic.

Jacob 7:24

“And it came to pass that *many means* were devised to reclaim and restore [them]. . .”⁸

This phrase “many means” speaks of multiple and varied approaches to missionary work during the time of Jacob in the *Book of Mormon* and again throughout the pandemic.

Doctrine and Covenants 90:11

“For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and *in his own language*, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ”⁹

Is it possible this “language” could include computer and social media languages too? Some of the most popular “languages” used to develop social media applications include, PHP, JavaScript, Python, Java, and others.¹⁰

1943; *Evidences and Reconciliations*. Elder John A. Widstoe

“Then other kinds of knowledge may be added to support and amplify the more direct knowledge of spiritual law. For example, it is a duty of the Church to preach the gospel to all the world. This however requires the aid of railroads, steamships, printing presses, and a multitude of other things that make up our civilization. A knowledge of the gospel is the missionary’s first need, *but the other needs, though lesser, help him perform better the divine injunction to teach the gospel to all people.*”¹¹

Elder John A. Widstoe, first wrote these words in 1943. The full-time missionaries of today are called upon to stay focused on the “first need” of their missionary purpose just as missionaries of any age. However, the missionaries of today live in the most sophisticated and complex of times and must attend to an increasing number of “other needs,” more so than any previous generation of missionaries, especially during the pandemic of 2020 to 2021.

September 30 and October 2, 1966; General Conference. President David O. McKay (93 years old of age at this time), Elder Bernard P. Brockbank and Brother Arch L. Madsen

“. . .Scientific discoveries of today stagger the imagination. . .Nearly every day we read of almost unbelievable accomplishments. . . The discoveries and inventions of this age are unequaled by any previous period in the world’s history, discoveries latent with such

potent power, either for the blessing or the destruction of human beings as to make men's responsibility in controlling them the most gigantic ever placed in human hands. Yes, it is a glorious age in which we live, but no thinking man will doubt that this age is fraught with limitless perils as well as untold possibilities” (p. 4).

“Now, I am going to ask Brother Bernard P. Brockbank of the Church Information Committee and Brother Arch L. Madsen, president of Church broadcasting, to tell you what the Church is doing to disseminate the gospel by these modern means. . .” (p. 87).

“And so it is that we now stand at this point of bright discovery. *We must blend the testimony of the missionary with vital and powerful messages; we must accelerate our effectiveness in giving outsiders something they both can see and hear.* Today we must find ways to reach and teach millions and even billions by having them come to centers where the teaching and fruits of the gospel of salvation and God’s plan of life are on exhibit and where the teacher filled with faith, love, and the Holy Ghost can touch their hearts. Millions of the Saints can participate (p. 90-91). . . . The members are anxious, we discover throughout the world, to follow the prophet’s counsel to do missionary work among their friends and neighbors, but *they need the help of the great Christian teaching exhibits. . . . We have taken only first steps--they will be multiplied many times. We have taken only a few steps--just far enough to see the unlimited horizons in the technical ability to communicate to every nation and kindred and tongue and people that are now within our grasp*” (p. 96).¹²

October 1974; *Ensign*. President Spencer W. Kimball

“I believe that the Lord is anxious to put into our hands inventions of which we laymen have hardly had a glimpse. I am confident that the only way we can reach most of these millions of our Father’s children is through the spoken word over the airwaves. Our Father in heaven has now provided us mighty towers—radio and television towers with possibilities beyond comprehension—to help fulfill the words of the Lord that “the sound must go forth from this place unto all the world.”¹³

February 21, 1999; Satellite Broadcast. President Gordon B. Hinckley

“So many of us look upon missionary work as simply tracting. Everyone who is familiar with this work knows there is a better way. That way is through the members of the Church.”¹⁴

October 1, 2011; General Conference. Elder David A. Bednar

“Your fingers have been trained to text and tweet to accelerate and advance the work of the Lord—not just to communicate quickly with your friends. The skills and aptitude evident among many young people today are a preparation to contribute to the work of salvation.”¹⁵

June 2013; Worldwide Leadership Training. Elder L. Tom Perry, Chair of the Missionary Executive Council

“The world has changed since that time (his young mission). Now, many people are involved in the busyness of their lives. They hurry here and there, and they are often less willing to allow complete strangers to enter their homes, uninvited, to share a message of the restored gospel. Their main point of contact with others, even with close friends, is often via the Internet. *The very nature of missionary work, therefore, must change if the Lord is to accomplish His work of gathering Israel* “from the four corners of the earth” (2 Nephi 21:12). The missionaries are now authorized to use the Internet in their proselytizing efforts.

As missionaries enter this new age where they will use computers in the work of the Lord, we invite the young and the old, the adults, the young adults, the youth, and the children everywhere to join with us in this exciting new work by becoming Facebook friends with the missionaries in your area on your own computers and sharing their gospel messages online and by becoming involved in missionary work yourselves.”¹⁶

August 2014; General Handbook of Instructions. Handbook 2, section 21.1.22

“Members are encouraged to use the Internet to flood the earth with testimonies of the Savior and His restored gospel. They should view blogs, social networks, and other Internet technologies as tools that allow them to amplify their voice in promoting the messages of peace, hope, and joy that accompany faith in Christ.

“Members are encouraged to share messages from official Church websites and social accounts as well as their own words, images, and media. As members express their own thoughts and feelings, they should not give the impression that they represent or are sponsored by the Church”¹⁷

August 19, 2014; BYU Campus Education Week. Elder David A. Bednar

“What has been accomplished thus far in this dispensation *communicating gospel messages through social media channels is a good beginning—but only a small trickle. I now extend to you the invitation to help transform that trickle into a flood.*”¹⁸

June 2016; Seminar for New Mission Presidents. Elder David A. Bednar

“Please do not fear technology. Please do not take counsel from your fears. *Embrace these inspired tools. Learn to use them to proclaim the gospel.*”¹⁹

June 2017; Seminar for New Mission Presidents. President Dallin H. Oaks

"We are in an unusual and extremely important transition in our missionary work." He then spoke of the introduction of "smartphones to assist missionaries in their study, finding and teaching and increase the use of technology to help find people interested in religion."²⁰

March 2018; Sister Bonnie Oscarson, member of the Church's Missionary Executive Council

"The world is changing, so *the way we do missionary work is changing as well. We recognize our methods need to change with technology.* Our missionaries are growing up with technology and are well-versed in it and comfortable with it. They are using technology to do missionary work more effectively and more efficiently. Rather than knock on 90 doors we can go directly to the one person who is reaching out to us. And they are reaching out to us."²¹

II. Statements made by Elder Uchtdorf, Chairman of the Missionary Executive Council, concerning social media and missionary work from 2020 to June 2021

In the past year, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and chair of the Missionary Executive Council, has spoken many times about the emerging role of social media in doing missionary work. Some of the venues in which he has spoken include General Conference, a worldwide missionary devotional, mission leadership seminars, and on his social media platforms. Following are some of the statements he has made about how missionaries (and members) will adapt to the times and better use social media in doing missionary work.

Social Media Post on March 27, 2020

"... all missionaries throughout the world are still working and serving the Lord in the ways possible under local health conditions and requirements. Some missionaries work from their apartments, others from their homes until they will be reassigned to a new mission. They all are still magnifying their sacred callings to proclaim the gospel and bear witness of the Savior Jesus Christ.

You might think, 'What can these missionaries really do from their apartments?' I assure you—they are not just sitting at home. They are active and doing a lot of marvelous things! We get wonderful reports of the creative ways missionaries are working to fulfill their callings from their homes during this unique time. *Many of them are digitally reaching out to people who are interested in this wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ.*"²²

In a Liahona article highlighting an interview Elder Uchtdorf gave counsel concerning social media missionary work in May 2020

“COVID-19 accelerated our thinking about this tremendously and *opened our eyes for new ways, including the use of technology*. The Spirit can work wonderfully as we use new and unfamiliar ways of communicating with each other.”

“All missionaries, regardless of their circumstances, have the wonderful opportunity of going forward by finding, teaching, baptizing, and making disciples” with the aid of technology and social media. The work goes on irrespective of whether there is an epidemic or smooth sailing.”

“The gospel is a message of peace and hope; it is a message of healing and joy. *Using technology to share this message with the help of the Spirit is the opportunity of our time*. The transition from sharing the gospel by technology to eye-to-eye personal contact is an important step in this process and will be much easier when the pandemic is better under control. But missionary work will continue to move forward despite the pandemic. Still, as Latter-day Saints, *we are living in a time when we need to learn and find new approaches for sharing and proclaiming the gospel in more creative and productive ways. Members are connecting at this moment through technology. Missionaries are doing the same*. We have to use our creativity, our hearts, our minds, our experiences, our great potential of counseling together.”

The Church and its members will still share God’s truths with His children. Just as the Apostle Paul traveled by boat, and missionaries centuries later took planes, missionaries of tomorrow may *connect with others through many different and often new means. We are continuing to learn how to improve missionary work now and for the future*. The Lord has promised to ‘hasten [His] work’ [Doctrine and Covenants 88:73] for the blessing of all of God’s children. I feel that we are right in the middle of this process while living through this challenging time. *Our precious missionaries are the pioneers of our day, blazing a trail of sharing the gospel message in new ways fitting to our circumstances* so that the Church of Jesus Christ will continue to roll forth until it fills the whole earth.”²³

Social Media Post on April 19, 2020

“The worldwide missionary work, a fulfillment of the Savior’s charge to His servants, is continuing to go forward by finding, teaching, baptizing, and making disciples, regardless of current circumstances.

Right now, missionaries may be mainly working from their apartments (very much as they would at home), but *they are learning to better use technology and social media to further the work of the Lord! Modern technology can be a great blessing* as we use it

wisely and stay connected to our families and friends during these challenging times. Wherever our missionaries serve, they are disciples of Jesus Christ and can bless God's children through the gospel message."²⁴

Worldwide Video Message on June 14, 2020

"We are continuing to learn of the immense good that comes from the righteous and intentional use of technology. Sometimes we think of the Internet and social media as an enemy because there can be so much negativity there. However, the Internet can be a friend to us when we use it correctly. *Our goal for the future is to continue to learn and become better at using the Internet to proclaim the gospel and to bless God's children. The future of missionary work is bright.*

*It is through our everyday actions — including our social media interactions — that we invite others to come and see, come and help, and come and belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I only hope we carry this momentum, this energy, up forward in all areas of the church."*²⁵

June 2020 Missionary Leadership Seminar

"That the Lord already saw our day long ago should give you great comfort and confidence. He has not been surprised by the events that have put the world in commotion. Harriet and I have presently three grandchildren called as missionaries. We are physically distant from them, but socially we are close to them—through technology. That's why I prefer to call the efforts to stay safe during this COVID-19 phase 'physical distancing,' not 'social distancing.'

As I reflect upon what has happened and look to the future, I like to consider the question 'what can we learn from this?' I feel that the Lord has lessons in store for each of us in difficult times."²⁶

A Virtual Worldwide Missionary Devotional on August 13, 2020

"When public restrictions are lifted again, be wise to resist the temptation of going back to the 'old ways,' which too often didn't work too well anyway. *You need to 'go back to the future' — and I promise you a very bright future with new and exciting opportunities.* This work will move forward and upward. Instead of being the last resort, *technology needs to be considered upfront as an option for us to become more efficient and effective."*²⁷

October 2020 General Conference Address

"At first it may have seemed that a worldwide pandemic would be a roadblock to the Lord's work. For example, traditional methods of sharing the gospel have not been possible. *However, the pandemic is revealing new and more creative ways of reaching*

out to the honest in heart. The work of gathering Israel is increasing in power and enthusiasm. Hundreds and thousands of stories attest to this. In Latvia, a woman who had discovered the Church by *clicking on an internet ad was so excited to learn about the gospel of Jesus Christ* that she showed up to her appointment an hour early, and before the missionaries ended the first lesson, she asked for a date to be baptized. In Eastern Europe, one woman who received a call from the missionaries exclaimed, ‘Sisters, why haven’t you called earlier? I’ve been waiting!’

Many of our missionaries are busier than ever. Many are teaching more people than ever. There is an increased connection between members and missionaries.

This is the Lord’s work. He invites us to find His ways of doing it, and they may differ from our past experiences. *In the past, we might have been so tied to traditional approaches that it took a pandemic to open our eyes.”²⁸*

Social Media Post on March 6, 2021

“It is impressive how our dear missionaries are learning how to use the powerful tools of technology wisely and effectively—the Lord’s way. Just as the missionaries are perfecting themselves in their use of technology and social media, we should be doing the same from our homes and in our wards and branches. If you aren’t sure how to start, have the missionaries teach you. They’d love to help!”²⁹

Devotional to all missionaries on February 25, 2021

“Future generations will remember today’s missionaries as those who served during the great pandemic, the ones who learned to use technology and social media in new and effective ways to proclaim the gospel to every nation and language, and in any circumstance. You will find people of any nation or language, of any religious or socioeconomic background — everyone. With the help of technology, people might even find you.”³⁰

Elder Uchtdorf made this introductory statement at a Worldwide Missionary Devotional with Elder Marcus Nash and Elder Michael Ringwood

"The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who are the missionary committee of the Church, are encouraging you to teach and practice these more natural ways of inviting those who are not members of the Church.”³⁰

Mission Leadership Seminar on June 26, 2021

“The Lord did not cause the pandemic however, He has used it to move His work forward by providing us a ‘divine reset’ to help us think about what we have done in the past and what we can do better in the future.

Missionary work is not a choice between traditional or modern approaches; it includes both. As fishers of men, we learned that it is wise to cast the net the Lord’s way, sometimes to the other side.

The result is retaining and cultivating proven successful principles and ways of how missionary work has been done in traditional forms, he added. ‘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.*’

Now the members of the Church better understand one of the important reasons Elder Uchtdorf was released from the First Presidency and returned to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The unique background and training of this venerable apostle was just what missionaries and mission presidents needed during the pandemic. As the First Presidency was being reorganized, President Russell M. Nelson said this about the release of then President Dieter F. Uchtdorf: “[he] has resumed his place in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and has already received major assignments for which he is uniquely qualified . . . and *where he is needed most.*”³¹

III. The social media experience of the NDBM through the eyes of former mission president, online teaching center trainer at the MTC assigned to the NDBM, and missionaries who served during this time as social media specialists.

When the author began his service (July 2018) as mission president of the NDBM, the missionaries had received smartphones just two months previously. During this pre-pandemic time (May 2018 to March 2020), the missionaries used their smartphones to organize missionary records (AreaBook), study the gospel (Gospel Library), teach lessons (particular use of Gospel Media), and communicate with family and others using text/e-mail messages. Some missionaries began using Facebook to introduce themselves to people they were teaching and “friend” them to access Facebook’s companion product, Messenger, and communicate via messages and video. However, the focus remained on missionaries maintaining or creating their personal Facebook pages and growing their friend list with family and friends back home and with local members, missionaries, and people in the area.

The authors share a chronological overview of social media events and activities over six, three-month-long quarters (18 months total) beginning in March 2020 and ending June 30, 2021. This year-and-a-half covers the pandemic period and the last of this mission president's service before his release.

Quarter 1 of 2020

[Mission President perspective, hereafter MP] As COVID-19 fell upon the world in February and March of 2020 all mission presidents (and missionaries) anxiously waited for direction from the Missionary Department. What measures will they recommend? Will missionaries need to return home? Will missions close? All hoped, prayed, and fasted that the effects of the virus would quickly pass but as all who lived through this experience know this was not to be. The magnitude of the situation became evident when the Missionary Department announced senior missionaries, and young missionaries with underlying health conditions, e.g., asthma, diabetes, compromised immune systems, etc. were to return to their homes.

In just a matter of a couple weeks the NDBM watched 10 senior couples and 25 young missionaries return home. It was heartbreaking to those returning early and those who remained. The early releases included new missionaries who had just joined the NDBM a few weeks earlier to senior missionaries and leaders in the NDBM, including one of the assistants to the mission president. The almost immediate departure of about 45 missionaries in just a matter of days required the temporary closing of areas and apartments and the storing of extra vehicles in the fleet.

[MTC perspective hereafter, MTC] In the October 2019 general conference, Elder Uchtdorf invited those listening to reach out and to "share their story" detailing their journey with Christ and being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. In January of 2020 a small online support team of 15 trainers at the MTC, who were also undergraduate students at BYU, began a pilot program using social media to facilitate a "viral" response to Elder Uchtdorf's invitation to "share" using the social media platform, Facebook. None of the team realized that in just three months most missionaries would be confined to their apartments as the world faced the crippling effects of the COVID-19 virus. The team quickly learned from the pilot three important lessons they started sharing with missions: (1) specific topics of discussion over social media brought specific reactions; (2) not all online engagements are created equal; and (3) the Facebook algorithm was complex and difficult to predict (some people received

postings and others didn't). During this quarter the MTC and Missionary Department did its best to know how to respond to the unique challenges facing its missionaries.

[Missionary Perspective hereafter Missionary] As the COVID-19 pandemic began to disrupt life and everyone's routine in early 2020, the missionaries in the NDBM wondered and worried about what was going to happen next. How would they find new people to teach? How were the people currently being taught going to progress not meeting in person and going to church? And, could people even be baptized and confirmed members of the Church during this period of time? During this time the mission president helped everyone pivot to doing missionary work virtually. He began calling missionaries with some social media experience to advise him and the rest of the missionaries on what they needed to do to find and teach people online.

The missionaries began using their own personal profiles on Facebook to start contacting people all over the world by joining certain groups they were interested in, e.g., photography, cooking, community history, etc. Some sisters even started teaching a young adult in Africa who joined the Church along with some of his friends. However, the Missionary Department began advising missions to focus on finding and teaching people living within their own mission boundaries. Next, the NDBM began building twelve local Church Facebook pages and one local Instagram profile based on centers of population within the NDBM. (The purpose of these Facebook pages was to bring the Church's ComeUntoChrist.org website to each community and give it a local and personal feeling.)

Quarter 2 of 2020

[MP] An influx of over 120 reassigned international missionaries joined the NDBM over a short 12-week period beginning the first week of May and ending the last week of July. They arrived in groups of about 10 missionaries each week during this three-month period. This quarter was a "time never to be forgotten" by the mission president and his wife as so many faith-filled, determined, internationally-serving missionaries joined the NDBM anxious to know how they could still do missionary work (in English this time), even though most were confined to their apartments due to the pandemic. While this constant addition of new missionaries was welcomed it also preoccupied the MP with interviews, reading and responding to more weekly letters, training, making assignments, finding housing (including renting hotels), and securing additional vehicles (including renting vehicles).

The mission president now had more missionaries than ever before, with less work than ever before for all of them because of COVID-19 restrictions. (The NDBM official complement is 130 but it swelled to 230 during this quarter and stayed around 200 through the end of June 2021). He was as thrilled as he was concerned about the large complement of missionaries all with such diverse and extraordinary talents (a talent and interest survey was given to each new missionary to learn more about their talents and interests). He began focusing missionaries on accomplishing their purpose by using their talents and creating an authentic but appropriate missionary presence on social media while also encouraging them to perform more community service in the outdoors, e.g., taking pictures of cemetery headstones and uploading them to BillionGraves (see <https://blog.billiongraves.com/missionaries-taking-photos-of-gravestones/>).

As the NDBM created the first of its local Church Facebook pages, as instructed by the Missionary Department, they also experienced the power and influence of Facebook as a platform since their newly created Pages were suspended for over a month. (Apparently, in the NDBM's excitement to build the pages too quickly through sending too many friend requests at one time, this flurry of activity was assumed by Facebook to be the work of spammers and, hence, shut down the pages. (This action by Facebook was taken with some other missions too.) The NDBM also learned people antagonistic to the Church registered complaints with Facebook about missionaries using their platform to spread its message, which contributed to the suspension. This time was one of great hardship and trial to the NDBM and it was after much prayer and fasting that the block was lifted on the 40th day of the pages being turned off.)

[MTC] With more and more missions around the world opting to be a part of the social media efforts, the online teaching center trainers at the MTC became overwhelmed with questions and requests for training from an increasing number of missions. The trainers needed more training themselves and started interacting more closely with the Worldwide Finding team in the Missionary Department to try and stay just a step ahead of the demands for more training on how missions could use social media in their missionary efforts during the pandemic.

An online teaching center trainer was assigned to the NDBM and together they established a groundwork for creating a Church Facebook presence throughout the NDBM. This mission particularly demonstrated the importance of identifying missionaries throughout the NDBM with pre-mission social media and digital-content creation experience and the president calling them to take the lead in formulating and then executing a social media plan fitting for the NDBM, the members, and the community. Using these missionaries' prior knowledge of social media and digital

content helped the NDBM get a quick start on integrating social media as a new approach to missionary work.

[Missionary] The NDBM continued to adapt to the unique challenges and problems created by the pandemic. Missionaries started working more effectively with the local Church Facebook pages and building a local following of the same--the pages were geographically situated around the NDBM, usually mirroring the zones within the NDBM. (The missionaries invited everyone they talked with, member and nonmember alike, to follow the Pages.) These Facebook pages became a virtual meeting place for member and nonmember alike, with inspired content teaching the doctrine of Christ and the restored gospel. The missionaries began using Facebook Ad Manager (a tool created by the company for ads) to post ads inviting people to study, pray, and learn more. The missionaries' first ad was about prayer and invited people to pray with them. The missionaries found many people interested in the Church from this ad, and then witnessed the first baptism from these early social media efforts. This new convert told the missionaries they would not have found him any other way except through social media.

To advance the missionaries' understanding and use of social media four companionships were called to travel the NDBM and train the rest of the missionaries. These trainers identified what each companionship needed and customized their training to those. They also introduced a new style guide created by a missionary with graphic design experience to use in making posts more professional and uniform across the NDBM's local Church Facebook pages.. This training and guide helped the missionaries improve their social media skills and raise the NDBM's overall effectiveness in working with others in this online, virtual environment. The mission president continued to emphasize the importance of each missionary praying for the "gift of tongues" and "interpretation of tongues" since all were learning this new language of social media.

Quarter 3 of 2020

[MP] This quarter was arguably the most important of all in integrating social media throughout missionary work. I called upon the following people to help everyone learn how to use social media in missionary work: (1) A small team of three employees (Shawn Cates, Tom Larsen, and Ernesto Rodrigues) who comprised the Worldwide Finding Area in the Missionary Department. They went into overdrive to train mission presidents and missionaries on how they thought social media platforms could be used

to do missionary work. The use of these resources by the Missionary Department were available upon request and the NDBM was quick to engage them; (2) The trainer assigned to the NDBM from the Online Teaching Center at the MTC met with the social media leaders once a week, the Instagram team once a week, and all missionaries who wanted more training (usually a third of the missionaries participated) each week; (3) Some social media professionals, related to missionaries serving in the field (e.g., Swello company owned by three brothers, all returned missionaries, were especially helpful during these early stages of learning how to use social media). They met with the social media leaders and the mission president multiple times; (4) and to the rescue came the 25 micro-lessons prepared by the Missionary Department (using the EdApp platform, see <https://www.edapp.com/>, but rebranded as “Edify” lessons); (5) more social media specialists traveled the NDBM to train each companionship; and (6) the North America Central Area Presidency provided weekly training meetings in each of the 20 missions in the Area. Those who attended this meeting each week from the NDBM then joined together immediately afterwards with the mission president to debrief and decide what changes should be made in the NDBM based on the training the hour previous. This meeting became one of the most important social media strategy meetings in the NDBM, and sometimes lasted longer than the hour-long training at the Area level.

[MTC] The third quarter was one where the Online Teaching Center of the MTC sought to respond to the increased demand by mission presidents and missions for more training and support in using social media. The NDBM turned to the Center for weekly training (sometimes two or more trainings a week) and also participated in the weekly North America Central trainings to learn, and sometimes to train too. (The Area resource manager, Shane Littlefield, facilitated this weekly training on behalf of the Area Presidency and turned to the NDBM frequently to help train the other missions through sharing best practices with other missions.)

While most missions were using Facebook at some level, a few missions, including the NDBM, began experimenting with other social media platforms, e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Google, YouTube, and even TikTok. The NDBM especially turned to the Online Teaching Center for support using Instagram since many of the young adults they worked with on college campuses, and the visitors at the Mt. Rushmore National Memorial, preferred Instagram over Facebook.

[Missionary] The missionaries began to witness the miracle of many responding to their invitations over use of social media and “eat the fruit of [their] labor”³². Almost every missionary in the NDBM had now found someone new to teach using social media, and their confidence in this new approach was growing. The social media missionaries

continued to learn from other missions in the weekly North America Central Meeting (NAC) meetings for social media specialists, and the NDBM was invited to share their best practices with other missions during this quarter. The NDBM also began its own weekly training meeting, which they called “Showcase” for its missionaries, modeled after the weekly NAC meeting. In Showcase the social media missionaries and mission president highlighted, and celebrated, the miracles of the previous week and then provided more training.

The social media specialists in the NDBM created a number of five-to-ten minute lesson outlines for missionaries to use in teaching members how to better use their social media accounts to invite their friends to learn about the Church. In early September, the mission president worked closely with stake presidents and bishops to invite them to call additional ward and branch missionaries with social media expertise to work closely with the full time missionaries. These new unit missionaries were called online ward/branch member missionaries. Once these specialized ward missionaries were called they were trained by the NDBM’s social media specialists and became part of a weekly, online community that exchanged ideas and assisted (1) other members in learning how to use social media to do missionary work, and (2) in helping missionaries create content for the local Facebook pages and Instagram profiles.

Quarter 4 of 2020

[MP] As the NDBM designed and published more Facebook, Instagram, and Google ads the missionaries began seeing more success in finding, teaching and baptizing God’s children. The Church also began preparing missions for the launch of the global 2020 Christmas initiative in November. This social media initiative was the most extensive and well-developed by the Church yet, with many multimedia resources available at www.LightTheWorld.org. The missionaries kept busy sharing these resources with as many members and nonmembers as would receive them--they also used them to teach members how to share these inspiring, digital Christmas resources with family and friends. Since people were concerned about missionaries handing them a paper, pass-along card and spreading the virus, the NDBM developed QR codes for each missionaries’ phone so others could use their camera to capture the QR code and go directly to the LightThe World website, and also to the local Church Pages in the area.

As hard as missionary life was wearing masks; spending so much time in apartments; doing virtually everything virtually, from teaching others to attending Church; not gathering on preparation day with the other missionaries in the area; and taking turns

being quarantined for two-week periods whenever exposed to, or diagnosed with, COVID-19 there was still a feeling of hope, even excitement throughout the NDBM. The missionaries had faith (and works) that God could help them see as many of God's children enter the kingdom during this challenging year as they did the year before. They rallied around the mantra that "no puny arm [or virus]" or "unhallowed hand [or virus]" could interfere with God's work. They knew they were His servants and the "day of miracles had not ceased." All missionaries who served this last quarter of the year will always remember being part of the miracle of seeing as many convert baptisms (the exact number) in 2020 as in 2019. The NDBM had truly witnessed a modern day miracle. (The statistical reports of the Church for 2020 revealed 125,930 convert baptisms during this year as contrasted to the same report of the Church for 2019 with 248,835 convert baptisms, a 49.4-percent decrease from 2019 to 2020.)³³

[MTC] The NDBM seemed to thrive during this time. It was inspiring to watch and work with them as they faced the formidable challenges brought about by the pandemic. While other missions were focusing on using Facebook, the NDBM started using Instagram too (the mission president authorized about 30 sisters to use Instagram and only a few elders for safety purposes) and witnessed the first baptism from its use. The missionaries "hungered and thirsted" for more training on how to use social media tools to "gather in scattered Israel" and they pushed the trainers in the Online Teaching Center to keep up with them. They were also quick to acknowledge God's help in any success they experienced.

Many missions, including the NDBM, were doing their best to adapt to the challenges of the day while still experiencing frustration and disappointment in these early pioneering efforts of using social media in missionary work. Furthermore, the prolonged confinement in apartments, excessive looking at and working on small phone screens, and the lack of physical contact was taking its toll on missionaries emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Fortunately, most found renewed strength, including those working in the MTC Online Teaching Center, as the Church released the Christmas initiative, www.LighttheWorld.org, to the missions. It also helped that the Missionary Department extended the privilege of participating in weekly MTC devotionals to all missionaries and not just those in the home-MTC's.

One other thing that happened during this quarter at the Online Teaching Center of the MTC was hiring more trainers and organizing them into smaller groups that were then assigned as a group to different areas of the world. This reorganization enabled trainers in each area to not feel as isolated, create more community, and better support each other as they provided support and training to their assigned missions in the same area.

[Missionary] This quarter was an exciting time in the NDBM as its missionaries prepared for the best ever Light-the-World initiative developed by the Church. The many resources, (e.g., videos, daily service calendar, digital pass along cards, home evening lesson outline, etc.,) available to the missionaries to share the Christmas message and spirit with members and nonmembers alike across the local Church Facebook Pages, local Instagram Profiles, and individual personal Facebook/Instagram profiles was just what was needed. During this time of preparation for and excitement about the Light-the-World initiative, the NDBM also saw its first baptism of someone who was found using Instagram.

Since missionaries were using their devices so much it was also important to reemphasize missionary safeguards for using technology. During one of the series of zone conferences the mission president brought with him the social media specialists to audit devices and provide individualized feedback to each missionary on how to use Facebook more effectively. Toward the end of the quarter, Elder and Sister Jeremy Jaggi, General Authority Seventy and member of the North America Central Area Presidency, conducted a three-day virtual tour of the NDBM. They asked for a presentation of social media practices in the NDBM, after which they commended the missionaries on their inspired and innovative use of social media during the pandemic. They told the missionaries present “They were pioneering new approaches in missionary work that will help the restored gospel of Jesus Christ reach ‘every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people. . . (Rev 14:6)’”³⁴

Quarter 1 of 2021

[MP] As the new year approached the mission president felt the need to shift the attention of the missionaries to doing more with members and helping them to learn some of the new approaches to missionary work made possible through social media. It was also time for the missionaries to encourage members to organize themselves to do missionary work by creating a more inclusive missionary coordination council as announced by President M. Russell Ballard at the outset of the pandemic on May 26, 2020 letter. The missionaries determined to follow the prophet and qualify for the promise he made at a recent mission leader seminar (2018) when he said “. . . [their] success will be multiplied exponentially as [they] harness the power of members with whom [they] serve.”³⁵

The missionaries began meeting more frequently with members and using the newly announced member missionary website (see www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share) to

share ideas with members on how they can do missionary work, especially using their own social media accounts. Wherever it was possible for missionaries to meet with members in their homes (wearing their masks) at this time they would take a group picture (with member's permission) and then tag everyone in the picture so their friends could see them associate with the missionaries and thereby "ignite righteous curiosity" about the Church. Another initiative at this time was helping each ward and branch in the NDBM to prepare a "welcome video" to be shared over social media by members and missionaries alike with their nonmember friends in the area (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GkXIJoRAhA> for an example of a welcome video by a small branch in Beulah, ND).

[MTC] Maintaining the momentum from the Christmas initiative was important going into the New Year for the OTC and the NDBM. The missionaries in the NDBM carried the momentum of working more closely with members into the new year just as they experienced during the LightTheWorld Christmas campaign. Their OTC trainer spent many hours with missionaries in the NDBM to brainstorm ways to improve member involvement in using social media to invite their own friends to learn more. The NDBM started tagging members in posts so the friends of the members would see them with the missionaries and encouraging members to create content to share on their personal page and on the local Church Facebook page.

[Missionary] In hopes of starting the new year off right, increased emphasis was placed on working with members. The NDBM used the online ward/branch member missionaries more and encouraged the missionaries to work with each and every member in the ward to use social media. Fortunately, the missionaries were able to use the Church's newest resource www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org/share to offer ideas to members on how best to use social media. They also began working more with the ward and stake leaders and used the newly redefined missionary coordination meetings to communicate with members of the committee using text, e-mail, or Messenger groups. The first stake presidency and high council social media training took place. It was important for the leaders to understand and use social media themselves for missionary purposes so they could encourage the members to do the same. The missionaries also began creating a series of videos called ward (branch) welcome videos. These videos were filmed and edited by the content missionaries for the wards/branches throughout the NDBM, using local leaders, members, and missionaries as they invited friends and acquaintances in the community to join them. (For an example of one of the branch welcome videos see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GkXIJoRAhA&ab_channel=WalkwithChrist). These videos were posted to the Local Church Facebook Pages, at the Google listing for

the meetinghouse, and shared directly by missionaries and members to their friends over Messenger or on their social media timelines.

Quarter 2 of 2021

[MP] The Easter Initiative, *#StartingToday*, preoccupied the missionaries the first week of the quarter. Again, this was a well-planned and -executed social media initiative developed by the Church and carried to the members and community by the full time missionaries. This quarter was also a time of transition and of streamlining the social media organization in anticipation of the release of the current mission president and many of the social media specialists as they completed their missions. These changes in leadership meant the new missionaries joining the NDBM each month needed to be trained in the use of social media as a missionary tool.

The NDBM continued to emphasize “member work” by encouraging missionaries to engage in frequent interaction (even daily) with the ward/branch missionary coordination committees and to share training messages with members from the newly created Church website: www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share. The use and development of ads, i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Google to invite people in the community to “Come and See” reached a new level.

The NDBM content team (videographers and editors) remained busy doing “Welcome Videos” with the local units and also capturing on video important stories from members and missionaries alike to post on the local Church Facebook pages and on the NDBM’s new YouTube channel (*Walk with Christ* in the NDBM). The Missionary Department reached out to the mission president and asked him to videotape stories of missionaries who experienced healing in their life through the atonement of Jesus Christ. The North America Central Area Presidency considered its 20 missions (and their missionaries) proficient-enough in using social media that they rolled back the weekly “best practice’s” meetings for mission presidents and social media specialists to bi-weekly.

[MTC] From a small team of 15 to a team of 70 (and the number continues to grow) the Online Teaching Center at the MTC supports more than 400 missions worldwide. A few missions, like the NDBM, continue to pioneer the use of social media in missionary work. The better use of current platforms and online teaching approaches with the adoption of new ones by missionaries is likely the next frontier for missionaries and the Online Teaching Center to visit. From a video about missionaries teaching the gospel on

TikTok (video-sharing social media app) going viral in the country of Georgia; to missionaries teaching exclusively online from outside of the country of Lesotho (country in South Africa) using Messenger Video and the local members performing the saving ordinances; to missionaries in the NDBM using social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to invite members and nonmembers to “talk of Christ, rejoice in Christ, [and] preach of Christ”³⁶ the Lord’s hand is seen in these new approaches to missionary work.

[Missionary] This quarter of the year was largely dedicated to the Easter initiative, #StartingToday, which provided the NDBM with similar opportunities as the Light-the-World campaign did during the last quarter of 2020. Using the Church’s resources created for the Easter initiative, along with some prepared by social media specialists that were more particular to the people and cultures within the NDBM, the missionaries were busy inviting everyone they could meet, virtually or physically, to learn more about the Church. The missionaries were especially preoccupied with sharing these resources with members so the members will share the same with their friends on Facebook or Instagram.

As the Easter campaign came to a close, the social media team began working on a 52-week content calendar to provide more relevant ideas and topics for missionaries to make posts about. The team paid close attention to national and state holidays and other awareness months, weeks, or days, e.g, May is mental health awareness month. Most importantly every topic selected for the week and within the context of events going on at the local, state, and federal levels was deeply anchored in the doctrine of Christ, in scripture, and in chapter three of *Preach My Gospel*. This calendar is used across all social media platforms in the NDBM and provides needed correlation and efficiency.

The NDBM began to prepare in earnest for the new mission president arriving on June 30, 2021 and the return home of most of the social media specialists just before or soon after this same time by providing in-depth training to new missionaries and newly called social media specialists. Furthermore, the social media missionaries created training videos on topics (e.g., basics of using Facebook and Instagram to find people to teach, tips on creating good content for personal and local Church Facebook Pages, using QR codes to invite people to follow local Church Facebook and Instagram Pages, etc.) they felt would be of most help to those who take their place.

At the end of the quarter the social media specialists who handled analytics for the NDBM reported that over 27,000 people now followed the local Church Facebook Pages

and another 2,100 the local Church Instagram Pages. As so many of these missionary pioneers were returning, and new ones taking their place, this scripture was fitting: “Paul had planted, Apollos watered; and God gave the increase.”³⁷

Conclusion

Writing this article invoked raw and fresh emotions for the authors while also reminding them of how the hand of providence carried them and all of missionary work through this trying pandemic. Those who read this article are influencers and will help prepare future missionaries, and local members too, to embrace new approaches to missionary work, including the use of social media. The day seen by prophets and Church leaders when the Lord would “hasten his work” and use technology to take the gospel to every corner of the earth is here. Elder Uchtdorf taught many times throughout the pandemic about how God was not surprised by what was happening and how He prepared the compensatory technology and tools needed for the restored gospel to penetrate every door closed by reason of virus, work schedule, security (gated communities), political reality, etc.

One of the biggest challenges missionaries the NDBM faced as they began using social media was the resistance (and sometimes criticism) of local members who, as well-meaning as they were, expected missionaries to do missionary work just as they did it when they were missionaries, or as they saw it done in their ward or branch the years previous to the pandemic. One of the greatest blessings was seeing missionaries who were temporarily assigned to the NDBM, and then called back to their original assignment, take with them what they learned about using social media in the NDBM to their original mission.

Truly, “the Lord’s thoughts and ways are not always man’s thoughts or ways”³⁸ but all believers acknowledge “His thoughts and ways” are always better. One of the future volumes of *Saints* will help all see more clearly the far-reaching impact of the pandemic on new and inspired approaches to missionary work. The missionaries in the NDBM know from their own experience while serving during the pandemic that “no puny arm [or virus]” or “unhallowed hand [or virus]” will interfere with God’s plan for all His children to hear the gospel in their “own language,” including the modern-day language of social media. Truly, the pandemic helped missionaries and members discover new approaches to accomplishing the same wonderful and eternal missionary purpose of inviting all to come unto Christ and in Elder Uchtdorf’s words the Church and missionary work must go “back to the future” and not “back to the past.”

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