The LDS Missionary Experience: Observations on Stress

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The LDS Missionary Experience: Observations on Stress

Madison H. Thomas, MD
Marian P. Thomas, BSW

Abstract

The missionary experience may exceed the stress-hardiness level of some missionaries. Professional observations over the past six years have prompted a survey of factors involved. Six special areas considered are: (1) Comparative models of life sequences; (2) Selected factors in stress; (3) Diversity of mission administrative and priority patterns; (4) Women in mission relationships; (5) End-of-mission and after-mission considerations; and, (6) Stress disorder parallels. Suggestions are made for some conceptual frameworks to help in further study of these areas, including a proposal to recognize as a clinical entity a mission-related stress disorder.

Missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) have set out to convert the world for the past century-and-a-half and have been largely responsible for the growth of the Church by over 1000% within the lifetime of some now living. For the stress-hardy among them the stresses involved in

The authors express gratitude to other participants in the AMCAP workshop on missionary mental health (April 1987) who added greatly to their insights and understanding: Richard C. Ferre, MD; A. James Morgan, MD; Glen R. Steenblik, MSW; Louis G. Moench, MD; David W. Smart, PhD; Kent Peterson, MSW; and, Glen VanWagenen, MSW. Likewise, they gratefully acknowledge the ideas shared with them by missionaries, returned missionaries, parents, and other mission presidents and leaders in various roles.
the work are seen as challenges to overcome and it is common for the end-of-mission reports to include the phrase “the best two years of my life.”

However, it is apparent that there are missionaries for whom the stresses encountered exceed the limits of their vulnerability with resulting short- and long-term consequences (Sellars, 1971; Thomas, 1976; Moench, 1987). Counselors with an LDS orientation are increasingly being called on to help those who develop emotional symptoms. The authors were invited to participate in a workshop on missionary mental health at the 13th semi-annual spring AMCAP meeting. What follows is an extension of material presented there.

Missionaries and Stress

From among limited specific references in the literature, some older examples may be helpful, as they do not reflect on current management practices but help to give understanding of inherent problems in a challenging situation.

Sellars (1971) reviewed the historical background of missionary work and cited a general conference statement of 60 years ago by Hugh J. Cannon that “the returned missionary is one of the biggest problems the Church has before it” (Cannon, 1928). Sellars reported her retrospective study by personal interview of 30 returned missionaries who were enrolled at the University of Utah and members of a returned missionary fraternity. She inquired about structural and interactional strains before, during, and after their missionary experience. (We equate her word “strain” with the word “stress” in more current usage.) She reported on many positive support elements. For our purposes, we have tabulated the percent of subjects who reported on various factors of “strain” in her study. (See Table 1, on facing page.)

She reported words and phrases used by her subjects in describing their feelings as follows: “anxiety, dejected, nervous, guilty, confused, not doing enough, lost interest, discouragement, felt inadequate, depressed, loss of freedom, negative attitude, physically tired, rebellion, scared, hated regimentation, doubting
Table 1

Percent of Returned Missionaries
Reporting Structural and Interactional “Strains”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>% of Subjects Reporting Strain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-entry Period</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missionary Home training content</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Home schedule</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role description</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mission field</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missionary work</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural shock</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership positions</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of success</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other missionaries and leaders</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role shock</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missionaries' feelings about themselves</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companions</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People (non-LDS, investigators, new converts)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First companion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other missionaries</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Return home</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving mission field</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being busy</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Elements reported by 20% or less of the subjects have been omitted from this tabulation.

worth, emotional strain, worried, personal conflict, doubt about value of mission, disappointed, shock, cannot turn back, feeling
others are looking at you, feel like crying, lonely, homesick, wasn’t happy about them forcing me, no longer autonomous, sometimes apathetic, ‘trunked-out,’ conflict within myself, mental anguish, negative, wore me down, not prepared, didn’t feel worthy, lost weight, couldn’t accomplish enough, mediocre missionary, sad, wanted to get out, didn’t do anything, failure, feel pressure, ineffective, rejection, wears you down, will be a strain my whole life.”

Other terms her subjects spontaneously used to express what they had experienced included: “discrepancy from ideal, upset me a lot, felt like a shadow, mission shock, destructive to my personality, always tired, physically ill, impatient, wore me down physically, didn’t think I was ready, hurts self-esteem, strain to keep up, complete lapse, wanted to set own goals, not doing as well as I could, something wrong with me, conflict, hated him at first, black spirit, broke me down, cried, disturbed, fighting, friction, hatred, lay awake at night, not happy, strife and struggle, went down to depths mentally, bad feeling, apathy, felt everything was against you, kept to myself, pessimistic, questioned values, starts getting on your nerves, weird, very emotional, felt alienated, made me feel inferior, helpless, unsure, quite disappointed, what’s the use, hard to adjust, in limbo, “not with it,” judging me unfairly, lost feeling, a little bitter, developed an ulcer, let down, uncomfortable, wanted to stay in protective shell, burns your strength, shy, took four years afterwards to relate to people, awkward, resentment, hard to live with family.”

Some of the descriptive words were repeated many times throughout, including the pre-entry and after-mission phases of the mission experience.

In summary, Sellars concluded that “when the total effects of the mission experience were judged, 59% of the effects were emotionally healthy and 41% were unhealthy,” based on 853 healthy effects and 600 unhealthy effects reported.

Although the numbers are small, it should be noted that the subjects were limited to those getting along well enough to do
academic work at the university level and to affiliate with a social group.

In 1976, Matthew Thomas reported on responses of eight psychiatrists and counselors in the Salt Lake City area who had had extensive experience with missionaries. There was a strong consensus that there were major stresses involved in the missionary experience and wide variation in how they were handled by individuals and leaders. One estimated the incidence of psychotic episodes at four times the national level for that age group and all agreed depression and psychosomatic reactions were prevalent. Other observers have confirmed similar impressions in personal communications.

Individual vulnerability to stress varies widely. What appears to be stress is often good. It is the spice of life if one has resources to cope with it, but it may be destructive. Stress is not only from obvious factors or always from outside influences such as rejection, deprivation, hardship, or threat of physical harm or death. Internal factors such as feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness, a recognition of conflict between understood principles and observed practices, or a sense of futility in an endeavor may produce either acute or delayed symptoms. Even threat of physical harm depends upon how it is perceived by the individual.

Holmes and his associates (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) in their pioneering work on stress, rated life experiences as to their impact on individuals' subsequent health. They listed events such as changes in line of responsibilities or conditions of work, ending or changing schools, changing living conditions, personal habits, residence, recreation, church or social activities, eating or sleeping habits or changing family relations. On their widely-used event rating scales, adding up the values related to leaving home and beginning a mission gives a score of 302 within a few months. Any score in excess of the 300 level within one year is predictive of a 70% likelihood of serious illness within two years, according to Holmes. With frequent moves and changing companionships and leadership responsibilities, a similar numerical stress value might well accumulate during a mission. Then, a similar sequence takes place at the end of the mission. With an early after-mission
marriage, a missionary might accumulate a score of 1000 or more in a two-and-a-half-year period, suggesting levels of stress very seldom found in ordinary life patterns.

Since most missionaries get along well, one must conclude either there is a magnificent support structure in place or most missionaries have learned great stress-hardiness before their missions, or both. However, the impact on the minority who are less stress-hardy deserves consideration especially in light of growing understanding of the effects of stress.

**Basis for Observations**

Perceptions of the missionary experience vary because missions are diverse and observers have diverse backgrounds. When we ask missionaries or mission presidents, we hear highly variable estimates of the incidence of emotional problems of missionaries. In the past, individuals with problems may have been considered as lacking in testimony, not being spiritual enough, or just not willing to work. Newer resources may help to give broader interpretations. Mission traditions and circumstances vary in different areas. Our observations of missionaries were made on a sample limited in numbers and in time and place, but our recording them may add to the collective wisdom of counselors in understanding mission and after-mission experiences.

From July 1982 until July 1985, one of the authors served as a mission president in southern Wales and southwest England. We believe that the mission may be considered representative or sort of average. It was not a "hard" mission where many missionaries return home without baptizing, nor an "easy" one where thousands are joining. It had cultural challenge and cold weather but these were not excessive.

Our leadership style included open and frequent communication. We had private personal interviews every month and were able to see every missionary face-to-face every two weeks. Our professional backgrounds seemed to make it easier for missionaries to be open in expressing their feelings. We were fortunate to have excellent counseling support from John McLaverty who had
responsibility for Church Social Services in Great Britain. We subsequently worked with missionaries during another full-time mission in New York City (1987-88). After each mission, we have had follow-up contacts with former missionaries and their parents and presidents of other missions, though not in an organized research project fashion. Older couples have been omitted from consideration here.

**General Impressions**

There was great variability in mission-readiness. It was our impression that any new group of missionaries included about one-fourth who were either quite immature, lacking in any real personal testimony, or were on missions largely from the impact of social pressures from families, peers and/or leaders. Some would indicate in the first few days or weeks that they were not ready for a mission. In our three years, two did go home for that reason and at least ten times as many talked about it. Most responded to reassurance that their feelings were not unusual and that if they concluded they should go home for the right reasons, we would support their decision and promptly arrange their return. Several accepted an offer of professional counseling, which helped them decide on their own to stay.

Missionary readiness appeared to relate to the same factors as have been reported as important in the progress of young men in the Aaronic priesthood and the decision of about one-third of them to accept mission calls, namely strong religious values in the home, feelings of belonging, and strong relationships with youth leaders (Home is Cradle, 1987).

An observed high incidence of inappropriate weight gain by missionaries is thought to be related to feelings of stress.

Among the almost 400 missionaries we worked with, we found that significant emotional problems occurred with about the same incidence as in the average population. Results of a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) multi-center study of the incidence of mental illness came to our attention (Locke and Regier, 1980). We found a surprisingly close match with their
findings. At any one time, about 15% of our missionaries were in a status where professional help was or had been appropriate, with approximately 14% having anxiety or depression problems, in about equal numbers, and 1% having schizophrenic patterns.

The NIMH studies found a variable incidence of alcohol and other drug problems. Pre-mission screening weeded these out, but it did not seem to alter the prevalence of the others.

Two elders could not live within the mission framework because of character disorders and returned home. Recognition of their problems was delayed because companions tended to be highly supportive of them.

When emotional symptoms emerged, careful open-ended interviewing not infrequently led to disclosure of feelings of guilt about past behavioral patterns. This was a continuing process. When missionaries taught investigators high principles and standards, their understanding was expanded and they realized there were things they had not cleared with their bishops. Most often, thorough interview and ecclesiastical clearing was all that was needed, but some accepted an opportunity for professional counseling because of persisting feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

Special Areas of Observation and Responses

Six special areas have been selected as a focus for observations and responses as follows:

1. Comparative models of life sequences.
2. Selected factors in stress.
3. Diversity of mission administrative and priority patterns.
6. Stress disorder parallels.

At the conclusion of each of these special areas, we draw limited conclusions and suggest ways in which these preliminary observa-
tions and responses might be extended to further our understanding of the stresses involved in the missionary experience.

1. Comparative Models of Life Sequences

Before-mission, mission, and after-mission life involves a sequence of experiences. Some have said each mission experience is unique, but our observations suggest a step-by-step progression of events and experiences generally similar for all missionaries, irrespective of other variables.

Social scientists have evolved patterns of life sequences as a means of studying and understanding them. Our response has been to develop a framework for comparison of various models, to which we have added priesthood calling and missionary service models, as in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Deciding</th>
<th>Processing</th>
<th>Getting Started</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>After Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Choice of School</td>
<td>Application, Interviews, Acceptance</td>
<td>Registration, Orientation, “Hazing”</td>
<td>Making the Grade</td>
<td>After Graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Choice of Job</td>
<td>Application, Interviews, Acceptance</td>
<td>Initial Training</td>
<td>Doing the Job</td>
<td>After Job, Loss or Retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priesthood Calling</td>
<td>Calling, Setting apart</td>
<td>Learning the role</td>
<td>Serving in the calling</td>
<td>Loss of the Mantle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Service</td>
<td>Choice of service</td>
<td>Induction, Basic Training</td>
<td>Active Duty</td>
<td>After Active Duty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missionary Service</td>
<td>Decision to go</td>
<td>Interviews, Farewell, MTC Experience</td>
<td>The Mission</td>
<td>After the Mission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another possible parallel model is suggested by a recent report of the Bishop’s Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988). They report “serious and substantial morale problems” among the 53,500 priests who share with LDS missionaries requirements of mandatory celibacy, long
hours of work, and a not-always-friendly public. Other models may also have parallel sequences despite obvious variations in detail.

We suggest there would be value in using such parallel models of life sequences in further study of the missionary experience, perhaps leading to descriptive literature of value to missionaries, parents and leaders.

2. Selected Factors in Stress

Missionary work is seen as one of the prime responsibilities of the LDS Church and its members. In recent years, a responsibility has been placed on every worthy young man to serve a mission. This changed the missionary force from a smaller group of specially motivated young men to one made up of a broad cross section of the young people of the Church, men and women alike.

Preparation for departure includes the sobering impact for most of first-time temple attendance. For some, the commitments made there may seem almost overwhelming.

The mission experience itself begins with the rituals of departure, with the young person being lionized, perhaps an unrecognized effort to build a store of self-confidence to draw upon. Many report leaving home on an emotional high.

The Missionary Training Center (MTC) experience follows in contrast in some ways, despite strong reinforcing elements. The missionary's first name is taken away and replaced by "Elder" or "Sister." Uniformity of dress and conduct is required. Every hour is scheduled and many have never had such a demanding program of long hours of study. An always present companion may be a first encounter with lack of privacy. An extended moratorium on close relations with members of the opposite sex comes abruptly for those who may have been dating regularly for several years.

One of the internal stresses reported by some is an awareness of a gap between principle and practice. At the upper administrative and training levels, the highest principles are expressed, but some returned missionaries they meet report their own emphasis on numbers of baptisms by whatever means as the principal key to leadership advancement and "being a success." To the vulnerable,
this dichotomy may be a heavy burden, made heavier by its not being very acceptable to talk about it.

Other conflicting messages tend to stress the vulnerable. For example, in the past, instructions have been to exclude reading of any books except those on a short approved list, whereas other instructions have encouraged wide-ranging reading of historical and social materials. For the meticulous, uncertainty may develop.

After reaching their field of labor, missionaries are often expected to respond to major changes of program direction. Within three years, the missionaries we served with were directed to change from using discussion which featured the Book of Mormon prominently to eliminating any reference to it until well into the discussions, and finally to going back to presenting it prominently in the first discussion. They changed from memorized discussions to non-memorized ones. Terms for missions went from 24 months to 18 months and back to 24 months. The latter was especially difficult for many to handle, as they felt under pressure, often from parents, to stay the extra six months but felt they had completed what they had been called to do.

Changing of mission presidents midway through their missions may be traumatic for some missionaries, especially if methods and priorities differ significantly. It seemed that vulnerable missionaries from large stable wards were more upset by changes as they had had less experience with "differences of administration" and "diversities of operations" (1 Corinthians 12:5–6; Doctrine and Covenants 46:15–16).

Another institutionally related stressor might be uncertainty of direction which may be stressful for some missionaries. In the past, instructions for missionary work were scattered in a number of places: the White Handbook (Missionary Handbook, 1973), various bulletins and handbooks, MTC instructional materials, letters from the First Presidency, letters from the Council of the Twelve, letters from the Missionary Department, etc. Added to this were many verbal instructions and the very powerful impact of traditions from an unknown past.
For example, missionaries were instructed to exercise and write in their journals, but there was no time in the White Handbook daily schedule to do it, so it came out of gospel study or some other time. Thus, the more conscientious missionary felt he was breaking rules whatever he did. One of our insightful missionaries wrote plaintively, “President, I wish you would write down all the unwritten rules.” Our response was to publish, with general authority review and approval, a supplement to the Missionary Handbook to try to minimize or interpret these ambiguities. We also produced a Missionary Mini-Handbook (1983) for joint use in wards and a Missionary Maxi-Handbook (1983) for use in stakes, taking their content from over a dozen different sources. They seemed to help.

Another possible source of stress may be the lack of “fit” between a missionary and his mission’s traditions and priorities where motivation-by-recognition is used. For example, a potentially vulnerable missionary may become depressed if he never makes the “winners” list and never gets leadership roles because he isn’t a “producer.” On the other hand, in a mission with few measurable results, a hard-driving missionary from baptism-producing family traditions may become anxious when he can’t count his results and feels diverted when asked to do things not directly “results”-oriented.

Adaptable missionaries may take on elements of the marketing character described by Fromm (1976, pp. 147-53) where success and results are seen as paramount.

A more general concern arises when missionaries feel there is inconsistency between the priorities of being strong and aggressive as a leader and those of gospel teachings of meekness, gentleness and humility.

Although this basis for stress is a general concern throughout society, it is more apparent among LDS Church members because they are expected to adhere to higher standards. It is further amplified when strong encouragement is given to missionaries (especially the elders), to be aggressive, to be leaders, to be competitive and forceful and to produce expected results. Fromm
(1976, pp. 145–46) and others have commented on the contrast between the conditional "fatherly" love that depends upon achievement and good behavior, and unconditional "motherly" love of mercy and compassion. Leadership may tend toward one or the other or vacillate between.

Examining masculine and feminine gender stereotypes has been found useful in studying the dilemmas of modern working women who are often expected to be, as many missionaries are, "everything to everybody." In Table 3 are excerpts from a list of gender stereotypes, cited by Braiker (1986), which may prove useful in considering the differences between our culturally-based characteristics of masculinity and the ideals expressed in what is taught to investigators about love and meekness. These contrasts may set the stage for stresses to be internalized.

Table 3
Gender Stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a leader</td>
<td>Affectionate (loving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>Childlike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Eager to soothe hurt feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful</td>
<td>Loves children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliant</td>
<td>Loyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sufficient</td>
<td>Sensitive to others' needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong personality</td>
<td>Sympathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Expected Behavior)</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Warm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yielding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Principles taught)
We suggest that a study of some of these apparent dilemmas might result in helps for professionals who are called on to counsel missionaries. They will better understand the factors of internal stress, and more specifically recognize and deal with the apparent conflicts of role expectations and beatitudinal admonitions. Perhaps insights gained from such a study of the missionary microcosm might have spill-over benefits for Church members at large.

3. **Diversity of Mission Administrative and Priority Patterns**

The missionary experience varies widely from mission to mission, partly because of the variety of local member and non-member populations and social customs, but also because of a diversity of mission traditions, which in turn are shaped to a large extent by mission presidents. They bring to their tasks widely divergent backgrounds of experience and traditions. As a result, we have a whole spectrum of priorities and methods which have an impact on the lives of young missionaries. Also, patterns of emotional support may vary. Our observations of these socio-cultural and institutional aspects of missions began from the first days of our mission with vigorous expressions by priesthood leaders of almost total dissatisfaction with things as they were. We had expected to be welcomed with open arms because baptisms were up over 500% over the previous year, but we weren’t. The mission was having phenomenal success in baptizing, but priesthood leaders predicted that almost none of these new members would stay active. They did not say, but it appeared that, among other factors, the baptism of a person who became inactive made them look worse by the percentage statistical yardsticks they were measured by, such as attendance at sacrament meetings, percent going to the temple, etc. Bishops resisted baptisms and full-time missionaries considered priesthood leaders as “enemies” of the Church.

Only a few years before, our mission had made the transition to having organized stakes throughout its area. Originally, the mission president had presided over component districts, but with the change, the mission was superimposed on stakes and linked to
them by an often tenuous chain of correlation, with each component retaining its essential autonomy.

The official statements were clear. On April 3, 1985 President Benson quoted President Kimball: “... convert baptisms are not the responsibility of the Missionary Department of the Church, but are the responsibility of ecclesiastical line officers and members of the Church” (Benson, 1985). However, the powerful force of tradition still gave most mission presidents the feeling that the principal yardstick of their success was the number of baptisms. Meetings with other presidents often gave a sense of being among competitors rather than team members.

In our situation, a polarization between missionaries and local members had taken place and an unacknowledged but real sort of “resistance movement” had developed. This tendency was deplored as “friction” by a general authority in 1971 (Dunn) and discounted by others as “to be expected.” Correlation efforts, which recognized two separate “forces” in the same sphere, although applied diligently, did not resolve the problem. Retention rates remained so low that net growth of the Church over a ten-year period was essentially nil in the area served by the mission, despite thousands of baptisms, millions of dollars spent, and over two thousand man-years of full-time LDS missionary effort in that area. It appeared that the local priesthood leaders were correct in their impression that people were being lost about as fast as they were gained.

After many hours of listening to reasons for the polarization, two concepts emerged. First, there were residues of feudal and class traditions that make the British slow to accept strangers from outside their close-knit ranks. Second, with exclusively American mission presidents and predominantly American missionaries, members felt they were being “invaded” or “colonized” by an American missionary “force.”

Details of these observations and our organizational responses to them were reported at the BYU Symposium on the Church in the British Isles (Thomas, 1987) and only highlights pertaining to the missionary experience will be mentioned here. Although lacking nicety of design or sophistication of measurement, our
circumstances provided an experimental model from which certain perceptions have been derived,

In response to these perceptions of polarization, a unified system for missionary and retention work was developed in meetings with local priesthood leaders and approved by the executive administrator. Direction of day-to-day activities of missionaries was put in the hands of local priesthood leaders. At local discretion, full-time missionaries became active, along with local members, in retention and reactivation work in addition to their finding and teaching missionary work. Units varied greatly. A common-sense balance was encouraged. Missionaries assigned to units became mission leader assistants and zone leaders became mission president assistants to visit units and support the local (stake) mission presidents and their associates.

Dramatic changes in attitudes took place. Members and leaders spontaneously expressed enthusiasm for the new arrangement. Retention, one year after baptism, rose from 10% on the average to 80% or more, as gauged by stake leaders, who felt a sense of growth and increasing strength. Fewer converts were baptized, but the improved retention set a trend for doubling or tripling the net gain in solid members.

Another perceived consequence of the unified system was the effect on full-time missionaries. Before the unified system, our impression was that some individuals had become almost exclusively concerned with numbers of baptisms and on occasion rode roughshod over sensitive feelings of members and leaders in order to make baptism goals. After working more closely with members under the unified system, they seemed more mature, considerate, and seriously committed to broader principles. (Incidentally, this shift away from a “macho” image may have been reflected in greater safety, as driving speeds and vehicle accident rates went down dramatically.) Disciplinary problems decreased noticeably. However, this may also have been the result of other factors, such as the “settling-in” and maturing of the mission president, etc. Regardless, in each of these cases, it seems reasonable that ending the polarization and becoming “of one heart” helped significantly.
Subsequently, by direction, many of the features of the unified system were eliminated. These experiences led us to consider characteristics of various types of mission traditions and to formulate a tentative descriptive spectrum as shown in Table 4.

We have listed a number of things which appear to be related in varying degrees. Listing of factors is not meant to be judgmental, as any of the types may be most suited to a given area or time, to the experience of the incumbent mission president, or to the direction he receives. Mission traditions, though strong, are not static and change from time to time. There are probably no "pure" Type A or Type Z missions, though most will tend toward one end of the spectrum or the other, often reflecting the kind of administrative emphasis perceived by the mission president. Our experience began toward the Type A end of the spectrum, moved toward Type Z, and ended somewhere in mid-range. Explaining to missionaries the background and reasons for changes seemed to help them to cope with the stresses of changing patterns.

Many missions will show a mixture of features. The more stable ones are likely to be in mid-range, similar to long-established wards and stakes where a traditional balance has been struck between an emphasis on measured results (such as attendance or performance of specific functions), versus the intangible things of the Spirit that can't be so easily counted and reported. Depending upon one's perspective, leaders may be viewed as "producers and counters" or as "visionaries," or somewhere in between, each being effective according to his own traditions.

To help in understanding the particular circumstances a missionary finds difficulty coping with, it seems there may be value for counselors and others concerned with missionaries to explore a more fully developed pattern such as this sort of descriptive spectrum of mission traditions. Priority emphasis and administrative patterns are not the responsibility of professional counselors, but of ecclesiastical authorities. Since these will vary in different parts of the world, counselors may be helped by a conceptual framework such as this, especially when called upon for evaluation or short-term therapy for missionaries with stress-induced symptoms. Professionals should observe the injunction given Oliver
Table 4
A Tentative Descriptive Spectrum of Mission Traditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Missions</th>
<th>Type A Mission</th>
<th>Intermediate types</th>
<th>Type Z Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Principal Motivational Emphasis | High number of baptisms | 1. Baptize  
2. Correlation within limits | Support of local priesthood in their responsibility for growth of the Church |
| Priorities | 1. Baptize^a  
2. Be a success | 1. Baptize^a  
2. Avoid offense | 1. Missionary and family  
2. Companion  
3. Members  
4. Non-members |
| Local Priesthood and Member Response | Reject responsibility for missionary and retention work^b | Limited response to correlation efforts | Accept responsibility for missionary, retention and reactivation work |
| Potential for Polarization of Members and Missionaries | High^c | Present, but not expressed | Low |
| Anticipated Results | More baptisms  
Variable retention | Average baptisms  
Variable retention | Fewer baptisms  
Improved retention |
| Motivational methods (Trends observed) | “Business model” Rewards/punishments, labeling winners/losers, goals become quotas, end may justify means, rules may bend if... | Mixture of methods | Personal responsibility model.  
Principles prevail. Personal, private goals.  
Need for rules minimized. |
| Leadership Style | Authoritative | Moderately authoritative | Sitting in council with and teaching one another^d |
| Mental Preparation | Means to an end | Mixed purposes | To understand better |
| Spiritual Preparation | For personal progress | For progress and to serve better | To serve better |
| Missionary mental health | Needs further study | Present patterns of mission and after-mission problems | Decreases mission and post-mission stress |

^aType A missions traditionally focus on numbers of baptisms. ^b"They won't stay away." ^c"Friction to be expected" (Dunn, 1971). ^dD&C 107:85–89. ^ePersonal Impressions.
Cowdery to write (or counsel) "not by commandment but by wisdom" (Doctrine and Covenants 28:5, 8), based on understanding.

4. Women in Mission Relationships

While the women in our mission were exposed to stresses similar to those of the men, our observations suggested some differences in selection and relationship patterns. About one-fourth of our missionaries were women. The majority were from the U.S. and the balance from Europe. In terms of social confidence and skills, there seemed to be an over-representation at each end of a spectrum, with fewer in the middle. The incidence of emotional problems was quite consistent. At any one time, about one-fourth of our sisters were in professional counseling or had been during their missions. We have been assured we did not receive a selected sample.

Something we were not prepared for was the incidence of sexual abuse in early life. We came to expect that at any one time a significant number of our sisters had been the victim of sexual molestation as a child, or of rape as a youth. It had, almost without exception, never been previously reported. As they progressed in teaching gospel principles, an unwarranted nevertheless debilitating sense of guilt seemed gradually to rise, even to the point of immobilizing some for a time, until it reached a level where it had to be shared with the mission president.

We were surprised because we were confronted with these difficulties before it became generally known in our profession that this problem was as pervasive as it is now known to be in the general population. It appears it was not out of line with general prevalence rates. In these circumstances, as the stories tearfully poured out, it was usually possible to give reassurance of absence of guilt, structure any steps of repentance indicated, if any, and give ecclesiastical clearance to continue their work. This, along with encouraging them to dwell no longer on the past, enabled many of them to move ahead with a new sense of confidence and zest for the work.

For others—especially where the trauma had been early and repeated—long-standing feelings of guilt and low personal value
were so well established, nearly all of the sisters took the opportuni-
ty to obtain professional counseling. Church social services staff
used short-term counseling and often a miraculous transformation
appeared in a matter of weeks. Sisters with an unkempt, head-
down, worried appearance blossomed into confident and well-
groomed persons whose faith in themselves and the gospel had
been restored.

Beyond these individual considerations were perceptions of
women in social and cultural relationships. It appeared that the
sisters generally related better to local members than the elders did
and often drew greater emotional support from them. In each
major geographic area, there usually was a mature woman who
provided a live-in haven for sisters who needed special nurturing.
Occasionally, with borderline medical-psychological problems, such
a placement proved diagnostic.

An area of concern to many is that of girl-boy or sister-elder
relationships. At the outset, we observed a fair amount of playing-
up to the elders, a sort of “fascinating womanhood” approach to
being invited to share group P-Days or spend time during confer-
ences, etc. Early on, there seemed to be too many mid-month
transfers or monthly changes to break up sister-elder relationships.
Nothing serious happened, but we seemed often only a step ahead
of possible disaster.

A number of seemingly unrelated things led to what we
interpreted as a significant change in relationships. First came
bicycles. Long-standing tradition—not rules—had dictated that
sisters were not allowed to ride bikes. When asked about it, with
only a few exceptions, they expressed a great desire to be allowed
to do so to increase their effectiveness as missionaries. Some of
them wanted someone else to keep the bikes in repair, but when it
was explained that they were missionaries and responsible for their
own bikes, just as the elders, they accepted that concept of equality
as well.

Next came automobiles. Again, tradition, not rules, had
dictated that sisters could not drive mission vehicles, or even ride
in them with the elders. When they were encouraged to qualify
themselves for British driver licenses and assigned to vehicles as appropriate, the sisters responded positively. Simply extending the standard rules of missionary chaperonage to include vehicles eliminated a double standard.

Third came leadership and training patterns. Traditional mission organization puts the older, more mature sisters entirely under the direction of young elders who are either in or just barely beyond their teenage years. In other areas, sister districts or zones have been tried, with women in leadership, but these deviate from basic Church leadership principles. However, at ward, stake and highest general Church levels, there is the expectation for women to play important leadership and training roles in support of priesthood leadership. Mission handbooks did not exclude use of people in training and coordinating roles.

We developed a role for coordinating sisters in each of the zones who were expected to communicate with, arrange training activities with, and enhance the work of the sisters in their areas. They worked closely with zone leaders to coordinate the work just as Relief Society presidents work with their bishops.

Next, we established the role of a traveling coordinating sister to work with her zone counterparts and with the assistants to the president. Morale among the sisters appeared to be enhanced and problems were more quickly reported and resolved. Sisters commented on how hard it had been to talk about some of their problems with young men several years their junior.

It was apparent that on Preparation Days (P-Days), small groups of missionaries would gather for social purposes, with the potential for the formation of cliques. The sisters felt they “had” to play up to the elders to make sure they would be invited. The less socially active were often left out of the groups. Recognizing this, and after various trials, we settled on a regular once-a-month event we called Organized P-Day, arranged by the zone leaders and the coordinating sister for the zone. Various activities were planned, such as visits to castles, museums, golf courses, ice rinks, or to local chapels for games. Attendance was not mandatory, but everyone was invited and almost all attended.
We weren't sure of exact explanations, but it seemed the sisters gained a greater sense of place and value through such seemingly unrelated things as bicycles, automobiles, leadership and training relationships, and always being included with the elders at a social event at least once each month.

A news report of studies of Jewish kibbutzim in Israel came to our attention and suggested further possible insights. It was observed that Jewish young people, in general, had about the same sexual behavior as other populations, but not among members of their own kibbutz. They noted there is a very strong taboo against sexual feelings and activity among members of a family of brothers and sisters. The kibbutz seemed to duplicate the family pattern sufficiently that the same taboo applied to its members. We reasoned that by bringing our sisters more into feeling of equality with their brother elders and insuring their access to group social activities, we had established an extended family constellation of equals and, to an extent, duplicated the kibbutz observations. We also speculated that there may well have been a secondary effect on the elders. Having less "stimulating" but satisfying regular social contacts with the sisters may have contributed to an unusually low incidence of serious sexual problems of any sort among the elders.

It seemed that both the sisters and elders were more stable, mid-month transfers dropped to almost zero, and the sisters could focus more on the work and less on the elders. It would take a well-planned research effort to evaluate the similarities we are suggesting, but we offer them for consideration as to their value in reducing some of the stresses of the mission field.

We suggest that these tentative insights might be studied more definitively and lead to a broader understanding of the emerging social patterns of concern to women and men alike, as their shared roles in the work place and at home become more alike. It seems possible that retrospective study of women’s changing attitudes in various mission settings might lead to a better understanding of roles in planning for youth, young adult and women’s programs, especially where there are large concentrations as at universities or in singles’ units.
5. **End of Mission and After-Mission Considerations**

The later part of a mission represents a period of concern for many missionaries, some wondering if they have “done enough.” This appeared to be accentuated in those who opted to go home after 18 months rather than staying for two years. Others were apprehensive about the transition from a relatively simple, single-task, structured life to an unstructured one with many conflicting priorities. These included both self-imposed, family, Church or community expectations, such as selecting a career and entering employment or school; a new social life; physical fitness; scripture study; accepting Church teaching or leadership callings; courting; doing genealogical and temple work; writing a personal history; doing welfare work; doing missionary work; reestablishing a new and different set of family relationships; attending Church meetings faithfully; being involved in community activities; developing acceptable recreational activities, etc., etc.

Although no systematic follow-up has been possible, we have noted that after their missions, life goes on to continuing success for most, but it does not do so for all. We are not longer surprised by after-mission adjustment problems of uncertainty, frustration, feelings of not being valued, futility and confusion. When there is a good trust level with parents, it is surprising how often they describe their son’s or daughter’s reintegration as having been “tough,” with frustrations on both sides. Missionaries who attend missionary reunions are probably among the more positive and confident ones, but some show a surprising and dramatic change in appearance soon after their return. Conservative hair styles and suits are replaced by beards, mustaches, long hair and clothing suggesting life-style diversity.

Observers have reported to us that up to one-fourth of returned missionaries on two non-church university campuses became essentially inactive within a year, and an indirect indication of a similar level appeared on a third Utah campus. Some mission presidents have suggested similar rough estimates, though highly variable, with some stake presidents keeping the numbers low through special efforts. One British leader told us that of 26 missionaries he had sent out as a stake president, only one was fully
active and one partially so. Quite reasonably, detailed statistics are not available because missionaries become part of the general membership of the Church on their return, with probably an overall higher than average participation.

We have not had an opportunity for systematic follow-up as done by Sellars (1971), but a number of returned missionaries have commented on the stresses they felt during their missions, especially as related to changes in mission priorities. Others have commented on the stresses of returning, most frequently mentioning their feelings of conflict, decreased interest in Church activities and a sense of not really belonging or fitting in any more. Near the surface have been feelings of guilt, most often expressed as feeling they should have been more diligent. Lack of attendance at Church meetings may represent an avoidance of symbols of the stresses they felt, with their associated reminders of things they should be doing more diligently. Parents comment that reminding them of their responsibilities may be met with a surprisingly strong reaction and not infrequently with openly expressed hostility.

Most of these feelings were listed in a reference in the Library of the Church Historian on “The Church Activity of Returned Missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (1977, approx.)—the only study we know of aside from a few theses of 1930s vintage. In order of significance were listed problems of dating, courtship and marriage; loss of routine and structure; adjustment to family and friends; homesickness for the mission field; lack of Church assignments; and financial-employment problems. Among causes of inactivity were listed depression, loneliness and feelings of unimportance. Neither this report nor our Mission Presidents Handbook or Missionary Health Manual contained reference to use of professional counseling during or after-missions, perhaps because it may not be widely enough available. Further, this report indicated higher levels of activity than reported to us, perhaps because times are changing or because there is spontaneous “recovery” when follow-up is extended to five or ten years.

Among returned missionaries, when talk turns to rates of inactivity among new converts, one may hear expressions of a sense
of futility. Occasionally, one hears “I don’t think I did anybody else any good.” This in turn relates to feelings of doubts about the Church and loss of faith in leaders as well as doctrine. All of this tends to accentuate non-participation. Many of these elements are similar to those of veterans of Vietnam and similar circumstances where stress was often associated with feelings of futility.

Our response to these end-of-mission and after-mission concerns has been limited by circumstances. At final interviews with missionaries, an effort was made to alert them to the complexity of expectations they would face and to remind them of their personal responsibilities for planning and setting time priorities. Since our return, we have listened to reports of frustrations and painful transitions, often from those who had performed very well on their missions. They seemed reassured to find that others had experienced similar feelings.

The isolated report on *Church Activity of Returned Missionaries* (1977, approx.) reminds us that returned Missionaries are not falling away in great numbers. However, the loss of even a small percentage of the returned missionary force of the church is a significant loss. And those who are “active” still need to be strengthened. Consequently, the welfare of returned missionaries should continue to be a matter of great concern to the Church.

We hope it might be possible to gain greater insight into the end-of-mission and after-mission experience by missionary-centered, feelings-oriented, professional-level studies, including a diversity of locations and social levels. This would appear to be an appropriate social and professional concern.

### 6. Stress Disorder Parallels

In our introductory comments, we referred to the surprising level of life stress events involved in the mission experience, as defined by Holmes and Rahe (1967). In subsequent sections, we referred to additional kinds of stress peculiar to mission circumstances, such as divergence of precept and practice, diversity of mission administrative and priority patterns, an enforced moratorium on expression of sexual maturation, and dilemmas inherent in returning to the “real world” again.
Beyond these general and specific stresses are those embraced by even less tangible concepts of being expected to be completely committed, strong, faithful, diligent, hard-working, single-minded, spiritual and "perfect" in all things. Where mission tradition uses motivation by competition and reward or recognition, there will inevitably be the converse of motivation by embarrassment and guilt for the less productive. For the strong, these stresses appear to build greater strengths, but for the vulnerable, the same circumstances may be highly stressful.

Bessel A. Van der Kolk, in the book *Psychological Trauma* (1976) cites Krystal's finding that it was not the intensity of the experience for the individual that "posed challenge and generated the affective response," which in turn caused the ultimate posttraumatic adaptation. Van der Kolk (1976) describes reaction to psychological trauma as often being a chronic sense of helplessness. Once embarked on a mission, a person has no voluntary way out except by the very painful route of going home early, which is embarrassing to himself and his family because of its frequent association in the public mind with serious sexual misbehavior. For the vulnerable, staying on may result in the potential for an extended period of feeling helpless.

Vulnerability has been related by Van der Kolk to genetic disposition or developmental levels, adults with a firm sense of identity being less vulnerable. Disruption of social support, prior traumatization and preexisting personality factors also contribute to the appearance of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. He also cites Terr's study of children kidnapped on a school bus to show that in the immature, 100% showed symptoms as long as four years later, even though there had been no physical harm. He further refers to a long latency in appearance of symptoms, as late as 15 years or more after the trauma.

Although the clinical syndrome defined as posttraumatic stress disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-III-R* (DSM-III-R [1987]) describes an appropriate stress as being "outside the range of human experience and . . . markedly distressing to almost anyone," our interest has been drawn to noticeable parallels between clinical cases of posttraumatic
stress disorder we have seen in other settings and missionaries and returned missionaries who have shared their painful experiences with us. Some of these parallels are outlined in Table 5 below.

Our impression is that such a formulation as a mission-related stress disorder (MRSD) would obviously not apply to the great majority of stress-hardy missionaries who are reinforced in their strengths by effectively coping with the variety of stresses encountered. However, if it is true that there are those who are stress-vulnerable, the parallel patterns should be useful as a model. Because the missionary experience may prove to be a series of stresses with cumulative impact on the vulnerable, and because missionary stresses are often seen as more psychological than as a simple threat to physical survival, it seems useful to suggest the term mission-related stress disorder (MRSD), rather than its parallel, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In our observations, it seems that a number of missionaries and returned missionaries who have been considered as showing anxiety or depression symptoms might appropriately be described more specifically as having mission-related stress disorder. Likewise, the term adjustment disorder (309.24, 309.00, 309.28, 309.82, 309.83, etc., of the DSM-III-R) might fit some with a short duration of symptoms (less than one month), but MRSD seems to provide a better framework for understanding and helping in recovery from the longer lasting reactions seen.

Progress is being made in use of methods to develop stress-hardiness and to help those with posttraumatic stress disorder gain a new sense of wellness (Flannery, 1987; Borysenko, 1987; Adams, et. al, 1983, Chapter 5).

By and large, the spiritual and emotional growth and maturation of most missionaries observed was phenomenal. Even among some where there had been previous long-term unemployment or academic failure, the results were often miraculous. However, others made slower progress, notably those with long-standing problems of early abuse, dropping out of school, never learning work habits, etc., and still others appeared to show clear stress
Table 5
Observed Stress Disorder Parallels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-traumatic Stress Disorder</th>
<th>Mission-Related Stress Disorder (proposed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> Recognizable Stressor</td>
<td><strong>A</strong> Recognizable stressor(s) (may be internalized)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> Avoidance of numbing of responsiveness (at least three)</td>
<td><strong>B</strong> Recall of stress feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Avoiding thoughts or feelings</td>
<td>(1) Recurrent recollections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Avoiding activities that arouse recollections</td>
<td>(2) Recurrent dream patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Selective amnesia</td>
<td>(3) Recurring feelings of conflict associated with ideational or environment stimuli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Diminished interest in activities</td>
<td>(4) Distress on exposure to symbolic events, e.g., meetings, ceremonies, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Feeling of estrangement</td>
<td><strong>C</strong> Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Restricted affect</td>
<td>(1) Avoiding thoughts or feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Sense of foreshortened future</td>
<td>(2) Avoiding Church-related activities, non-participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> Symptoms of increased arousal (at least two)</td>
<td>(3) Selective amnesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Sleep difficulty</td>
<td>(4) Diminished interest in activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Irritability or anger</td>
<td>(5) Feelings of estrangement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Difficulty concentrating</td>
<td>(6) Restricted affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Hyper vigilance</td>
<td>(7) Sense of limited future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Startle responses</td>
<td><strong>D</strong> Symptoms of increased arousal (or anxiety)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Physiologic reactivity</td>
<td>(1) Sleep disturbance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong> Re-experiencing trauma (at least one)</td>
<td>(2) Expression of anger (especially towards parents or other authority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Recurrent recollections</td>
<td>(3) Difficulty concentrating, memorizing, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Recurrent dreams</td>
<td>(4) Feelings of guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Feeling as if event were recurring</td>
<td>(5) Avoidance of exposure to stressor(s) or symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Distress on exposure to symbolic events</td>
<td>(6) Increased symptoms on being reminded of responsibilities, actions or lack of action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong> Duration: at least one month (specify delayed onset if after at least six months.)</td>
<td>(7) Feelings of futility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8) Weight gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9) Expressed doubts or loss of faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10) Non-participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>E</strong> Duration: at least one month (specify delayed onset if after at least six months.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

disorder symptoms. Their missions did not cause the disorder, but circumstances related to the mission appeared to contribute.
Our situations have not allowed an opportunity to apply this formulation systematically, but in retrospect, it seems that some of the missionaries we saw during and after our full-time mission experiences (Bristol and New York City) might have been helped more effectively by more specifically planned stress-disorder-oriented approaches.

It also seems possible that using a framework such as that suggested by the term “mission-related stress disorder,” or something similar, might help in recognizing at-risk vulnerable missionaries and provide a helpful rationale for preventing untoward effects of stress during and after their missions.

If properly identified, some of this knowledge may be useful with stress-vulnerable missionaries and may help change the eternal perspectives of their lives.

It is not likely that any sound concept which might develop would deviate from the principles of stress-hardiness found in the gospel and expressed in words taken from our mission song: “Only by persuasion, and love unfeigned . . . only with his spirit . . . grow in your soul . . . only lead with kindness. . . . conquer vain ambition . . . be faithful, be strong . . . go forth together believing, the Lord is calling you.” (Wheelwright.)

**Conclusion**

Based upon observations of full-time and returned missionaries, several tentative conceptual frameworks have been devised for the purpose of examining stress-vulnerability relationships involved in the missionary experience and to assist counselors in understanding the circumstances of missionaries they are called on to help. Identification of a clinical syndrome termed mission-related stress disorder is suggested for further study of the stress-vulnerable during and after-missionary service.

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