

Reaching Understanding Sensitivities

Mormons: the

How to reach the unchurched is one of the most talked about topics among Christian leaders today. A quick Google search for the term “unchurched,” in fact, yields more than 1.1 million results, providing links to a myriad of articles, books and blogs devoted to the subject of connecting with people who have never entered a church building and don’t know much, if anything, about Jesus and the believers who have devoted their lives to Him.

But what if the people you’re trying to reach are not unchurched, but very churchd—in a religion different from historical Christianity? And, to make matters more complicated, what if the church these friends of yours belong to seems, at least at a cursory glance, to tout many of the same beliefs you as a traditional Christian hold? How do you begin to approach someone who says he or she sincerely believes in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but is part of a church system whose doctrines buck many of the key teachings of historical Christianity?

Such is the unique challenge of reaching people who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—14.1 million strong worldwide—more commonly referred to as the Mormon church. Mormons view themselves as Christians, using the broad definition of a Christian being someone who follows Christ. This conflicts with evangelical Christianity, which tends to use the term “Christian” more narrowly, meaning a Christian is someone who holds to a particular set of biblical beliefs.

Doctrinal Differences

In traditional Christianity, Jesus is God, having always existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity. In Mormonism, Jesus is a created being, the spirit-brother of Lucifer, and he was born after a physical union of God the Father with the virgin Mary.

Traditional Christianity teaches that human life begins at conception. The Mormon church teaches that all people preexisted in heaven, as spirit-children of God the Father. Mormons also believe in an “eternal progression toward exaltation,” meaning that humans can advance toward godhood, eventually becoming gods themselves.

These teachings, as well as many others—such as the Mormon church being the only true, uncorrupted church—clearly conflict with traditional Christianity. And what adds to the complication of dialoguing with Mormons is that there is a variance of views and practices among individual members.

Additionally, Mormonism is more than just a religion—it’s a culture with a strong sense of family and history. Most Mormons know their historical roots well and are very proud of them. Minimizing or dismissing that Mormonism is a culture as much as it is a religion will undermine any efforts to reach Mormons with the true gospel message.

Sensitivity and Respect

Foursquare pastors across the U.S. who minister in areas of the country with high Mormon populations affirm the importance of being sensitive and respectful if one wants to minister to a Mormon friend or neighbor.

Georgeann Dillard, senior pastor of Delta Foursquare Church in Delta, Utah, about 130 miles south of Salt Lake City, started the church in May 1996, co-leading it with her husband. Six months later, her husband suddenly became ill and passed away. Then, five years later, the couple’s youngest daughter, only 17, died in a car accident. Despite these devastating

setbacks, Georgeann stayed in Delta, knowing God had called her there and that the deaths in her family did not negate that call.

Living among and befriending Mormons has given Georgeann crucial insights regarding the sensitivities of ministering to them.

“I think it’s important to avoid needless arguments about Mormon doctrine, and focus on the Good News of Jesus Himself as much as possible,” Georgeann tells . “It is helpful to look for common ground upon which to build when sharing with Mormons, just as you would with any seeker. The point is not to show how much you know; it’s about how much Jesus loves and cares. ... Genuine, loving relationships are important. ... If the seeker has questions about doctrinal differences, there is a foundation of trust to undergird evangelism.”

Genuine Love and Friendship

Tony Maupin Jr., co-pastor with his wife, Carol, of Shiloh (Idaho Falls Foursquare Church) in Idaho Falls, Idaho, agrees. He and his wife have served Shiloh for 22 years. Tony is also the divisional superintendent of the Mountain River Division.

“One of the best ways to engage Mormons is to plan to do so over time. Commit to genuinely loving them,” Tony says. “When they know that you care about them, the Holy Spirit always seems to arrange times when honest conversations about faith can take place. My experience is that many Mormons ... have questions about their faith. For many, the biggest problem is that they don’t have anybody they consider ‘safe’ to talk with about their questions.”

Respect for others, he adds, is a key to building bridges. He notes that a person’s convictions aren’t a proof of truth, as one can be very sincere but sincerely wrong. Still, a person with convictions should be treated with respect.

“It is my firm belief that people of sincere faith are

deserving of respect,” Tony asserts. “You are acknowledging that they desire to live their lives with integrity. Respect for another is a great place to begin the kind of relationship that will allow for an honest dialog. You can respect the person without spiritually validating his faith.”

Pete Akins, senior pastor of True Life Center (Cedar City Foursquare Church) in Cedar City, Utah, about 250 miles south of Salt Lake City, stresses the importance of building authentic relationships. He also serves as the divisional superintendent of the Utah Division, and his wife, Cami, is a disaster relief worker with Foursquare Chaplains International.

“The person is a valid relationship that needs to be enjoyed, not a goal to be met or a target to be hit,” Pete explains. “The love of Christ, and His life in us, is more powerful than any argument we could make.”

Pete says that we should avoid an adversarial approach when talking with Mormons, instead praying for the Holy Spirit’s leading in the context of friendship. Doctrinal discussions, he believes, are best handled in the context of relationships.

“Enjoy the dialogue that springs forth as two friends talk about what they believe, value and practice,” Pete says. “Listen to them, and appreciate what they say. That is what friendship is about.”

In Part 2 of this article series, we’ll take a closer look at how Foursquare churches are ministering to Mormons in practical ways, and cover suggestions for how each of us, personally, can reach our Mormon friends.

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