

# Mormons to Use Technology in Missionary Work

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that missionaries will do less door-to-door proselytizing, and instead, use the Internet to recruit new church members.

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The common image of Mormon missionaries has long been two young men wearing white shirts and ties walking through neighborhoods, knocking door-to-door.

But in a few years, that image may be replaced by one of young Mormons sitting with an iPad, typing messages on [Facebook](#).

Recognizing the world has changed, leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced Sunday night that missionaries will do less door-to-door proselytizing, and instead, use the Internet to recruit new church members.

The strategy shift reflects the growing importance of social media and people's preference to connect over sites such as Facebook rather than opening their homes to strangers, church leaders said.

"The way in which we fulfill our responsibilities to share the gospel must adapt to a changing world," said Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during a presentation to mission presidents in Provo, Utah, that was broadcast worldwide.

The move is the latest example of the LDS church's gradual embrace of the digital age, and a recognition that door-to-door proselytizing is not the most effective way to expand church membership, church scholars said.

Many of the details about how the social media work will be carried out by missionaries and monitored by mission presidents have yet to be ironed out, church officials said.

But it's clear that the new rules mark a significant change in the way the church governs Internet access for missionaries.

Previously, Internet use for missionaries was limited to once a week and only for communicating with friends and family back home or accessing official church sites. Those rules were designed to reduce distractions and temptations for missionaries expected to devote all their attention to serving the Lord, while leaving behind personal affairs.

The announcement comes as the church sends more missionaries around the globe than at any time in history. There has been an unprecedented surge of missionaries since the church's announced in October that it was lowering the minimum age for missionaries from 21 to 19 for women and from 19 to 18 for men.

There are 70,000 young men and women on mission now, and church officials say there will be 85,000 by the end of the year. The previous record total of missionaries at one time was 61,600 in 2002, church figures show.

Missions are considered rites of passage for many Mormons, broadening their perspective on the world, strengthening their faith and helping prepare some for future leadership roles within the church. Men serve two years while women go for 18 months.

The new focus on social media will likely come as welcome news to young, tech-savvy missionaries, said Matthew Bowman, assistant professor of religion at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia and author of the book, "The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith."

"This generation knows social networking, they know how this works," Bowman said. "It's much more appealing work than going door-to-door knocking and hoping somebody doesn't slam the door in your face."

Door-to-door work has not been effective for many years, said Matt Martinich,

a member of the LDS church who analyzes membership and missionary numbers with the nonprofit Cumorah Foundation. Missionaries have far greater success spending time with people who are referred by church members or who are family members of current Mormons, he said.

Perry acknowledged that the new shift marks a “better way” to proselyte.

He said missionaries will use social media, blogs, email, text messages and the church’s website in their ministry. It will start in a limited number of locations this year and should be in place worldwide next year, he said.

Perry said missionaries will use Internet in the less productive parts of the day, usually the morning, at Mormon meeting houses and other church buildings.

Perry encouraged Mormons to become Facebook friends with missionaries in their area to help share their gospel message. Networking through current church members and others already receptive to conversion is the most likely way missionaries will use Facebook, Martinich and Bowman predicted.

Both scholars doubt missionaries will be asked to send friend requests to strangers.

This is the second time this year the church has loosened rules on Internet use for missionaries.

In April, church officials said they would begin allowing missionaries to send emails to friends, priesthood leaders and new converts. Previously, missionaries could only email immediate family members.

Under the new rules, missionaries must get permission from their mission president before sending emails to converts or people of the opposite gender. They are still required to send emails from public computers where a fellow missionary can see the screen.

Martinich says giving 18- and 19-year-olds more access to the Internet on mis-

sions is a delicate balance, and could lead some to waste time surfing the web or on Facebook. But, he said it's simply unrealistic to do mission work in today's world without embracing technology.