

# Missions and the Rhetoric of Male Motivation

*Allison G. Stimmler*

I COULDN'T SLEEP. I sat at the open window and watched the occasional person walk by. The sidewalk glowed florescent orange from the street lamp above. It was quiet in Montréal's university district, and everyone else in the apartment was asleep. My companion and I were spending the night with another set of sisters far from our own area. We had traveled three hours by car from the Eastern Townships of Québec to attend a weekend sisters conference. My sleeplessness came not just because my bed was nothing but the hardwood floor and a blanket. It came because I felt alive for the first time since my mission had begun six months earlier.

I had always looked forward to my mission as a glorious time when I would meet wonderful people, teach and baptize them, and be revered by their posterity as the one who had brought them the gospel. For years, I looked forward to serving, loving, and filling my heart with the lives of other people. And although I anticipated rejection, trials, struggles, and difficulties with companions, I regarded my future mission as a time when I would fall into bed at night exhausted from the emotional but rewarding strain of helping so many people. However, I now served in the Canada Montréal Mission where, with an average of 250 missionaries—35 of us women—we were probably one of the largest missions in the world in 1977 and where baptisms among the Catholic French-speaking people were rare. For the majority of my mission, all I encountered day after day were doors opened for just a few seconds before being slammed to the sound of "Ca ne m'intéresse pas!" or "On va laisser-faire!"

I considered myself successful if I could make it from zone conference to zone conference without a major breakdown due to the loneliness, isolation, rejection, and anxiety I felt on a daily basis. Teaching appointments were hard to come by. Most of the French-speaking suburban

areas where I served were sparsely populated by members, and hours of tracting door-to-door yielded one conversation that lasted more than a few minutes at best. Human interaction was scarce.

On top of all that, my mission was strict. We had rules for everything. To avoid inappropriate interaction between elders and sisters, we were strongly discouraged from having district activities on P-day. That meant that I rarely interacted with anyone other than my own companion because the next pair of sisters was in another district and too far away to spend time with. This was perhaps one of my greatest struggles—feeling completely alone and cut off from friendly human contact. Inevitably, this isolation fueled the depression and sense of failure that I fought every day to overcome.

I remember looking forward to the nightly calls from our district leader as if they were our lifeline to humanity—our only contact with a world of people who knew us, cared about us, and would speak to us. Every night he called just to make sure we were in our apartment and to perhaps collect some statistics for the day. They were brief calls, never very personal (that would have been against the rules), but every night it was a relief to know that we weren't *really* alone; we just felt alone.

Here is a typical journal entry from my mission, in which my feelings of discouragement and emptiness translate into a confused and critical examination of my faith and feelings:

I feel like I have no faith—like I have no testimony of this gospel and what I'm doing here. Father, why do I feel this way? This near despair, and I'm not even sure why—there's nothing wrong or extremely difficult in the work. But I was frightened last night as we started working. And now I just feel sick inside—maybe I am sick.

Am I supposed to pretend I feel differently than I do? Am I supposed to change how I feel? Or will God change it for me?

I hope that I can find joy, peace, and meaning on my mission—I hope that I can feel the redeeming love of Christ in my life—June 17, 1997.

Given these circumstances, gender issues in general were not, at first, important to me. I had anticipated that they would be. I expected that I would have conflicts with immature nineteen-year-old elders assigned as "leaders" over me. I had expected to feel some loss at not being able to baptize my own converts or jealousy at not having even the potential to serve in leadership positions or assist the mission president. But thoughts of leading other missionaries in the daunting effort of breaking through the cold surface of Québécois culture to find, teach, and baptize the "Lord's elect" were irrelevant now as I spent my days treading through snow from closed door to closed door.

In general, the sisters in my mission were respected. Most of the elders seemed to freely admit that we worked harder, accomplished more,

and were more effective missionaries than they were themselves. Granted, there were remnants of sexist attitudes towards women and sisters floating around the mission, like the drawing hanging on the refrigerator in my first apartment. It displayed a woman above the caption, "Remember, Elder, with every door she gets more beautiful." (I never asked my companion why she hadn't already taken that down.) The phrase, "sister pros" (short for *proselytizing*) referred to staying home from regular missionary work to bake brownies or write cute notes to investigators. But everyone in the mission knew and admitted that elders actually did more "sister pros" than sisters did.

The time I felt the most alienated because I was a woman was in those rare but precious moments when I did have contact with other missionaries at mission conferences, zone conferences, or district meetings. These gatherings were meant to instruct and motivate us. They were meant to be oases of spirituality and nurturing in an otherwise discouraging existence, and I looked forward to them as such. But I rarely left them feeling motivated. It was six months into my mission when I attended our first sisters conference, one designed specifically for women, that I realized why our regular meetings were so unfulfilling. At standard zone conferences, the rhetoric we heard was male oriented and appealed to a masculine sense of competitiveness to encourage and inspire us.

I realize, looking back on how I felt as a missionary, that my understanding buys into stereotypes about men and women, their differing needs and styles of motivation. These generalizations may yield a distorted picture, and I feel a little embarrassed that I seem to fit so neatly into them. But that doesn't change the fact that this is how I experienced it; this is how I felt as a sister among hundreds of elders—a woman among hundreds of men.

In general, the male motivational tactics I experienced on my mission can be categorized in three rhetorical approaches: the rhetoric of numbers, the rhetoric of sports, and the rhetoric of war:

#### NUMBERS

Anyone who has served a mission knows the numbers rhetoric. Missions keep track of who's being taught, who's being baptized, who's coming to church, and even who's been contacted. In my mission, we reported how many people we had "GQed" (asked a "golden question") each week—"Have you heard of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?" "What do you know about the church. . .?" or "Would you like to know more about the church. . .?" We filled out charts that recorded how many discussions we had taught, how many people had come to church, and ideally how many people we had baptized. Then every week we called those numbers in to our district leader, who reported

them to the zone leaders, who reported them to the mission president and his assistants. It was a tedious process that reduced people to quantities and made the already impersonal process of enduring rejections almost mechanical and inhuman.

These numbers were then thrown back in our faces as a way of motivating us to achieve “better numbers.” Almost every conference consisted of some elder standing up with a chart displaying our proselytizing record, urging us to meet a higher standard—that is, higher numbers. We were falling short; we weren’t good enough; we weren’t producing enough. The emphasis was always on the negative—*not* living up to expectations.

It seemed to me that this was a particularly male form of motivation. The elders seemed to get a charge out of it. We were told before one zone conference to prayerfully set a goal for the number of baptisms we would have in the upcoming month and to bring those goals to the conference. Of course, every set of companions said they would have at least one baptism during the month—saying anything less would have meant we had no faith. Some missionaries projected more if they were currently teaching investigators who seemed close to baptism. At the conference, we combined those goals to create district and zone goals. The results were outrageously high. Even three or four baptisms in a month in one district—in other words, in one ward—were unheard of. We averaged maybe one or two baptisms per zone in a month, and those were usually in the English- and Spanish-speaking zones. But the elders, nodded their heads, said, “Yeah, let’s go for it!” and seemed encouraged by having this impossible-to-reach number as a goal to work towards.

These outrageous goals did nothing, however, but discourage me. I would look at those numbers, think over the reality of my past months of proselytizing, and get sick to my stomach. I wondered how I was supposed to change the fact that no one would open the door to us, that the only members in our area were an 80-year old woman and an inactive Spanish-speaking family, and that all creative efforts to “find” investigators (like setting up street displays or arranging service) had been beaten down by the district leader or any public official we’d approached. The conclusion I always came to was that I didn’t have enough faith. If they wanted us to achieve those numbers—and I didn’t feel we could do it—then the problem was within me, my faith, or my work patterns. I would leave zone conferences upset with myself for being so faithless rather than motivated or feeling capable of achieving the impossible.

#### SPORTS

The rhetoric of sports probably didn’t discourage me as much as analyzing numbers, but neither did it do much to motivate me. This rhetorical approach relates all things to sports: life is like a football or basket-

ball game. Heavenly Father is like our coach. Investigators are the goals or touchdowns or baskets or whatever. The elders had a way of “pumping” each other up to work and progress by approaching missionary work like a game. District meetings felt like pep-talks in the locker room before going out onto the field or court. The elders would get riled up, punch their fists into their hands, and yell, “Yeah! We can do this! We’re gonna go get ‘em!” and then rush back out onto the “field” to “win.”

This sports rhetoric was evident in the pseudo-“huddles” we held, which ended with all hands piled on top of each other in the middle of the circle and then released into the air with a shout of “1-2-3 Baptize!” or “1-2-3 Convert!” I would walk out of the chapel with my feet dragging. I didn’t feel part of a team. When the meetings were over, it was back to just my companion and me. I didn’t feel that my investigators were touchdowns or baskets; they were people who couldn’t be quantified or “won.”

#### WAR

And then there’s the rhetoric of war. Missions are like great military conflicts; we’re the army going out to fight a battle, and the people out there, if not the enemy themselves, at least are in the grasp of the enemy. This rhetoric isn’t unique to missions and missionaries. It’s found throughout the scriptures and in the titles of hymns such as, “Behold! A Royal Army,” “Up, Awake, Ye Defenders of Zion,” “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” “Hope of Israel, Zion’s Army,” and “Like Ten Thousand Legions Marching.” A hymn we sang frequently in my mission was “We Are All Enlisted,” which is filled with overt references to war and armies:

We are all *enlisted* till the *conflict* is o’er;  
 Happy are we! Happy are we!  
*Soldiers* in the *army*, there’s a bright crown in store;  
 We shall *win* and wear it by and by.  
 Haste to the *battle* quick to the *field*.  
 Truth is our *helmet*, *buckler*, and *shield*.  
 Stand by our colors; proudly they wave!  
 We’re joyfully, joyfully *marching* to our home.

This image of missionaries as soldiers in an army was recently publicized in the film *God’s Army*. The poster for the movie displays elders and a sister standing in formation with serious looks of determined resolve as if they are ready to go off to battle.

The idea within this rhetoric that astonished me the most was the thought that we, as missionaries, were working to condemn people. We were giving them the opportunity to accept or reject the gospel so that

the Lord would be justified in condemning them if they didn't listen to us—as if our six-second presence on their doorstep were the determining factor between their salvation and damnation. Elders cited scriptures like D&C 84:94–95 to support this idea: “Search diligently and spare not; and wo unto that house, or that village or city that rejecteth you, or your words, or your testimony concerning me.” I think the popularity of this rhetorical argument comes from our being rejected so much ourselves as missionaries. A few elders (and I'll grant that this wasn't the majority) seemed to feel vindicated by such rhetoric. Somehow their own rejection seemed more tolerable if they believed they had the power to condemn the people who treated them so badly.

This then was the motivational culture of my mission. These were the arguments and inspirational tools I encountered whenever I met with other missionaries to talk about missionary work. I don't think that I recognized at the time why I felt conflicted about these approaches. In fact, these paradigms were so prevalent that they permeated my own thinking and journal writing. Another of my journal entries shocks me now:

I realized this morning that the people here are not our enemy—yes, I must admit I feel like they are the enemy often—most of the time. But they're not. They are our allies—our victimized allies. Satan is the enemy and he is their enemy too. We're here to rescue them from this common enemy. But they treat *us* like the enemy and I started reacting as such.—July 1, 1997

Despite being convinced by and taking meticulous notes on these ideas in our meetings, I always felt discouraged and let down when I left the other missionaries. And yet I consistently looked forward to being at all of our meetings. Actually, I *lived* for them and measured the passing days by them because I perceived them as one of my only sources of encouragement and motivation. Without district, zone, and mission conferences, I lived in relative isolation, without family or friends besides my companion, who was most likely struggling as I was. I *needed* the support I thought I could get from other missionaries. In addition, conferences were a break from the routine, a necessary disruption in the almost meaningless cycle of days.

I'm not sure where the pervasive male rhetoric came from exactly. I don't think it was or is unique to my mission. I heard the same motivational tactics in the MTC from branch presidents, instructors, and visiting general authorities. Perhaps it is established there and carried into the field with the elders. More likely, it has roots even further back, in Deacon's quorums and Young Men's programs. Perhaps it just comes from the elders themselves and the male culture they create as a group. A rhetoric that ignores the needs of sisters probably isn't a result of delib-

erate decisions on the part of mission presidents, assistants-to-the-president, zone leaders, and district leaders. Perhaps it is just the natural result of a system made up of hundreds of men working together at something difficult and striving to help each other succeed in a way that works for them.

And perhaps missions need to be that way. Unless the church includes women in its mandatory call to labor as missionaries, I suppose missions might as well be set up for men. The conclusion I came to while serving—which represents a complete reversal from my beliefs before my mission—is simply that not all women should serve missions. I think that serving a mission needs to be a personal and prayerful decision for a woman because she won't be "coddled"—or maybe even noticed—when she gets out into the field. There were many times during my eighteen months as a missionary when the only thing sustaining me was knowing that I had decided to be there, that I felt I was *supposed* to be there. I'm not sure I would have lasted without that personal sense of commitment.

Despite the prevalence of this male rhetoric, I don't think that it was a direct result of my mission president's approach to leadership. I had, and still have, great respect for him. When he addressed us in conferences, he focused on doctrine and principles. He started every talk with, "I want to discuss a principle with you," and proceeded to illuminate the basics of the gospel in a thoughtful, scriptural way. I loved listening to him. In interviews, he was caring, personable, and completely attuned to our individual needs. I remember hearing him ask, "How are you doing?" as I walked into one of my interviews with him.

"Not so well," I responded.

"I know. I've been reading your letters," he said and continued to assure me that my work was acceptable and I was doing all I could despite the failure I was feeling. It seemed that he was aware of the sisters and tried to provide for us as best he could. The most effective thing he did for us was to hold a sisters' conference each year, at which the approach to motivation stood in extreme contrast to what we heard in our regular missionary gatherings.

The main speaker at that first sisters conference six months into my mission was a professional psychologist, who was a member and worked for the church. I know that several of the sister missionaries had met or were meeting with her one-on-one at our mission president's recommendation. My companion at the time—a seasoned missionary who had struggled with depression her entire mission—was one of them. The more companions I served with, the more I realized that depression and serious feelings of discouragement were common among the sisters even though we rarely talked about them publicly. Nothing we heard in our regular conferences addressed these issues.

The sisters conference speaker talked to us honestly about how we

were feeling. She discussed the nature of depression and how mentally and emotionally to deal with it. She allowed us to admit that we were discouraged or that we didn't always feel love and charity for the rude people behind the slammed doors. Within the rhetoric we were used to hearing, discouragement indicated a lack of faith, and not loving the people who rejected us meant that we weren't being "Christ like." Instead of telling us to feel only "positive" emotions, this sister told us that there were no negative emotions, that what mattered was how we handled our emotions. Even love, she said, can be handled inappropriately.

And then she let us talk. She let us talk to her; she let us talk to each other. It was the first time I felt free to work through months of frustrations and anxieties. It was incredibly healing. I remember feeling guilty and almost unwilling to release what was inside of me at first because my real feelings would give me away; they would betray me as the frightened, insecure, lonely, and demoralized woman I was, rather than the confident, faithful, strong sister I felt I was supposed to be. But the comfort of honestly confiding in someone was worth far more to me at that point than maintaining a superhuman image. And what made this possible was the rhetorical space sisters conference gave us to be ourselves, space in which it was safe to be weak and safe to admit that we were weak.

When the conference was over, I felt motivated. I wanted to go out and convert the world. The conference had served to validate me and my efforts, no matter how pathetic my numbers were. I remember very little of what was said about missionary work directly. And yet, the impact of that conference on my effectiveness as a missionary was tremendous, especially compared to the impact of our regular conferences. I felt capable and empowered rather than discouraged and worthless.

The two sisters conferences I attended during my sixteen months in the field were among the few times I actually felt supported and strengthened as a missionary. Sitting in zone conferences every month, surrounded by seventy or eighty young men, and listening to them motivate and inspire each other never provided me with the sustenance that all missionaries need to keep going. I wonder if it really worked for the elders. It appeared to. But perhaps it also appeared to work for us. Perhaps the other sisters and I looked as if we were each just one of the guys, feeling just as motivated and inspired as the elders.

Perhaps we appeared that way because they never saw our reaction to the words that came from women instead of from men.

Here is my reaction to that first sisters' conference, written in my journal that sleepless night six months into my mission:



Sisters Conference: Inspiring, wonderful, beautiful, bonding—these trite and cheesy adjectives don't do it justice! The APs sitting on the side, looking on at the foreign, perhaps strange pattern of womanhood—the tears and laughter that mean the same thing, come from the same things—the truth about who we are and why we're here—as missionaries, as women, as human beings. The instruction was gently challenging—motivating and calm—I'm excited to do the work. "Begin to believe"—I can *choose* to start believing even though I haven't believed in the past. Freedom—freedom to really be myself in front of these women and friends.—July 29, 1997