

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### *Unhealthy Rhetoric*

I enjoyed Allison Stimmler's reflections on missionary motivational rhetoric (Vol. 36, no. 3). Given the wealth of research showing that men are more overtly aggressive than women, Stimmler is probably right to suggest that rhetoric based on tropes of competition, sports, and war appeals to elders more than sisters.

However, I would caution against concluding that because such rhetoric appeals to male missionaries, it is therefore "right" for them—that such rhetoric meets their particularly male needs. It is not inevitable that, because most LDS missionaries are male, missionary culture will be driven by a business-like concern for numbers, nor is it inevitable that missionary rhetoric be dominated by athletic and military metaphors. The Church could foster a missionary culture that is pastoral rather than numbers-driven, that values quiet dignity over locker-room exuberance, and that encourages missionaries to think of themselves as sowers, shepherds, or teachers rather than warriors. One can, in fact, find statements that indicate Church leaders *want* missionaries to exemplify quiet dignity and pastoral concern. This is not so much a question of gender as it is one of different models of religiosity.

The motivational strategies used in the sisters' conferences that Stimmler describes (talking frankly about depression and the frustrations of the work, being assured that it's all right to feel negative emotions) could benefit many missionaries, regardless of gender. There are two reasons I suspect such strategies are not widely used—and here gender does come into play, but more indirectly.

First, in order to talk about their feelings in the way the sisters did at their special conferences, elders would have to open up in a way that is atypical for men in our society. Men aren't supposed to admit that they feel vulnerable or weak (though I'm inclined to think it would be healthy for them to do so). Instead, elders, along with sisters, get pep talks from the mission president and stand together to belt out "We Are All Enlisted." The point of these performances is to help missionaries overcome feelings of inadequacy but in a way that doesn't require them to articulate those feelings, since that's not "what men do."

Second, I suspect that mission leaders craft their motivational rhetoric on the assumption that most missionaries spend most of their time in a state of moderate motivation and therefore need to be "worked up." Hence the pep talks: the lofty goals, the incredible stories about other missionaries' successes, the extravagant promises of the blessings that follow sacrifice, the constant insistence on doing better. This rhetoric is delivered on the assumption that, after the high of zone conference wears off, most missionaries will settle back into a less demanding routine and will therefore need to be worked up again next month. I further suspect that, for most missionaries, this rhetoric works exactly as it's intended to. The problem is that for missionaries who start with a high motivation, this rhetoric can produce debilitating feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

Perfectionists of any gender face this problem. But sisters, as a group, may seem more vulnerable because