



## From Eat Pray Love to Preach, Pray, Learn

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*How does lowering mission age shape young women? It roots emerging adults in faith, service, and pro-family purpose.*

On Friday, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [announced](#) that young women would now be eligible for missionary service beginning at 18, rather than 19. This change will bless individual young women and strengthen families and congregations.

The Church Newsroom statement reiterated that, “While the Lord asks every worthy, able young man as part of his priesthood responsibility to prepare for and serve a mission...missionary service remains an *optional* opportunity for young women.” Sister Amy Wright, first counselor in the Primary General Presidency and a member of the Missionary Executive Council, further stated that after consulting with many young

women throughout the world, the council decided to keep the length of missions for young women at 18 months, after “(reaching) out throughout the entire world to young women, inviting them to be a thoughtful part of this revelatory process.” The council found that the “overwhelming” preference was to keep the term of service as it currently stands.

On a weekend in early August, 2012, I took a spontaneous drive to Salt Lake City to see some friends. At the time I was 22 years old, living with my parents, working a retail job and attending what was then Dixie State College (now Utah Tech University) part-time. I had previously paused my university studies and was “taking some time” to “travel,” and “find myself.” It was, after all, the decade of *Eat Pray Love*. But the truth was, I was listless, lonely, without direction or a deep sense of spirituality or purpose.

On Sunday morning, before my drive back to St. George, I had a passing thought to stop by the Salt Lake City Temple. I hadn’t been very active in the church in many years—I had mostly attended friends’ mission farewells and homecomings. I believed that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was probably mostly true, except for the teachings on coffee, priesthood ordination, and marriage. I assumed that eventually I would return to church activity, perhaps when I was older or when the changes I desired in the church came, which I was sure was just around the corner.

As I sat quietly on the temple grounds, I thought it might be appropriate to pray. I don’t remember what I said in my prayer, but as I opened my eyes, I looked toward the smiling sister missionaries greeting visitors and thought *I should serve a mission*.

It was preposterous. And yet that thought didn’t go away. It grew louder and louder in my mind as I drove home. I couldn’t put it out. After hours of this very clear and direct impression, I called my mother while driving and told her I needed to prepare to serve a mission. And I did.

I returned home from my mission in Toronto, Canada, two years later a completely different person. Yes, I had many more bumps and bruises ahead of me in my spiritual and temporal growth, but within a year I had returned to university studies and become a 4.0 student, had met and married my now-husband in the temple, had developed

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some goals in my life, was active in my ward, and within two years my husband and I welcomed our first child.

This past Friday evening, I volunteered backstage for that same daughter's (now 9) ballet recital. I was overjoyed to hear the oldest girls chatting about how they would now be eligible for missionary service. These precious daughters of God are already so far ahead of where I was at their age, with accomplishments and goals and a devotion to the Savior.

In 1979, President Spencer W. Kimball prophesied, "Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world ... will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world."

President Russell M. Nelson later echoed his words many years later, saying, "My dear sisters, you who are our vital associates during this winding-up scene, the day that President Kimball foresaw is today. You are the women he foresaw! Your virtue, light, love, knowledge, courage, character, faith, and righteous lives will draw good women of the world, along with their families, to the Church in unprecedented numbers!"

These were the young women I served with on my mission, the young women I see in my ward, the young women from the dance recital, my nieces, and my children's wonderful nanny. Young women and men coming out of our youth programs are extraordinary. **Emergent adulthood**, the stage from about age 18-25, is so crucial for identity formation. As young adults become immersed in the gospel during the beginning of these years, they will be better equipped to engage with the prevailing university party culture and worldly philosophies they may later be exposed to. I wasted years of my young adulthood trying to find myself, but was only successful when I **forgot** myself, as is the case with so many.

Sister missionaries return home with **leadership** and public speaking skills, and a deeper knowledge of the gospel. They also return having lived independently, budgeted wisely, and cooked, cleaned, and served those in

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the sisters.

Research shows their GPAs are higher and they take more university credits when they return.

Those outcomes don't just bless the sisters themselves; they ripple out into the families and wards they eventually help build. A woman who has spent a year and a half testifying of Christ, studying scripture daily, and learning to work shoulder to shoulder with a partner is better prepared to teach the gospel in her own home, to counsel with a spouse, and to nurture children in a bewildering cultural moment. Even for those who never marry or have children, that spiritual maturity and practical experience fortify Relief Societies, Young Women classes, Primary presidencies, and every corner of the Church family.

Lowering the missionary age for young women is, in that sense, a profoundly pro-family policy. It opens a window for more daughters of God to be deeply rooted in the gospel during the very years when so many peers are drifting, and it does so without pressuring every young woman into one path or timeline. By keeping missionary service optional and the length of service at 18 months, the senior leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ has made more room for young women to seek revelation about education, work, and family in a way that fits their circumstances and callings.

The road to adulthood is never easy, and it provides many opportunities for young men and women to lose their way. What a blessing the missionary program is for not only those who are taught by missionaries, but those who are blessed to serve. My hope is that with this policy change many more young women will choose to serve, to lose themselves for a season in the work of the Lord, and in doing so find a surer sense of who they are.

About the author

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Amanda Freebairn is an associate editor at Public Square Magazine. She is a proud wife, mother, writer and teacher, and holds an M.Ed. from Arizona State University.

