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An Interview with Professor Richard Neitzel Holzapfel—Returned Mission President

Posted by [Stephen Smoot](#) | [1 comment](#)



Professor Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Jeni Broberg Holzapfel.
Image courtesy of Richard Neitzel Holzapfel.

The recommencement of fall classes at Brigham Young University frequently reunites friends and colleagues who have spent their summers enjoying study abroad programs, working or visiting family. Occasionally professors return to BYU after completing callings for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One member of the faculty, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, who is a professor of Church history and doctrine with BYU's Religion Department, has done just that, and returns to BYU this fall after serving as a mission president for the Church.

According to a biography posted on the Religion Department's website, Professor Holzapfel "attended BYU, Hebrew Union College, and the University of California, Irvine (B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. respectively) emphasizing in Middle Eastern Studies, Jewish History, Ancient History, American History, and Nineteenth Century American Religious History." Since 1993 he has been teaching Church History and Ancient Scripture at BYU. He is married to Jeni Broberg and is the father of five children. He served as a missionary in the Italy Milan Mission from 1973 to 1975 and as president of the Alabama Birmingham Mission from 2010 to 2013.

In an e-mail interview with the *Student Review*, Professor Holzapfel related what he learned from his mission and how he wishes to use this knowledge in the classroom.

Student Review (SR): What sort of challenges face returning mission presidents?

Holzapfel: More than one hundred and fifteen mission presidents returned home this past July. They range in age, nationality and experience, so each would have their own unique experience in returning home. For those who return to full-time employment, as is my case, the transition is somewhat easier because you are busy at work as soon as you return home. I suppose without full-time employment, some mission presidents had to find something to fill the void. Some are retired or they came back looking for a job having lost it when they accepted the call to serve for three years.

SR: What challenges have you faced returning to your professorship?

Holzapfel: Being gone for three years, I have missed a lot on campus. It not only looks different (new buildings and grounds changes), but new programs and initiatives have been developed while gone. However, the biggest challenge is academic. Having been away from my discipline for three years, I need to catch up on the academic literature that has been produced while gone.

SR: What have you learned as a mission president that will help you in your career?

Holzapfel: I hope to be more sensitive to student needs. Having worked with nearly seven hundred missionaries during the past three years, I have become more aware of the diversity of young men and young women. I will certainly look at my students through new lenses. As a professor you mostly are concerned about academic performance, as a mission president you are concerned about all facets of the lives of your missionaries. I will be more interested in their lives, while still maintaining the intellectual integrity of my classes.

SR: What do you expect your first semester back to be like?

Holzapfel: It will take a full semester and maybe longer to be more comfortable with all that is new at the university. I do not have any false expectations that there will not be a learning curve. The university staff, administrators and faculty have been very kind in helping me get back in the saddle. Their kindness and help has been much appreciated.

SR: How have things changed at BYU since you've been gone?

Holzapfel: Some of my former mentors and colleagues have retired and many new faculty, staff and administrators have replaced them. Many familiar faces and voices have been replaced with new faces. They don't know me, and it will take sometime to get acquainted.

SR: Have you noticed any positive changes here at BYU?

Holzapfel: The campus is beautiful and it appears the new grounds changes, such as a pedestrian walking area, will enhance campus life.

SR: How was your experience as a missionary in Italy different from your experience as a mission president in Alabama?

Holzapfel: As a mission president you don't always get to sleep until 6:30 am and you don't always get to bed at 10:30 pm. You often miss meals and simply have to push forward no matter how tired you get. The other big difference is that as a young missionary I enjoyed Preparation Day and many holidays in the mission. As a mission president we could not always take advantage of Preparation Day or many holidays. You simply have a lot of missionaries to take care of during three years and doing so cannot be scheduled in your daily missionary planner!

SR: Do you have any words of advice for returning missionaries?

Holzapfel: Remember your mission fondly and be grateful for the opportunity you had to do something very different from what most young adults are doing during this time of their lives. If you received any help or support during your mission, make sure you take the time to thank those that helped you.

SR: Do you have advice for new students at BYU?

Holzapfel: Embrace the opportunity to a new world. Don't compare BYU or Utah with home. Remember, you will return home sooner than you think. While at BYU for a very short time, enjoy what is different about this opportunity. The world is much bigger than your old high

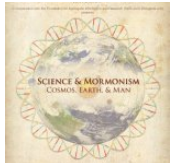
school and old neighborhood. Diversity is a positive thing, so enjoy and celebrate what is different in Utah and BYU. Go to some mom and pop restaurant, visit one of Utah’s national parks and enjoy things you cannot when you return home. Life would be very dull if everything was the same!

Professor Holzapfel’s current research includes compiling an annotated edition of Church president Joseph F. Smith’s letters to his sister, Martha Ann Smith Harris. The volume will be published with the Religious Studies Center at BYU.

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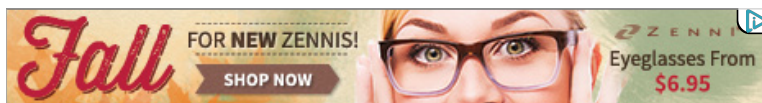
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