

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Top Five Encouraging LDS Growth and Missionary Developments in 2013

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Overview

This case study reviews five of the most encouraging LDS growth and missionary developments for the year 2013. Limitations to these developments are identified.

Top Five Encouraging LDS Growth and Missionary Developments

1. The Worldwide Surge in the Full-time Missionary Force and Hastening the Work of Salvation

During his opening remarks at the October 2012 General Conference, LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson announced a reduction in the minimum age for missionary service from age 19 to age 18 for men and age 21 to age 19 for women. The Church reported an unprecedented number of new missionary applications that were received during the weeks following the historic announcement. The number of missionary applications received at Church Headquarters increased from approximately 700 a week to over 4,000 a week, with women comprising slightly more than half of applications.[1] Consequently, the Church received 10,000 more missionary applications during the month of October than would have been otherwise been expected if no adjustment to the minimum mission age occurred. The number of missionary applications remained at least twice as high as the normal average for wintertime months during late 2012 and early 2013.[2]

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Although no official statements were originally made on numerical projections for full-time missionaries serving in the coming months and years, Elder David F. Evans of the Seventy reported in February 2013 that "there will be a surge that will last for about three years" but that "even after the surge, the number of missionaries will be much higher than what it has heretofore been."[3] In February 2013, church leaders noted that the number of full-time missionaries serving recently surpassed 60,000[4] for the first time since early 2003. During the first three months of 2013, the Church issued an average of 1,300 mission calls per week and reported that 36% of new mission calls were issued to women;[5] a significant increase as in 2007 the percentage of women in the full-time missionary force was only 13%.[6] In early April, LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson noted that there were 65,634 members currently serving full-time missions with over 20,000 members who have received their mission calls and over 6,000 currently in the interview process.[7] In late May 2013, the number of full-time missionaries serving reached 68,700 and church officials projected that this number would topple 85,000 by the one-year anniversary of the historic announcement of reducing the minimum mission age.[8] At the time the number of members who had received mission calls and were awaiting to be set apart as missionaries stood at more than 22,500 whereas an additional 6,200 were in the application process.[9] In June 2013, the number of missionaries surpassed 70,000 for the first time.[10]

Within the first six months of the announcement reducing the minimum mission age for men and women, the Church made several additional announcements regarding how it would accommodate such a massive, sudden surge in the number of members serving full-time missions. Immediately following the announcement, church leaders indicated that the duration of missionary training center (MTC) training would be reduced in order to house larger numbers of missionaries.[11] In late 2012, mission presidents throughout North America reported that the standard complement for most, if not all, missions would be increased to 250 to accommodate surplus missionary manpower. This revised complement was up to 100 more than the number of missionaries previously assigned to many of these missions. In January 2013, the Church reported that it would repurpose its high school in Mexico City (Benemérito de las Américas) into a new MTC for Mexico in order to provide sufficient

facilities for thousands of additional missionaries soon to serve. The proposed MTC was anticipated to accommodate upwards of 1,500 missionaries; significantly more than the previous MTC that housed approximately 200 missionaries.[12] In February 2013, the Church announced that 58 new missions would be organized in July 2013 to accommodate the enormous influx in the number of full-time missionaries serving.[13] This marked the first time since 2008 that no mission consolidations were announced and the second highest percentage increase in the number of missions for a single year within the past century as the number of missions would increase from 347 to 405. In April 2013, the Church announced that the administrative organization of missions would be modified to provide separate leadership infrastructure for male (elder) and female (sister) missionaries.[14] During the first half of 2013, the Church considered options for expanding its flagship MTC in Provo, Utah as the number of missionaries anticipated to enter its doors that summer was projected to reach as high as 7,800; nearly twice the original capacity of the center of 4,000.[15] By late May, the Church had begun housing the first of up to 1,700 missionaries to be assigned to temporary MTC facilities in apartment buildings nearby the preexisting Provo MTC.

In September, young elder missionaries numbered 54,200 (68% of the missionary force) whereas young sister missionaries totaled 19,300 (24%). At the time senior missionaries numbered 6,300 (8%). In October 2012, there were 58,700 missionaries serving including 44,800 young men (76%), 8,100 young women (14%), and 5,800 seniors (10%). The percentage increase in young women serving missions substantially outpaced the percentage increase in young men serving missions (140% versus 21%). Prior to the announcement adjusting the minimum age for missionary service, the percentage of young women comprising the full-time missionary force appeared constant for several years as in 2007 the Church reported that sisters comprised 13% of the worldwide missionary force compared to 14% in 2012.

The number of members serving missions continued to increase during the latter half of 2013 but at a slower rate than during the first half of the year. In early October, the Church reported that the number of members serving full-time missions had surpassed 80,000 for the first time.[16] In December 2013, the Church reported that the number of members serving full-time missions had almost reached 83,000 and that another 12,000 members had received their mission calls and awaited entry to a MTC.[17] As of year-end 2013, the Church had not provided any demographic information regarding the country of origin for newly called missionaries since the revised mission age announcement but the vast majority of the surge in the full-time missionary force appeared attributed to North America but with noticeable improvements in the percentage of members serving missions in many other regions of the world. During 2013, the Church reported that approximately 60% of newly called missionaries were trained at the Provo MTC whereas the remaining 40% were trained at MTCs in other countries.[18]

The reduced minimal mission age for men and women has altered the demographic characteristics of the worldwide missionary force. Women currently comprise a substantially higher percentage of the missionary force than ever before. Significant increases in the number of members serving full-time missions occurred in many countries that have historically had extremely few members serve full-time missions such as the Federated States of Micronesia. The first members to serve a full-time mission from Burundi and South Sudan also began their missionary service in 2013.

2. Website Launched for the Church in China

In March 2013, the Church announced that it launched a new website for providing information on the Church's operations in the People's Republic of China (PRC) called http://mormonsandchina.org/.[19] The website answered questions regarding the operation of the Church such as the guidelines governing the segregation of Chinese nationals and foreigners, the distribution and possession of LDS materials, and the teaching and baptism of converts. For the first time since the establishment of branches comprised of Chinese nationals in mainland China, the Church provided the public with an online method for members of the Church who are Chinese nationals to contact church leadership and obtain information on the location and meeting times for branches and member groups throughout the country. The Church has published meetinghouse locations and worship service times for English-speaking branches on its official meetinghouse locator lds.org/maps for several years but no information has been provided for Chinese branches. Consequently it is likely that many Chinese nationals who joined the Church abroad have lost contact with the Church following their return to China or were unaware of LDS congregations operating in many, if not most, of the largest cities. The new website can help raise awareness among church members and leaders around the world of the Church's presence in mainland China and help returning Chinese nationals remain active and obtain information regarding location and meeting times for church services.

The Church has admitted that over the years it has released few details regarding its operations in mainland China.[20] In 2004, the Church held its first church services for PRC citizens in mainland China.[21] In 2006, the first male PRC member to serve a mission completed his mission. In 2008, LDS apostle Elder Russell M. Ballard reported that approximately 20 branches operated in mainland China for PRC citizens.[22] In 2010, the Church announced plans to "regularize" its activities in mainland China among PRC nationals.[23] By 2013, the Church acknowledged that the number of Latter-day Saints who were born in China numbered in the thousands as most joined the Church through temporary employment or education opportunities abroad.[24] In recent years, the number of PRC citizens serving full-time missions at any given time has increased dramatically from only a couple individuals in the mid-2000s to over 40 in 2010. By 2013, the Church had assigned Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionaries to several missions around the world such as in Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. Many Chinese taught and baptized by missionaries have been PRC citizens who were temporarily living abroad for employment or educational purposes. Some Chinese-designated wards and branches number among the highest baptizing church units in missions where Chinese-specific outreach occurs.

By the early 2010s, isolated member and church leader reports indicate that the Church in mainland China has a branch or member group designated for Chinese nationals established in most, if not all, cities with over one million inhabitants. There may be as many as 200 cities that have an LDS congregation (branch or member group) operating.

The development of an official church website that simply explains to church leaders and Chinese nationals how to find the Church in mainland China has great potential to improve the accountability of Chinese national converts who join the Church and return to mainland China. This may result in increased member activity rates and more accurate church membership record keeping. Publicly providing the email address for the China Area Unit (CAU) director permits Chinese nationals who are church members to obtain information on the location and times for worship services. It is unknown what percentage of PRC converts baptized abroad remain active after their return to mainland China. A lack of awareness of the Church's operations in mainland China among Chinese nationals has likely contributed to a lack of church leader accountability for converts baptized. The new website helps improve awareness of the Church's presence in mainland China and directs church leaders and new converts with contact information so PRC members who return to China can remain in contact with the Church and continue to attend church services.

The Church may experience greater national outreach expansion in mainland China due to the Church launching the new website. Within the first decade of a church presence among PRC citizens residing in mainland China, the Church has achieved phenomenal outreach expansion that has been unparalleled in its scope to any other country that the Church has established official church units in within the past several decades. The Church grew from operating in only a handful of locations in 2004 to likely several hundred by 2013 without a single full-time missionary serving within mainland China. To contrast, the Church in Russia has had a full-time missionary presence for over two decades and operates wards and branches in fewer than 100 cities nationwide notwithstanding greater religious freedom in Russia compared to China. The growth of the Church in mainland China began and continues to strongly rely upon the conversion of Chinese temporarily living abroad. PRC converts baptized abroad have originated from cities throughout China and not from a narrow selection of major cities or a couple of provinces. When these converts return home they have coordinated with CAU leadership to establish a member group in their city or town if no church presence was previously established. This fortuitous, passive approach to expanding outreach has yielded unmatched results in the speed and scope of the operation of the Church in a single country. Use of the new website has potential to accelerate outreach expansion and facilitate coordination with CAU leadership and new move-ins.

3. Rapid Growth in West Africa

There were many indications that rapid LDS growth occurred in West Africa during 2013. Significant church growth developments occurred in all eight countries in West Africa with an LDS presence. Membership growth rates also accelerated for the area as a whole. In early November 2013, senior missionaries reported that there had been 13,500 convert baptisms in the area whereas there were 13,100 convert baptisms for the entire year of 2012. Most missions in West Africa experience some of the highest member activity and convert retention rates in the world notwithstanding rapid membership growth.

In Benin, the Church reported 1,081 members at year-end 2012; a 60% annual increase over the previous year. In 2013, the number of branches increased from six to 10 as four new branches were organized in Aibatin, Avotrou, Cococodji, and Jericho; a significant achievement as there were only three branches in early 2012. Rapid growth has occurred as a result of church planting tactics throughout the Cotonou area. During the first half of 2013, missionaries reported that approximately 70 converts were baptized a month within the three missionary zones of Cotonou. Missionaries serving in some branches reported inadequate seating for members and investigators during Sunday meetings resulting in full-time missionaries standing during sacrament meeting services. Organized as a member group in May 2013, the Cococodji Branch reached over 100 members and investigators attending church services on Sundays prior to becoming an official branch in July 2013. Missionaries relate that the Cotonou Benin District may become a stake in 2014 due to rapid membership growth and good leadership development notwithstanding the Church organizing the district a little over a year ago in October 2012.

In Cape Verde, the recent acceleration of growth numbers among one of the greatest successes in the worldwide Church reversing slow and stagnant growth. Growing from 200 members and one branch in 1991 to 4,964 members and 18 branches in 2001, the Church initially experienced rapid growth during the first decade of missionary work. Rapid growth was followed by a decade of stagnant growth in the 2000s where little progress was reported. By year-end 2009, there were 7,149 members and 19 branches. Notwithstanding nominal membership increasing by 44% between 2001 and 2009, the number of congregations increased by only one (5.6%) during this eight-year period.

Accelerated growth began in the early 2010s as membership increased from 7,149 in 2009 to 9,326 in 2012. In April 2012, the Church created its first stake from the Praia Cape Verde District. Over 1,000 attended the conference to organize the new stake[25] which initially included six wards and two branches. In May 2013, the Church organized a second stake in the country in Mindelo. Rapid congregational growth began in 2012 as there were 18 branches in March 2012 whereas by December 2013 there were 31 official units (14 wards and 17 branches); a 72% increase in less than two years. Provided with assigned district, stake, or mission in parentheses, new units organized during this period included the Calheta Group (Praia), Congresso Branch (Fogo), Mindelo 5th Branch (Mindelo), Ponta do Sol Branch (Mindelo), Palmarejo Ward (Praia), Praia 5th Ward [originally organized as a branch at stake creation in April] (Praia), Relva Branch (Fogo), Ribeirão Manuel Branch (Praia), and Sal 2nd Branch (Mindelo). Additional units organized during 2013 included the Eugénio Lima Branch (Praia), Achada Grande Branch (Praia), Cova Figueira 2nd Branch (Fogo), Sal Rei Branch (Cape Verde Praia Mission), Santa Maria Group (Mindelo), Maio Group (Cape Verde Praia Mission), and the Chão Bom Branch (Praia).

In Cote d'Ivoire, the Church experienced unprecedented rapid growth during 2013. During 2013, the number of wards and branches increased from 53 to 72; a 36% increase. In the most populous city of Abidjan, the Church experienced rapid congregational growth in four of the five stakes as many wards organized less than two years ago were split to form new congregations. Rapid membership growth occurred in 2012 as membership increased by 14.5% for the year. Rapid

congregational growth in 2012 suggests that many recently baptized members have been retained and that rapid membership growth has continued in 2013. Rapid national outreach expansion has also occurred. The number of cities and towns with an official ward or branch operating increased from eight at year-end 2012 (Abidjan, Ahoutoue, Bouafle, Divo, Grand-Bassam, Meagui, San-Pedro, and Yamoussoukro) to 12 at year-end 2013 (Abidjan, Abisso, Ahoutoue, Bonoua, Bouafle, Divo, Gagnoa, Grand-Bassam, Meagui, Ouragahio, San-Pedro, and Yamoussoukro).

In Ghana, the Church continued to rapidly expand national outreach and engage in church planting efforts. Several previously unreached cities had missionaries assigned and member groups organized. In early 2013, the Church assigned its first missionaries to serve in northern Ghana as a result of opening Tamale to missionary work. Missionaries simultaneously opened several member groups in an effort to spur growth and properly saturate the city with LDS outreach in a fashion similar to the opening of Sunyani in late 2010. In mid-2013, the Church opened a fourth mission (Accra West). In the Ghana Kumasi Mission, missionaries opened Techiman to missionary work and organized three member groups. The Ghana Cape Coast Mission also organized a group in Abura-Dunkwa and assigned a missionary companionship. Additional locations in Ghana also opened to missionary work and had branches or member groups opened. The number of congregations increased by 21 during 2013 (a 14% increase) and the Church organized one new stake (Kumasi Dichemso) and two new districts (Obuasi and Twifu Praso).

In Liberia, the Church organized a separate mission to service the entire country with headquarters based in Monrovia. The new mission has one of the smallest populations serviced by a mission in Sub-Saharan Africa with approximately four million people within the mission boundaries. Following the organization of the mission, the Church assigned full-time missionaries outside of Monrovia for the first time in the history of the Church in Liberia as both Harbel and Kakata had missionaries assigned. Three new branches were organized during the year in Congo Town 2nd, Liberia Monrovia Mission Branch, and Tinker Village.

In Nigeria, the Church organized one new mission (Benin City), one new stake (Warri), and two new districts (Agbor and Ogwashi-Nsukwa). The Church experienced a net increase in the number of official congregations by 30 during the year; an 8.6% increase. The Church in Nigeria has continued to experience commensurate membership and congregational growth rates, suggesting stable member activity rates and good convert retention rates. Several locations that previously had no official LDS unit operating had wards and branches organized during 2013; a significant development considering only a handful of locations have had a ward or branch organized for the first time within the past three years.

In Sierra Leone, the Church continued to experience rapid membership growth in 2013. Missionaries report that districts in Freetown East and Bo were coming closer to reaching the minimal qualifications to become stakes. Provided with the assigned district or mission, the Church organized three new branches during the year in Hangha Road (Kenema), Makeni (Sierra Leone Freetown Mission), and Waterloo (Freetown East). The number of missionaries assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission increased by scores during the year as a result of the division of the mission to create the Liberia Monrovia Mission and increases in the number of members serving full-time missions worldwide. Some of the most impressive growth occurred in Makeni during the last two months of 2013. The Church organized its first branch in November and one of the first sacrament meeting services had approximately 175 in attendance. The Church assigned its first young proselytizing missionaries to the city shortly thereafter.

In Togo, the Church continued to experience rapid growth as the number of LDS congregations increased from 10 to 12 in 2013; a significant accomplishment considering the number of branches increased from six to 10 the previous year. Two new branches were organized in Adidogome and Baguida and missionaries reported that a group also operated in Kodjoviakope. In December 2013, the Church organized the first stake in Togo from the Lome Togo District with eight wards and four branches. Over 800 members attended the special conference to organize the new stake. As of December 2013, the Church had baptized 310 converts in Togo during 2013.[26]

4. Progress Achieving "Real Growth" in Central and Western Europe

The Church made considerable strides during 2013 reversing stagnant or declining congregational group within Central and Western Europe. France was the only country in the region that reported a decline in the number of congregations during the year and this decline was attributed to the closure of only one branch. To contrast, the Church in the Europe Area has experienced slight net declines in the number of congregations in most countries. Provided with the net increase in the number of congregations, five countries experienced positive congregational growth during 2013 including Portugal (4), Italy (3), Spain (2), the Netherlands (1), and the United Kingdom (1). All of these countries had previously experienced trends of congregational decline lasting for most of the 2000s. The Church in Italy and Portugal, for example, experienced a net decline or no change in the number of congregations operating year to year between 2000 and 2011. In 2013, the Church organized new stakes in France (Paris South), Italy (Rome West), and Spain (La Palmas). Missions in several countries opened additional cities to missionary work and organized member groups, most notably in the Italy Rome Mission. In late 2013, area leaders reported that sacrament meeting attendance surpassed 100,000 for the first time and that several districts in central and eastern Europe within the Europe Area were close to becoming stakes such as the Tirana Albania District. The Church also continued to make progress baptizing larger numbers of converts and increasing church attendance in the recently opened countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Chinese-specific outreach in the United Kingdom and France also continued to experience good successes and may result in the formation of Mandarin Chinese-speaking branches within the next year.

5. Translations of the Book of Mormon Completed in Malay and Slovak

In 2013, the Church completed the translation of the entire Book of Mormon into two additional languages thereby increasing the total number of languages with a translation (full book or select passages) of the Book of Mormon to 109. Missionaries reported that the completion and publication of the Slovak translation of the Book of Mormon occurred in early 2013 and that the initial distribution of the new translation occurred during the first months of the year. Missionaries reported the completion and publication of the Malay translation of the Book of Mormon occurred in mid-2013 and that the translation became available for distribution around this time. Unlike some languages that have recently had the entire Book of Mormon translated, neither Slovak nor Malay had select passages of the Book of Mormon previously translated. The Church currently reports less than 300 members in Slovakia and approximately 10,000 members in Malaysia. Malay speakers number approximately 16 million worldwide[27] whereas Slovak speakers number approximately five million worldwide.[28]

Limitations

The subjective nature of determining which LDS missionary and church growth developments numbered among the most significant for 2013 constitutes the greatest limitation to this case study. There may be some significant developments that were unknown to missiology researchers due to restricted access to LDS statistical data and limited reports from members, missionaries, and church leaders from around the world. Data obtained regarding the organization of new congregations and organizations and the expansion of national outreach was retrieved from official LDS sources such as lds.org/maps. Local member, full-time missionary, and church leader reports also contributed to the findings in this case study. Official country-by-country membership data for year-end 2013 will not become available until April 2014.

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