

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

>

Using Open Houses for Investigator Finding: A Success Story from the DR Congo

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: July 14th, 2014

Overview

In 2013, LDS apostle Elder L. Tom Perry emphasized the importance of utilizing LDS meetinghouses as a finding and teaching tool in his The Work of Salvation broadcast address.[1] Although the Church has frequently held open houses in newly church-built meetinghouses in North America, the Church in many areas of the world has not utilized this approach for investigator finding.

This case study describes a recent open house in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Successes in how the open house was effectively utilized for finding investigators and educating the general public about the Church are discussed, and opportunities and challenges for utilizing open houses as a finding method are explored. Limitations to this case study are identified.

//

Background

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, senior missionaries serving in Lubumbashi reported that local church leaders had never participated in a meetinghouse open house as of early 2014. The recent construction of a new church-built meetinghouse in one neighborhood attracted attention from locals. The new meetinghouse prompted senior missionaries to provide local church leaders a basic outline of how an open house is typically conducted and encouraged them to organize their own open house for the new meetinghouse. Missionaries reported that local church leaders responded with enthusiasm while planning for the event, embellishing the basic open house concept with a local member choir providing music, two separate open house sessions, gift baskets for local dignitaries, and church video showings. The bishop and the stake president met on numerous occasions prior to the open house to ensure that preparations were proceeding as planned and everything was in place prior to the event.

On a Saturday in April 2014, church leaders and missionaries held the open house in the newly completed meetinghouse. Missionaries organized two open house sessions, one for dignitaries and another for the general public. Full-time missionaries waited at the gate of the meetinghouse complex for individuals and families to arrive, escorted groups of attendees through the meetinghouse, answered questions about the Church, and directed them to a referral table at the end of the tour. Individual classrooms and rooms in the meetinghouse were set up with information about a particular doctrine or church organization associated with the room and had a member or missionary available to explain these to attendees. Doctrines and church organizations presented in the meetinghouse included the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, baptism, Primary, Relief Society, sacrament meeting, temple work, and Young Men and Young Women. At the end of the tour, two full-time missionaries staffed a referral table for any who were interested in meeting with full-time missionaries, or to receive a copy of the Book of Mormon or a piece of church literature. Additionally, missionaries showed videos about the Church in the chapel for those who wished to stay longer. 36 young missionaries and one single missionary couple participated in the open house.

Missionaries reported that the open house event was a major success with over 500 teaching referrals obtained. Approximately 20 dignitaries visited and more than 2,000 people were estimated to had attended the open house. Missionaries reported that there were over 30 first-time visitors attending church in the new meetinghouse the following Sunday.

In May, the chapel began to be completely filled during sacrament meeting. In June, missionaries reported that the ward

baptized new converts on a weekly basis, and between 30 and 40 investigators attended the Gospel Essentials Sunday School class.

Missionaries identified several aspects of the open house that could be improved to make future open houses more effective and to meet frequent interests and needs expressed by attendees. A separate room specifically about the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith appears necessary due to many asking questions about these topics. Assigning one full-time missionary and one local member to each room appears appropriate as some members struggled to answer questions. The pairing of a full-time missionary and a local member provides full-time missionaries to teach attendees about the Church and explain questions, whereas local members can provide fellowship and context for membership serviced by the meetinghouse. Showing the Church's film The Restoration appears needed in the chapel as another format to teach attendees about the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith. Ensuring that all proselytism and teaching pamphlets that accompany the missionary lessons are available is also warranted to meet the diversity of ages and needs among those attending. Providing flyers and information to full-time missionaries and local members concerning the date and time of the open house activity at least one week prior to the open house is also necessary as flyers were only available a few days before the event.

As of June 2014, missionaries reported plans for conducting similar open house events at recently completed meetinghouse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Lubumbashi Mission.

Successes

The open house held in April 2014 was a significant success as evidenced by the generation of over 500 teaching referrals, dozens of investigators attending church during the weeks and months following the event, and convert baptisms occurring on a weekly basis. These impressive results were achieved as a result of local church leaders taking the lead in planning and preparing the open house event and exhibiting enthusiasm in developing creative approaches tailored to local conditions. High receptivity in the area was effectively harnessed by full-time missionaries and local members participating in the event together, and the presentation of LDS teachings in a variety of formats, including printed and audiovisual media. Involvement from senior missionaries in educating local church leaders regarding the use of open houses as a finding and public affairs tool, and providing feedback for how future open houses in the area could be improved, has proved valuable in refining the use of this intervention in local proselytism efforts. The success with the open house has encouraged local church leaders, missionaries, and mission leadership to hold similar events in additional locations.

Opportunities

Congolese number among the most receptive peoples that have received LDS outreach to date. Most value organized religion and actively practice their faith. Missionaries report that many willingly hear and accept LDS teachings, even if they have received little information or have had limited contact with missionaries or church members. The Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has on numerous occasions had isolated members or investigators self-organize into congregations and petition mission and area leaders for an official LDS establishment in their location. Additionally, the Church in some central areas of the country has gone from a single mission branch to a stake without the assignment of young, full-time missionaries due to self-sufficient and effective member-missionary programs.

These conditions suggest that additional open house events have enormous potential to harness the uniquely-high receptivity and steep spiritual learning curve exhibited by many Congolese. Opportunities for growth appear limitless, as open houses can be utilized as a finding approach not only for areas where there is a more established LDS presence, but also in areas with a new or tiny presence. The use of local construction teams to build meetinghouses in locations where there are few or no known members has good potential to rapidly expand outreach and instill self-sufficiency in new converts. The establishment of meetinghouses that operate within close proximity of target populations is strongly correlated with the development of LDS community and effective missionary programs. Consequently a combination of engaging in methodical church-planting tactics that begin with holding cottage meetings and family home evening groups in a community, transition to organizing a member group and baptizing the first converts, and result in the creation of an official branch can effectively develop resource-laden congregations that can provide additional manpower and strength to fuel additional church growth and missionary efforts within the surrounding area. The utilization of the open-house format for meetinghouse that are not newly constructed also presents good opportunities for finding investigators and accelerating growth.

Challenges

The rigid application of the open house format described in the April 2014 example poses the greatest challenge for successfully using open houses for finding and public affairs efforts. The key success in the open house event centered on senior missionaries providing a basic outline of how open houses traditionally look, and local church leaders adapting this approach with their own creativity and ingenuity to make it effective for local conditions. Repeated successes with meetinghouse open houses will require local church leaders to take the lead in planning and carrying out these events, and relying on inspiration to make any specialized modifications to enhance quality and performance.

Mission leadership asserts that many new meetinghouses constructed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are culturally inappropriate as these buildings convey an image of a wealthy, non-African church. The new meetinghouse utilized in the open house described in this case study was described by missionaries as the "nicest" building in the entire area of the city and unlike

any other building in the area. Although the Church utilized local Congolese members to build the meetinghouse, the meetinghouse design was developed in North America and construction materials were imported from outside the country. The use of foreign meetinghouse designs and materials poses serious challenges for the Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to efficiently and effectively construct meetinghouses to meet demand, as well as to avoid misconceptions of the Church and its compatibility with Congolese culture. The Church in many areas of Sub-Saharan Africa has historically struggled to construct adequately large meetinghouses that complement local architecture and standards of living. Some new church-built meetinghouses in Sub-Saharan Africa are ostentatious as they are the largest buildings constructed with the finest materials in a given location, notwithstanding the tiny size of the Church in comparison to other religious groups and pervasive low living standards.

Rapid LDS growth and populations exhibiting high receptivity to LDS outreach may discourage church leaders to hold open houses out of concern that growth may become unmanageable and overwhelm current church infrastructure. The Church in many areas of Sub-Saharan African has historically followed a conservative interpretation of the "centers of strength" policy that advocates for the strengthening of the Church in locations where it already has an official presence as opposed to opening additional areas for missionary work. This policy aims to establish self-sufficient centers of strength, often in the most populous cities, in order for these emerging centers to provide resources to permit the eventual opening of additional locations currently unreached by the Church. Many former mission presidents and senior missionaries in Sub-Saharan Africa have reported that mission and area leaders have avoided the opening of congregations in locations where no LDS presence operates due to concerns with effectively administering the Church in these often isolated locations, a lack of mission resources available, and worries that a combination of isolation and recent conversion to the Church may lead to improper church administration and apostasy. Past experience in Sub-Saharan Africa has demonstrated that large numbers of new converts baptized within a short period of time in locations with a small or recently established church infrastructure does not invariably result in poor long-term member activity and convert retention rates, or shortages in local priesthood leaders to effectively administer the Church. Rather, the consistent adherence of reasonably high convert baptismal standards has been key to long-term conversion and the transition of masses of new converts from liabilities to assets in their respective congregations. Additionally, member-missionary focused programs have also been strongly correlated with better long-term activity and leadership self-sufficiency outcomes in situations when large numbers of converts join the Church within a short period of time.

Limitations

A high-quality report from a senior missionary couple provided extensive quantitative and qualitative data utilized in this case study. However, no data was directly obtained from others who participated in the open house event, including local members and church leaders, young full-time missionaries, and open house attendees. As plans for the implementation of similar open house events remain in the conceptualization phases at present, it is unclear if open house events for new meetinghouses will become standardized in regards to structure and layout, or if similar events will occur for existing meetinghouses that have not been recently constructed.

[1] "Special Broadcast: The Work of Salvation," lds.org, retrieved 14 July 2014. https://www.lds.org/training/wwlt/2013/hastening/special-broadcast?lang=eng