


# Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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**Recent Missionary and Church Growth Successes in the Russia Vladivostok Mission**

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**Overview**

Beginning in late 2012, the Russia Vladivostok Mission began to experience noticeable increases in many church growth indicators. Sacrament meeting attendance increased to record highs and larger numbers of converts were baptized than in previous years. Several cities that once had an LDS presence were reopened to formal proselytism efforts and had multiple convert baptisms within a matter of a couple months. The number of missionaries assigned to the mission also began to substantially increase for the first time in many years.

This case study recounts the history of the Church in the Russia Vladivostok Mission and summarizes recent missionary and church growth developments. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth are identified and discussed. The growth of the Church in other Russian missions within recent years is compared to the Russia Vladivostok Mission. A synopsis of the growth of other nontraditional proselytizing faiths that operate within the geographical area covered by the Russia Vladivostok Mission is provided. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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**LDS Background**

The Church established its official presence in the Russian Far East in the early and mid 1990s. Latter-day Saint American expatriates temporarily lived in Vladivostok and Magadan for employment purposes and initially held church services in their homes. These members shared the gospel with associates and several converts joined the Church in both cities. Additional Russian members joined the Church elsewhere and returned or relocated to these and other cities in the Russian Far East. In 1995, formal missionary activity began under the direct supervision of the Asia North Area Presidency. The Asia North Area administered the Russian Far East until the Church created the Russia Vladivostok Mission in 1999. The original boundaries of the mission included Amur, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Khabarovsk, Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Kamchatka, Magadan, Primorsky Krai, Sakha, and Sakhalin. In 1996, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin became the first LDS apostle to visit the Russian Far East.[1] The Church organized a member district in Vladivostok sometime in the late 1990s[2] and discontinued the district sometime in the early 2000s. In the early 2000s, there were six branches in the mission (Khabarovsk, Magadan, Ussuriysk, Vladivostok 1st, Vladivostok 2nd, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk). In 2005, LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley held a special member meeting in Vladivostok where 200 members attended.[3] In the late 2000s, there were seven branches in the mission (Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, Nakhodka, Ussuriysk, Vladivostok 1st, Vladivostok 2nd, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk). Missionaries appeared to visit Artyom but it is unclear whether any branch or member group operated in this city at the time. In eastern Siberia, there were four branches in the late 2000s that were administered by the Russia Novosibirsk Mission (Angarsk, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude 1st, Ulan-Ude 2nd).

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, there were at least five branches that were discontinued within the present-day geographic area of the Russia Vladivostok Mission (Angarsk, Blagoveshchensk, Magadan, Ulan-Ude 2nd, and Vladivostok 2nd). The mission also closed the following cities to missionary work: Angarsk, Artyom, Blagoveshchensk, and Magadan. Very few or no active members, limited numbers of missionaries, and few investigators and convert baptisms were contributing factors to the removal of missionaries and closure of branches in these cities. In 2012, the boundaries of the mission were expanded to include several additional administrative divisions that previously pertained to the Russia Novosibirsk Mission. Only two branches operated in these administrative divisions at the time that met in Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude. Since 2012 the Russia Vladivostok Mission has serviced the following 12 administrative divisions in the Russian Far East and in Siberia (Amur,

Buryatia, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Khabarovsk, Irkutsk, Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Kamchatka, Magadan, Primorsky Krai, Sakha, Sakhalin, and Zabaykalsky). These 12 administrative division altogether comprise 10.8 million people; less than eight percent of the population of Russia.[4]

In late 2012, mission leadership and full-time missionaries began reporting increasing numbers of members and investigators attending church, larger numbers of convert baptisms, and increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to the mission. In early 2013, missionaries reopened the cities of Angarsk and Artyom and organized member groups in both locations. In May 2013, the mission held a special conference for members in the Nakhodka, Ussuriysk, and Vladivostok Branches and the Artyom Group. 176 attended the conference - 50 more than were anticipated. In early June, the first convert baptisms occurred in Angarsk since missionaries were reassigned. In mid-2013, the mission reported record numbers of converts baptized for several consecutive months. One weekend in June had eight convert baptisms - more than the number of convert baptisms for a higher-than-normal month prior to accelerated growth. During several months of 2013 the mission reported that sacrament meeting attendance for the mission was setting all-time highs on a regular basis. The mission reported that sacrament meeting attendance had recently increased by 25% and that mission-wide church attendance was close to reaching 400 for the first time. In mid-2013, locations with an official branch established included Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, Nakodka, Ulan-Ude, Ussurisk, Vladivostok, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. All meetinghouses are rented or renovated facilities with the exception of the church-build chapel in Ulan-Ude. In 2013, missionaries report good prospects for a church-built meetinghouse to be constructed in Vladivostok within the near future.

In late 2012 and 2013, missionary reports provided details on sacrament meeting attendance for individual branches in the mission. In Angarsk and Arytom, missionaries reported in July 2013 that there were approximately seven members and investigators who attended church in each city. In Irkutsk, the branch averaged over 50 attending church on Sundays during the month of May and sacrament meeting attendance reached an all-time high of 63 on one Sunday. In Khabarovsk, there were approximately 30 members attending church in early 2013. In Magadan, a member group operated that had five member families in late 2012. In Nakodka, mission leaders reported that sacrament meeting attendance had tripled from a year earlier and that six convert baptisms occurred within a two-month timeframe that summer. However sacrament meeting attendance in the branch widely fluctuated from as high as 43 to as low as 18 within a single month. In Ulan-Ude, there were approximately 80 active members in August 2013. In Vladivostok, sacrament meeting attendance averaged around 80. In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the branch has had one of the most self-sufficient, well-organized branches in the mission for many years with a full branch presidency led by native Russian members, auxiliaries staffed by local members, and generally 50-60 members attending church on an average Sunday. The branch is one of the only units in the mission where full-time missionaries do not hold branch callings.

Most missionary transfers in 2013 have had three to five missionaries returning home and five to ten new missionaries arriving. In late 2012, mission leaders indicated the possibility of full-time missionaries reopening the city of Magadan to missionary activity within the foreseeable future. In September 2013, missionaries were removed from Khabarovsk due to widespread flooding in the area.

**Successes**

In 2012 and 2013, mission leadership made significant progress reversing stagnant growth with relatively few mission resources. The Russia Vladivostok Mission has numbered among the missions of the Church with the smallest missionary complements with as few as 30 missionaries assigned to the mission at a time. The mission has mobilized missionaries and revamped proselytism vision resulting in steady increases in sacrament meeting attendance and the number of convert baptisms. The substantial increase in sacrament meeting attendance for many branches and member groups is one of the most meaningful accomplishments as church attendance is a critical indicator of member activity and baptismal preparation that can be easily measured. The Russia Vladivostok Mission has experienced little growth compared to other Russian missions and for the first time since the initial introduction of LDS missionaries has experienced progress increasing church attendance that has been sustained for several months.

The Church has reopened cities that once had missionaries assigned and has formed member groups. Missionaries have reported steadily baptizing new converts and reactivating less-active and inactive members in both recently reopened cities of Angarsk and Arytom. The Church has achieved good success in attracting larger numbers of investigators and less-active and inactive members to church services in other cities. These findings illustrate that cities previously opened and later closed to missionaries due to few active members and convert baptisms can experience a resurgence in growth years later when missionaries are reintroduced and committed members are baptized and channeled into leadership positions.

**Opportunities**

The baptism of sizable numbers of new converts in many branches and groups presents good opportunities for leadership development. Careful coordination with local branch presidencies in the assignment of new converts to member responsibilities such as home teaching and leadership positions such as in auxiliary presidencies and as teachers has potential to create resource-endowed branches that can operate with minimal to no full-time missionary intervention in branch administration. Taking steps to ensure that new converts are socially integrated into their congregations prior to baptism will be important to help them continue to attend church when they experience personal challenges and difficulties that test their faith and commitment to attend church.

The increased size of the missionary complement for the Russia Vladivostok Mission has improved opportunities for expanding outreach to additional cities. Missionaries may be reassigned to the two remaining cities that once had missionaries and branches (Blagoveshchensk and Magadan). Several cities that have never appeared to receive LDS outreach appear favorable for future missionary activity such as Chita and Yakutsk. Provided with 2012 population figures in parentheses, there are six cities with over 100,000 inhabitants located within the boundaries of the mission that appear to have no branch or member group operating include Chita (327,423), Yakutsk (269,486), Komsomolsk-na-Amure (260,257), Bratsk (243,926), Blagoveshchensk (215,736), and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (179,784). These cities appear favorable for mission leadership and senior missionary couples to conduct investigatory visits and assess conditions for assigning full-time missionaries and organizing member groups.

There are unrealized opportunities to reach non-Slavic indigenous peoples in the Russian Far East and Siberia. Some of these people may exhibit higher receptivity to the LDS Church compared to ethnic Russians such as the Yakut. Mission leadership and senior missionary couples visiting locations where these Turkic, Paleo-Siberian, and Mongoloid peoples reside will be the critical first step towards extending outreach to these peoples that have never received a Latter-day Saint gospel witness. The widespread use of the Russian language among most of these peoples can facilitate initial outreach efforts through use of Russian-speaking missionaries and translations of Russian church materials and scriptures. However many of these peoples would benefit from translations of basic proselytism materials in their native language to convey compatibility of local culture and LDS teachings and to facilitate gospel understanding.

**Challenges**

It is unclear whether recent progress increasing sacrament meeting attendance in the mission will be sustained in the coming years and decades ahead. The Church has successfully augmented some measurements of church activity such as sacrament meeting attendance and seminary and institute enrollment in many missions around the world through establishing mission-wide goals. Setting and fulfilling these goals can have little long-term impact on "real growth" if there is a lack of focus on pre-baptismal preparation and post-baptism fellowship, little member-missionary involvement, undeveloped or nonexistent missionary preparation for youth and young adults, and insufficient emphasis on teaching and living the basic teachings and doctrines of the Church. Recent missionary reports from the Russia Vladivostok Mission suggest that mission leaders have emphasized the importance of full-time missionaries helping local members fulfill many basic member responsibilities and expectations such as regular church attendance and attending all three hours of church meetings on Sundays in locations where a three-hour meeting block is established. However, some convert baptisms appear to have been rushed and may result in diminished convert retention rates in the medium and long terms. Since its organization, the Russia Vladivostok Mission has numbered among the lowest baptizing missions in Russia largely due to a combination of few mission resources allocated to the mission, administrative challenges, and overall low to modest levels of receptivity.

The Church may experience challenges opening additional cities to missionary work due to the Church in Russia experiencing limited religious freedom, periodic opposition from civil and religious authorities, and visa regulations requiring foreign missionaries to leave the country every 90 days to renew their visas. There have been many reports over the past two decades of LDS missionaries getting detained for no particular cause and then urged by local police to stop their activities and released.[5] In the early 2000s, the local Department of Justice in Chelyabinsk rejected the Church's application to register, stating that church activities are not permitted by federal law.[6] Similar problems have been experienced in other locations in Russia within the past decade. Although there have been few reports of local government officials impeding LDS missionary activity within the boundaries of the Russia Vladivostok Mission, difficulties may arise in administrative divisions that have had no LDS presence previously established due to a lack of awareness of the Church in these locations and widespread circulation of negative stereotypes and prejudices of the LDS Church in Russia. There are many aspects of Russian culture and society that pose challenges for achieving greater growth such as high rates of substance abuse, strong ethnoreligious ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, and suspicion of proselytizing Christian groups based in the United States.

Geographically, the Russia Vladivostok Mission is one of the largest missions in the Church. It is also likely the mission with the lowest population density. The huge expanse of the mission includes many large and medium-sized cities scattered throughout the Russian Far East and eastern Siberia, posing many difficulties for mission leadership for travel and administration. Mission leaders must travel regularly to isolated mission branches located thousands of kilometers apart where there are tiny numbers of active members. Distance between mission headquarters and cities where full-time missionaries are assigned challenges efforts for the mission to provide adequate administrative and ecclesiastical support to isolated missionary companionships. Harsh winter weather conditions also pose safety concerns. These conditions make the organization of member districts that span multiple cities where LDS units operate unfeasible due to long distances, travel difficulties, and tiny numbers of active members.

Past efforts to establish more than one branch in the most populous cities of the Russia Vladivostok Mission have been unsuccessful. Only Ulan-Ude and Vladivostok have ever had more than one branch operating. The Church operated two branches in each of these cities until the early 2010s when both branches in each city were consolidated into a single unit. Few convert baptisms, limited numbers of active priesthood leaders to serve in leadership positions, and moderate to low member activity rates prompted mission leaders to consolidate branches to conserve resources and provide more socialization and fellowshipping opportunities. There are currently three cities in the mission that have over half a million inhabitants and only one LDS congregation including Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok. Although these cities have multiple missionary companionships assigned to provide outreach, distance from the Church's sole meetinghouse in each of these cities has been a factor that has lowered member activity rates.

Many branches and member groups remain heavily reliant on full-time missionaries to properly function. A lack of member

involvement in holding leadership positions or burnout of dedicated leaders due to years of service with few fellow members for support have resulted in poorly developed leadership infrastructure in most congregations. The assimilation of new converts into leadership positions will be important for the long-term growth of the Church, improving self-sufficiency of congregations, and preventing burnout.

**Comparative Growth**

The Church has experienced very slow, stagnant, or declining growth in all other Russian missions within the past five years. In the early 2010s, area and mission presidencies focused on consolidating small branches in major cities as part of an effort to create ward-sized congregations to prepare for the organization of stakes. Consequently the number of branches was halved or reduced even further in most major cities in Russia. Only two member districts have matured into stakes: Moscow Russia (2011) and St Petersburg Russia (2012). In the early 2010s, the Church in Russia closed nearly all of its member districts that did not appear likely to become stakes within the foreseeable future. Most missions had only a couple cities opened to missionary work within the past five years, if any cities were opened at all, and most missions have fewer cities with branches organized and missionaries serving in 2013 than five years earlier. The number of convert baptisms in most missions has steadily declined since the 1990s and today most Russian missions number among the lowest baptizing in the world. Within the past couple years only the Russia Vladivostok Mission has appeared to make any significant headway reversing stagnant or declining growth.

Other nontraditional, proselytizing Christian groups report a more widespread presence in the Russian Far East than the LDS Church but these groups report very slow or stagnant growth. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 150 congregations within the LDS mission boundaries for the Russia Vladivostok Mission. Provided with the number of congregations in parentheses, administrative divisions with a Witness presence include Irkutsk (55), Khabarovsk (42), Primorsky Krai (20), Amur (7), Buryatia (7), Sakha (6), Zabaykalsky (6), and Sakhalin (5). There are no reported Witness congregations in Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Kamchatka, or Magadan. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 51 churches and 20 companies within the nine eastern administrative regions covered by the LDS Russia Vladivostok Mission.[7] Adventists reported 34 churches and 33 companies in the three western administrative divisions covered by the LDS Russia Vladivostok Mission in addition to several administrative divisions in eastern Siberia.[8]

**Limitations**

Data on recent church growth developments were obtained by the mission president and young, full-time missionary reports. No reports were available from local members or church leaders on recent growth developments. The Church publishes no official figures on member activity rates, the number of annual convert baptisms for individual missions, and the number of temple recommend holders. The Church does not publish the location and meeting times for member groups. The location of member groups that currently function in the mission was retrieved from full-time missionary reports. It is unclear whether there are any additional locations in the Russia Vladivostok Mission that have member groups operating. There were no missionary or member reports on sacrament meeting attendance trends for the Russia Vladivostok Mission prior to 2013 and for other Russian missions in 2013. In September 2013, the Europe East Area Presidency directed all missionaries and mission presidents to discontinue or make private any missionary blogs or reports published online. Consequently data on future church growth trends for the Russia Vladivostok Mission will be very difficult to obtain until this policy is reversed.

**Future Prospects**

Future LDS growth in the Russia Vladivostok Mission will largely depend on whether recent missionary progress and active membership growth is sustained into the coming years and decades to come. Full-time missionary reports obtained in mid-2013 indicate that mission leadership is optimistic that a member district based in Vladivostok may be forthcoming once the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders is sufficient to staff both branch and district leadership and prepare for the creation of a stake. However, past experience in the mission indicates that the organization of even one member district has been impractical - let alone mission and area leaders instigating the widespread dissolution of member districts across Russia within the past few years. These findings combined with the current number of active members suggest that the organization of a member district may be several more years away. The organization of members districts will require currently operating branches to have larger numbers of active members and sufficient numbers of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders to staff both branch and district leadership. Prospects appear favorable for the opening of additional cities to missionary activity due to increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the mission. The Church may organize a second branch or member group in cities where active membership steadily increases and surpasses 100.

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