

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent LDS Church Planting Efforts in the Tennessee Nashville Mission

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Overview

Within the past couple decades, there have been few documented cases of the LDS Church in the United States systematically opening previously unreached cities and towns to missionary work through "planting" new member groups or branches. The decline in the number of members serving full-time missions during the 2000s coupled with stagnant numbers of members serving missions for nearly a decade thereafter limited available mission resources that church leaders could allocate for outreach expansion purposes in the United States and around the world. A renewed emphasis on the "centers of strength" paradigm that focused on consolidating small church units in order to create larger ones with more auxiliary programs and socialization opportunities has in some locations reduced the number of locations where a ward or branch operates and deterred efforts to organize additional church units in locations that receive no LDS outreach. The vast majority of surplus missionary resources has consequently been channeled into either wards and branches with the largest numbers of active members as these units are regarded to provide greater member-missionary fellowship or units that experience the most severe member activity and convert retention problems in order for missionaries to focus on reactivation and retention efforts.

This case study examines recent mission outreach expansion and church planting successes in the Tennessee Nashville Mission. A summary of these events is provided followed by successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth. A comparative growth section compares recent church planting successes in the Tennessee Nashville Mission to other missions in the United States and contrasts the extent of outreach of the LDS Church to other proselytizing denominations. Limitations to these findings and data are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

Renewed outreach expansion efforts in the Tennessee Nashville Mission began in the early 2010s in small cities and towns that were known to have small numbers of Latter-day Saints and investigators but were located many miles from the nearest LDS meetinghouse. In late 2012, mission leaders placed a missionary companionship in the town of Winchester, Tennessee (population: 8,530)[1] and gave the missionaries the task to reactivate less-active members and baptize new converts to prepare for the organization of an official branch. Mission leaders organized a family home evening (FHE) group which had approximately 25 in attendance when it first opened. A senior missionary couple facilitated efforts to establish a congregation through reactivation and proselytism efforts. In late April 2013, the mission organized the Winchester Group into a branch. By this time church attendance had reached 153 and mission leaders reported that the new branch would become a ward within the near future. In June, mission leaders reported that the branch regularly had over a dozen investigators attending church at a time and that as many as 20 converts were anticipated to be baptized during the month. The branch met in a mortuary as no meetinghouse was available and the owner of the mortuary permitted the Church to use the building free of charge. In late May 2013, the mission president reported that he was considering placing ten full-time missionaries within the small city of Winchester due to the massive number of member and investigator teaching referrals that at time numbered over 300.

The mission also facilitated efforts with stake leaders to revamp young single adult (YSA) outreach. In March 2013, the Church organized a new YSA unit in the Murfressboro Tennessee Stake and had 115 in attendance at the meeting to officially create the new unit. A senior missionary couple was instrumental in the organization of the new unit and heading reactivation efforts resulting in over a hundred active members at the time the branch was organized.

Additional cities and towns previously unreached by the Church have had missionaries assigned or have had missionaries visit. In early 2013, mission leaders reported a mission-wide program to organize family home evening (FHE) groups in cities and towns without a ward or branch functioning. In May 2013, the first sacrament meeting services were held in Livingston, Tennessee (population: 4,058)[2] with approximately 40 members and investigators attending. Church services were held in an investigator's garage. That same month missionaries assigned to the Paris Branch reported that they were in the process of organizing two FHE groups in towns within their proselytism area distant from the branch meetinghouse. In June, mission leaders reported that efforts were underway to establish a branch in the city of Springfield (population: 16,440)[3] through holding Sunday evening cottage meetings. Over 60 people were attending these meetings by mid-June. Mission leaders reported over 50 members and investigators attending a FHE group in Pulaski. In 2013, mission leaders reported that several ministers of other Christian denominations have joined the Church - an unusual occurrence within the United States. By mid-2013, FHE groups were operating in 12 cities in the mission with several holding Sunday worship services as member groups.

Successes

Full-time missionary and member-missionary efforts have operated succinctly in locations targeted for outreach expansion and

have produced surprisingly successful results. This achievement reinforces and validates that longstanding counsel provided by international church leaders of the importance of coordination between local members and full-time missionaries and mission leaders. The success of the Church in some locations augmenting active membership from as few as 20 to as many as 150 in a matter of months deserves serious consideration by church leaders throughout the eastern United States and other areas of the world in implementing similar church planting tactics within their jurisdictions. These successes have occurred in multiple cities and towns within the past year suggest that church leaders reevaluate how a centers of strength policy is implemented, especially in countries and world regions where there have been little or no vision to expand outreach and a greater emphasis placed on consolidating small branches to create larger branches and wards rather than to open unreached areas to missionary activity.

Individual member groups have successfully advanced along the progression of becoming larger and more self-sufficient church units. This suggests that local leadership development has occurred as a result of the gradual hand off of responsibilities met by full-time missionaries to local members. Although only one member group has officially reached branch status as of mid-2013, several FHE and member groups have steadily augmented the number of members and investigators in attendance and appear likely to become branches within the coming months. Senior missionary couples have played an important role in leadership development and reactivation efforts resulting in good progress in accelerating the self-sufficiency of individual church units.

Church leaders have utilized a variety of options for finding spaces to hold cottage meetings, member groups, and new branches that have included member and investigator homes, mortuaries, and garages. The flexibility and versatility in finding minimally sufficient building space to hold semi-official church meetings has been key to swiftly opening areas to missionary activity and preparing for the organization of official church units. This approach also challenges the notion held by some members and church leaders that the construction and availability of church-build meetinghouses plays an important role in achieving and measuring growth.

Opportunities

The Tennessee Nashville Mission has abundant opportunities to continue church planting efforts in lesser-reached and unreached cities and towns. The population has exhibited higher receptivity to LDS outreach than in many other areas of the United States and there remain many small cities and towns that have not had missionaries assigned. In mid-2013, there were 13 cities and towns with 5,000 or more inhabitants that did not appear to receive any LDS outreach. No wards or branches are headquartered in these locations and very few, if any, have ever appeared to have had missionaries assigned or a ward or branch previously operate. Continuing the church planting vision established by current mission leaders of holding weekly FHE groups and simplified church services in these locations will be critical towards the Church achieving long-term outreach expansion. A map displaying the location of cities and towns with wards, branches, or member groups established and the location of cities and towns with 5,000 or more inhabitants without a known LDS unit functioning can be found here.

There has not appeared to be any church planting efforts to facilitate the organization of additional member groups and branches in lesser-reached areas of major cities such as Nashville. These locations will likely require mission leaders to place greater focus on meeting ethnolinguistic diversity issues as ethnic minority groups such as immigrant and refugee peoples generally exhibit higher receptivity to missionary efforts than the English-speaking Caucasian population. Holding language-specific Sunday school classes in established wards and branches and organizing weekly FHE groups to foster a sense of LDS community and encourage socialization opportunities with members and investigators may be the most appropriate method to provide specialized outreach without overburdening local stake and mission leaders. Holding language-specific Sunday school classes in established wards and branches and organizing weekly FHE groups to foster a sense of LDS community and encourage socialization opportunities with members and investigators may be the most appropriate method to provide specialized outreach without overburdening local stake and mission leaders. Currently missionaries teach only in English and Spanish resulting in no concentrated outreach among immigrant groups that speak other languages. There remain opportunities to organize YSA units in many of these urban areas that have yet to be fully explored.

Challenges

Future Tennessee Nashville Mission leaders maintaining the continuity of current church planting vision poses one of the greatest potential barriers to church growth. Within the past decade, the Church has generally avoided the opening of previously unreached areas to missionary activity in most countries around the world due to limited numbers of full-time missionaries serving worldwide and a renewed emphasis on the centers of strength model to guide missionary activity and outreach expansion. The interpretation of this policy has differed by area and mission with some locations experiencing a retraction of geographical outreach within the past decade whereas other locations have experienced a significant expansion of outreach as additional cities are steadily opened to full-time missionaries. In the United States, most missions have concentrated surplus missionary manpower into the largest wards or to struggling branches with inactivity and leadership development problems, leaving extremely few or no resources for allocation to outreach expansion purposes. Future mission leaders may reverse current mission policies and approaches to church growth within the mission, resulting in members groups that do not attain branch status folding back into their assigned ward or branch and a total cessation of outreach expansion efforts. This type of action appears most likely to occur if the program of starting FHE groups and organizing member groups becomes less successful than at present or if mission and church leaders determine that existing congregations need larger numbers of active members in order to provide greater social support and fellowship.

The overstaffing of newly organized branches with several missionary companionships may make some of these units

vulnerable to becoming dependent on full-time missionaries for local leadership and member responsibilities such as the administration of the sacrament, home and visiting teaching, and holding callings. The vulnerability for these units to become dependent on missionaries is especially likely if the number of investigators declines from current levels and missionaries fill member responsibilities due to a lack of productive proselytism activities to engage in and frustrations with newly baptized or reactivated members inconsistently fulfilling their callings.

Comparative Growth

No other mission headquartered in the United States has appeared to implement as widespread and as successful of a church planting program as the Tennessee Nashville Mission. Many missions in the United States have attempted to open one or two previously unreached cities or towns by assigning a full-time missionary companionship but in most circumstances missionaries, members, and investigators are required to travel to the nearest ward or branch for church services. The formation of member groups in the United States has occurred primarily for ethnolinguistic minority groups in order to accommodate language needs, especially among Spanish speakers. Rarely have member groups begun functioning in locations where no ward or branch previously operated and these instances have occurred in locations where long distance has prevented local members from attending church such as in rural locations in western Texas and Georgia.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report a presence in Tennessee similar in size to the LDS Church or slightly larger. The LDS Church reports 102 wards and branches in Tennessee whereas Jehovah's Witnesses report 231 congregations in Tennessee that hold worship services in eleven different languages.[4] Witnesses maintain a more pervasive presence than the LDS Church and operate congregations in many towns that currently receive no LDS outreach. Witnesses do not publish past or current membership data for Tennessee and consequently it is unclear how many locations have recently had Witness congregations opened or closed. The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Tennessee and Kentucky reported slow congregational growth between 2001 and 2011 as the number of churches increased from 90 to 96 and the number of companies increased from six to seven. Adventists generally baptize between 200 and 500 converts a year in Kentucky and Tennessee combined.[5] The Church of the Nazarene reports 157 churches in Tennessee.[6]

Limitations

Data on the recent opening of additional cities and towns to missionary activity and church planting efforts was retrieved from mission president and full-time missionary reports. No local leader or member reports were available regarding these developments. The Church does not provide an official listing of the locations where member groups or FHE groups assemble. Consequently it is unclear where many of these groups operate in the Tennessee Nashville Mission and in other locations around the world. The Church does not publish membership statistics regarding the number of convert baptisms, active members, and total members on church records for individual counties or urban locations. No data on member activity and convert retention rates are published by the Church.

Future Prospects

The unprecedented surge in the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide coupled with ongoing successes opening many previously unreached cities and towns within the Tennessee Nashville Mission to missionary activity has potential to accelerate membership and congregational growth rates within the mission and influence missionary work and church growth policies in neighboring missions in the Southeast United States. The Church will likely experience several indicators of real growth within the foreseeable future as member groups mature into branches and recently baptized converts and reactivated inactive and less-active members remain active. Carefully integrating church programs that have been demonstrated to improve convert retention and member activity such as seminary and institute, youth programs, and young single adult programs will be important to perpetuate progress in maintaining recent gains and solidifying a sense of LDS community in recently opened areas.

[1] "USA - Tennessee," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 11 June 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/usa-census-tennessee.php

[2] "USA - Tennessee," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 11 June 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/usa-census-tennessee.php

[3] "USA - Tennessee," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 11 June 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/usa-census-tennessee.php

[4] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 19 June 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[5] "Kentucky-Tennessee Conference (1932-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 19 June 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2149631

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 19 June 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=US&s=TN&z=&l=&SearchChoice=