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The Cost Per Convert: Analysis on the Financial Costs for Retaining Converts in the LDS Church

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Converts Baptized Per Missionary

One of the methods for assessing the efficiency and productivity of the missionary program is calculating the average number of converts baptized per missionary. In 2012, the LDS Church baptized 272,330 converts and had 58,990 full-time missionaries serving. These statistics indicate that the average missionary brought 4.6 converts into the Church that year; a relatively small number considering the average missionary brought seven to eight new converts into the Church a year during most years in the 1980s.

Missionary Funding

The Church supports its missionary program through a variety of funding sources, most notably through monthly payments made by missionaries, their families, and their respective congregations to cover service-related expenses for individual missionaries. Since 1991 the Church has equalized its monthly fees for service-related expenses of missionaries serving from all countries around the world.[1] Prior to the equalization of mission costs, missionaries from North America spent as little as $100 a month to as much as $750 a month depending on the service-related expenses for their assigned mission. Monthly payment costs are adjusted by country. The Church originally set the standardized cost for serving a full-time mission to $350 a month for missionaries serving from the United States and $400 a month for missionaries serving from Canada.[2] In 2012, the monthly payment for members serving full-time missions from the United States was $400 a month whereas monthly payments for members serving missions from other countries appeared to be significantly lower. In 2012, the Church reported that the average total amount paid by each missionary to fund full-time service was $10,000 to $12,000[3] although it was unclear whether this statistic pertained just to North American missionaries or missionaries serving worldwide. The Church may have received as much as $283 million in 2012 through the contributions of missionaries, their families, and their congregations to meet service-related expenses if $400 was the average monthly payment amount for all members serving missions. Isolated reports from missionaries indicate that monthly service-related expenses are than $100 for many undeveloped and developing countries around the world.

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Additional funding sources for supporting the full-time missionary program include the General Missionary Fund and tithing. The General Missionary Fund helps finance missions for members who desire to serve a full-time mission but are unable to do so without outside assistance.[4] With the recent surge in the number of members serving full-time missions, LDS leadership has requested members to "contribute generously" to the General Missionary Fund "to help maintain this missionary force, and because many of our missionaries come from modest circumstances."[5] The Church indicates that one of the primary uses of tithing funds is to "sustain missionary work"[6] although the Church does not disclose precisely what aspects of missionary work are financed by tithing. Tithing may finance missionary costs regarding the operation of missionary training centers (MTC), proselytism supplies, and transportation costs such as airfare. It is unclear how much money the General Missionary Fund and tithing contribute to the cost for each individual missionary to serve on average, but it appears likely that both of these funding sources contribute several hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

The cumulative cost for the Church to fund its full-time missionary program through service-related expenses, the General Missionary Fund, and tithing may total more than $500 million a year.

The Cost Per Convert

The average amount of money spent per baptized convert can be estimated through dividing the total cost to support the missionary program by the total number of converts baptized per year. The Church may have spend as much as $1,836 per convert baptized in 2012 if the estimated cost to support missionaries ($500 million) is divided by the number of converts baptized (272,330). This estimate does not take other costs into account such as constructing additional meetinghouses to accommodate growing membership, member-missionary expenses, and congregation-level expenses for ward and branch missionary programs.

The Cost Per Retained Convert

The cost per retained convert baptized into the Church appears significantly higher than the cost per nominal convert due to low to moderate convert retention rates experienced by most missions in the Church. Although there is significant variability in convert retention rates between missions, most missions currently report that 30-60% of converts baptized remain active one year after baptism. Many of the missions that baptize the largest numbers of converts also report some of the lowest convert retention rates, particularly in Latin America, due to rushed pre-baptismal preparation and focus on quota-driven strategies to

achieve numerical goals. The Church in Mexico, for example, grew its membership by nearly 160,000 between 2008 and 2012 (a 14% increase) yet there was a net increase in the number of congregations of only eight during this period (a 0.4% increase). Convert retention rates for the Church in Mexico may have been as low as 20% during this four-year period as congregational growth rates strongly correlate with increasing numbers of active members.

Convert retention problems are keenly observed in incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates for the worldwide Church. The annual growth rate for the number of congregations between 2007 and 2012 ranged from as low as 0.43% in 2011 to as high as 1.26% in 2007 whereas the annual growth rate for membership during this six-year period ranged from 2.19% in 2011 to 2.53% in 2007. In 2011, the Church experienced the most severely incommensurate membership and congregational growth since 2003 as congregational growth rates grew at a rate of only 20% of membership growth rates for the year. The Church in 2007 experienced the most commensurate membership and congregational growth rates during this six-year period as congregational growth rates grew at half the rate as membership growth for the year. On average, the Church within the past six years has experienced congregational growth rates that are slightly more than one-third of membership growth rates. This finding suggests that worldwide convert retention rates for converts baptized between 2007 and 2012 do not appear higher than 30%, especially considering active membership growth attributed to reactivation efforts and natural increase (i.e. children born into the Church).

The costs per retain convert become staggeringly high when taking into account convert retention rates, the cost spent on supporting the full-time missionary program, and the number of missionary hours spent proselytizing. If only 30% of converts baptized worldwide are retained each year, the Church may have experienced an increase in retained new converts of only 81,700 in 2012. The Church may have spend as much as $6,120 per retained convert baptized in 2012 if the estimated cost to support missionaries ($500 million) is divided by the estimated number of retained converts (81,700). In his book Law of the Harvest, LDS growth researcher David Stewart estimates that the cost per retained convert may exceed $16,000 when taking into account the cost of missionary time in addition to other expenditures previously noted in this case study. Stewart asserts:

With fewer than five baptisms per LDS missionary per year and world convert retention rates near 25 percent, making a single retained convert requires on average nearly eleven months of full-time missionary labor and nearly $5,000 in missionary support fund money, in addition to other mission overhead. If we are to assume very conservatively that missionary time is worth just $5 per hour, which is below U.S. minimum wage and far below the immeasurable spiritual value of missionary time, the total value of the time and money to find a single retained convert exceeds $16,000.

Cost-Effective Missions in the LDS Church - The Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission

The greatest examples of cost-effective missions in the Church include missions where only local members or members from neighboring countries are assigned to serve, successive mission leaders maintain national outreach expansion vision, and local members regularly participate in member-missionary activity.

Perhaps the quintessential cost-effective mission in the LDS Church at present is the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission as this mission is self-sufficient with regional missionary manpower, large numbers of converts are baptized per missionary, high convert retention is achieved, and rapid national outreach expansion occurs. This mission services the entire country of Cote d'Ivoire and has been entirely staffed by French-speaking African members primarily from Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Madagascar for most years over the past decade. The mission has achieved some of the most rapid LDS growth in the world within recent memory according to several growth indicators. In 2012, LDS membership increased by 14.5% and over 1,000 converts appeared to join the Church in the mission. High convert retention rates appear to occur throughout the country as congregational growth rates have surpassed membership growth rates since 2009. The number of congregations increased from 42 in 2011 to 72 in 2013 (a 71% increase); the largest numerical increase in congregations for any country in the Church with fewer than 100 congregations as of late 2013. Much of this increase in the number of congregations occurred due to many additional cities opening to missionary work. The number of cities with an LDS congregation mushroomed from six to 12 within a period of less than two years between early 2012 and late 2013. The combination of rapid national outreach expansion, self-sufficiency in the full-time missionary force, and large numbers of new converts baptized and new congregations organized points to excellent member-missionary participation and frugal use of available missionary resources.

Although no information was available regarding the number of missionaries assigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission in 2012, the average missionary likely baptized as many as 10 converts that year (more than double the worldwide average) assuming that 100 missionaries appeared to serve in the mission during most months of the year and that the mission likely baptized at least 1,000 converts for the entire year. The service-related costs and the amount expended by the Church from other funding sources also appears dramatically lower than in most missions due to lower levels of economic development and the adjusted service-related costs for members serving missions from Francophone African countries totaling significantly lower than costs for members serving missions from North America and Europe.

Other missions in Sub-Saharan Africa have achieved similar results with the use of both Africa and non-African missionaries such as the Benin Cotonou Mission. Success in these missions has occurred as a result of church planting strategies, greater pre-baptismal preparation for new converts, and good member-missionary participation.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church appears to number among the least cost-effective proselytizing Christian faiths. Other denominations gain significantly larger numbers of retained converts at a fraction of the mission-direct expenditures of the LDS Church.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports extensive statistics on its financial operations. In 2011, Adventists reported $83.4 million spent on its World Mission Fund which also included its Sabbath School operations. As Adventists reported 1,139,000 accessions[7] (individuals who are either baptized into the Seventh Day Adventist Church or who make a public commitment to become an active member after straying from the church or having received baptism by immersion in another Christian denomination), Adventists appear to spend as little as $73 per new or reclaimed member.

In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported baptizing nearly 269,000 converts and spending over $184 million " in caring for special pioneers, missionaries, and traveling overseers in their field service assignments."[8] Consequently Witnesses appear to spend as little as $684 per baptized new member.

In 2012, the Church of the Nazarene reported spending $113.5 million on its Global Mission and District Mission. Nazarenes reported 144,142 new members in 2012, suggesting that the church spent an average of $787 per new Nazarene.

Limitations

There are numerous limitations to these findings. The LDS Church does not release figures to the public regarding the amount of money spent on its missionary program. It is unclear how much money the Church receives a year in tithes and offerings and what proportion of this money funds its missionary program. As the cost of serving a mission widely varies by country, it is unclear how much the Church receives annually from full-time missionaries and their family members to pay for service-related expenses.

Other missionary-focused groups do not indicate how much income is allocated for proselytism and missionary purposes. It is difficult to determine which expenditures fall under missionary and proselytism and which do not as some expenses such as meetinghouse construction and paying clergy provide services for both missionary-outreach and servicing members. Furthermore, criteria for what determines a new convert significantly varies by denomination. Consequently, it is difficult to provide an accurate assessment of how the costs to gain converts differs by religious group.

Conclusion

The enormous cost, time, and energy the LDS Church expends per retained convert reflects poor member-missionary participation on a worldwide scale and mediocre convert retention rates. Most of the full-time missionary force appears concentrated to locations where either severe member activity and convert retention problems exist (Latin America and the Philippines) or where there is minimal member-missionary participation (North America and Latin America). Consequently the Church's full-time missionary program has made few strides in accelerating growth and improving convert retention notwithstanding widespread emphasis from international LDS leadership to do so.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Church's full-time missionary program is not progress on expanding national outreach and baptizing and retaining converts but rather training full-time missionaries for lifelong service and discipleship in the LDS Church. Sizable numbers of members who serve full-time missions join the Church as converts themselves during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. Full-time missionary services does not inoculate against inactivity later in life but nonetheless significantly improves long-term member activity and leadership development.

[1] "Policy equalizes missionary expenses," LDS Church News, 1 December 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19765/Policy-equalizes-mission-expenses.html

[2] "Policy equalizes missionary expenses," LDS Church News, 1 December 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19765/Policy-equalizes-mission-expenses.html

[3] "LDS Missionary Infographic," LDS Philanthropies, 5 December 2012. http://www.ldsphilanthropies.org/missionary/news-features/lds-missionary-infographic.html

[4] "Missionary Fund," LDS Philanthropies, retrieved 23 December 2013. http://www.ldsphilanthropies.org/missionary/

[5] Monson, Thomas S. "Welcome to Conference," General Conference, April 2013. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/welcome-to-conference

[6] "Tithing," Gospel Topics, lds.org, retrieved 23 December 2013. http://www.lds.org/topics/tithing

[7] "2013 Annual Statistical Report," www.adventistarchieves,org, retrieved 15 November 2013. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CCwQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.adve

[8] "2012 Grand Totals," 2013 Yearbook, p. 178 http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302013019