Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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Analysis of New Missions to be Organized in July 2013

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Overview

In February 2013, the Church announced it would create 58 new missions in July 2013 to accommodate increasing numbers of members serving full-time missions. The new changes would result in the worldwide number of missions increasing from 347 to 405. The October 2012 announcement to reduce the mission age to 18 for men and 19 for women combined with increasing numbers of members serving missions since early 2011 culminated in the number of missionary applications quadrupling from pre-announcement levels during the month of October[1] and remaining at least twice as high as the normal average for wintertime months as of late January 2013.[2] Although no official statement has been made on numerical projections on full-time missionaries serving in the coming years, Elder David F. Evans of the Seventy in February 2013 reported 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 remarked that the number of full-time missionaries serving recently surpassed 60,000[4] for the first time since early 2003. 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.[5] Unofficial reports from international church leaders relayed from full-time missionaries and local church leaders suggest that the full-time missionary force may reach 90,000 to 100,000 by year-end 2013.

The Church reported that all 58 missions would be organized in locations that already have LDS missions and that no new countries or territories would open to missionary work as a result of new mission creations.[6] No mission consolidations were announced for the first time since 2008. Notwithstanding the anticipated surge and decline in the number of missionaries incurred by a double-cohort of missionaries serving (individuals preparing to serve at the previous minimum mission age and individuals serving at the revised minimum mission age), church leaders reported that the creation of 58 new missions is a permanent change. Elder Evans remarked, "what we are doing is building and creating missions to what we expect will be needed after the peak part of the surge. So we anticipate not needing to close any of the missions as we go forward."[7] Recent reports from missionaries serving in the mission field indicate that plans are underway to potentially create additional missions in 2014 although there have been no official announcements made by church leaders as of April 2013.

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This case study analyzes the geographic distribution of newly announced missions for 2013. Trends in mission growth are reviewed. The ramifications of the organization of new missions on church growth trends are examined followed by a discussion on whether future mission consolidations are inevitable. Likely locations for future missions to be organized within the mid-2010s are identified and discussed. Limitations to these findings and future prospects for church growth relating to new missions are explored.

Geographic Distribution of New Missions

Of the 58 missions to be created in July 2013, 17 are in North America (Arizona Gilbert, Arizona Scottsdale, California Bakersfield, California Irvine, California Rancho Cucamonga, Colorado Fort Collins, Georgia Macon, Idaho Nampa, Idaho Twin Falls, Illinois Chicago West, Kansas Wichita, Ohio Cincinnati, Oregon Salem, Utah Salt Lake City East, Virginia Chesapeake, Washington Federal Way, Washington Vancouver), 15 are in South America (Argentina Comodoro Rivadavia, Argentina Posadas, Bolivia Santa Cruz North, Brazil Curitiba South, Brazil Fortaleza East, Brazil Juiz de Fora, Brazil Natal, Brazil Piracicaba, Brazil Santos, Brazil Sao Paulo West, Chile Santiago South, Ecuador Guayaquil West, Ecuador Quito North, Peru Huancayo, Peru Iquitos), 11 are in Central America (El Salvador San Salvador East, Guatemala Coban, Honduras San Pedro Sula West, Mexico Cancun, Mexico Ciudad Juarez, Mexico Ciudad Obregon, Mexico Mexico City Chalco, Mexico Pachuca,

Mexico Queretaro, Mexico Reynosa, Mexico Saltillo), six are in East Asia (Japan Tokyo South, Korea Seoul South, Philippines Cavite, Philippines Cebu East, Philippines Legaspi, Philippines Urdaneta), five are in Africa (Angola Luanda, Botswana Gaborone, Ghana Accra West, Liberia Monrovia, Nigeria Benin City), three are in Oceania (Australia Sydney North, New Zealand Hamilton, Papua New Guinea Lae), and one is in Europe (Ukraine L'viv). New missions in North, Central, and South America account for 74% of all new missions to be created in 2013 notwithstanding 83.6% of world church membership and approximately 15% of the world population residing in the Americas. Three of the 58 missions will be the first missions to be headquartered within a particular country (Angola Luanda, Botswana Gaborone, and Liberia Monrovia). The four countries with the most new missions to be organized are the United States (17), Mexico (8), Brazil (7), and the Philippines (4).

A map displaying the approximately location for these missions can be found here.

Trends in Mission Growth

The increase in missions from 347 to 405 in 2013 is a 16.7% annual increase; the second highest reported by the Church within the past 100 years (the all-time high is 18.6% in 1975). The percentage increase in the number of missions surpassed the world average (16.7%) in Central America and the Caribbean (23.4%), Africa (22.7%), South America (20.0%), and Oceania (18.8%) and was less than the world average in North America (15.6%), Asia (15.0%), and Europe (2.6%). Since 2000, the Church has experienced virtually stagnant growth in the number of missions worldwide after nearly half a century of steady increases. The Church reported 334 missions in 2000, 341 missions in 2005, and 340 missions in 2010 and generally experienced annual mission growth rates of less than one percent during the 2000s.

The creation and consolidation of missions has significantly varied by region since 2000. The most dramatic shift in mission resources occurred in Europe as nearly half of the all mission consolidations occurred in Europe. The reduction of missions in Europe was not limited to countries that had multiple missions as the Church closed its only mission in several European countries (Austria, Ireland, and the Netherlands) and both its missions in Switzerland. The number of missions discontinued by region since 2000 totaled 17 in Europe, nine in North America, five in Asia, two in Oceania, one in Africa, one in the Caribbean, and one in South America whereas the number of new missions created by region between 2000 and 2012 totaled 12 in North America, 11 in Africa, nine in Central America, seven in South America, five in Asia, two in Oceania, one in the Caribbean, and one in Europe. The net growth or decrease in missions by region during this period was 10 in Africa, nine in Central America, six in South America, three in North America, zero in Asia, zero in the Caribbean, zero in Oceania, and -16 in Europe.

New missions to be created in 2013 will significantly increase the number of missions in the ten countries with the most missions. Provided with the number of missions in parentheses, the countries with the most missions in 2012 were the United States (103), Brazil (27), Mexico (26), the Philippines (17), Argentina (10), Peru (10), Chile (9), Canada (7), Russia (7), Japan (6), and the United Kingdom (6). After new missions are created in July 2013, the ten countries with the most missions will be the United States (120), Brazil (34), Mexico (34), the Philippines (21), Argentina (12), Peru (12), Chile (10), Canada (7), Japan (7), and Russia (7).

Analysis

New missions to be organized in 2013 are concentrated in countries that have the largest numbers of members on church records. For example, 36 of the 58 new missions (62%) will be organized in the four countries with the most members on church records, namely the United States, Mexico, Brazil, and the Philippines. 51 of the 58 new missions will be created in countries that have 100,000 or more Latter-day Saints. Although it may seem counterintuitive to expand missionary operations in countries with the most Latter-day Saints rather than allocating surplus missionary resources to countries with few members, the Church has emphasized the importance of regional self-sufficiency in meeting missionary needs and assigning missionaries where they can collaborate with local members in teaching and conversion efforts.

With only a few exceptions, all 58 new missions will be organized in countries and regions that have experienced increasing numbers of members serving missions, including countries that have comparatively few members that comprise a small percentage of the general population. For example, in Papua New Guinea the number of missionaries assigned from Oceania increased from approximately two dozen in 2010 to over 100 in 2012 largely due to impressive gains in the number of Papuan members serving missions during this period. This development, coupled with the immense size of the mission, likely motivated mission and area leader to recommend that a second mission be organized in 2013. In 2013, the Church reported its highest percentage increase for missions in Central America and Caribbean at 23.4%. It is likely no coincidence that in 2009 church leaders reported that the Central America Area became self-sufficient in staffing its full-time missionary needs, possibly resulting in surplus missionary manpower in the early 2010s warranting the creation of additional missions.

2013 will be the first year that the Church in Africa organizes new missions that service populations of less than five million. The Liberia Monrovia Mission will consist of only Liberia (3.9 million people) and the Botswana Gaborone Mission will consist of Botswana, Namibia, and neighboring areas of South Africa within the geographic boundaries of the Gaborone Botswana Stake for a combined target population of slightly less than five million. Smaller target populations for proselytism activity indicate increased resource allocation to Sub-Saharan Africa and strong receptivity to LDS teachings in many locations.

The Church will organize seven new missions in 2013 in locations and regions where missions have been consolidated within the past decade including Australia Sydney North (discontinued in 2010), Brazil Juiz de Fora (Brazil Belo Horizonte East

discontinued in 2009), Georgia Macon (discontinued in 2011), Illinois Chicago West (discontinued in 2010 as Illinois Chicago South), Japan Tokyo South (discontinued in 2007), Korea Seoul South (discontinued in 2010 as Korea Seoul West), and Ohio Cincinnati (discontinued in 2010). This finding suggests that the Church may have reluctantly closed some of these missions within the past decade to redistribute manpower to more productive areas of the world in need of additional resources. No major changes in receptivity or societal conditions appeared to influence the decision to reopen these seven missions. Established mission headquarter facilities left dormant when missions closed and sufficient leadership support in these areas likely contributed to the reopening of these seven missions.

How Will the Creation of 58 New Missions Influence Growth?

There has perhaps never been a time in the history of the Church when there have been so many opportunities for expanding missionary work and accelerating church growth as at present. The creation of 58 new missions has enormous potential to revitalize missionary work and establish the Church in previously unreached areas if mission and area leaders implement appropriate tactics and maintain proper vision. The organization of dozens of new missions will enable greater mission resource allocation to many lesser-reached areas of the world such as Sub-Saharan Africa and potentially among Amerindian peoples in Latin America. In March 2013, mission leaders in many missions were in the processing of opening previously unreached cities to missionary work due to larger numbers of missionaries available to assign to these locations such as in the Amazon Basin of Brazil.

There are good prospects for noticeable increases in the number of convert baptisms worldwide as a result of new mission creations due to tens of thousands of more missionaries projected to serve within the coming months and years. Assuming that the average missionary continues to baptize five converts per year (the world average for the past decade), the number of annual convert baptisms may increase from approximately 275,000 to over 400,000 by the mid-2010s if the number of full-time missionaries reaches 90,000.

Many new missions will be organized in locations that have experienced low member activity and poor convert retention rates such as Latin America and the Philippines. More focus may be placed on reactivation and member support efforts, especially after recent successes in the Philippines where area leadership encouraged substituting street and house-to-house proselytism with reactivation and member support. Some missions in the Philippines reported that church attendance nearly doubled in many branches that had experienced stagnant or slow growth for years or even decades due to this shift in focus. Congregational growth trends in the Philippines have also recently reversed from stagnant or negative growth to positive growth as a result of increasing active membership; a major development considering stagnant congregational growth previously occurred for nearly a decade.

Some areas of the Americas with new missions created may experience an oversaturation of full-time missionaries if multiple missionary companionships are assigned to small congregations. Oversaturation can lead to diminished local member and leadership self-sufficiency and reduce growth in the long-term if full-time missionaries undertake member responsibilities in their congregations. Failure to hand off these responsibilities to members and have full-time missionaries only temporarily hold callings can result in members and leaders becoming dependent on missionaries to meet these tasks such as serving as counselors in a branch presidency, holding callings for Sunday School, and home and visiting teaching. Consistently examining prospects for opening unreached or lesser-reached cities and communities for missionary work will be required in order to safeguard against self-sufficiency, leadership development, and activity challenges incurred from oversaturating current units with surplus missionary manpower.

Likely Locations for New Missions in 2014 and 2015

The Church will continue to create new missions to accommodate increasing numbers of missionaries, especially when it becomes more clear how sustainable recent increases in the full-time missionary force will be for the long-term. Missionaries serving in several locations have reported preliminary plans to open additional missions sometime in the near future notwithstanding 58 new missions to be created in 2013. The geographical distribution of future mission creations will likely mirror the distribution of mission creations for 2013, with most new missions to be organized in locations with large numbers of nominal church members in the Americas and the Philippines. Some missions that closed during the 2000s may reopen to accommodate surplus missionary manpower such as in North America, East Asia, and Europe.

The potential for accelerating growth through the organization of more missions has perhaps no greater potential for long-term success than in Sub-Saharan Africa where populations have generally been highly receptive to the Church and where the Church maintains a tiny presence in most countries if there is any presence at all. The organization of the first missions in countries like Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda, and Tanzania has excellent prospects to reach tens of millions of people who have never received an LDS gospel witness. The excuse of inadequate numbers of members serving full-time missions to staff existing missions and open additional areas to missionary work has now been eliminated due to burgeoning numbers of missionaries serving worldwide. Even if the Church were to maintain its trend of primarily concentrating missionary resources in already reached areas, the Church could make incredible progress if even 10% of surplus missionary manpower is channeled into Sub-Saharan Africa to establish separate LDS missions in each country populated by over two million people that experiences sufficient religious freedom and political stability to permit the assignment of foreign missionaries.

The reason for relatively few new missions organized in 2013 in areas with small numbers of Latter-day Saints despite ample

missionary manpower at present centers on whether missionary visas can be easily obtained for these countries, concerns regarding the self-sustainability of local leadership, and church policies that favor the assignment of missionaries within their home countries or in countries with similar language and culture. Growth in the number of members serving missions from countries with relatively few members on church records such as India and Indonesia will be required for the Church to open more missions in many of the most populous countries of the world unless changes are made to current church policies, more ample numbers of foreign missionary visas can be secured, and if religious freedom conditions improve.

A map displaying likely locations for new missions in 2014 or 2015 can be found here.

Will Mission Consolidations be Inevitable One Day?

The Church has consolidated missions throughout its history during times when missionary resources are plentiful and when they are limited. The Church will likely continue to experience mission consolidations in order to achieve its highest degree of efficiency and productivity possible as determined by international church leadership. Predicting precise missions to be consolidated is extremely difficult to do with much accuracy but less-productive areas that have achieved relatively moderate to high levels of local leadership sustainability appear likely to experience future mission consolidations such as industrialized East Asia, North America, and Western Europe. In 2010, mission presidents in several European countries reported that the consolidation of missions in Europe that year was primarily sparked because of improved local leadership functioning that required less involvement from full-time missionaries and mission leaders to provide administrative and ecclesiastical support. Decisions to close missions may also occur due to limited regional or worldwide numbers of missionaries, thus requiring a redistribution of missionary manpower from less-productive to more productive areas and changes in political or religious freedom conditions that seriously impede the functioning of a mission. For example, the Church once headquartered missions in Palestine, Iran, and central Nigeria but closed these missions due to political instability, security concerns, and deteriorating levels of religious freedom. Church leaders have indicated that new missions created in 2013 were not anticipated to close within the foreseeable future and were organized to accommodate the number of missionaries expected to serve within the long term.[8]

Limitations

The Church publishes few official statistics on its missionary force. No data is available regarding the number of missionaries assigned to each country and each mission. Isolated church leader reports and reports from members and missionaries were utilized in obtaining data on plans for future missions and the projected number of missionaries to serve in the coming years. There has been no previous instance in the Church when an age reduction for full-time missionary service culminated in such a dramatic increase in the full-time missionary force. Consequently it is unclear how trends in the number of missionaries serving will behave within the next five years and how this will impact the number of convert baptisms and congregational growth trends. Locations identified for potential future missions were ascertained through examining the size of church membership and target population for current missions and available reports on the number of convert baptisms for these areas. Potential locations for new missions were consequently areas that experience good receptivity and where current missions are large and may be unable to effectively administer their jurisdictions.

Future Prospects

Since 1973 the Church has had 163 missionaries per mission on average. If the Church were to maintain this average into the coming years notwithstanding dramatically larger numbers of members serving missions, the Church would have 429 missions when the full-time missionary force numbers 70,000, 491 missions when the full-time missionary force numbers 80,000, 552 missions when the missionary force reaches 90,000, and 613 missions when the missionary force reaches 100,000. The Church will likely experience a major increase in the number of missionaries per mission between 2013 and 2015 as church leaders assess the long-term impact of reducing the minimum age for missionary service to avoid prematurely organizing too many new missions to accommodate the number of missionaries serving in the mid to late 2010s. Rather, many missions will continue to accommodate larger-than-normal numbers of missionaries until there is more certainty in how many missionaries will be serving after double-cohort missionaries finish their missions. It is possible that the Church may organize between 30 and 60 new missions a year for the near future if growth experienced prior to the new missionary age announcement is perpetuated beyond the service of the double-cohort of missionaries and if the reduced mission age increases the percentage of young adults who serve missions.

[1] "Missionary age change update," LDS Church News, 9 November 2012. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62935/Missionary-age-change-update.html

[2] Lloyd, R. Scott. "'Calling more servants'," LDS Church News, 9 March 2013. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63191/Calling-more-servants.html

[3] Lloyd, R. Scott. "'Most wonderful time' for missionary service," LDS Church News, 22 February 2013. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63258/Most-wonderful-time-for-missionary-service.html

[4] Lloyd, R. Scott. "'Most wonderful time' for missionary service," LDS Church News, 22 February 2013.

http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63258/Most-wonderful-time-for-missionary-service.html

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

[6] "Missions to Be Created to Accommodate Influx of New Missionaries," News Release, www.mormonnewsroom.org, 22 February 2013. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/missions-created-accommodate-influx-new-missionaries

[7] Lloyd, R. Scott. "'Most wonderful time' for missionary service," LDS Church News, 22 February 2013. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63258/Most-wonderful-time-for-missionary-service.html

[8] Lloyd, R. Scott. "'Most wonderful time' for missionary service," LDS Church News, 22 February 2013. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63258/Most-wonderful-time-for-missionary-service.html