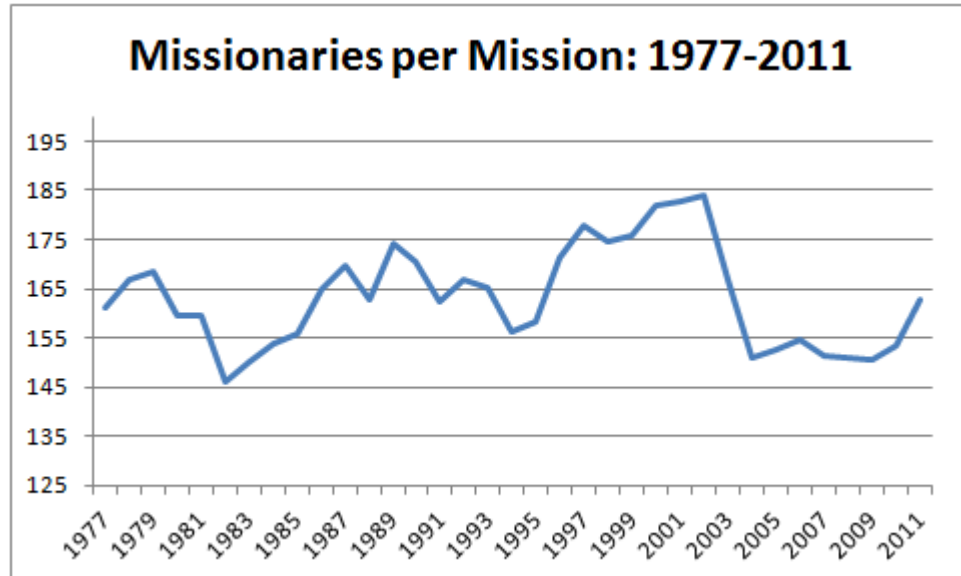




Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies



Lowering the Minimum Mission Age: Analysis and Predictions for Growth for the LDS Church

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Overview

On October 6th, 2012, LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson made a landmark announcement during his opening remarks at the 182nd Semiannual General Conference that the minimum age for full-time missionary service would be lowered from 19 to 18 for men and from 21 to 19 for women. Apostles Elder Russell M. Nelson and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland conducted a news conference later that day where they further elaborated on the change in church policy and specifically emphasized that the change was motivated to help expand the opportunities available for young adults to serve a mission and to help accelerate the expansion of missionary activity into lesser-reached areas.^[1] Elder Nelson and Elder Holland anticipated that the reduction in minimum missionary age would increase the number of missionaries serving within the coming months and years. To accommodate larger numbers of missionaries, the Church announced that the duration of missionary training center (MTC) stay would be reduced by one-third, additional missions would be created, currently operating missions would receive larger numbers of missionaries to their complements, additional staff would be hired at the Provo MTC, and the Church may expand the Provo MTC and some of the other 14 international MTCs around the world. Prior to the announcement, the Church permitted men from 48 countries to begin serving at age 18 due to educational and mandatory military service constraints.^[2] Within the first month of instituting a lower minimum mission age for men and women, the Church reported that it had received approximately 12,000 missionary applications; more than four times the typical amount of applications received prior to the announcement.

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This case study examines various missionary-related statistics and projects future growth based on growth trends over the past 33 years. Future growth in the number of missionaries and the number of missions are explored and analyzed in regards to past trends and potential increases in the number of missionaries serving as a result of lowering the minimum mission age. Potential concerns that may arise due to this change in policy are examined and prospects for church growth as a whole are summarized.

Relationship between the Increase in Missionaries and Missions

The number of missionaries serving has a strong correlation with the number of missions operating. This relationship is apparent in one interesting trend that has held true since 1978. Every year the missionary force has increased by at least four percent, the number of missions has increased by at least two percent the following year. This finding suggests that noticeable increases in the number of missions depends on sizable increases in the number of missionaries serving the previous year to provide needed manpower to staff additional missions. Based on the early October 2012 report that the number of missionaries serving surpassed 58,000, the Church experienced a 4.7% increase in the number of missionaries within the first nine months of 2012 and will likely reach at least 6% growth for the year as a whole. If the trend over the past 33 years holds true, there should be an increase of at least seven new missions in 2013 purely based on increases in the missionary force that occurred prior to the announcement of reducing the minimum age for missionary service. The reverse has also held true - when the number of missions increases by at least two percent, the number of missionaries serving the previous year increased by at least four percent. There has been only one year (1991) when the number of missions increased by at least two percent but the number of missionaries for the previous year did not increase by more than four percent.

Since 1977, there have been six years when the percentage increase in missionaries serving has exceeded eight percent (1978 - 9.4%, 1986 - 8.7%, 1987 - 9.3%, 1989 - 10.0%, 1990 - 9.8%, 1996 - 8.9%). The percentage increase in the number of missions for the year following each of these years generally ranged from four to eight percent. In 1990, the Church had the highest percent increase in missions (12.3%) whereas in 1997, the Church reported its lowest percent increase in missions (2.9%). If the Church experiences an increase of eight percent or more in the number of missionaries in 2012 or 2013, the number of missions may increase between 14 and 28 for the following year (2013 or 2014).

Average Number of Missionaries per Mission

Dividing the number of missionaries by the number of missions per year generates a ratio of the number of missionaries per mission. Since 1977, the Church has had 163 missionaries per mission on average. The year with the fewest missionaries per mission was 1982 (146) whereas the year with the most missionaries per year was 2002 (184). Generally speaking, the number of missionaries per mission decreased from the late 1970s to early 1980s, increased from the early 1980s to the late 1980s, decreased from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, increased from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s, decreased in the early 2000s, exhibit no change in the mid to late 2000s, and increased in the early 2010s.

With 347 missions currently in operation, the Church would have to reach 63,848 missionaries in order to match the previous high set in 2002 of 184 missionaries per mission. If the Church were to reduce the number of missionaries per mission to its low of 146, the Church would have to increase the number of missions by 50 to 397 assuming there were 58,000 missionaries serving.

Converts Baptized per Missionary

Dividing the number of converts baptized a year by the number of missionaries serving generates a ratio of convert baptisms to missionaries serving, or the number of converts baptized per LDS missionary a year. The year with the fewest converts baptized per missionary was 2003 (4.3) whereas the year with the most converts baptized per missionary was 1989 (8.0). Since 1977, the Church has baptized six converts per missionary per year on average. The trend in the number of converts baptized per missionary has declined over the past two decades but experienced a slight increase of approximately one convert per missionary between the mid-2000s and the late 2000s.

If the Church sustains the current missionary-to-convert ratio of one missionary to five convert baptisms a year there would be 300,000 convert baptisms when the number of missionaries reaches 60,000, 350,000 convert baptisms when the number of missionaries reached 70,000, 400,000 convert baptisms when the number of missionaries reaches 80,000, and 450,000 convert baptisms when the number of missionaries reaches 90,000.

Missionaries to Membership Ratio

The ratio of missionaries serving to total church membership has steadily increased over the past decade due, in part, to a declining percentage of total membership serving a mission. In 1977, 0.64% of church membership were missionaries, or one missionary per 157 members. The ratio of missionaries to membership increased to 203 (0.49%) in 1983, decreased to one missionary per 178 members (0.56%) in 1990, and steadily increased to 271 members per missionary (0.37%) in 2010.

If the percentage of membership serving missions was the same in 2011 as it was in 1977, there would be nearly 92,000 missionaries serving in 2011. The aging worldwide LDS population has also reduced the percentage of membership serving missions in recent years.

The decreasing percentage of membership serving missions over the past several decades has occurred for two reasons. The

shrinking LDS family size in the United States constitutes the greatest contributor to the declining percentage of membership serving missions as the vast majority of the worldwide missionary force originates from North America. Annual increase in children of record (children under age eight counted in church membership upon priesthood blessing and naming) once accounted for as much as 2.4% of total church membership for a given year in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, annual increase in children of record constituted only one percent of total LDS membership. In 2002, the Church reported its lowest annual increase in children of record in several decades (69,522) that accounted for just 0.61% of total church membership. North American Latter-day Saint families having fewer children has reduced the natural growth of the Church and decreases the percentage of church membership that arrive at mission age two decades later. In recent years this has resulted in missionaries comprising a smaller percentage of church membership that is approximately half of what it once was three decades earlier.

A second reason for missionaries accounting for a smaller percentage of church membership is due to no percentage increase in the number of young men who serve a mission. The percentage of young men that serve full-time missions has not appeared to noticeably change over the past three decades. In 1984, the Church reported that 32% of young men served missions as of 1981 and approximately 25-35% of young men in the United States served a full-time mission on any given year during the previous two decades.^[3] In 2007, approximately 30% of American 19-year-old men in were serving full-time missions and 80-90% of young men from active LDS families in the United States were serving a mission.^[4] There are no estimates available for the percentage of young men outside the United State who serve a full-time mission, but the failure of the Church to develop self-sufficient missionary forces in most countries has been due to no percentage increase in local members serving missions.

Future Growth in the Number of Missionaries

In the October 2012 press conference, Elder Holland noted that it was uncertain how large of an increase in the number of missionaries would occur within the coming months and years ahead.^[5] In late October 2012, some church leaders predicted that the number of missionaries would reach somewhere between 70,000 and 90,000 within the first year following the implementation of the reduced mission age according to several member and missionaries reports from around the world. With nearly 10,000 more missionary applications received than usual during the month of October, the Church appears poised to surpass the 70,000 milestone sometime in early 2013. However, the Church will need to increase the percentage of young adult members serving missions to achieve substantial increases in the numbers of missionaries serving over the long term.^[6] To tackle the question of how much the missionary force will increase in the foreseeable future, predictions must take into account how the increase would look without any missionary age adjustment as well as with the missionary age adjustment. There are three factors that will influence the number of missionaries serving: Natural increase, the reduced minimum mission age, and the percentage of members who serve a full-time mission.

In 2012, the number of missionaries increased on average by approximately 300 a month during the first nine months of the year. Assuming that the rate of missionaries serving continues at this rate for the remainder of the year, the Church would report approximately 59,000 missionaries by year-end 2012. In 2011, the Church reported an average increase of 265 missionaries a month. The annual percentage growth in the number of missionaries serving was 6.1% in 2011 and will likely be around 6.5% for 2012. Lowering the mission age for men to 18 for specific countries prior to the October 2012 announcement has not appeared to significantly influenced this statistic due to the small numbers of members serving missions from these countries. The Church also enacted this policy in many countries a couple years prior to the recent increases in the worldwide missionary force. If the number of missionaries continues to increase by six percent a year, the number of missionaries would reach 60,000 in 2013, 65,000 in 2014, 70,000 in 2015, 80,000 in 2018, 90,000 in 2020, and 100,000 in 2022. Based on past growth trends, it appears unlikely that the Church will sustain these systematic increases. Since 1978 the Church has never sustained an annual percentage increase in the number of missionaries serving by more than six percent for more than two consecutive years. However, between 1983 and 1990 the number of missionaries did increase by over six percent a year on average.

With the change in church policy, the number of missionaries serving will likely increase by the tens of thousands within a short period of time due to increasing numbers of both men and women serving missions. With men, many 18-year-olds that would have served at age 19 may soon begin their missions at the same time as their 19-year-old counterparts. This will likely result in an increase of perhaps as high as 50% for men serving missions at ages 18 and 19 from countries where the previous minimum mission age was 19 due to a double cohort. It is unclear how large of a percentage missionaries that began their missions at age 19 comprise of the total missionary force, but this percentage may be as high as 50% considering the majority of missionaries in the world are North American men. Assuming that 50% of full-time missionaries worldwide are men who began their missions at age 19 and that 50% of 18-year-olds who would have served a mission at age 19 prior to reducing the mission age serve missions at age 18, the total number of missionaries may increase by as much as 15,000 within a single year solely due to the age adjustment for men.

The age reduction for single women serving missions also has strong potential to contribute to large increases in the full-time missionary force as the minimum age for service was reduced by two years and that this age reduction will expand opportunities for young single adult women to serve a mission prior to post-high school education and marriage. In 2007, 13% of the missionary force were single women,^[7] or approximately 7,000 people. In October 2012, Elder Nelson reported that the percentage of single women serving missions increased by 12% since October 2010 when President Monson pleaded for more members to serve missions. If the sister missionary force were to double within a year and the percentage of sister missionaries within the full-time missionary force has not noticeably changed between 2007 and October 2012, the Church would likely experience an increase of approximately 7,500 sister missionaries by October 2013.

The Church may experience an even greater increase in the number of missionaries serving if the percentage of young men serving missions also increases. Just as lowering the mission age for women has potential for larger numbers of women to serve missions prior to educational pursuits and marriage, lowering the mission age for men has potential to reduce the number of men who lose the desire to serve a mission between ages 18 and 19 following high school graduation or disqualify themselves from missionary service. In 2007, approximately 30% of 19-year-old men served a mission and 80-90% of young men in active LDS families served a mission.^[8] Unless the percentage of young men in active LDS families has declined over the past five years, there is little opportunity for the Church to substantially increase the percentage of young men in active LDS families to serve missions as a result of reducing the missionary age. However, lowering the mission age may improve prospects for young men who serve missions from part-member or partially-active families to go after high school graduation. During the 2010-2011 school year, there were 375,000 seminary students worldwide and approximately 90,000 students in each age cohort,^[9] indicating that there are many male seminary students who do not serve a mission. If the Church permanently increased the percentage of young men serving missions within the United States by five percent as of late 2012, the number of missionaries would increase by 5,000 assuming that 30% of North America 19-year-olds were serving missions prior to the October 2012 announcement. By October 2013, the Church may reach 89,000 missionaries due to a net increase of 31,000 missionaries (15,000 missionaries from lowering the mission age for men, 7,500 missionaries from lowering the mission age for women, 5,000 from hypothetically increasing the percentage of single men in North America who serve a mission by five percent, and 3,500 missionaries from the Church perpetuating its six percent annual growth rate for the number of missionaries serving that has occurred over the past two years independent of lowering mission ages). These estimates appear similar to what some church leaders are anticipating. In October 2012, there were reports from members and missionaries in Eastern Europe that an international LDS Church leader reported that the number of missionaries serving would reach 90,000 as a result of lowering the minimum age for missionary service.

The number of missionaries serving may decline after a few years once the overlap disappears from members serving missions at earlier ages and at the previously designated ages, especially for young men as there will likely be a smaller increase in the percentage of men who serve missions than young women. This may result in a decrease in the full-time missionary force for a year or two after the surge in missionaries dissipates. It is unclear how large of a decrease in the missionary force will occur if there is any decrease at all. However, it appears unlikely that a decrease will exceed 10,000 due to natural growth and the possibility of the percentage increasing for men and women serving missions.

Increasing numbers of members serving missions has potential to augment leadership manpower in the Church as returned missionaries remain active and serve in their assigned congregations. Returned missionaries have higher rates of temple marriage and member activity rates, suggesting that the Church may improve general church activity rates as a result of increasing numbers of members serving missions.

Future Growth in the Number of Missions Operating

Due to anticipated increases in the numbers of missionaries serving, church leaders have indicated that there will be a need to create new missions and that Church Headquarters has recently received requests from all around the world to create additional missions.^[10] In late October 2013, senior missionaries in Africa reported that one LDS apostle predicted that there would be 30 to 40 new missions created in 2013. In this section, potential locations for new missions are identified and increases in the number of missions are predicted.

As previously noted, every year that the missionary force has increased by at least four percent, the number of missions has increased by at least two percent the following year. If the Church were to achieve an average of at least four percent growth a year for the next five years, the number of missions would total 354 in 2013, 361 in 2014, 368 in 2015, 375 in 2016, and 383 in 2017. In other words, the number of missions would increase by 36 within the next five years if the Church experienced annual growth rates of two percent for the number of missions. The Church has experienced up to 12% annual growth (1990) for the number of missions. If the Church were to experience 12% annual growth for the number of missions for the next five years, the number of missions would reach 389 in 2013, 435 in 2014, 487 in 2015, 546 in 2016, and 611 in 2017. In summary, the total number of missions appears likely to increase by at least 36 but no more than 264 based on past growth trends.

Potential increases in missionaries serving numbering in the tens of thousands will merit the creation of scores of new missions if the number of missionaries per mission were to remain below their all-time high of 184 missionaries per mission. If the Church were to reach 90,000 missionaries and have 184 missionaries per mission on average, there would be 489 missions worldwide - or 142 more missions than at present. In late 2012, mission presidents throughout North America reported that the standard complement for most, if not all, missions in would be 250 due increasing numbers of missionary applications. If the Church were to have 250 missionaries per mission on average and reach 90,000 missionaries, there would be 360 missions worldwide; only 13 more than at present. It appears unlikely that the Church will ever reach a standard of 250 missionaries per mission internationally as many missions cannot have more than 50 or 100 missionaries assigned due to visa and religious freedom restrictions.

With the strong possibility of the Church creating dozens of new missions within the foreseeable future, the Church appears most likely to create new missions in locations where the Church can obtain larger numbers of missionary visas and in locations where there are large numbers of members serving missions. In the United States, the Church may create several new missions in the Intermountain West due to higher numbers of convert baptisms than other regions and recently revamped reactivation efforts. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Church may create over a dozen new missions in locations such as Luanda, Angola; Gaborone, Botswana; Bujumbura, Burundi; Yaoundé, Cameroon; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Monrovia, Liberia; Lilongwe, Malawi; Benin City, Nigeria; Pretoria, South Africa; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Lome, Togo; and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. In Asia,

the Church may create new missions in Hyderabad, India; additional missions in the Philippines; and a second mission in Thailand. In Oceania, the Church may create new missions in New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea. In South America, the Church may create several new missions in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. In Central America, the Church may organize additional missions in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. In the Caribbean, the Church may organize a separate mission for the Guianas.

Since the decline in the number of missionaries serving in the early 2000s, the Church has consolidated 28 missions worldwide - 10 of which were in Europe. With the expected surge in the missionary force in the coming years, the Church may reopen some of these missions if visa regulations or other legal issues prevent the opening of new missions in more receptive areas that have received minimal or no previous missionary outreach.

Potential Concerns

One of the foremost concerns about lowering the minimum mission age centers on the maturity level of younger men and women. Church leaders stressed on multiple occasions that one of the reasons the Church lowered the mission age worldwide was that mission leaders around the world reported that 18-year-old men serving from one of the 48 countries where the mission age was lowered did not exhibit less maturity than their older counterparts.^[11] 18-year-old males from the United States may experience greater challenges exhibiting the same level of maturity as their international counterparts considering most have not lived away from home before, become accustomed to living with roommates, and developed independent life skills as adults^[12] whereas most 19-year-olds have already had a year of living away from home and have gained some experience living in the "real world." Most 18-year-old missionaries who were permitted to serve under the country-specific policy were assigned to their home country or a country with similar cultural characteristics. This may have improved the perceived maturity of these young missionaries. To address any concerns of immaturity and its impact on 18-year-old missionaries getting along with their companions, the Church and its members will need to ensure that missionaries are properly coached and prepared before entering the MTC and that issues pertaining to communication and interpersonal skills are appropriate in order to minimize potential conflict. However it is debatable whether any maturity difference between 18-year-old and 19-year-old males will have a noticeable effect on church growth. One MTC teacher noted that the only maturity difference he observed between 19 and 20 year olds was that the 20-year-old thought they were more mature. Reports from returned missionaries who have served with 18-year-olds companions report that at times they are less mature but more teachable and malleable resulting in a higher ability to confirm to mission standards and mentoring. The Church has not reported any instances of women younger than 21 serving missions prior to the October 2012 announcement. It is unclear whether the maturity level of younger adult women serving missions will impact their effectiveness.

Mission leaders often channel surplus missionary manpower into congregations that already have one or two full-time missionary companionships assigned. Oversaturating congregations with several missionary companionships often leads to many problems for achieving real church growth including reduced emphasis on national outreach expansion, reduced member and local leader self-sufficiency, and often decreased long-term convert retention rates as congregations often become more reliant on missionaries to meet their own administrative and ecclesiastical needs. Since 1990, the Church has at times oversaturated congregations in many locations in Eastern Europe and the Caribbean by assigning as many as four to five companionships to a single branch. Once the surplus of missionaries disappears and only one or two companionships are assigned to these branches, there has been little if any progress increasing active membership and helping leaders become self-sufficient before and after assigning additional companionships. Mission leaders intend to do well by assigning several companionships to a single branch - often with the intent to revamp reactivation efforts, help a branch qualify to ward status, and revitalize proselytism efforts in a location with a large population - but reports from ordinary members and returned missionaries indicate that these efforts are time consuming, yield mixed results, and sacrifice resources that can be allocated to open new locations to missionary work where church growth is often the most rapid. Assigning several missionary companionships to a single congregation may also reduce the ratio of missionaries to convert baptisms, especially in locations where population exhibit low receptivity to the LDS Church.

The excitement and potential explosion in the number of missionaries serving has the potential to reduce convert retention rates. Missionaries and mission leaders must remember the overarching goal of missionary work is to strengthen congregations and establish the Church as outlined in Preach My Gospel.^[13] A surge in convert baptisms in 2013 and 2014 will have no positive consequences for long-term growth of the Church if most of these converts become inactive shortly after baptism as a result of haphazard prebaptismal preparation, disconnect between full-time missionaries and local members and ward or branch missionaries, and reduced self-sufficiency in the functioning of the Church on a local level. New missionaries must remember former LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley's statement given in 1999 when quick-baptismal tactics and inadequate convert retention efforts were widespread that, "There is absolutely no point in doing missionary work unless we hold on to the fruits of that effort. The two must be inseparable. These converts are precious. Every convert is a son or daughter of God. Every convert is a great and serious responsibility."^[14]

Future Prospects

The upcoming surge in the number of missionaries serving likely numbering in the tens of thousands will supply needed manpower for the Church to initiate a new era of outreach expansion across the globe. Limited numbers of foreign missionary visas, government restrictions on religious freedom, and safety concerns may dissuade the Church from opening more missions in many of the lesser-reached, most populous countries of the world such as Bangladesh, Burma, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey, and Vietnam. After a few years, the Church will likely experience a significant slowdown or even a decline in the number of missionaries serving once the surplus caused by the double-cohort dissipates. It is too early to tell how much of

an effect reducing the mission age will have on stake, district, and congregational growth as these indicators will be largely determined by the interplay of convert retention rates, the rate of opening unreached locations to missionary work, the percentage of young adults who serve missions, and the quality and quantity of local leadership development. Some current MTCs may be enlarged to accommodate more missionaries if the Church achieves long-term growth following the surge. Additional MTCs may be constructed if warranted by increases in the number of missionaries serving within specific areas where preexisting MTCs are unable to accommodate them.

[1] "Church Lowers Missionary Service Age," www.mormonnewsroom.org, 6 October 2012.
<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-lowers-age-requirement-for-missionary-service>

[2] "Church Lowers Missionary Service Age," www.mormonnewsroom.org, 6 October 2012.
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[3] "News of the Church," *Ensign*, December 1984. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/12/news-of-the-church>

[4] Stack, Peggy Fletcher. "Mission Metamorphosis," 30 June 2007. http://www.sltrib.com/faith/ci_6262037

[5] "Church Lowers Missionary Service Age," www.mormonnewsroom.org, 6 October 2012.
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[6] Holland, Jeffrey R. "We Are All Enlisted," General Conference, October 2011.
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[8] Stack, Peggy Fletcher. "Mission Metamorphosis," 30 June 2007. http://www.sltrib.com/faith/ci_6262037

[9] "Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2012," institute.lds.org, retrieved 5 November 2012.
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[11] "Church Lowers Missionary Service Age," www.mormonnewsroom.org, 6 October 2012.
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[13] *Preach My Gospel*, p. 214

[14] Gordon, Hinckley B. "Find the Lambs, Feed the Sheep," General Conference, April 1999.
<https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1999/04/find-the-lambs-feed-the-sheep>