



Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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Effectively Opening a Country to LDS Missionary Work

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Overview

The Church has experienced drastically different outcomes in missionary work around the world. Steady or rapid national outreach expansion has occurred in some nations whereas slight outreach expansion or no change in the extent of outreach has occurred in others. This essay examines the typical pattern that the LDS Church follows when establishing an initial presence in a country, highlights the success of the Church opening Burundi to missionary work, presents challenges and opportunities for the Church entering currently unreached nations, and discusses future prospects for the Church expanding outreach into additional nations.

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General Procedure for Establishing an LDS Presence

The typical pattern for the Church to open a nation to missionary work begins with mission and area leaders obtaining requests from isolated members and investigators petitioning for a formal church establishment or assignment of full-time missionaries. Mission and area leaders generally visit the nation and meet with these individuals to evaluate their motivations for requesting contact. During these meetings, mission leaders often distribute church literature if permitted by the law and provide recommendations and guidance to investigators and isolated members. There have been some instances where the visiting church authority appoints certain individuals as teachers when there have been groups of self-affiliated members and no known Latter-day Saints who officially joined the Church. Visits from area or mission leadership can vary from a small, simple gathering of isolated members or enthusiastic investigators to special sacrament meetings or firesides that can have large numbers of people in attendance. In situations where a sufficient number of active members are available to fulfill leadership and administrative responsibilities, mission and area leaders can authorize the creation of groups for church services. In situations where no requests were sent to church leaders and few if any Latter-day Saints live in a nation, international LDS leaders have at times visited these nations and made government and humanitarian contacts to explore future opportunities for outreach.

During visits to unreached nations, mission and area leadership examine conditions and assess whether it is feasible to allot mission resources to the candidate country. If leaders determine that extending outreach is possible, the Church generally assigns one or two senior missionary couples to the largest city. Senior missionaries generally perform humanitarian and development work and conduct public affairs work with media, nonprofit organizations, and government. To meet the ecclesiastical needs of senior missionaries and any members or investigators in the city, a group is generally organized at this time if no group was previously established. Once conditions have been thoroughly assessed and mission and area leaders identify and troubleshoot health, safety, and legal concerns, senior missionaries and church leaders begin preparations for introducing young, full-time proselytizing missionaries if such a course is deemed favorable and appropriate. Tasks accomplished during this preparatory period include finding and securing housing, learning visa regulations, preparing local members for the arrival and ramifications of full-time missionaries, beginning proselytism activity among personal contacts and member referrals, and other logistical issues relating to mission finances.

The Church generally assigns at least two young, full-time proselytizing missionary companionships when opening a nation to formal missionary activity. The first missionaries begin learning the local language if it is not already known and start teaching investigators who have already attended church regularly or are member referrals. The development of adequate local language skills generally leads to the first open proselytism activities. Open proselytism activities can include street contacting, going door-to-door, distributing church literature and outreach tracts, publicizing church meeting times and locations, and organizing creative activities to draw public attention.

The first convert baptisms often occur within a month from the arrival of the first young missionaries if no convert baptisms had previously occurred. Generally the number of converts baptized and frequency of baptismal services surpasses the numbers and frequencies from before missionaries were assigned. Missionaries gradually hand off church administrative responsibilities and callings to new converts as larger numbers of members join the Church and remain active. As local members demonstrate consistency and growth in meeting their responsibilities, missionaries reduce their involvement in administrative affairs and refocus time and effort on teaching investigators and preparing them for baptism. Once local members become self-sustaining in leadership and a sizable following of new converts remain active and undertake member responsibilities a branch may be organized.

The direction of expanding national outreach depends on several factors at this point in this process such as the availability of mission resources, local receptivity, visa regulations, mission and area leadership vision, and societal and political conditions. In some areas of the world, mission resources are too scarce to assign additional missionaries to the country and open additional cities to proselytism. In some situations, church leaders begin to evaluate prospects for expanding outreach to additional cities by following nearly the same paradigm previously outlined. In other situations, church leaders advocate for increasing the number of mission resources assigned to the single branch in the city in hopes of forming a large branch that can provide all or most of the Church's programs to members. Mission and area leaders in some areas of the world open additional groups or branches within the largest city due to convenience, desire to capitalize on large populations that are easily accessed, distance from members' homes to meetinghouses, and plans to organize a district.

Successful Example of Opening a Country to Missionary Work - Burundi

In the late 2000s, mission presidents and area leaders reassessed the opening of Burundi to formal missionary activity and the reestablishment of an official church presence. In the early 1990s, the Church organized its first branch in the capital city Bujumbura and assigned missionaries but withdrew missionaries shortly thereafter due to the onset of civil war. Over time, the branch dwindled and was closed. In late 2009, the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission President visited Burundi to investigate groups of self-proclaimed Latter-day Saints and assess conditions to determine the feasibility of reestablishing a church presence. Mission leaders increased the frequency of visits to Burundi and kept track of the locations of isolated members who relocated to Burundi from other nations or who remained from when the Church used to operate in the country in the early 1990s. The Church also maintained regular contact with committed investigators. Area leaders also visited these individuals and assessed security conditions. Organized in mid-2010, the Democratic Republic of Congo Lubumbashi Mission played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Church primarily due to the mission president advocating for establishing a presence as soon as possible. Mission leaders visited in August 2010 to meet with members and investigators. A stake president from the Kinshasa area also joined the expedition and provided valuable insight and vision toward planning to open Burundi to missionary activity. A special sacrament meeting service was held during the visit for isolated members in Bujumbura. During this visit, mission leaders searched for apartments to house missionaries and signed contracts before leaving the country. A rented space was likely secured before mission leaders returned to Lubumbashi. Area leaders granted the mission president permission to send full-time missionaries the following month to begin proselytism.

In September 2010, two North American senior missionary couples and six African full-time missionaries were permanently assigned to Bujumbura. The missionaries organized a group, began teaching investigators, and baptized the first converts in the country for the first time in over a decade. Due to careful preparation and close collaboration between local members and investigators and mission and area presidencies, 72 attended the first sacrament meeting service held that month. The number of members increased from eight in September to 39 by year-end 2010. Apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Burundi for missionary work in October of that year. Steady increases in church attendance, high convert retention, and local leadership development warranted the organization of the Bujumbura Branch in early January 2011. The Church organized a second branch in June 2011 and by September 2011 there were nearly 200 members meeting in the two branches in Bujumbura.

The success in opening Burundi to missionary work occurred for several reasons. First, mission and area leaders investigated requests from isolated members and investigators when beginning the process to establish an official church presence in Burundi. Visiting church authorities distributed church literature and provided brief lessons on doctrine and church organization. Area leaders also adequately assessed safety concerns and made appropriate recommendations for establishing the church. Second, church leaders prepared these individuals for the introduction of full-time missionaries by holding small meetings and a worship service. These meetings stressed the need to follow the Church's protocol for establishing the Church to ensure that this process occurred successfully. Third, church leaders sent multiple missionary companionships who were native to the region. All six young missionaries first assigned to Burundi appeared to serve from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fourth, senior missionary couples effectively trained and mentored new converts to hold leadership positions thereby instilling self-sufficiency in the fledgling group. Fifth, church leaders quickly responded to strong receptivity and growing leadership manpower by organizing a second branch within less than six months following the organization of the first branch.

Challenges to Opening Countries to Missionary Work

Reliance on foreign missionary manpower to open additional countries to missionary work is the primary obstacle that limits or delays the Church from entering and performing proselytism in more nations. Many countries currently present favorable opportunities for an official church presence like Gabon and South Sudan, but visa regulations, the legal status of the Church, and security concerns in assigning foreign missionaries often dissuade church leaders from opening additional countries. Greater success and more penetrating outreach will only occur if church leaders delegate more responsibilities to local members and investigators in the conversion process without the assistance of permanently-assigned full-time missionaries. The Church has experienced success and has readily relied on local members to fill these responsibilities within the bounds of

the law in many nations where it is unfeasible or impossible to send foreign proselytizing missionaries such as mainland China, Laos, and Pakistan.

The Church has hesitated to assign administrative responsibilities to isolated members in their native countries which have had minimal experience serving in the Church. Mali, Chad, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo, and Gabon have had native Latter-day Saints live in each of these countries for years but there has not appeared to be any proactive effort to reach these committed, isolated members and provide them with the training and resources to officially start the Church in their home countries. On the other hand, the Church has often quickly responded to the pleas of expatriate American and European Latter-day Saints living in unreached countries to hold church services and, if permitted by the law, initiate member-missionary activity with the indigenous population. The Church has spread into many nations through this process of fortuitous church planting by expatriates such as in the Central African Republic, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Moldova, and Tanzania.

Mission and area leadership have often lacked strategic vision in preparing and planning to open additional countries to missionary work. Excuses for not pursuing the divine mandate to take the gospel to every nation of the world are varied. Many church leaders rationalize that there is no need to focus on opening additional unreached countries to missionary work if other countries within their jurisdiction are poorly reached. Some church leaders cite current struggles and challenges in countries opened to missionary work as too burdensome and that if similar issues developed in additional nations their leadership tasks would become totally overwhelming. Others avoid the process of opening more countries to missionary work to avoid the often arduous process of obtaining the needed church and government permissions. Coordinating with other church leaders in finding and preparing isolated members and investigators, communicating vital information between successive church leaders, and securing housing and visa documentation can lead to many frustrations and disappointments that discourage church leaders and dissuade any consistent efforts to continue their attempts to open additional countries to proselytism.

The decline in the number of full-time missionaries serving by 10,000 in the early 2000s and stagnant numbers of members serving missions until the early 2010s has stretched available missionary manpower to staff LDS missions to open additional countries during this period. The Church overall has remained inflexible in considering other options and continues to heavily utilize full-time missionaries to make significant headway in worldwide outreach expansion. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, steady increases in the worldwide missionary force were vital towards the progress of opening over a dozen countries in Eastern Europe when laws governing religious freedom were relaxed to permit foreign missionaries to enter these nations and for citizens to assemble and openly live religious teachings.

The Church has few if any translations of church materials and scriptures in commonly spoken languages native to unreached countries. There are opportunities for utilizing translations in other languages that are spoken as a second language in many nations, but this approach limits outreach to at times a small proportion of the population.

Recommendations for Opening Additional Nations

Greater collaboration with indigenous Latter-day Saints and committed investigators and their assigned mission and area leaders will need to occur for the Church to enter additional nations in a timely manner. In situations where security or other concerns prevent area or mission leaders from visiting these nations, the Church can send local church leaders to these nations if possible. Regular visits and contact with members and investigators can provide opportunities to teach and train future leaders and baptismal candidates. Technology opens the door for many excellent methods for mission and area leaders to meet these needs remotely through the internet with services such as Skype. Translating LDS materials into additional languages commonly spoken in unreached nations will also be crucial towards preparing necessary resources for missionary activity.

The Church has made some recent efforts to better organize and maintain track of isolated members in unreached nations. For many years the Church has created "area branches" that service members living in unreached countries of a given church area, such as in the Europe East area and the Asia North Area. In 2010, the Church organized a new category of congregations called administrative branches. Initially the Church created administrative branches in each of the four unreached nations of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro) and designated the sole branch in the Falkland Islands as an administrative branch. In early 2012, most if not all unreached nations appeared to have either an administrative branch or area branch to facilitate efforts administering isolated members of the Church and providing the administrative infrastructure for small congregations to operate. For example, the Church's online meetinghouse locator in early 2012 included the Africa Southeast Area - Gabon Branch and missionary reports indicated that a group met for church services in Libreville.

Future Prospects

The outlook for effectively opening additional countries to the LDS Church appears mixed as opportunities are abundant but church leaders continue to rely on limited numbers of full-time missionaries to accomplish this feat. Prospects appear most favorable in Sub-Saharan Africa for opening additional countries to missionary activity due to high receptivity, few government and societal restrictions on Christian proselytism, and the willingness and sizable numbers of investigators and isolated members who petition mission and area leaders for an official church establishment.