Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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Missionary Training Centers and LDS Growth

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Overview

The LDS Church operated 15 missionary training centers (MTCs) worldwide in 2011 in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Guatemala, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Additional MTCs once operated in Japan, Samoa, South Korea, and Tonga[1] but were decommissioned between the late 1990s and late 2000s. International MTCs were established in the last quarter of the twentieth century to meet the training needs of the Church in nations where appreciable numbers of members were serving missions, improve accessibility for new missionaries, provide cultural exposure and teaching to foreign missionaries, and simplify visa issues. This essay examines the relationship between opening additional MTCs and the stability and augmentation of missionary manpower numbers worldwide.

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MTC Background

In 1925, LDS missionaries began receiving training at the beginning of their missions in a mission home in Salt Lake City, Utah.[2] In 1961, the Church established the Language Training Mission initially at Brigham Young University and later at church colleges in Idaho and Hawaii to meet foreign language study needs for missionaries called to serve foreign language-speaking missions.[3] The Church established its first MTC in Provo, Utah in the early 1970s and its first international MTCs in Sao Paulo, Brazil and Hamilton, New Zealand in 1977.[4] In the early 2000s, the Provo MTC provided foreign language education in approximately 50 languages and could accommodate up to 4,000 missionaries at a time. In recent years, the number of missionaries at the Provo MTC has generally averaged around 2,000 at a time and in 2010 the Church reported that the Provo MTC could accommodate only 3,000 missionaries.[5] Other MTCs provide missionary training in Cebuano, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Samoan, Spanish, Tagalog, and Tongan.[6] In 2010, missionaries attending MTCs in Argentina, Brazil, Ghana, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States received their full missionary training before entering the field at these MTCs unless visa issues delayed the arrival of foreign missionaries to these centers. Phased training occurs in MTCs in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Peru, and Spain which require foreign missionaries to attend basic language training at the Provo MTC and then complete the remainder of their training at the MTC within or near the nation they are serving in. In 2010, MTCs in Colombia, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, and the Philippines solely met the needs of missionaries from these or other nearby nations.[7]

In 2010, one-third of LDS missionaries entering the field were trained in MTCs outside the United States.[8] In 2011, all MTCs were located nearby a temple to permit missionaries to attend the temple regularly during their training and to provide the opportunity for members residing in nations without an LDS temple to receive their own temple endowments.

The number of missionaries trained at international MTCs is available for only a few centers. Between October 2010 and October 2011, the Argentina MTC trained approximately 660 missionaries. Between June 2010 and June 2011, the Guatemala MTC trained approximately 1,700 missionaries. The Dominican Republic MTC trains approximately 500 missionaries a year and has the capacity to house 72 missionaries at a time.[9] The Chile MTC trained approximately 380 missionaries between September 2010 and September 2011. The Peru MTC generally trains 60-90 missionaries at a time and likely trained approximately 1,000 missionaries in 2010. In mid-October 2011, the Brazil MTC had 175 missionaries; 45 of whom were North Americans. The center can currently accommodate up to 646 missionaries at a time.[10]

Successes

The increasing number of MTCs in the late twentieth century was correlated with increasing numbers of missionaries serving. The establishment of additional MTCs appeared to influence the number of members serving missions as these centers reinforced the permanency of the Church in a country or region, fostered the development of an LDS community, and likely influenced local church leaders to focus on sending larger numbers of youth on full-time missions. Missionary manpower remains heavily reliant on the Church in North and South America where the majority of church members reside and where nine of the 16 MTCs are located. North Americans generally comprise the minority in international MTCs unlike the Provo MTC where they stand out as a clear majority. The Church has adapted the size of MTCs to meet local needs to train new missionaries as most MTCs currently train fewer than 100 missionaries at a time.

MTCs often operate in locations that are among the strongest LDS centers in the worldwide church. In 2010, every country with at least 200,000 Latter-day Saints had a MTC. These training centers reinforce the permanency of the church and the establishment of a long-term church community that is potentially self-sufficient in all local and regional ecclesiastical and administrative functions. Countries with their own MTCs are often less reliant on limited international mission resources to meet their local needs.

Opportunities

Additional MTCs offer benefits to buttress local church growth and stability comparable to establishing church schools and universities as a sense of LDS community is strengthened, the self-sufficiency and permanency of the Church are reinforced, and members and church leaders focus on meeting the missionary needs for their specific nation or region. Favorable opportunities abound for establishing additional small and medium-sized MTCs that are capable of housing up to 100 missionaries at a time. The most promising locations include Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Cochabamba, Bolivia; Aba, Nigeria; Kyiv, Ukraine; Guayaquil, Ecuador; Caracas, Venezuela; and Frankfurt, Germany as temples operate or are announced for each location and no MTC is nearby. These locations are promising candidates due to appreciable numbers of local members serving missions, language barriers, and political issues. For example, a MTC in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo would significantly simplify the training of missionaries from French-speaking African nations who currently undergo training in MTCs located in English-speaking nations, capitalize on large numbers of local members serving missions, reduce travel times and costs for Congolese missionaries, eliminate visa issues for Congolese missionaries seeking training, and reinforce self-sustainability of the full-time missionary force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; one of the nations experiencing some of the most rapid membership and congregational growth in the international church. Additional MTCs could be constructed in Central America such as in El Salvador and Honduras where temples have been recently constructed. Close proximity to the Guatemala MTC may not necessitate additional MTCs in this region however unless greater numbers of Central American members serve missions and the Guatemala MTC is not expanded. The need for a separate MTC in these nations is warranted nonetheless to establish a sense of LDS community and raise awareness for local members to serve missions.

Potential MTCs may also be constructed in nations with smaller numbers of members serving missions but yield highly favorable prospects for increasing the size of the missionary force and taking advantage of large, receptive populations. Examples of such countries include Cote d'Ivoire, India, Zimbabwe, and Papua New Guinea. All of these nations do not have temples at present and will not become likely locations for future MTCs until temples are constructed in these locations. A MTC could ideally be established for every nation which had a sizable population and sizable Latter-day Saint membership in order to focus on tailoring missionary preparation to meet cultural needs. A MTC in Kenya, Nairobi or Kampala, Uganda would provide teaching preparation and encourage the development of a self-sufficient full-time missionary force in East Africa by training new missionaries in English, Swahili, Luganda, Amharic, and other commonly spoken native languages to the region.

Challenges

The closure of some MTCs has occurred to consolidate resources, especially in areas where the number of members serving full-time missions is static or declining. In Oceania, the closure of MTCs in Samoa and Tonga occurred in tandem with the expansion of the MTC in New Zealand to accommodate increasing numbers of missionaries. In South Korea, the number of Korean Latter-day Saints serving missions plummeted between the late 1980s and the late 2000s from as many as 300 to as few as 100. The decline in the number of Koreans serving missions was largely due to fewer numbers of youth joining the Church in the 1990s and 2000s and low member activity rates. Greater numbers of Japanese members appear to serve missions compared to their Korean counterparts although high operational costs likely discouraged the ongoing operating of a separate MTC for Japan. Few members serving missions from Europe may prompt church leaders to consolidate MTCs in the United Kingdom and Spain and dissuade the opening of additional centers elsewhere in Europe.

The pattern for MTC construction has primarily focused on meeting the current need for training missionaries rather than starting additional centers in areas where prospects for church growth and increasing the size of the full-time missionary force are most favorable. This reactionary approach adopted by church leaders in most areas of the world is not limited to building additional MTCs but includes most outreach and missionary-oriented programs. LDS outreach - whether it be translation or proselytism efforts - are seldom expanded by proactive policies to open additional cities, translate church materials in additional languages with few or no Latter-day Saint speakers, and train and recruit new converts to serve full-time missions. Full-time missionaries are the primary vehicle for carrying out more proactive policies to expand outreach, often leading to increased dependence by local members and leaders on outsourced full-time missionary manpower to meet local missionary needs. Over time, this contributes to self-sufficiency challenges and burdens the international church by exacting resources into what often become less productive areas. These mediocre results often reinforce reactionary policies for church growth that dissuade anticipating prospective growth opportunities in lesser-reached and unreached areas of the world.

Operational costs, a lack of qualified personnel to train missionaries, and small numbers of members serving full-time missionaries pose significant obstacles in opening additional centers. Starting additional MTCs that meet in rented facilities or in retrofitted church meetinghouses which initially operate part-time and train new missionaries only once every three months would offer flexibility, reduce costs, and provide a proactive approach to missionary training and preparation. Such an approach could result in significant growth in nations with a recent church establishment and high receptivity such as Burundi.

Language Issues

Due to fewer numbers of members serving missions from non-English-speaking countries, resources available for teaching non-English-speaking missionaries additional languages to teach and proselyte in is insufficient with the exception of English as many members from outside the United States serve within the United States. The absence of foreign language training in additional languages for non-English speakers has further reinforced the use of North American missionaries in meeting international missionary demand in countries with few or no local members serving missions. In such locations only local members serving missions in their homeland or native English speakers receive the needed language skills and preparation to communicate, proselyte, and teach.

LDS missionaries around the world appear to learn no more than 60 languages in MTCs notwithstanding members, investigators, and peoples within reach of mission outreach centers speaking hundreds of languages worldwide. Missionaries learn many languages while serving in the field and have served as translators for church materials upon returning from their missions if no church materials are available in the languages they learned to teach members and investigators. Increasing the number of mission languages taught to new missionaries will be crucial towards increasing church growth and outreach expansion.

Comparative Growth

Other outreach-focused Christian groups generally have no full-time missionaries and instead utilize local members who are trained by local leaders and more experienced members for proselytism efforts. Many Christian groups expand outreach and accomplish many of the functions of LDS missionaries through clergy and pastoral leadership who are at times assigned to unreached cities to introduce their faith and plant congregations. Many missionary-minded Christians heavily rely on education and development work in conjunction with missionary activity whereas the LDS Church often separates missionary work and development work activities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for opening additional MTCs around the world is bleak due to stagnant numbers of members serving missions for nearly a decade, a lack of vision to open additional centers to encourage greater numbers of members to serve missions in and from areas with high potential for church growth, unfeasible operational costs, and poor coordination between local church leaders and the Missionary Department. The only location which appears highly favorable for the construction of a new MTC is Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo due to distance from MTCs in Ghana and South Africa, the need for a French-language MTC in Africa, large numbers of Congolese serving missions, the recent announcement of a temple, and economic and political constraints. Prospects appear fair for expanding currently operating MTCs worldwide pending a steady and sizable increase in the number of member serving missions. Due to logistical, financial, and operational issues, church areas with multiple MTCs may consolidate these centers into a single MTC.

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