

Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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Meetinghouse Construction and LDS Church Growth

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Posted: December 2011

Overview

Latter-day Saints have often associated the maturity, strength, and growth of the Church with constructing new church-built meetinghouses in place of renting apartment spaces and buildings, purchasing and remodeling preexisting buildings, building makeshift structures from local materials, and meeting in members' homes for church meetings. Notwithstanding the often high expectations for future growth following the completion of a new meetinghouse, the relationship between the completion of new meetinghouses and accelerated church growth is not strongly supported. Church attendance in many areas of the world often remain unchanged or in some cases decrease following the completion of a new meetinghouse. This essay explores the challenges of building church meetinghouses, the costs and benefits of constructing a church-built meetinghouse versus utilizing less-expensive substitutes, and recommendations for how meetinghouse location, style, and size can increase prospects for church growth.

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LDS Background

Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, the LDS Church utilized local members for constructing chapels and raising funds to rent, remodel, and construct meetinghouses. The Church called labor missionaries to construct meetinghouses in some areas of the world such as Polynesia in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s, the Church in Samoa implemented an aggressive meetinghouse construction program headed by labor missionaries.[1] Rapid membership and congregational growth often accompanied the efforts of meetinghouse construction in Polynesia during this period as outreach expanded to additional islands through church planting. In the mid-twentieth century, the Church began to transition from relying on its own members to provide the labor to construct meetinghouses to contracting construction companies to build meetinghouses. The Church began standardizing meetinghouse designs in some areas of the world around this time, such as in the western United States.

In the early 1980s, the Church announced that new designs would be utilized for meetinghouse construction and that new meetinghouse designs called for smaller buildings than previously constructed. Two generic designs for ordinary meetinghouses were approved named the "Aspen" and "Sage" plans. The Aspen Plan was the Church's smallest meetinghouse layout for small branches. The meetinghouse design consisted of a large, square multi-purpose room surrounded by small classrooms. Expansion of the meetinghouse could occur as the number of church attendees increased through a series of add-on stages which included building a separate chapel, additional classrooms, and a separate cultural center. The Sage Plan meetinghouse design met the needs of wards and reduced the number of square feet by 5,000 compared to previous ward meetinghouse designs. The smaller size of the meetinghouse was initiated to reduce energy costs and seated 200 in the chapel area as the average ward had fewer than 200 in attendance on a given Sunday at the time.[2]

Shortly after the unveiling of new meetinghouse layouts, the Church announced in 1982 that financing policies for meetinghouse construction changed to not only consider the three previous requirements (reaching the minimal standard of the number of members attending sacrament meeting, identifying a need to construct a meetinghouse, and submitting a construction master plan) but also to consider tithe-paying faithfulness and consistency in financial and statistical reporting for each congregation. The standard of tithe-paying faithfulness demanded that a proscribed percentage of adult members had to be full-tithe payers for a meetinghouse proposal to be approved; a number often calculated by ascertaining the percentage of adult males holding the Melchizedek Priesthood.[3] In 1991, the Church requested that local members significantly contribute to meetinghouse care and cleaning.[4] This meetinghouse maintenance program was exclusively applied to the United States and Canada as congregations in these nations often had more active members and most membership residing within reasonable proximity of their assigned meetinghouses.[5]

In the last couple decades, the Church has constructed meetinghouses in an increasingly more diverse number of locations and has utilized a more diverse range of designs to meet local needs. In 2002, the Church adopted a new meetinghouse standardization program for areas around the world which provided meetinghouse layouts to meet the needs of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Utilizing the same meetinghouse layouts throughout the world has facilitated the recognition of meetinghouses belonging to the LDS Church by those passing by, but the drive to standardize church meetinghouses is primary focused to reduce construction costs as current standardization programs appear to cut building costs by as much as 20%. Local architects are hired by the Church to construct meetinghouses according to standardized floor plans for approved meetinghouse layouts.[6] In recent years, the Church appears to have favored increasingly more spacious meetinghouse designs throughout the world. As congregational and membership growth rates have declined over the past couple decades, the number of meetinghouse construction projects have also decreased. In 1979, there were 750 new buildings or major meetinghouse expansion projects underway[7] whereas in 2004, there were only 451 meetinghouses under construction.[8]

Successes

The LDS Church has successfully established meetinghouses within close proximity of church membership in most areas of Oceania and in some locations in Africa. Building costs appear to have also been reduced in many of these locations compared to other regions of the world. In Africa, full-time missionaries and local members have regularly constructed makeshift meetinghouses in a matter of days or weeks that have thatched roofs, dirt floors, and no walls. These structures provide a culturally-appropriate and a frugal approach to addressing meetinghouse needs. This approach permits speedy construction and utilization by missionaries when holding church services in previously unreached locations. The Church in some remote communities such as in Papua New Guinea has constructed "bush chapels" which are more permanent structures with metal roofs, fencing around the church property, and chairs. In the Solomon Islands, the island of Malaita was first opened to missionary work in the early 2010s and had its first meetinghouse constructed by two full-time missionaries serving from elsewhere in Oceania. The meetinghouses was constructed from natural materials such as wood, straw, and grass.

Rented spaces in urban areas within close proximity of members and investigators have been shown to consistently improve church attendance and member activity rates and augment the number of convert baptisms. The Church revamped its outreach in many of the largest cities in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. Wards and branches that met in rented spaces in urban areas within the geographical boundaries of these units appeared to experience greater sustainable growth as travel times were minimized and a sense of a permanent LDS community was established. Reducing travel times and transportation inconveniences has played a major role in activity rates. The consolidation of medium-sized branches that meet in separate locations to organize a single ward often decreases member activity rates and church attendance due to increased travel times for some members and socialization problems. Remodeling preexisting buildings as church meetinghouses appears an effective, cost-efficient method for establishing a permanent LDS presence that is often culturally appropriate, avoids the consolidation of smaller units, and better meets local member and investigator needs. A successful instances of this approach occurred in 2002 when the Church completed its first meetinghouse in Serbia which was a remodeled villa.[9]

In areas with higher concentrations of Latter-day Saints and developed transportation systems, the construction of large meetinghouses to service multiple congregations is often a practical solution to meeting local needs. To address high real estate prices and limited space in urban areas, the Church developed a standardized urban meetinghouse layout capable of accommodating between two and five stories of meetinghouse space.[10] Establishing separate meeting locations for each congregation is preferred in the interest of making LDS congregations more accessible to members but unrealistic in some urban areas due to high real estate prices such as in areas of East Asia, Europe, and in many of the world's most populous cities. In the United States, most church meetinghouses are built by the Church and service multiple wards and branches as most can drive to church building within a relatively short period of time. Accessibility to meetinghouse in the United States appears excellent in most of the western United States but moderate to poor in other locations.

Successes in constructing church-built meetinghouses outside the United States and Oceania have been more limited. Notwithstanding low standards of living, the LDS Church has constructed large, modern meetinghouses India. The first LDS meetinghouse was constructed in Rajahmundry in 2002 to service the Rajahmundry Branch which at the time had over 400 members. By 2011, there were three branches in Rajahmundry which were formed into a district.[11] In successful situations such as in India, growth appears more attributed to member involvement in missionary work, good receptivity, and meetinghouse proximity to members and investigators rather than to the size of the meetinghouse and whether the building is built entirely by the Church or remodeled from a preexisting structure.

Opportunities

Renting apartment or building spaces, holding meetings in members' homes, and constructing meetinghouses from natural materials in less-developed areas of the world present excellent opportunities for spurring greater LDS Church growth. Apartment or building spaces are often easily acquired and permit flexibility in meeting the number and location of active membership in an area. Holding meetings in members' homes provides extensive opportunities for growth as it is a thrifty approach which reinforces fellowship and congregation unity. Each of these approaches can occur within a short period of time, allowing church leaders to act quickly when a perceived need to expand outreach and plant an LDS congregation arises. As active membership increases in a given area, mission leaders can evaluate where additional meetinghouse locations can be established to perpetuate growth. All three of these alternatives to constructing a church-built meetinghouse exact fewer costs to the international church and encourage frugal use of tithing funds and foster dynamic growth and mission outreach expansion.

The completion of a new church-built meetinghouse or the opening of a new meeting location in a rented or remodeled facility offers extensive opportunities for finding new investigators. Open houses carefully coordinated with full-time missionaries, unit missionaries, and local church leaders can generate large numbers of referrals and leave positive impressions in nearby communities that can last for months and years. In Madagascar, an open house event in Tamatave generated hundreds of referrals and revitalized missionary activity for months thereafter. Open houses can also provide good opportunities for public affairs and to repair any misunderstandings between the Church and the community.

Publicizing meetinghouse locations and worship service times for LDS congregations worldwide offers excellent opportunities for growth. Launched in 2010, the Church's new online meetinghouse locator presents a wealth of information for members and investigators to locate meetinghouses worldwide. The LDS Church has explored new avenues for members to publish the location of their meetinghouses and provide reviews which can include a brief testimony and personal introduction to the Church. Google Reviews on Google Maps permits members to identify the location of their meetinghouse and provide a commentary.[12]

Challenges

Area presidencies have frequently placed minimal standards for congregations to reach before a church-built meetinghouse can be approved in a given area, specifically regarding sacrament meeting attendance and other measures of member activity. This logic stems from two assumptions: That the greater numbers of active members in a given area, the more permanent of an LDS presence has been established and that larger numbers of active members are better served by a church-built meetinghouse than by other substitutes. This tactic has generated mixed results. Some congregations have become more self-sustainable as the focus has been placed on improving activity and retention rates. In other congregations, local leaders overemphasize goals to increase sacrament attendance in order for area leaders to approve the construction of a meetinghouse. This results in a temporary increase in sacrament meeting attendance that is sustained for the predetermined amount of time to qualify for approval which is followed by a decline in church attendance once a meetinghouse is under construction or completed. These results often occur when increasing church membership did not represent high-quality, committed active members and instead represented superficial efforts to simply get people to attend church.

Some LDS meetinghouses have looked very out-of-place in less-developed nations of the world. Missionaries serving in some nations of Africa report that the high-quality LDS meetinghouses in some cities reinforce negative stereotypes that the Church is a wealthy American institution. Critics of the Church highlight the spacious, grandiose meetinghouse of some poor nations where many do not have the resources, education, and means of achieving minimally-sufficient living standards.

There have been dozens of accounts where church-built meetinghouses have not accelerated growth. In 2002, the Church dedicated its first meetinghouse in Sri Lanka to house two branches in Colombo and the Colombo Sri Lanka District offices with more than 300 attending the dedicatory services.[13] However by the late 2000s, one of the branches returned to group status and the number of active members did not appear to had changed since the completion of the meetinghouse or perhaps had decreased. In 1992, the Church began construction on its first meetinghouse in Swaziland[14] yet within the next decade the number of LDS branches in the country declined and the district was discontinued and consolidated with nearby stakes. In the late 2000s, the Church completed its first church-built meetinghouse in Croatia for the Zagreb Branch but by its completion the number of active members in the branch declined by over 50%. The LDS Church has experienced similar challenges in Hungary where spacious, modern LDS meetinghouse were constructed in some branches when approximately 50 to 100 members were active over a decade ago yet by late 2011 church attendance often averaged between 10 and 30 in some of these locations.

Government restrictions for public worship can limit or prevent the Church from openly publishing meetinghouse locations and times or requires the segregation of natives and foreigners. Members and missionaries in some areas of the world have reported that landlords have refused to rent spaces to the Church. Holding meetings in the privacy of members' homes is permitted in nearly all nations worldwide even if serious impediments are enforced regarding Christian proselytism. However the LDS Church has not taken greater advantage of holding church services in members' homes.

Many LDS congregations are difficult or impossible for members and investigators to locate. The Church only publishes meetinghouse locations for independent wards and branches and in non-sensitive countries, resulting in the meetinghouse locations of possibly as many as a thousand dependent branches and groups unlisted and unaccessible to all with the exception of those with connections with mission or area presidencies. In sensitive nations such as Pakistan and China, the Church publishes no public information on meetinghouse locations for non-foreigners, seriously hampering efforts for lost and returning converts to locate the Church. Although political issues may render any public disclosure of meetinghouse locations in these and others sensitive nations unfeasible for the foreseeable future, publishing the location of dependent branches and groups on the Church's online meetinghouse locator deserves serious consideration from international church leaders. The dynamic and sometimes temporary nature of dependent units presents challenges in maintaining an up-to-date catalog of these small congregations and consistent collaboration with church headquarters, but will be required for the Church to achieve more efficient outreach expansion in the coming years.

Comparative Growth

Other outreach-focused Christian groups have established meetinghouses more readily than the LDS Church. Many Christian

groups meet in members' homes until a sufficiently large congregation necessitates the use of its own meeting space. House churches are common in many areas of the world and have furthered outreach efforts in nations where religious freedom is restricted. Although most missionary-focused Christians have been more adaptive to establishing meetinghouse locations than the LDS Church, no other major missionary group has as an extensive online directory for locating meetinghouse locations.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS Church growth worldwide appears correlated with policies relating to meetinghouse construction and church planting. Recent expansion of LDS outreach in many Sub-Saharan African nations will mandate the continue thrifty use of church resources in establishing an increasing number of meetinghouses in the next decade. Prospects for accelerating real church growth in Latin America, the Philippines, and the United States will hinge on utilizing more efficient, cost-effective meetinghouse alternatives which are within close proximity to their target populations and fit cultural norms. Standardizing LDS outreach expansion efforts in relation to meetinghouse types and locations will be required in many areas for the Church to engage in consistent, systematic outreach expansion.

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