

Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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The Impact of Changing Area Policies on Church Growth

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Church administrative decisions regarding missionary work, proselytism methods, and outreach expansion efforts are heavily influenced by area leadership. Policies aimed at controlling and facilitating growth vary considerably by church area with some area leaders advocating for systematic outreach expansion, congregational growth, and church planting whereas others discourage it to strengthen operating congregations and internalize church growth efforts. Area policies and growth approaches also vary within an area as successive area leaders modify or totally change policies implemented by their predecessors.

This essay examines the interaction of changing area policies and growth trends, specifically how policies and approaches advocated by area leaders increase or decrease rates of congregational growth, member activity, convert retention, and outreach expansion. Examples are provided from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and the Caribbean.

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Latin America

Changing area policies have had catastrophic consequences on LDS Church growth in Latin America. Strong receptivity occurs in most nations and the Church has allotted significant mission resources to the region, but changing qualifications for converts to be baptized and congregations to be organized and continue to operate has compromised the growth of the Church in many areas of the region over the past two decades.

In Chile, mission and area leadership in the 1990s lowered the standards for congregations and stakes to be organized and continue to function when large numbers of converts were baptized. The goal for reducing these standards was to capitalize on rapid numerical growth and to channel new converts into leadership and administrative responsibilities to facilitate retention and leadership training and development. Initially the policy appeared successful as hundreds of new wards and branches were organized in the mid-1990s and over 100 new units were created in 1995 alone. The number of stakes in Chile skyrocketed from 50 in 1988 to 116 in 1999.

In the early 2000s, it became apparent to area and international church leadership that the program was unsuccessful in retaining new converts baptized during the years of rapid growth in the 1990s. Many congregations appeared to have fewer than 50 active members despite over 500 members on church records. In order to strengthen active church membership, area leadership closed approximately 330 wards and branches to create wards and branches with greater numbers of active members. Notwithstanding efforts to consolidate resources and strengthen congregations, the program resulted in additional retention challenges as many previously active members became less active or inactive as they were unable to socially integrate into consolidated units and distance to meetinghouses increased travel times. Between 2000 and 2005, 42 stakes were discontinued as a result of congregation consolidations. Some former stakes in the Santiago area were reduced to a single ward by 2011.

Similar decisions regarding congregation consolidations and convert baptismal standards were made in other Latin American countries during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, most notably in Brazil and Peru where the number of congregations declined by the hundreds. In recent years, church growth has rebounded in both Brazil and Peru as several new stakes are organized every year and no additional stakes have been discontinued in nearly a decade. The trend of consolidating congregations in these two nations was reversed due to increased efforts to establish new congregations and expand outreach

within the largest cities and in additional, previously unreached locations. Outreach expansion nonetheless remains painstakingly slow in Brazil notwithstanding rapid outreach expansion occurring in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In 2011, there were over 400 cities with at least 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation nationwide. The Church generally opens less than a dozen previously unreached cities to missionary work a year. The justification given by church leaders for the slow outreach expansion process in Brazil is linked to following the "Centers of Strength" paradigm of concentrating mission resources into a handful of select cities which are perceived as the most receptive and capable of becoming strong church centers. Distance from cities with an established church presence, limited numbers of full-time missionaries serving, and a lack of members in unreached locations are additional contributors to mediocre outreach expansion efforts in Brazil.

Only a handful of Latin American countries have experienced no significant congregation consolidations and have had never had a stake discontinued such as Venezuela. These nations have tended to have had a more recent church establishment, have had significantly large expansion of LDS outreach within the past decade, and are more self-sufficient in their full-time missionary needs. Area policies have nonetheless reduced outreach expansion in these nations and have altered the qualification for new congregations to be organized from time to time. At present, independent branches cannot be organized in most nations in Latin America unless there are at least six active Melchizedek Priesthood holders in a given area. In the past, some branches appeared to be organized with only a couple Aaronic Priesthood holders among general church membership and often had missionaries serve as branch presidents.

Eastern Europe

Area policies have strongly influenced decisions to organize new congregations and consolidate congregations in Eastern Europe since the initial establishment of the Church in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Russia, the LDS Church undertook impressive outreach expansion in the largest cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Between 1991 and 1992 the number of branches in St. Petersburg increased from one to six.[1] In early 1993, Moscow had 15 small branches;[2] a dramatic increase from just one less than two years earlier. By the summer of 1994, there were 15 branches in St. Petersburg. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the number of branches in both Moscow and Saint Petersburg were halved due to member activity and convert retention issues, decreased receptivity resulting in fewer convert baptisms, and emphasis from mission and area leaders to consolidate smaller congregations to create larger congregations that were perceived to possess greater resources and exact fewer demands from district, mission, and area leadership. The reshuffle of congregations and districts in Moscow and St. Petersberg had poor results as the number of active members per branch often increased but many active members fell into inactivity due to increased travel times to attend church, socialization and branch unity challenges, and personal testimony issues. Today a stake now operates in Moscow, but this has occurred through at least two cycles of creating and consolidating branches in the early 1990s and in the mid-2000s.

Coordinated congregation splitting occurred throughout much of Eastern Europe in the late 2000s in a renewed effort to bring congregations and meetinghouse locations closer to church members to help increase church growth, facilitate reactivation efforts, and spur additional church leadership opportunities. In Russia, additional congregations were organized in Moscow and the Moscow Russia District divided into two districts as a result of the number of congregations in the district increasing to as many as 15. Several additional branches were organized in Saratov. Branches were organized in smaller communities nearby large cities and several large cities which had just one LDS congregation had a second branch organized. Many of the new branches organized during this period were created with high expectations for anticipated growth. Additional examples of cities where congregational splitting occurred included Krasnodar and Engels. In Armenia, the Church divided the Yerevan Armenia District into two districts in 2008 and a couple new branches were organized. In Georgia, the sole Tbilisi Branch was divided into the Avlabari and Saburtalo Branches in 2007. In Ukraine, a second branch was organized in L'viv (Sykhivs'ka) and Bila Tserkva (Ros').

Beginning in 2009, missionaries serving in several Eastern European nations reported that the standards for branches to operate were raised to demand that a local priesthood leader must serve as the branch president instead of a full-time missionary and that a certain number of active members were required for branches to continue functioning. Congregational growth rates have plummeted throughout Eastern Europe since 2009 as nearly every large city in Russia has had at least one congregation closed and large-scaled congregation consolidations occurred in other Eastern European nations. In 2010, the Ufa Russia District was closed and only one branch continued to operate in Ufa notwithstanding four branches once operating in the city a decade earlier. In Bulgaria, the number of LDS congregations operating was cut in half during a two-year period and both districts were discontinued in 2011. Missionaries reported that the Area Presidency advised the mission president to discontinue branches that had fewer than 15 active members and remove full-time missionaries in these locations due to low productivity. That same year, the two branches in Tbilisi, Georgia were consolidated into a single branch, the two districts in Armenia were consolidated back into a single district, the Chelyabinsk Russia District was dissolved and combined with the Yekaterinburg Russia District, and the Dnepropetrovsk Ukraine District was dissolved and one of the four branches in Dnepropetrovsk was closed.

Changing standards for branches to operate in 2009 and the early 2010s has not decreased the number of branches in approximately a dozen Eastern European nations. Countries which have not experienced congregational decline during this period include Albania, Belarus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Serbia, Slovenia, and Slovakia. Hungary is the only country in the region which posted noticable congregational growth in the late 2000s and early 2010s as the first branches were organized in several previously unreached cities, the first stake was organized in 2006, and two districts were created in 2009. As much of an anomale as Hungary appears compared to other Eastern European nations, congregation consolidations have occurred in Hungary since the Church's initial establishment which appear induced by area and mission efforts to create larger branches in the Budapest area. Located north of Budapest near the Slovak border, the Vac Branch once appeared to support as many as 50 active members in the early 2000s but the branch was consolidated

with a Budapest congregation in an effort to create a ward-sized congregation in preparation for the Budapest Hungary Stake. Today missionaries report that with only a few exceptions, all of the former branch membership of the Vac Branch were inactive due to distance from the church meetinghouse in Budapest and social integration challenges.

Congregational growth trends have closely mirrored trends in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Eastern Europe and the number of additional cities opened to proselytism. In the late 2000s, a renewed effort to expand outreach began throughout the Europe East Area as additional cities were opened to missionary work in Albania (Shkoder, Kamez), Croatia (Pula), Estonia (Keila), Greece (Kavala, Patra), Hungary (Bekescsaba, Hodmezovasarhely, Kaposvar, Kiskunfelegyhaza, Komlo, Oroshaza, Szolnok, Tatabanya), Latvia (Jelgava), Moldova (Balti), Poland (Kielce, Szczecin, Torun, Zamosc, Zgorzelec), Romania (Alexandria, Craiova), Russia (Kemerovo, Novokuznetsk, Stavropol), Serbia (Subotica, Panchevo), Slovakia (Banská Bystrica, Kosice, Martin), and Ukraine (Boryspil, Khmel'nyts'kyy, Kremenchuk, Pavlohrad, Zhytomyr). By late 2011, full-time missionaries appeared to had been withdrawn from Pula, Croatia; Keila, Estonia; Kavala and Patra, Greece; Hodmezovasarhely and Kiskunfelegyhaza, Hungary; Torun and Zamosc, Poland; Subotica and Panchevo, Serbia; Martin, Slovakia; and Pavlohrad, Ukraine. In the early 2010s, the Church appeared to open additional cities to missionary work only in the previously unreached nations of the former Yugoslavia, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and Hungary.

Membership growth rates have also significantly declined over the past decade in Eastern Europe. In 2001, annual membership growth rates were 13.6% in Albania, 12% in Romania and Russia, 11.2% in Bulgaria, 10.6% in Ukraine, and 7% in Poland whereas in 2010 annual membership growth rates were 3.75% in Romania, 3.7% in Russia, 3.1% in Albania, 2.6% in Bulgaria, 1.6% in Poland, and 1.5% in Ukraine. Only a handful of nations have experienced relatively steady membership growth rates such as Hungary but these nations have had low membership growth rates since the early 2000s, higher convert retention, and more successful outreach expansion campaigns.

Trends in membership and congregational growth throughout the region attest to the value of consistent area and mission standards and policies regarding adequate prebaptismal preparation, outreach expansion, and minimally sufficient conditions for congregations to operate. Frequent and non-essential changes in these standards and policies have taken disastrous tolls on the stability and self-sufficiency of active LDS populations. Limiting outreach to only a handful of select cities under the Centers of Strength paradigm has been a recurrent policy which has stunted growth in almost all Eastern European nations.

Sub-Saharan Africa

The limited extent of LDS outreach in Sub-Saharan African notwithstanding high receptivity is largely the product of area policies restricting growth. The Centers of Strength paradigm has heavily influenced area decisions to permit mission and local leaders to introduce the Church into unreached areas. This policy has consequently reduced the expansion in LDS outreach throughout Sub-Saharan Africa notwithstanding unprecedented opportunities to open additional nations to missionary activity, capitalize on highly receptive populations, plant new congregations in previously unreached areas, and translate basic church materials and LDS scriptures into local languages.

Historically, mission resources in Africa were channeled into a handful of nations among only a few major cities and no small cities, towns, or villages. Today the Church operates wards or branches in three or fewer locations in most African countries. In Madagascar, the LDS Church operated solely in the capital Antananarivo for over a decade before additional cities were opened to proselytism (Antsirabe and Toamasina). In Malawi, the Church introduced full-time missionaries in 1999 to Blantyre but did not assign missionaries to additional cities for another decade. In Tanzania, LDS missionaries were assigned only to Dar Es Salaam for nearly two decades until Arusha opened for missionary work in 2008. The LDS Church continues to operate in only one city in Benin (Cotonou), Burundi (Bujumbura), the Central African Republic (Bangui), Namibia (Windhoek), Rwanda (Kigali), South Sudan (Juba), and Togo (Lome). Political instability, civil war, and no government recognition have been common reasons for delays in expanding outreach throughout Africa. However even in peaceful nations such as Botswana the activities of the LDS Church are limited to only a handful of cities despite high receptivity, government recognition, and increasing numbers of capable and trained local leaders.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church began to refocus mission resources to expanding outreach in a select number of locations which generally had an LDS presence for several decades. In Monrovia, Liberia the Church organized five new branches during a single weekend in 2011 to facilitate growth. A church-planting approach was instituted in two Ghanaian cities (Kumasi and Sunyani) in 2010 and 2011 which resulted in accelerated membership growth, convert retention, and congregational growth during this period. The organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission was a major breakthrough by the Church to take advantage of high receptivity and stability in Benin and Togo by magnifying missionary efforts beginning in Lome, Togo and Cotonou, Benin where several additional congregations were planted in 2011. Decisions to organize new congregations and open a few additional cities to proselytism in these and other African nations were directed by mission and area presidencies but policies reinforced the constrictive nature of the Centers of Strength policy to primarily locations which had already received LDS outreach. Opportunities to expand outreach continue to be strongly linked to the number of full-time missionaries assigned to missions within the region, especially in West Africa. In late 2011, full-time missionaries serving in the Ghana Cape Coast Mission reported that approximately 50 new missionaries were being assigned to serve in the mission and would all arrive within a six-week time frame. Increasing the allotted number of missionaries to expand outreach demonstrates progress ensuring accelerated church growth in the coming years but reliance on full-time missionaries to accomplish this feat has serious limitations such as the artificial support system that missionaries provide which is subject to disruption from missionary transfers and government issues with visas, the static number of missionaries serving worldwide for nearly a decade, and the lack of training and experience most missionaries have pertaining to cultural issues in newly opened, unfamiliar locations.

Based on reports by isolated members and concerned Latter-day Saint visitors, area leaders appear to have strongly discouraged the opening of additional nations to proselytism in Africa, particularly in Muslim-majority West African nations. Reasons for why this stance has been adopted include concerns over adequately meeting the current needs and demands of already opened nations and the difficulties that arise from undergoing the process to register the Church in these nations. Low standards of living, political instability, distance from established LDS missions, and a lack of local Latter-day Saints are additional concerns which appear to have dissuaded regional church leaders from more strongly contending to establish the Church in additional unreached nations. Opportunities for establishing a permanent LDS presence in currently unreached nations in Sub-Saharan Africa nonetheless deserves serious consideration due to widespread religious freedom and tolerant Muslim majorities in most of these nations.

East Asia

Area policies in East Asia have strictly enforced and stressed adherence for Latter-day Saints to follow local laws to protect the Church's relationship with governments in nations with religious freedom restrictions. In China, there is no interaction between Chinese nationals and foreigners. The Church segregates these two populations into separate congregations because Chinese law mandates no contact between foreigners and citizens. Maintaining good government relations by exhibiting strict adherence to the law has been an additional motivator for the Church. The segregation of native Chinese Latter-day Saints in China from their foreigner counterparts appears to have significantly contributed to the development of local Chinese leadership. LDS congregational growth in China has ranked among the most rapid worldwide since the late 2000s and would not be possible without local leadership development. The duration of LDS outreach expansion in mainland China among Chinese citizens has been too short to determine the consistency of area policies regarding congregation operational standards, convert baptismal standards, and outreach expansion initiatives. In Vietnam, the Church does not prohibit the mingling of local and foreign Latter-day Saints but ascribes to strict protocol regarding other issues such as proselytism activities only occurring through native Vietnamese full-time missionaries. In Laos, no proselytizing missionaries are assigned and convert baptisms are conducted in harmony with local regulations.

Declining levels of receptivity to the LDS Church in Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong appear to have dissuaded mission and area leaders from expanding outreach in these locations. Low member activity rates have further compounded the issue and have necessitated the closure and consolidation of congregations in some areas. In the Asia North Area, the Church has not engaged in any church planting opportunities as full-time missionaries are principally utilized for reactivating less-active and inactive members, finding and teaching investigators, and strengthening smaller church units. Larger congregations siphon surplus missionary resources as mission leaders assign multiple missionary companionships to a single large ward under the assumption that greater opportunities exist for teaching and baptizing new converts due to greater numbers of active members to provide investigator referrals. This logic presents serious challenges in outreach expansion as wards with more active members offer more local resources that can be utilized to reduce reliance on full-time missionary resources. Over time, the assignment of multiple missionary companionships can reduce local leadership and member self-sufficiency regarding missionary activity and administrative responsibilities. The careful assignment of full-time missionaries to lesser-reached or unreached cities and towns deserves serious consideration by mission and area leaders as no progress has occurred increasing outreach capabilities in Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong in over a decade. Many unreached locations have small numbers of active or semi-active members who can be utilized to facilitate church growth in their communities. The Centers of Strength policy reduces LDS outreach to a smaller portion of the population as opportunities for outreach expansion are unrealized.

The Caribbean

Trends of splitting and consolidating congregations in the Caribbean appears heavily influenced by area policies as evidenced by this phenomenon occuring in nearly all the Lesser Antilles and the Guianas within the past decade. In the mid and late 2000s, dozens of new branches were organized throughout the region as greater numbers of missionaries were assigned, larger numbers of converts were baptized, and receptivity remained high. These changes likely occurred in coordination with the creation of the Caribbean Area in 2006. In Guyana, the Church undertook an aggressive congregation-splitting approach to expand outreach which resulted in the number of branches increasing from eight in 2005 to 16 in 2008. In the early 2010s, a policy calling for greater numbers of active members in congregations and reducing reliance on full-time missionaries for administrative issues culminated in several branch consolidations and the closure of the sole LDS district in New Amsterdam. In Dominica, the Church organized its first branch in the mid-2000s and by the late 2000s there were three branches. However, by 2011 only one branch and one group continued to operate on Dominica. The number of branches in Guadeloupe reached seven by the late 2000s after several new branches were organized in previously lesser-reached and unreached communities such as Gosier and Moule. By 2011, only three branches continued to operate. Other islands which had congregations consolidated between the late 2000s and early 2010s include Aruba, Curacao, Martinique, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Martin, and the British Virgin Islands. Since 2010, outreach expansion appears to had halted throughout the Guianas and Lesser Antilles as congregations have been regularly consolidated.

Changing area policies regarding the operation of branches presents significant challenges for the Church to retain converts and keep active members attending church and fulfilling their callings. Congregation consolidations often require members to travel further distances to church services and socially integrate with a new group of members. This can result in reduced member activity rates. Finding and baptizing converts in communities which once had a branch but no longer do often proves more difficult than in communities with their own congregation due to increased travel times and costs.

Conclusion

The greatest care should be taken by mission and area leaders when amending policies regarding the creation and consolidation of congregations, the qualifications for convert baptisms, and outreach expansion. Substandard prebaptismal qualifications that permit converts to be baptized without developing habitual church attendance and demonstrating full compliance to all basic LDS teachings for a period of several weeks or months negatively impacts congregational growth and outreach expansion for many years and even decades. Maintaining reasonably high baptismal standards for converts will be requisite for any significant progress to occur in accelerating LDS Church growth worldwide. The oversaturation of LDS full-time missionaries in small branches has also been shown to present long-term challenges developing local member and leadership self-sufficiency in missionary activity. Mission and area leaders who regularly open additional lesser-reached and unreached locations to proselytism and maintain consistent standards for congregations to operate have experienced the greatest successes in convert retention and church growth within their jurisdictions.

[1] Fidel, Steve. "Converts pioneer frontier in Russia," LDS Church News, 19 September 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/22554/Converts-pioneer-frontier-in-Russia.html

[2] "Eight new missions announced," LDS Church News, 6 March 1993. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/23130/Eight-new-missions-announced.html