

Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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How to Open a City for Missionary Work

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Overview

The LDS Church has expanded its presence in most nations often through a series of fortuitous events rather than through premeditated, tactful planning and long-term vision by local, mission, and area leaders. Consequently, the rate of LDS outreach expansion has not appeared to exhibit any noticeable changes for most nations in over a decade. Conditions for LDS Church expansion appear better than ever before in many nations around the world due to political stability, rapidly urbanizing populations, improving living conditions, and growth among other nontraditional Christian groups yet the undeveloped vision of members and leaders prevents the acceleration of mission outreach expansion.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze and suggest effective methods for opening a previously unreached city to LDS missionary activity. This essay explores church planting in two circumstances: Locations with Latter-day Saints without a congregation and locations without Latter-day Saints and without a congregation. Effective approaches for church planting for locations with church members and without church members are examined as well as approaches specific to cities with or without Latter-day Saints. A ten-step approach to church planting is described that addresses the need for a systematic and preconceived method for effective outreach expansion. This essay addresses church planting paradigms in regards to church leaders, but a section on how isolated local members can help establish the church in their unreached community is also provided.

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Instances of Successful and Unsuccessful Church Planting

The LDS Church has experienced few successes in church planting in recent years and a decline in the numbers of full-time missionaries serving in the early 2000s and their current stagnant numbers at present are often to blame by members and leaders alike for slow outreach expansion trends. Successful church planting approaches have at times utilized full-time missionaries to assist in filling and training leadership, fellowshipping new converts, retaining new members, and reactivating less-active members but do not require the use of limited full-time missionary manpower. Successful church planting approaches in the LDS Church are often strongly influenced by local members and local leaders advocating for meeting perceived needs for the Church in their nearby communities and effectively perform member-missionary work and submit proposals to mission and area presidencies to expand outreach. Examples of recent successes which have not required the use of young full-time missionaries and only periodic visits from members in the mission presidency include outreach expansion in the central Democratic Republic of the Congo; the Sogere and Suki areas of Western Province, Papua New Guinea; and mainland China as the number of LDS congregations in each of these nations has proliferated in previously unreached locations. Recent successes which have utilized full-time missionaries in coordination with local leaders in church planting and outreach expansion have occurred in Sunyani, Ghana; Kadavu Island, Fiji; Mozambique; and Sarawak, East Malaysia as multiple groups or new branches have recently been organized.

There have been abundant instances of failed attempt for LDS Church planting in recent years, especially in Eastern Europe. Full-time missionaries opened Novo Mesto, Slovenia in the late 2000s but closed the city and disbanded the group due to a lack of convert baptisms. Other recent failed attempts at church planting in the region occurred in Pula, Croatia; Pancevo and Subotica, Serbia; and Kavala and Patra, Greece as each of these locations once had groups operating and full-time missionaries assigned but today appear to have neither missionaries assigned nor congregations operating. Notwithstanding several recent failures in planting new congregations in Eastern Europe, several locations have had LDS congregations successfully planted in the past five years and today have become independent branches often led by local church leaders. Examples of successful instances of church planting in Eastern Europe have occurred in Craiova, Romania; Bekescsaba,

Kaposvar, and Szolnok, Hungary; and Khmel'nytsky and Zhytomyr, Ukraine.

Overall the greatest failures in LDS Church planting are missed and unrealized opportunities. The Church missed significant opportunities for planting congregations in many former Soviet Republics in Central Asia in the 1990s, such as in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan when governments were more open to nontraditional, proselytizing Christian groups and populations were more receptive to Christian outreach. Unrealized opportunities for church planting today are widespread in some of the most populous and receptive nations of the world, including Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Within the past ten years only a handful of cities had their first LDS congregations organized in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines combined.

Approaches to Church Planting

Notwithstanding the resources available and the dynamics presented vary significantly from cities with a small number of Latter-day Saints and cities with no known Latter-day Saints, approaches to establishing a church presence and extending mission outreach have significant overlap between the two scenarios. Finding, retention, and teaching methods which can be applied to both scenarios include holding cottage meetings, disaster relief, media campaigns, family home evening, firesides, and musical performances, organizing literacy programs, clean water projects, and periodic visits by missionaries and mission leaders, and assigning full-time missionaries.

In the event that there are no known Latter-day Saints in a location that church planting efforts are focused, local church leaders and unit missionaries from nearby cities, full-time missionaries on permanent or temporary assignment from nearby cities, and mission presidency members can perform street contacting and organize thrifty media campaigns to publicize firesides and cottage meetings to expedite finding efforts. Examples of media campaigns include publishing the time and location of a fireside or cottage meeting in local newspapers and missionaries or mission leaders appearing on a local radio or television program to introduce the Church and inform the public of where and when individuals can meet with church representatives. Individuals and families who attend these functions that teach about the LDS Church and present basic testimony building experiences offer opportunities to invite participants to learn more about the Church and attend church services. These programs can generate a base of interested individuals to teach and invite to Church once church services commence.

Interested individuals and prospective members can serve as a vital tool in finding additional receptive individuals and advocating for mission and area leaders on a local level if registration of the Church in their communities is required or if certain laws or standards must be meet for a religious group to assemble in a location. This process can be ameliorated at times by mission leaders meeting with local government and civic leaders to present a basic background of the Church's beliefs, practices, and programs. In some areas of the world such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, some unreached cities with no known Latter-day Saints have followings of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints who have not been baptized and have no official LDS Church presence in their communities. Finding these individuals, introducing and reviewing church teachings, and assessing their understanding and commitment to church doctrines and principles are necessary steps toward establishing the Church in these areas.

Expanding LDS outreach into locations where several practicing Latter-day Saints reside offer additional approaches to establishing congregations and initiating missionary activity. Local members can provide referrals for interested individuals and pair up with a full-time missionary to maximize productivity in the area, in essence doubling the capabilities of allotted missionary resources for a single proselytizing area. Opportunities for local members to engage in missionary activity with full-time missionaries can improve their teaching skills, solidify their doctrinal understanding, and spark greater awareness and interest in member-missionary activity that can accelerate growth. The calling of local members to serve as unit missionaries can provide greater focus on reactivation work of less-active members in the area and assist in finding and retention of new converts. Church Education System (CES) programs can also be initiated if Latter-day Saints are present, such as seminary and institute but often not until a congregation is officially organized. These CES programs can provide additional options for local members to introduce acquaintances, coworkers, neighbors, friends, and family to the Church in an environment that fosters socialization with members and missionaries and centers on study of the scriptures and LDS beliefs, doctrines, and practices. Missionary preparation classes for youth often occur through institute and if established can increase the number of local members who serve missions over the medium term. As local members who serve full-time missions return and remain in their native communities they can provide invaluable experience in administrative and ecclesiastical responsibilities and are often utilized to serve as group leaders, branch presidents, and other leadership positions. The Perpetual Education Fund permits local returned missionaries to obtain loans to further their education, thereby increasing their prospects for greater financial security and allowing them to provide greater economic resources to building up the Church in their area. Sizable numbers of local members also provide opportunities for humanitarian and service projects completed by local members, such as the Mormon Helping Hands program where members and community leaders coordinate to clean and refurbish school, hospitals, and prisons, beautify parks, and provide additional services.

Steps to Church Planting

A generic, linear approach to church planting in unreached locations is provided below.

1. Learn background of a region (geography, culture, demographics, ect.)

2. Assess needs of isolated members and investigators in region

3. Prioritize locations by a cost and benefit analysis

4. Focus resources on highest priority locations

5. Hold regular cottage meetings

6. Establish a group with a basic worship program

7. Baptize investigators who regularly attend church services and meet baptismal standards

8. Assign new converts to callings and train local leadership

9. Organize a branch

10. Repeat steps one through nine for locations within jurisdiction of branch

Each of these ten steps in vital towards a successful church planting strategy that perpetuates itself and leads to strength and resources which support the Church in a region instead of weaknesses and deficits that consume national or international LDS resources.

1. Learn background of a region

LDS members and leaders must become familiar with regions within their jurisdiction. This includes issues such as geography, environmental issues, history, demographics, economics, culture, religion, corruption, government, law, and politics. Each of these and additional background factors can improve or reduce receptivity and prospects for establishing an LDS congregation. Teaching, proselytism, and planting paradigms may need to be customized to fit local needs. For example, opening an LDS congregation in the African country of Guinea would require specific protocol regarding threats posed by tropical diseases and low living standards, the proselytizing of Muslims, recent political instability, resources for addressing the strong ethno-religious ties of most ethnic groups to Islam, and challenges posed by approximately half the population living below the poverty line. Learning the background of a region provides insight into inherent strengths and needs of the general population and leads to the formulation of more accurate inferences into the potential of LDS outreach and growth in these regions. Awareness of unreached regions within a mission or area's jurisdiction often arises through performing humanitarian and development projects, which can serve as an effective tool to make contacts and begin to assess local needs.

2. Assess needs of isolated members and investigators in region

Information regarding the locations which have known Latter-day Saints, the number of members in each location, their level of activity and commitment to the Church, and their duration of attending church services when they once lived in a location with an LDS congregation is vital toward assessing needs. The presence of a full-member LDS family who has several individuals that previously held callings in their former congregation for a period of several years can provide invaluable assistance and leadership if it is determined that a congregation should be planted in their unreached community. The presence of isolated Latter-day Saints in an unreached location does not determine whether it becomes a candidate for planting a congregation or not but is an important factor when performing a cost and benefit analysis. Oftentimes unreached cities have several interested individuals who are not members of the Church. Keeping good records of their religious background, past interactions with church members and leaders, location, and level of interest and understanding are additional important factors when assessing needs.

3. Prioritize locations by a cost and benefit analysis

Decisions to channel resources into a location deemed suitable for outreach appear to be often motivated by spiritual impressions and intuition rather than an actuarial approach. Seeking spiritual guidance and confirmation for prioritizing locations to open for missionary activity should not be discredited nor undermined as this is the pattern for ecclesiastical and administrative governance in the LDS Church but neither should performing a cost and benefit analysis to weigh the options and possibilities for where congregations are planted with limited available mission resources. A cost and benefit analysis consolidates information attained through the first two steps of the church planting process, looks at additional factors or resources available for church planting, and produces a picture of which areas appear most likely to benefit from the allocation of resources.

A multitude of factors need to be considered for a cost and benefit analysis to be effective. Examples of factors to consider

when planting a new congregation include local laws regarding religious assembly, the status of religious freedom, visa issues if the congregation is in a different nation from where the mission is headquartered, the presence of isolated members and investigators, the size of the potentially reached population, the availability of LDS materials in local languages, literacy rates, distance from mission headquarters and the nearest functioning congregation, living conditions, the religious, cultural, and ethnic composition of the population, and what mission resources are available. If desired, these data can be quantified to provide a more objective overview of suitable locations to focus mission resources and to facilitate prioritization. Rating each individual factor on a five-point Likert Scale and assigning numerical values to each point (-2 = strong disagree, -1 = disagree, 0 = neither agree or disagree, 1 = agree, 2 = strongly agree) and summing these to produce a composite score can assist in prioritizing locations for church planting.

The number of locations considered for church planting in a region can become unmanageable for a cost and benefit analysis if certain parameters are not applied to exclude less favorable or impractical candidates. Measures of exclusion may include population size, distance to the nearest operating LDS congregation, and laws banning proselytism and the assembly of nontraditional Christian denominations. Determining the bounds for when a location's population size becomes too small or its distance from an operating congregation too far or close can vary significantly with the size and prominence of the LDS Church in surrounding areas, past observed trends within the Church and in other Christian groups regarding receptivity, the accessibility and cost of transportation, and the availability of resources and administrative support. For example, if conducting a cost and benefit analysis to Orissa State in India, only cities with at least 100,000 inhabitants (50,000 inhabitants if several practicing members are present) should be considered as there are no LDS congregations in Orissa State, approximately a dozen cities with over 100,000 inhabitants, and prospective transportation issues to access smaller cities from outside the state that may lead logistical challenges.

4. Focus resources on highest priority locations

Allocating resources to different target locations for church planting can encompass a wide variety of methods ranging from occasional mission leaders visits which aim to distribute literature, raise public awareness of the Church, and find interested individuals to church leaders holding firesides and preparing for full-time missionaries to be assigned. Church leaders performing their first visits to target locations which were ascertained by a cost and benefit analysis must gather additional information on these locations when visiting, such as the quality and availability of transportation, housing if full-time missionaries may be assigned, and rented spaces suitable for holding church services. This information is then assimilated with information gained from learning the background of the location and performing a cost and benefit analysis to create a church planting plan tailored to the perceived opportunities, challenges, and prospects for growth in that location.

One of the greatest challenges for church planting is for church leaders to acquire a sufficient amount of available mission resources to invest in opening another location to missionary work. Mission leaders in some areas of the world in the past have reported that they have been unable to open additional locations to missionary activity due to an insufficient number of missionaries to staff operating congregations. Examples of additional mission resources include translations and availability of church literature and mission funds. Unfortunately few mission and area leaders have taken efforts to utilize more abundant and less expensive resources available for outreach in locations which do not appear the most favorable for church planting. Assigning a full-time missionary companionship, a senior missionary couple, or local church leaders to regularly visit unreached cities in their jurisdiction and distribute church literature and contact information for church representatives can improve the prospects for considering additional locations for church planting. Utilizing radio, television, and news media in unreached locations provides a means of reaching a large audience and if properly implemented by providing contact information and the location and times for firesides, cottage meetings, and other church services.

5. Hold regular cottage meetings

A cottage meeting is a small, informal gathering often occurring in a member's home, outdoors, or in a rented space where a basic lesson topic is presented and participants can ask questions and be committed to follow certain gospel principles. In essence, a cottage meeting is similar to a missionary lesson except more individuals are often present and the atmosphere is less formal. Holding regular cottage meetings is a significant step towards establishing a permanent presence in a given location as it demonstrates commitment by LDS leaders to invest resources and time into establishing the Church. Holding cottage meetings on a predictable time table such as every Monday evening often improves attendance and awareness since interested locals know when meetings are scheduled in sufficient time to plan to attend. Cottage meetings provide an excellent means of identifying the resources present in a location, such as isolated, practicing members with leadership experience. Faithfully attending individuals who develop a testimony of the Church can be prepared and mentored at cottage meetings for future church leadership callings once a group is established.

6. Establish a group with a basic worship program

The establishment of a group generally depends on approval from mission or stake leaders and in some situations depends on approval from area leaders. Groups can operate under a branch, ward, area, or an administrative branch, such as a mission branch, an area branch, or a district branch. Groups can be organized if there is at least a few Latter-day Saints and if at least one member holds a priesthood office. Locations which have a priesthood holder who has some experience in leadership and administration can be called as a group leader. Where there is no available local member to provide leadership, a full-time missionary companionship can be assigned and a missionary can serve temporarily as the group leader while they find, teach, baptize, and train potential local members who can fill this calling. When no local member and no full-time missionaries are

present, a member from another nearby city can serve as a group leader. Assigning a family or member to relocate to a city to provide leadership for a group to operate does not appear to have occurred at the request of mission or area leadership but deserves serious consideration to help expand outreach and foster self sufficiency.

A group with a basic worship program generally consists of just a sacrament meeting or a sacrament meeting and Sunday School. Additional programs and auxiliary organizations are added as the number of investigators who faithfully attend church are baptized, retained, and accept church callings. Seminary and institute may also be introduced following the organization of a group.

7. Baptize investigators who regularly attend church services and meet baptismal standards

Once a group is officially organized, prepared investigators begin to be baptized shortly thereafter as there is a system in place to provide ecclesiastical support and fellowship. Generally nonmembers with active family members in the Church are among the first to be baptized as they have often received teaching and mentoring over a period of several months or years but were unable to be baptized because there was no church unit operating near their community. Long-term interested and committed investigators are also among the first convert baptisms as they have demonstrated consistent desire and devotion to the Church. Ideally the number of investigators baptized increases over time as church attendance increases through finding and teaching efforts and investigators develop habitual church attendance and sustained commitment to follow church teachings.

8. Assign new converts to callings and train local leadership

Delegating church callings to new converts represents the gradually turnover of responsibilities from full-time missionaries or a couple local leaders to the general church membership in the area. Overtime the calling of group leader may transition from a full-time missionary to a local priesthood holder, especially when preparing for a branch to be organized. Regional and mission leadership regularly visit groups to provide leadership training and to reassess local needs and receptivity.

9. Organize a branch

Organizing a branch from a group generally occurs when local members reach a minimally self-sufficient point in leadership and administration that does not require the support from full-time missionaries or outsourced local leadership to function. The standard for branches to be organized has increased in most areas of the world over the past decade in order to prevent the closure of weak units and reduce dependency on mission leadership for unit administrative functions. Today newly-created branches usually have a fully-staffed branch presidency as well as local members holding most other local leadership callings in the congregation such as branch mission leaders, the Relief Society and Elder's Quorum presidencies, and auxiliaries for youth and children. Newly organized branches in what were once unreached cities by the LDS Church often continue to have greater needs than other more established branches as they tend to have few members, inexperienced local leadership, and comprise primarily of recent converts. Establishing a branch by following the previous eight steps of church planting is a major milestone that indicates local leadership resources and member activity have reached the point to where they can become self-sustaining in holding church services on their own and begin directing some efforts to expanding outreach in their own geographic parameters.

10. Repeat steps one through nine for locations within jurisdiction of branch

The purpose of a church planting paradigm is to perpetuate growth and outreach expansion, not to redistribute a limited number of mission resources to additional locations once the objective of organization a branch is achieved. By preparing new congregations to review and implement the ten-step approach to church planting, mission outreach continues to expand, additional mission resources are developed, and self sufficiency and resilience are preserved.

The application of the ten steps to church planting must be adapted to local circumstances in order to be effective yet must retain the methodology of each of these steps. For instances, it may be more effective to hold multiple cottage meetings within the same city if receptivity or travel distances and costs warrants it rather than hold a single cottage meeting in aspiration of organizing a single group. Oftentimes mission leaders who have applied some of the church planting principles previously outlined choose to open multiple groups in a single city rather than organize a single branch. While the approaches may differ within each of the ten steps, the progression of learning the background of an area to allocating mission resources and to fostering self-sufficiency in leadership, finding, and activity are universal and requisite for successful, long-term perpetuation of the church planting process within a congregation's geographical domain.

Member-Initiated Church Planting

Based on the structure and organization of the LDS Church, church planting efforts need to follow the line of authority and order of administration regarding organizing church units and the stewardship of missionary activity. Members must stay within their roles in church planting initiatives to avoid deviance from church doctrines and to maintain order and organization. Failure to follow the line of authority can result in distortion of church doctrines and possible disciplinary action for individuals disobeying protocol if these actions are not corrected.

The primary means that general members influence church planting approaches is providing support and encouragement for isolated members to live church teachings and share their beliefs with those around them through member-missionary activity. Isolated members can help find fellow isolated members in locations they live and report these findings to stake, mission, or area leaders. The greatest method that isolated members can influence stake, mission, and area presidency decisions regarding church planting in their communities is by creating a greater need in their communities for outreach to occur by finding investigators, increasing the number of individuals requesting a church presence, and remaining faithful to church teachings.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the application of church planting approaches previously outlined. The absence of LDS-language materials in local languages prevents effective outreach in many locations. Local or national laws forbid nontraditional Christian proselytism and assembly in some locations. The static number of full-time LDS missionaries worldwide has precipitated into ongoing difficulties distributing additional mission resources to unreached locations as outreach has heavily relied on full-time missionaries in the past and current LDS missionary manpower often struggles to meet the needs of operating congregations at present. The "centers of strength" approach to LDS outreach expansion adopted for nearly the past two decades in most areas of the world has often restricted outreach efforts to just a handful of the most populous cities in many nations and siphons international mission resources for relatively fruitless reactivation and less-active efforts. Past failures in church planting attempts have discouraged many leaders and members from attempting future church planting efforts.

Conclusion

Conditions for LDS outreach expansion appear excellent in many areas of the world but traditional reliance on full-time missionary manpower and a centers of strength paradigm for church growth prevents a greater realization of potential church planting opportunities. Following a more structured and purposeful methodology of church planting by local, mission, and area leaders may reverse the sluggish expansion of the LDS Church into unreached locations as local members become more self-sufficient and generate resources to permit greater expansion of outreach in their regions and nations. The calling of LDS families by mission and area priesthood leaders to relocate to unreached cities and coordinate with church leaders in establishing a congregation and outreach center deserves serious consideration to help propel the Church into unreached locations while conditions are still favorable for outreach. The urgency of expanding LDS outreach into unreached locations and the performance of these efforts in wisdom and order are frequently iterated in scriptural and general LDS leadership mandates to take the gospel to the entire world.