

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section III. Chapter 29: Church Planting

The Divine Mandate

Christ commanded his disciples: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Christ expressed the urgency of giving everyone an opportunity to hear the gospel and noted that even with good planning, hard work, fervent prayer, and our best efforts that we will ultimately fall short of the gospel mandate of reaching everyone. Christ taught: "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come" (Matthew 10:23). The need to enter new areas of opportunity promptly is linked to the need to leave stagnant, unreceptive areas to free up manpower and resources, because "the harvest is truly great, but the laborers are few" (Luke 10:2). In modern revelation, the Lord commanded: "Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes" (Isaiah 54:2, 3 Nephi 22:2). He further declared: "Go ye forth unto the land of Zion, that the borders of my people may be enlarged, and that her stakes may be strengthened, and that Zion may go forth unto the regions round about" (D&C 133:9). President Spencer W. Kimball taught that we must prepare to "open the doors of every nation as fast as it is ready" and to reach every creature with the gospel trump.[312] The limiting factors in establishing the Church must be the receptivity of local people and the opportunity to preach to them, not our lack of preparation or effort. New converts must be gathered into congregations to ensure that they are not lost (Alma 26:5).

The divine mandate for reaching everyone with the gospel message and gathering converts into congregations can be accomplished in two ways, and both are necessary. One is gathering the "pure in heart" out from small towns and villages to central locations with itinerant proselytizing, as was done by Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, Dan Jones, and other early LDS missionaries. The second method is to create accessible local congregations.

Church Planting Accelerates Membership Growth

Church planting refers to the process of strategically organizing congregations in new areas to make the Church accessible to as many people as possible. Saturation church planting involves planting as many congregations as the receptivity of local people will support. Church planting is a key element of successful church growth strategies. Dr. C. Peter Wagner stated:

New churches grow better than old churches. Built into new churches is a potential for growth that older churches no longer have. This does not mean that older churches cannot grow. They often do. Nor does it mean that all new churches grow. Frequently they do not. But across the board, growth is more likely with less effort in newer churches. Phil Jones, a researcher for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, reported: "If baptism rates per 100 members are used as a measure of efficiency for a church, then young churches are more efficient than old churches. The older a church gets, the less efficient it is in baptizing new converts." The late Keith Lusk did a similar study of churches of all denominations in the Santa Clarita Valley of California and found that in 1986 older churches were baptizing at the rate of four baptisms per 100 members per year, while newer churches were baptizing at the rate of 16 baptisms per 100 members. It is not surprising, then, that overall growth increases as new churches are started ... I am one of the strongest supporters of church renewal, and I believe that if renewal comes to our existing churches, much subsequent evangelism will be done. But good as this is, it is not enough. Old wineskins need to be patched, but new wineskins are even more desperately needed. Remember this simple fact: It's easier to have babies than to raise the dead! Not that all existing churches are dead, or even that most of them are. Most can and should be brought to life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Still the most exciting part of the hospital is the maternity ward.[313] //

Young LDS wards and branches generally have much higher convert baptism rates per capita than older wards and branches. Careful case studies of LDS missions in many countries demonstrate with few exceptions a strong trend for a disproportionately large amount of convert growth occurs in relatively newly opened wards and branches. The more rapid growth rate of small, new congregations has been repeatedly validated across many denominations. Seventh-Day Adventist Euro-Asia field secretary Jeff Scoggins reported that "the building of smaller congregations results in the same net number of baptisms that larger congregations gained in a given year."[314] This results in much higher growth rates per member in small, newly organized units than in large, long-established ones. Scoggins also noted that establishing small churches "doesn't concentrate members in one spot," facilitating outreach across broader areas. In an era when the LDS Church is growing at less than 3 percent per year in spite of the opening of many new nations to LDS missionaries, Southern Baptists have achieved annual growth rates of 100 percent in many areas of the developing world by applying principles of church planting. An excellent and freely available

manual entitled Church Planting Movements by David Garrison of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention concisely captures the vital principles of years of field church planting research collected from the most rapidly growing areas.[315] While not everything in this booklet is applicable to Latter-day Saints, it articulates principles of rapid yet sustainable growth that corroborate many of my observations in the LDS mission field. Church planting approaches can help us to go through open doors instead of banging our heads against closed ones.

Church Planting Is Time-Sensitive

The book of Acts records: "A vision appeared to Paul in the night; there stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them' (Acts 16:9-10). Many miraculous conversions occurred in Macedonia as a result of Paul heeding the Spirit's call and traveling to Macedonia to preach the gospel without delay.

Dan Jones, a successful LDS missionary to Wales in the early days of the Church, would telegraph ahead to cities and villages, informing the mayor that he was coming to "convert the whole town." He used newspaper articles to inform people of upcoming church meetings in their area. Prospective converts heard the message and self-selected themselves based on interest and desire. Dan Jones made the gospel message as widely available as possible within a short period and contacted hundreds of thousands of people by various means. When receptivity waned in one area, he moved on. He obeyed the Lord's word: "If they receive not your testimony in one area, flee to another." He taught with a sense of urgency. Dan Jones did not go back to visit repeatedly investigators who were not keeping commitments. He relied on the Spirit to convert, rather than attempting to win noncommittal souls through prolonged socialization. In contrast, many missionaries today have a difficult time understanding when it is time to move on until being asked not to come back by people they teach. As a result of these practices, over 6,000 people came into the Church during Dan Jones' two missions to the British Isles.

Many studies document that receptivity is time-sensitive and often declines over time, especially when many competing religious groups are present.[316] The best period for missionary work is the period of spontaneous religious interest, when large groups of individuals will turn out to investigate denominations, often with nothing more than a simple invitation. However, there is often a period -- sometimes brief, and sometimes lasting decades -- between the establishment of basic religious freedom and unrestricted opportunities for foreign missionaries in a nation. A high dependence on intensive efforts of full-time foreign missionaries therefore results in a loss of some of the best opportunities. Even in areas where full-time missionaries are permitted, successful establishment of self-sufficient and self-perpetuating branches leads to vastly improved growth.

Accelerated Baptism Programs Cripple Congregational Growth

Some claim that the collapse of hundreds of LDS wards and branches in Latin America from 2000 to 2004 demonstrates that church planting does not work. The failure of many new units has led to a retreat from congregational expansion into new areas. Church planting has largely been discounted in the LDS mission community because of the belief that the problems of struggling small units arise primarily from deficiencies of size or socialization.

In fact, the lack of durability of many new LDS congregations is most frequently caused by accelerated baptism practices that generate large numbers of poorly committed members who are lost to inactivity soon after baptism, dissipating the time and enthusiasm of active members with fruitless reactivation tasks. I have traced the collapse of many new congregations to patterns of indiscriminate and rushed baptism of individuals poorly prepared to sustain their own spiritual needs, let alone serve in the Church.

Accelerated baptism programs have survived in North America for many years, since congregations with a strong base of lifelong members are able to retain function and achieve some growth through births, even if convert retention is poor. However, such programs are particularly devastating in international areas, where congregations depend upon the participation of new converts for both maintenance and growth. Accelerated baptism programs lead to a proliferation of inactives and actives with serious problems that the few committed, active members are often unable to absorb. Under such circumstances, vast numbers of nominal members are necessary to achieve the modest core of actives needed to sustain congregational functions.

In spite of relatively few new cities being opened for missionary work in recent years, the newly opened smaller cities continue to account for a disproportionately large segment of convert growth. Adequate prebaptismal teaching and preparation is the most significant missing ingredient preventing Latter-day Saint church planting approaches from reaching their potential. For church planting to be successful, deliberate and methodical steps must be taken starting in the planning phase even before the congregation is established to minimize the loss of future converts to inactivity. All missionaries must be dedicated to the careful teaching, thorough preparation, and rigorous prebaptismal qualification of potential converts, since even short periods of unprincipled quick-baptize programs can cause irreparable damage to nascent congregations. These principles are prerequisites to the success of church planting efforts and to the ultimate health of every congregation, since inactivity saps the resources and vitality of any congregation and hampers community outreach.

Church Planting versus Unit Splitting

The dynamics of unit splitting are less favorable than those obtained by the fresh planting of new churches, especially in areas

where member activity rates are low. Split units are not truly church plants but inherit many of the problems of the parent unit. Existing members bring established personalities, attitudes, and behaviors that are not always conducive to growth. Split units typically face preexisting activity problems from their inception, so that large amounts of missionary and member time are already diverted from community outreach to ongoing attempts to home teach and reactivate lost members. Nonetheless, even split units often achieve higher growth rates than their parent units, as long as the units retain an adequate core of active members to fulfill essential tasks.

Congregational Size, Fellowshipping, and Growth

Many assume that the better staffing of peripheral programs in larger units results in better fellowshipping of newcomers than in smaller units. However, it is likely that the reverse may be true. C. Peter Wagner cited research that forty active adult members is the ideal size for members of a congregation to maintain personal relationships with everyone else.[317] He noted that this can expand to as many as eighty while still retaining most interpersonal and fellowshipping qualities. He continued: "When it goes past 80 toward 200 the relationships are increasingly strained. By the time it gets to 150 most groups are so stressed out that they can no longer handle the thought of strangers entering the group and thereby increasing the stress. Without knowing they are doing it or without even wanting to, they relate to strangers like two identical poles of magnets." Although unit size is only one of many factors influencing fellowshipping, many visitors have anecdotally reported being warmly welcomed by members in mission branches and small wards while being virtually ignored in some large wards.

"Building from Centers of Strength"

Since approximately 1993, the "building from centers of strength" policy has governed international LDS expansion. This policy focuses on building congregations in selected "centers of strength" and often directs missionaries to spend large amounts of time working with members and attempting to reclaim inactives. It relies on the assumptions that "critical mass" of members is necessary for church growth and that congregations become more effective and mature over time. The "centers of strength" program demonstrates awareness that prior methods of expansion often failed to build healthy and sustainable congregations and represents a response to very real concerns about poor convert retention and inadequate unit strength.

While its intentions are noble, the way in which the "centers of strength" policy has often been implemented has created new difficulties. The diversion of vast amounts of missionary time away from finding and teaching receptive people to less productive reactivation efforts has contributed to the sharp decline in LDS growth rates from 5 percent annually in the late 1980s to less than 3 percent at present. Directives to "strengthen members" and to "spend more time with less-actives" are often presented as nebulous vagaries that offer little practical insight, and reactivation successes have been meager. The "centers of strength" policy has drastically reduced the rate at which new, faster-growing congregations are organized in receptive areas. Expansion into new areas is based primarily on logistical and administrative considerations, while making little allowance for local conditions, needs, and opportunities. It is common for congregations to be established in several small cities surrounding a mission headquarters, while much larger cities in the mission area remain without any gospel witness for years or decades.

From both scriptural and practical standpoints, the "centers of strength" policy faces substantial difficulties. Neither Paul's missionary journeys nor Dan Jones' methods would be permissible under the modern "building from centers of strength" policy. Unique modern opportunities like that presented by the man from Macedonia in Paul's vision have been routinely declined. In Mongolia, the request of a local group with over one hundred families, who expressed a desire to join the LDS church, to send missionaries to their city located midway between two cities with existing congregations was declined without further investigation. One Latter-day Saint who traveled to Kenya noted: "I was told that even if a whole village was ready to be baptized, they could and would not oblige them. They were to stay in the large cities or areas where they already had large populations of Church members and build up a 'Center of Strength.'" The number of Protestants in Kyrgyzstan has grown from virtually zero to over 60,000 since 1993,[318] although no LDS missionaries had been assigned to the country through 2005. The Kostroma region has been a rare island of exceptional religious freedom in Russia since 1989 and is located in close proximity to the two Moscow missions, yet there have been no LDS efforts to proselyte anywhere in the entire region. Hundreds of other examples could be cited of remarkable opportunities that have been passed up while vast numbers of missionaries assigned to less productive areas experience little success.

It is difficult to see how policies that drastically restrict outreach can be construed to be consistent with repeated scriptural mandates to spread the gospel tent over the whole earth and "spare not." While the need for the Church to be established "in wisdom and in order" is undeniable, one wonders if there is wisdom in unresponsiveness and inflexibility that do not allow the utilization of even the most remarkable opportunities. The "centers of strength" paradigm lacks the vision of sounding the gospel in every ear embodied in saturation church planting approaches, which maintain that local congregations should be available to all people based on their receptivity and that outreach to new areas should not be held hostage to the problems of stagnant existing units and carnal members in other areas. LDS missionaries belatedly arriving in new areas often find that many of the seekers of earlier years have already been disciplined into other churches, making outreach more difficult. The limiting factor in church growth should be the receptivity and willingness of local people to accept the gospel message, not our failure to provide them any opportunities.

If the concept of an obligatory "critical mass" of members represented the key to building successful congregations and if maturity were an inevitable result of time or of missionary visit quotas, we would expect to see great strength in nations where the Church has been established for many years. Such areas -- Japan, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and so forth -- should represent model successes for the Church in new areas. Yet in these nations, we find crises of rampant inactivity, low home teaching, and

declining growth rates far more frequently than we find positive examples. If we are to believe that the "centers of strength" in nations where the Church has long been established represent successful worked models, then the future of "Mormonism" looks bleak indeed. Fortunately, saturation church planting offers more productive and exciting possibilities.

The real difficulties of the "building from centers of strength" policy arise from misidentification of the root causes of congregational instability, slow growth, and low convert retention. Small international congregations are not unstable because they lack a "critical mass" of members, but because continued quick-baptism tactics generate vast numbers of inactives while producing few committed converts who join the Church prepared to serve. Low retention is not primarily a problem of socialization that is solved by conglomerating larger and larger congregations but is improved by rigorous prebaptismal preparation of prospective converts to ensure lasting commitment. Members gain strength not by quotas of missionary social visits but by a consistent focus on daily scripture reading, personal prayer, tithing, church attendance, and adherence to other gospel laws. Properly organized new congregations can more quickly and consistently achieve rapid growth and spiritual self-sufficiency than older and larger ones with less flexible members and entrenched problems. When the true pathologies are understood, they can be remedied in more effective and scriptural ways that do not compromise our core mission to make the gospel message available to all people.

The Needs-Resource Allocation Mismatch

The average LDS missionary in North America spends only nine hours each week teaching investigators.[319] Having "no one to teach" or only a few investigators who are not progressing are the greatest frustrations of most LDS missionaries today. In contrast, teaching opportunities far exceed the ability of the small missionary contingent to meet with all receptive listeners in many developing nations. Interested prospective converts in areas of the world where proselyting is legal but where church units do not exist are told that they cannot be taught and that perhaps, if they are fortunate, some representatives may be assigned to their area years or decades from now. The needs-resource allocation mismatch is that the large majority of world missionary resources are directed toward a small fragment of the world's population. Nearly two-thirds of LDS missions serve the 12 percent of the world's population that lives in North and South America, and less than one-sixth of the missionary force serves the least reached 80 percent of the world. Even in areas of the eastern hemisphere where LDS missionaries serve, outreach tends to be heavily skewed toward large urban centers and a few smaller satellite towns. "Centers of strength" perpetuates and exacerbates this needs-resource allocation mismatch by focusing a disproportionate amount of resources to established areas, while devoting little or no resources to larger areas with no gospel witness. If there is not time to "go over all Israel" and reach everyone in the world once, how can there be time to give a few fortunate peoples dozens or hundreds of opportunities at the neglect of others?

Building Self-Sufficient and Self-Perpetuating Branches

Every missionary and mission leader should understand how new congregations can become self-sufficient and self-perpetuating from their inception, because local self-sufficiency leads to substantial increases in both long-term growth and retention. The volatile political situation in many nations permits local missionaries while limiting foreign ones, so the prompt and successful training of local members and missionaries is vital to reaching growth potential. Denominations that are able to rapidly and reliably organize many vibrant, growing, self-sufficient congregations with only a few full-time missionaries or expatriate member-missionaries have a tremendous advantage over faiths that require vast amounts of time and missionary manpower to organize a few struggling units.

The initial phase of laying the foundation of new congregations is often the most critical. The Apostle Paul wrote: "According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it" (1 Corinthians 3:10). Some new branches quickly become self-sustaining and self-perpetuating, while others grow stagnant in spite of the continued inflow of foreign missionary manpower and resources. Some converts join the Church better converted and more dedicated to service than many longtime members who lack essential gospel habits. What makes the difference? By consistently ensuring the presence of growth-generating gospel habits in new converts before baptism, effective missionaries can reproducibly and relatively rapidly establish branches of members who are spiritually self-sufficient. When the principles of proper teaching and preparation are not followed, newly created branches inevitably face rampant inactivity and serious member problems that no amount of time or "critical mass" of members is able to reverse fully.

Unless the active members are fully living the gospel and are avid fellowshippers, an existing member base is not necessarily an asset to church growth. Alma describes a situation where "the wickedness of the church was a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church, and thus the church began to fail in its progress" (Alma 4:10). In contrast, Ammon and his brethren organized anew vibrant congregations consisting of the entire population of several cities. These units were created in areas without existing members who could provide mentorship and fellowshipping. Yet full retention was achieved "as many as were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away" (Alma 23:6). In the context of a weaker Nephite church plagued by frequent apostasy, exposure of the Anti-Nephi-Lehite investigators to Nephite congregations would not have been a positive event. The paradigm of the Anti-Nephi-Lehites, whose righteousness exceeded that of the Nephites, may provide a more suitable model for the Church in new areas than the centers of strength "Church of Zarahemla" or "Church in Utah" model. Church units do not have to be stagnant to be solid.

The Church can often be built up for real and sustained growth more successfully in new areas, where prospective members can be taught correctly from the beginning, than in established areas, where many existing members hindered missionary

efforts through inconsistent examples, casual attitudes toward gospel laws, and cliquish behavior. By 1993, one of the first two branches formed in my mission city had been split into five branches, while the other branch had barely grown at all and could not be divided. In part, this was due to the disruptive behavior of a few active members in the second branch who managed to offend or embarrass most investigators. I spent the first seven months of my mission in another branch which was experiencing similar problems. While we experienced some success finding through our own efforts, a copy of the Book of Mormon was returned to me on several occasions by investigators who stated that they liked its message and enjoyed our discussions but did not want to return to the local congregation since they did not feel any spirituality or friendship from the members. It was often impossible to inspire such investigators to join the Church when member conduct was visibly inconsistent with gospel principles. In contrast, I later had the opportunity to serve in one exceptionally well-functioning branch, where similar missionary efforts produced tremendous results, because investigators were positively impressed not only by the Book of Mormon and the missionary discussions, but also by the quality of church services and the examples of church members. Vibrant, missionary-oriented congregations can be a great asset to missionary work, but relatively few LDS congregations fit this description.

At the time a companion and I opened a city in Russia for missionary work, there were three part-active members in the city who had previously been baptized elsewhere and a larger number of inactives. The core of our active membership came almost exclusively from investigators whom we taught and baptized. Instead of serving as a core for the "center of strength," the old semiactive members were inconsistent in attendance and in the fulfillment of other church responsibilities. The newly baptized members who were taught with more rigorous standards and better preparation than the older members achieved greater consistency in the fulfillment of daily scripture reading, weekly church attendance, and other basic gospel habits than some individuals who had been members for several years. Later, another companion and I worked to revitalize a group in a major city with approximately thirty nominal members of whom approximately five were active or part-active. Missionary work in the area had been very slow previously, and missionaries had struggled to build a functioning congregation. Although we worked intensively with existing members, by the time we left three months later, seven of the ten who attended weekly were individuals whom we had taught and baptized. Once again, we found that new converts who were properly taught were better able to live up to basic gospel standards and strengthen the Church than longtime members who had been taught and baptized by missionaries employing accelerated baptism approaches.

Subsidization and Dependency

LDS leaders have long cited the need for local missions to become self-sufficient, both for manpower and for funds. Most international LDS missions are still heavily reliant on both U.S. missionaries and U.S. funds for the work of the Church. In many cases, it is difficult to determine how years of missionary effort have built genuine "centers of strength." In Germany, LDS membership actually declined between 1996 and 2004 in spite of the efforts of four to six full-time missions. The greatest church growth experienced in Germany within the past fifty years was in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when local member-missionaries successfully found, taught, and baptized new members without the help of North American elders and sisters. When North American missionaries were introduced, growth and retention rates declined sharply. Prolonged subsidization of stagnant areas with North American missionaries may foster complacency, reduce member participation, and take the feeling of ownership and responsibility for local growth away from native members. Even in areas where relatively greater church growth is occurring (although with fractional retention), such as Latin America and the Philippines, U.S. missionaries and U.S. money continue to serve as the major drivers of both expansion and maintenance efforts. Longtime wards and stakes in these areas have not achieved sufficient health or vitality to provide for their own needs, let alone those of their communities.

When a new congregation is organized, it is generally expected that missionaries will be permanently assigned with no exit strategy. In the early Church, itinerant missionaries built up healthy congregations and then left, with leaders visiting from time to time to provide supervision. Rapidly growing denominations today send full-time missionaries to get new units standing on their own feet as quickly as possible before moving on to new areas. The goal of self-sufficiency must be established from the outset. The best time to set the church in order is at the beginning.

Outreach: Community or Core-Based?

Effective missionary approaches all make the gospel message widely available while allowing investigators to select themselves out based on their level of interest and commitment. As a result of focusing on core-based approaches and neglecting community approaches, the Church experienced slow growth in Eastern Europe, falling far short of expectations at times when other faiths were experiencing unprecedented growth. By the time a solid core of LDS members had been trained and the missions were ready to contemplate earnest member-missionary outreach, the prior high level of spontaneous religious interest in the community was gone. The seekers of prior years had either been absorbed into other denominations, or they had succumbed to growing materialism. Getting even trained core members to reach out and share the gospel became a continuing struggle.

Rick Warren wrote:

I suggest you grow the church from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. Start with your community, not your core! This is opposite the advice given by most books on church planting. The traditional approach to beginning a new church is to build a committed core of mature believers first, and then start reaching out to the community. The problem I have found with an 'inside-out' approach is that by the time the church planter has 'disciplined' his core, they have often lost contact with the community and are actually afraid of interacting with the unchurched. It's easy to ... [develop] such a close-knit fellowship that

newcomers are afraid or unable to break into it. Too often, a core group planning a new church spends so long in the small group stage that they become comfortable with it and lose their sense of mission. The fire of evangelism dies out. The problem with most small churches is that they are all core and nothing else. The same fifty people come to everything the church does. They've all been Christians for so long they have few ... unbelieving friends to witness to.[320]

The best time to firmly establish member habits of daily scripture reading, Sabbath Day observance, and consistently sharing the gospel with nonmembers is before baptism, not at some future date when members have reached an arbitrarily defined state of maturity. Attempts to instill such basic gospel habits in "mature" members who have reached a comfort zone and began to stagnate are far less successful than efforts starting well before baptism to ensure that prospective members are consistently implementing core gospel laws from the beginning.

LDS Member-Missionary Church Planters

Church planters are typically full-time missionaries, although LDS expatriate members serving as church planters without official assignment in the Russian Far East, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and other areas have been some of the most fruitful member-missionaries of the modern age. Even today, many of the active LDS members in Magadan, Vladivostok, and Yerevan are acquaintances of the early member-missionary church planters. Similarly, senior couple missionaries with little grasp of the local language and limited work schedules achieved an initial degree of success in Mongolia that has rarely been approached by larger numbers of linguistically proficient young missionaries. The increased strength of units started in this way relates to the greater strength of investigators and members who are not subsidized during the teaching process or after baptism, helping them to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency from the outset. The lack of pressure on investigators for rapid baptism from member-missionary church planters with professional and family responsibilities is also helpful in attracting a higher quality of converts than is achieved by full-time missionaries who employ accelerated baptism tactics.

While LDS member-missionary church planters have achieved significant success working in isolation, better training, coordination, and strategic planning could expand the benefits of member-missionary church planting to many other areas. The Seventh-Day Adventists have institutionalized the organization and coordination of member-missionary tentmaker programs in the Global Mission Pioneer program, contributing to rapid, consistent, and widespread growth in receptive areas.

The Economics of Church Planting

Church planter C. Peter Wagner wrote:

A pragmatic objection you will hear is that we can't plant new churches because the start-up cost is too high. The truth of the matter is that in terms of dollars spent by the sponsoring church or agency, new church planting can be the most cost-effective method of evangelization. I like Lyle Schaller's reply to some Methodist leaders who told him that if they started 500 new churches they would need $100 million, and that there was no way they could find the money. Schaller says, "That is the wrong question based on questionable assumptions ... A better beginning point is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). "… Back in 1980 I was invited to do a pastors' seminar for a presbytery in Texas. They were rather pleased to tell me that they had started two new churches in the past decade and that they were planning another for the 1980s. I asked them why only one. "That's all we can afford right now," they replied. On impulse I asked them how much each one cost and they told me it was $500,000 per church. I made a mental note. One month later I did a similar seminar for the pastors of an Assemblies of God district in North Carolina ... As I was having lunch with the district superintendent, Charles Cookman, I asked him how many new churches they had started in the 1970s. "Oh," he said, "I'm glad you asked. We set a goal of 70 new churches for the seventies, but we actually planted 85." Again on impulse I asked him how much they cost. He did some calculations on his paper place mat and said, "Each one cost about $2,500." No wonder the growth rate of the Assemblies of God is several times that of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It costs Presbyterians 200 times as much to start a new church! Of course, the Presbyterians operate on a set of assumptions that the Assemblies of God do not. They assume that the founding pastor needs a college and seminary education … and that land and a building are necessary up front. Those assumptions require a substantial budget. In the long run the Assemblies of God church is also worth $500,000, but their assumption is that the money to pay for staff, land, and buildings should come from the people subsequently won into the new church rather than up front.[321]

By focusing on church planting and minimizing assumptions of what is needed to start a new congregation, the Assemblies of God have achieved high growth rates even in areas that have traditionally been considered recalcitrant to evangelism. At present, 10,000 people per day are joining the Assemblies of God, while Methodists are actually losing ground. Dr. Wagner further noted: "My friend, Carl F. George … was called in for consultation with the leaders of a regional body of one of the mainline denominations. They wanted him to identify barriers to growth. He discovered a budget item of $250,000 per year for the support of a number of 'missions' that in 30 years had not been able to become viable enough to support themselves. He also discovered that they said they couldn't afford to plant new churches. George wisely persuaded them to close the missions and divert the $250,000 per year into new church development. It made all the difference in the world."[322]

Even without a paid clergy, Latter-day Saint church planting operates under assumptions that more rapidly growing faiths do not. Contemporary LDS mission paradigms insist that every newly opened city or congregation requires the permanent assignment of at least one full-time missionary companionship and a freestanding Western-style meetinghouse to be built within a few years, almost always with funds from the U.S. church. While the intention of such policies is to ensure that new converts are well-cared for, such practices are more restricting than empowering. They ultimately hamper growth by making outreach in new areas prohibitively expensive, while stifling local self-sufficiency and condemning nascent congregations to patterns of dependency from their inception. Under such paradigms, opening new cities for missionary work is a losing proposition: members are viewed as resource-consuming liabilities rather than as productive assets. This is not because church planting is

ineffective but because of nonscriptural assumptions that make the cost of expansion into new areas prohibitive. The greatest asset of the Church is not its fixed real estate, but the testimony and conviction of its members.

The cost of a single LDS chapel in Ufa, Russia, is estimated at $2.5 million by one media source.[323] Other LDS meetinghouses in Eastern Europe have cost several hundred thousand dollars each -- many times that which local tithes can ever be reasonably expected to collect. Faster-growing denominations have found inexpensive but reliable ways to provide international church facilities. Some faiths build churches from appropriate materials that are available locally, whether wood or bricks, bamboo in Southeast Asia, or even mud and straw in Sub-Saharan Africa. Others meet in members' homes. Still others purchase and remodel apartments as houses of worship. Meetinghouse policies help one to understand why the Seventh-Day Adventists start more new congregations in Russia, Ukraine, and many other areas of the world in a single year than Latter-day Saints are able to start in a decade. In Russia and Ukraine, the Seventh-Day Adventists purchased 291 church meeting places, including apartments, cottages, and other sites, for a total of $3.5 million.[324]

The Church and the Chapel

As a missionary in Russia in the early 1990s, I found that many members and missionaries spoke of anticipated chapels as a panacea to growth problems. Low growth and activity? Poor convert retention? Lack of respect in the community? A chapel would change everything, many claimed. In 2000, Dr. Thomas F. Rogers, my former second mission president, conducted a survey of seventeen current and prior mission presidents in the former Soviet Union to assess perceptions of the challenges of church growth. One of his most startling findings was that respondents cited the lack of permanent church buildings as one of the major causes of low convert retention and member activity rates. President Rogers rightly challenged this assumption, noting: "During my first mission in North Germany and Berlin ten years after World War II, we observed how at least five beautiful new chapels -- donated by a former president of our mission and millionaire -- were rarely half full, and the spirit in them correspondingly tepid, by contrast with the Begeisterung with which our East German members crowded into the dilapidated near ruins they had managed to rent near Berlin Alexanderplatz and elsewhere in the East Zone."[325]

Over the past decade, dozens of meetinghouses have been constructed or remodeled from existing structures throughout Eastern Europe, even in cities with relatively few active members -- Klaipeda, Vilnius, Engels, Solnichny, Sochi, Tallinn, Cherkassi, Ploesti, Ufa, Vyborg, Gorlovka, Donetsk, Debrecen, Gyor, Dunaujvaros, Szekesfehervar, three in Budapest, and many more. Now that an increasing number of chapels have been built in the Former Soviet Union, many are still underfilled and underutilized.

My research has found no evidence that the construction of chapels has had any measurable, independent, positive impact upon growth, convert retention, or member activity. In the most cases, the growth rate of local units actually slowed after chapels were built. As missionaries in St. Petersburg, my companions and I had ten or twenty investigators attending branches in rented schoolhouses or music halls on many Sundays. Members who have visited the chapels that have since been erected have commented both on the beautiful atmosphere and on the paucity of investigators. This slowing can often be attributed to other factors, but there are some instances where chapels have actually harmed local growth. Two branches in one city in Hungary were consolidated due to severe member contention over meetinghouse-related issues that resulted in mass inactivity. In many other cities, member activity and church growth have declined due to much longer travel distances to remote freestanding chapels than to prior, more central rental accommodations.

The fact that the absence of chapels was the most common "cause" of low retention cited by many mission presidents reveals little about church growth but provides a fascinating window into our own assumptions and difficulty in dissociating the blessings of "the Church" from fixed religious real estate. As President Rogers correctly noted in his insightful analysis, church growth does not depend on buildings. It depends on faith and the consistent application of scriptural outreach principles.

Churches without Walls

In contrast to widespread modern assumptions about the indispensability of freestanding chapels, both the scriptures and LDS history suggest that buildings are of little relevance to Church growth. The early Christian church was primarily a house church with few real estate holdings. Paul wrote: "Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house" (Colossians 4:15). When sent to Rome, Paul preached the gospel for two years from a hired house (Acts 28:30). Numerous other passages refer to apostles living and teaching in the houses of local members in their travels, allowing the gospel to be widely preached while minimizing expenses.

Christ taught that it is the gathering and not the building that gives life to our worship: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Paul noted: "Every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God" (Hebrews 3:4). Alma's efforts to dispel the notion that worship can occur only in designated meetinghouses is as relevant to modern mission planners as to the ancient Zoramites: "Behold thy brother hath said, What shall we do? For we are cast out of our synagogues, that we cannot worship our God. Behold I say unto you, do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only? And moreover, I would ask, do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week? I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom" (Alma 32:9-12).

The most spectacular LDS growth has historically occurred in areas without meetinghouses, and the same is true today. Many

years elapsed between the restoration of the Church in 1830 and the construction of the first LDS meetinghouse. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was initially a "house church" meeting in homes, stores, and even in the open air. Resources were directed to the printing of the Book of Mormon, missionary travel, and other projects far more important than the construction of meetinghouses. The most successful modern missionaries, including Dan Jones, Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and others, rarely had the benefit of an LDS chapel in which to preach. While buildings provide amenities, they do not build testimony. The lack of a freestanding meetinghouse cannot hinder growth, although the misplaced belief that buildings are essential can become an impediment.

The fastest growing churches worldwide are churches without meetinghouses. In recent years, cell churches or house churches -- organized religious groups meeting in the homes of members -- have achieved sustained, dramatic growth rates in many areas.[326] Such groups generally also experience warm fellowshipping and high retention. In China alone, conservative estimates suggest that the house church movement has attracted 30 to 40 million adherents. David Garrison and many other church planting experts have pointed out that chapels funded on foreign money can breed dependency and stunt growth.[327] Church planter C. Peter Wagner stated: "Mark Platt … says, 'There is great wisdom in delaying the purchase and development of property so that the new church can put its best efforts ministering to people.' I agree ... I do not think I am wrong in saying that the most common conscious decision that church planters have made through the years to lock their church under the 200 barrier is to buy and build too soon. I recommend that you postpone buying land, and especially building as long as you possibly can. In most cases when you first begin thinking, 'Maybe it's time to build now,' it's probably too soon. Postpone building at least until you are past the 200 barrier with 350 active adults, or better yet 500."[328] Rick Warren, pastor of the fastest-growing Baptist church in the history of the United States, wrote: "To accommodate our continuous growth we used seventy-nine different facilities in the first fifteen years of Saddleback's history ... I'm often asked, 'How big can a church grow without a building?' The answer is, 'I don't know!' Saddleback met for fifteen years and grew to 10,000 attenders without our own building, so I know it's possible to grow to at least 10,000! A building, or lack of a building, should never be allowed to become a barrier to a wave of growth. People are far more important than property."[329] My Protestant acquaintances who have served as successful church-planting pastors or missionaries consistently give one piece of counsel: "Don't construct a church building too early." The LDS policy of building meetinghouses in new areas based on raw membership alone without regard to member activity or tithing faithfulness was reversed only in 2001, leaving hundreds of expensive but underutilized church buildings throughout the world. The construction of a chapel can slow growth momentum. The church without walls is not a relic of the past but the wave of the future for exponential growth in frontier areas.

Location, Location, Location

Accessibility and visibility are the first and second most important factors, respectively, in selecting meeting place locations. While many denominations position their churches strategically on main roads to attract walk-in visitors, North American LDS meetinghouses are frequently tucked away deep in residential neighborhoods where few nonlocals are aware of their existence. Well-chosen locations offer many benefits. In Kyiv, Ukraine, the mission rented a central cultural palace on a main street as one of its meeting places. In Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia, a central, well-known historic children's theater was remodeled into a chapel. The prominent and centrally accessible locations contributed significantly to attracting more investigators without regard to whether the location was owned or rented.

The Polish Warsaw chapel was first chapel built in Eastern Europe. It is a beautiful and expansive edifice built on donated funds not long after missionaries first entered the country. Yet after its construction, the church in Warsaw collapsed from six branches down to one and has remained at just one native branch through the time of this writing in spite of having over four hundred members on the rolls. Warsaw has also had the lowest activity rate of any major city in Poland, although it was the only Polish city with an LDS chapel for many years. While space does not allow comprehensive discussion of all challenges here, I believe that poor location is one of several major factors that have harmed growth. In a city with over 1.6 million residents, the Warsaw chapel is located on the far western periphery. When I visited in 1999, a taxi ride from the city center to the chapel cost $9 U.S., a prohibitive sum for local members. A one-way trip to the chapel on public transportation typically took between one and two hours from other regions of the city. Members and investigators who lived in central areas of the city found that the location was inconvenient; for those the other side of town, inconvenience bordered on inaccessibility. Many programs were considered over the years to identify and address the low activity and retention rates, but none seemed to consider the remote location of the meetinghouse as a factor. Neither the beauty of the chapel nor its fine facilities compensated for its inaccessibility and inconvenience of both time and money for members and investigators. In the rush to build a freestanding chapel, mission and area leaders failed to consider the needs of local people.

In Riga, Latvia, local congregations met in a humble yet capacious remodeled apartment in the city center. The location was convenient and could be easily reached from anywhere in the city. A visiting authority noted that the facilities were among the best in Eastern Europe. A year later, the construction of a freestanding chapel on the periphery of the city was announced to replace the prior accommodations. Whatever the facilities, the new location could only disadvantage members and investigators.

An LDS member who travels extensively internationally wrote:

I do informal surveys of Church members in developing countries of the cost of transportation to get to church. In many cases, it is simply astounding the costs to reach church. Many times, I have found that members are spending 20 to 30 percent of their monthly income to pay for transportation costs to get to church. What member in the United States would be willing to pay 20 to 30 percent of their income, on top of tithing and fast offerings to be part of church? I was a branch president in Portugal of a large, geographically dispersed branch, with about 100 active and about 400 in the branch. I laid out where all the members lived and plotted the bus routes they had to take to get to church. We found that some had to make three bus connections and

that their bus fares added up to a significant portion of their monthly income. We convinced the mission president to split the branch and rented a store front next to a major bus terminal, that any place in the city could get to in one trip, and within two weeks of splitting, we had doubled our attendance and now had two branches with both 100 in attendance. In Kenya, when you attend church, you find congregations of almost entirely male members. I asked where the wives and children were, and I was told that they could not afford to have the rest of the family come, so the fathers would come and hear the teachings and then go home and share what they learned with their families. For those in priesthood positions, who have to come to church multiple times during the week, the cost of transportation becomes an enormous financial burden. I think little consideration is given to the actual cost to the local members in regard to transportation. I would much rather see a dozen small storefronts that are filled each Sunday throughout a city rather than two large beautiful chapels that are mostly empty.

Finding the Church

Missionaries work hard to find investigators. Can interested investigators find the Church? The LDS Internet meetinghouse locator has been extremely helpful in recent years, although many international contacts do not have Internet access and meeting times are not listed for many international units. A senior missionary serving in a large Central European capital told of an LDS member who moved to the city. She looked for the Church for two or three months but was unable to establish contact. The only LDS number listed in the local telephone directory was for a family history office which was open only two evenings per week for two hours, so the telephone rang unanswered when she called at various times. After several months of searching, she encountered LDS missionaries on the street and was able to get church meeting information. Many investigators and members have reported having difficulty connecting up with the Church in their area before making the connection under fortuitous circumstances. One wonders how many others were not so fortunate. A chapel telephone number is of little value unless it is listed in the telephone book and there is either a person there to answer it regularly or there is a message with useful information. Many newspapers allow religious groups to announce meeting times and locations at minimal cost, and other community opportunities for publicizing the local congregation may be available. The "visitors welcome" sign on almost all LDS meetinghouses is enigmatic, since I have never seen any accompanying sign that would inform prospective visitors of the time or day that meetings are held. Expecting nonmembers to receive personal revelation about meeting times is a less effective finding method.

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