

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Self-Sufficiency and LDS Growth

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Overview

Self-sufficiency in an LDS Church growth context is defined as the ability for the Church to meet its own local administrative and ecclesiastical needs independent of outside resources or assistance. A congregation of the Church that is self-sufficient generates its own leadership to fill callings. Missionary activity is headed by local leaders and ordinary members are active participants in finding, teaching, and retaining converts. The primary role of full-time missionaries in self-sufficient congregations centers on teaching the missionary lessons to investigators previously prepared and taught by ordinary members and ensuring prospective converts adequately meet prebaptismal standards. Local leaders and members head reactivation and convert retention efforts and ward or branch missionaries teach post-baptismal missionary lessons. Full-time missionaries, local leaders, and ordinary members apply principles outlined in Preach My Gospel in missionary efforts and focus on building up the Church. The congregation becomes a resource for stake, district, and mission leaders who coordinate with the local bishopric or branch presidency to explore future outreach expansion efforts within their geographic jurisdiction. As congregations become self-sufficient, they transform from a consumer of international church resources into a supplier of international church resources.

This essay identifies and discusses successes and failures in the LDS Church achieving self sufficiency in areas around the world. Factors which foster or hamper the development of self-sufficiency are identified and analyzed. Recommendations for achieving self-sufficiency, a comparison of self-sufficiency in the LDS Church and in other proselytizing Christian faiths, and the prospects for developing greater self-sufficiency in the LDS Church conclude this essay.

Successes

The LDS Church has experienced the highest degree of self-sufficiency in the United States, Oceania, and countries with limited religious freedom. In the United States, the Church benefits from multiple factors that foster self sufficiency such as several church universities, moderate member activity rates, large numbers of active priesthood holders in many locations, tens of thousands of local members currently serving missions, and availability of church materials in the most commonly spoken languages. In Oceania, the Church heavily relies on local members to staff missions, translates church materials and scriptures into many of the most commonly spoken languages, operates several prominent schools and colleges, and maintains moderately low to high rates of convert retention and member activity. In countries with limited religious freedom, the Church must rely on local members to accomplish all functions of the Church that the government or society permits to be practiced. This often results in higher member-missionary participation, stronger dedication from converts to remain active and true to church teachings in wake of potential persecution and harassment, and more committed leaders to learn how to properly fill their administrative and ecclesiastical duties.

Failures

The least self-sufficient regions of the world are Eastern Europe and the Caribbean. In Eastern Europe, the Church has assigned thousands of North American missionaries since open proselytism began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite over two decades of missionary activity in most nations, nonnative missionaries constitute an overwhelming majority in virtually every LDS mission based in Eastern Europe today. Some nations had more than twice as many native members serving missions a decade ago than at present. The Church has faced chronic local leadership shortcomings and upsetting setbacks as many former church leaders have become inactive since their release from a leadership position. In Russia, one mission president reported that during his three-year tenure in the early 1990s 14 branch presidents went inactive or left the Church. Missionaries speculated that the first stakes in Russia would be created in Moscow and St Petersburg in the late 1990s or early

2000s yet the first stake was not organized until 2011. Low member activity and convert retention rates, decreasing numbers of convert baptisms, and few active priesthood leaders were challenges that delayed the organization of the first stake on the surface. However on a deeper level cycles of congregation divisions and consolidations in the most populous cities perpetuated by changing area policies had disastrous effects on the self-sufficiency of the Church in the most populous Eastern European nations. Low receptivity to LDS teachings has further compounded self-sufficiency woes and dissuades international church leaders to expand outreach into additional areas when areas already opened to missionaries are unable to meet their basic administrative needs independent of full-time missionaries.

In the Caribbean, the Church has faced major struggles achieving long-term self-sufficiency. In the late 2000s, the Church experienced significant increases in the numbers of active priesthood holders that permitted the organization of more congregations and the first stake in Trinidad and Tobago. This progress was not sustained in many locations however as indicated by widespread branch consolidations throughout the region in the early 2010s. Like Eastern Europe, area policies oscillating between splitting branches and consolidating branches have exacerbated poor self-sufficiency in many locations. In the late 2000s, mission leaders reported preparations for the Georgetown Guyana District to become a stake in the near future. However by early 2012, there were no reports of the district reaching stakehood anytime in the near future and several branches closed within the previous two years. In New Amsterdam, rushed convert baptisms and inadequate post-baptismal teaching and support from local congregations snowballed into the dissolution of the district and the reassignment of all remaining branches directly to the West Indies Mission. In Guadeloupe, the Church introduced missionaries to additional cities and towns resulting in the number of branches increasing from three to seven between 2004 and 2008. However many of the branches had few active members or appeared to exhibit poor sustainability in new converts holding callings and meeting basic administrative duties. Consequently four of the seven branches consolidated with neighboring units by early 2012. In Dominica, the Church had formed three branches within only a few years after opening the island to proselytism and establishing an official presence. However by early 2012 only one independent branch continued to function.

Factors that foster self sufficiency

Geographic isolation from mission headquarters has frequently facilitated the development of self-sufficient local leadership. Infrequent visits from mission leadership and few or no full-time missionaries assigned to wards and branches often generate an increased sense of accountability from local leaders. This has resulted from local members realizing that they must meet their own administrative needs or else the Church would not be able to operate. Over time, good convert retention and moderate to high member activity rates result as local members head missionary activity and follow scriptural protocol for baptismal standards.

Restrictions on religious freedom imposed by government and society have improved the self-sufficiency of the Church in many nations. Many converts in these nations must make the personal decision to join the Church knowing they could face disapproval, ostracism, harassment, persecution, and surveillance from government and society. The devotion and courage required for converts to join the Church in these nations has inadvertently improved self-sufficiency as many converts have stronger dedication and devotion to church teachings than their counterparts in nations with few or no restrictions on religious freedom. Visa regulations and legislation limiting or prohibiting foreigner involvement in church administration require local members to hold leadership positions with limited outside support. This can create challenges for ensuring leaders are properly trained and qualified, but instills a sense of urgency and responsibility in local members to maintain any LDS presence in their country or city at all.

High prebaptismal standards for converts have improved the likelihood of instilling self-sufficiency. This occurs because baptized converts represent a higher quality of new members who have more developed personal testimonies, more consistent church attendance, and stronger devotion to live church teachings than converts who are rushed into baptism without adequately developing these characteristics. The progressive buildup of high-quality converts produces a larger number of local leaders and contributing members that not only meet their own administrative, ecclesiastical, and leadership needs but supply resources to dedicate to mission efforts elsewhere. When there are fewer numbers of inactive members on branch or ward membership records, more resources are free to channel into more productive activities like finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining new converts instead of reactivation efforts among inactive members with little recollection of their past experience with the Church.

Translations of LDS materials and scriptures into commonly spoken languages are requisite for local members to assume leadership roles independent of an intermediary. The translation of all LDS scriptures and a wide body of books and scripture study materials encourage gospel scholarship among ordinary members and improve the comprehension of gospel topics. Increasing the number of languages with translations of LDS materials also reduces the stereotype that the LDS Church is an American institution that promotes English usage among its membership.

The Church has generally achieved higher self sufficiency in countries with stronger religiosity in the general population. Nigeria has one of the highest percentages of people who weekly attend religious services in the world. The LDS Church experiences one of the highest activity rates in the world in Nigeria and Nigeria is one of the most self-sufficient countries in the Church. The cultural emphasis of weekly participation in religious gatherings appears a key factor in achieving this progress for the Church. Other factors that promote self sufficiency in the Church in Nigeria are also present such as translations of church materials in several commonly spoken local languages, the refusal of Church leaders to assign non-African missionaries due to security concerns, and isolation from other major LDS population centers.

Factors which hamper self sufficiency

Assigning multiple full-time missionary companionships to a single ward or branch has often deteriorated the self-sufficiency of the Church in many locations worldwide. Perceived high rates of receptivity, large numbers of investigators, revamped reactivation efforts, assigning leadership and administrative responsibilities to young missionaries due to few available priesthood holders, and concern for a single missionary companionship isolated from other locations where missionaries are assigned have been the primary reasons mission leadership has placed multiple missionary companionships in a single ward or branch.

The Church has assigned some of the largest numbers of missionaries to a single church unit in Eastern Europe and Latin America and both of these regions experience some of the poorest self-sufficiency. In Greece, the number of missionaries has often constituted a sizable minority or even a slight majority of church attendance in some branches and groups. Many wards and branches in Latin America have two sets of missionaries to facilitate reactivation efforts and at times provide administrative assistance and leadership development. Many large wards or non-English-speaking branches in the United States have had more than one missionary companionship assigned at a time. This has at times resulted in reduced member-missionary participation as this decision has inadvertently reinforced the common belief held by many Latter-day Saints that missionaries are primarily responsible for finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts.

Area policies changing convert baptismal qualifications and standards for congregations to operate have compromised self-sufficiency in many areas. Initiated by good intentions to either provide more socialization opportunities in congregations with more active and diverse membership or to reduce travel times to church services and spur greater growth, the major challenge in unit splitting and consolidating has been when policies change within relatively short periods of time. The oscillation in splitting versus consolidating branches in many locations around the world has led to inconsistency in expanding outreach and building up local leadership due to transient policies.

Low levels of religiosity in society often correlate with low levels of self-sufficiency in the LDS Church. Eastern Europe is one of the most irreligious regions of the world and has some of the smallest numbers of active church members and native leaders notwithstanding two decades of coordinated mission efforts in many of the most populous locations. Local leadership has achieved good levels of sustainability in some highly secular nations such as in Scandinavia, but few members in these locations serve missions and virtually no progress has occurred expanding outreach into lesser-reached and unreached areas. North American missionaries comprise a strong majority in nearly all of the most secular countries in Europe.

Recommendations for Instilling Greater Self-Sufficiency

The assignment of only one missionary companionship per ward or branch safeguards against excessive dependence of local members on full-time missionaries to run leadership and administration responsibilities. Overstaffing congregations with multiple missionary companionships often correlates with lower levels of sustainability. This occurs in areas with the least self-sufficiency in local leadership and member-missionary programs. Inadequate numbers of ordinary members with little or no training or experienced in church leadership and administration legitimize mission leaders to assign multiple missionary companionships to fill these needs. When only a single missionary companionship is assigned local members and leaders can still become too dependent on missionaries to meet their responsibilities in church callings, but the likelihood and severity of this dependency is reduced if there is only one set of missionaries.

The maintenance of consistently high baptismal standards prepares prospective converts to contribute to the self sufficiency of their ward, branch, or group. The scriptures, the missionary guidebook Preach My Gospel, General Conference talks, and other church literature detail what these standards ought to entail. Many congregations that cannot properly function without outside assistance have suffered from poor convert retention rates often linked to inadequate prebaptismal preparation. As the Church in most countries experiences shortages of qualified and committed members to fill church callings and leadership positions, the enforcement of reasonably high baptismal standards produces a higher caliber of converts who are more likely to become an asset rather than a liability. It is therefore not surprising that locations which experience lower receptivity but higher convert baptismal standards have better self-sufficiency than locations with higher receptivity but lower convert baptismal standards.

Translating church materials into languages without available translations of LDS materials and increasing the body of translated church materials and scriptures for languages with few translations of LDS materials can improve self sustainability. Many languages spoken by Latter-day Saints have no LDS scriptures or church materials available in their native language. This creates several problems. First, gospel comprehension is negatively impacted if investigators and members are unable to read and study the scriptures and church materials in their native language. Some members may proficiently read and communicate in a second language that has translations of church materials, but LDS doctrine and teachings may not fully resonate. Second, no translations in a person's native language can convey the feeling that the Church is not fully compatible with his or her culture and society. This reinforces common stereotypes in many nations that the LDS Church is an American institution and promotes American ideals and values through limiting the number of languages into which translations of materials are available. Third, interest in studying and learning the gospel is reduced. Those without access to LDS materials in their first or second language struggle to find accurate information and many have no awareness of the Church at all.

Some church programs can foster self sufficiency in youth such as missionary preparation classes. Missionary service provides the Church with some of its greater strength and self sufficiency not due to baptizing additional converts but rather because returned missionaries generally offer invaluable experience and devotion to live church teachings in the areas where they live.

At present, many church leaders in most countries served missions as young adults.

Starting additional church schools and universities can strengthen the sense of LDS community and improve self sufficiency. Schools and colleges provide an excellent segue for expanding missionary activity in a passive manner without any overt proselytism. Colleges and universities based in the home countries of church members also reduces emigration rates to the United States where many active members relocate to study at church-affiliated institutions.

Comparative Growth

Most proselytizing Christian denominations rely on local membership to meet their missionary needs within a particular area. The only exception to this finding is when a Christian denomination has no church membership in a specific area. When this occurs, many Christian groups will request families to relocate to unreached areas to establish a congregation and proselyte. Many of these planter families originally live nearby the target location or share certain cultural or linguistic similarities with those where they are assigned to that would prove them as an efficient resource. Instances of North American missionaries serving in close coordination with local mission efforts and leadership are much less common in most Christian faiths than in the LDS Church. Due to little reliance on foreign missionaries to expand outreach, many Christian groups such as Baptists have achieved rapid growth in many countries where governments limit religious freedom. Baptists claim over 2.5 million members meeting in nearly 15,000 congregations in India, 30,000 members meeting in 509 congregations in Vietnam, over 900,000 members in approximately 4,800 congregations in Burma, 55,734 members meeting in 974 congregations in Bangladesh, 39,240 members meeting in 218 congregation in Sudan, 56,892 members meeting in 834 congregations in Cuba, 3,000 members meeting in 22 congregations in Azerbaijan, 2,735 members meeting in 60 congregations in Uzbekistan, and 2,100 members meeting in 18 congregations in Egypt.[1] The LDS Church has a very small presence or no presence at all in these nations largely due reliance on foreign missionary manpower to open countries to proselytism and all of these nations experience restrictions on religious freedom or totally prohibit nontraditional Christian missionaries altogether. Baptists, Adventists, and Witnesses have each stressed self-reliance in church management and administration on a local level, making outreach expansion possible, self-sufficient, and efficient.

Future Prospects

Reports from missionaries serving worldwide over the past eight years indicate inconsistent implementation of reformed LDS proselytism tactics detailed in the missionary manual Preach My Gospel, resulting in only modest improvements in self-sufficiency in the Church worldwide. Consequently there is little indication that the Church's full-time missionary program will reinforce member-missionary programs that are self-sustaining, buttress local church leadership to meet current needs and expand outreach, and achieve noticeable improvement increasing convert retention rates. Most countries which struggle to meet their own administrative and ecclesiastical needs will likely continue to do so due to the hit-and-miss application of effective missionary tactics in many of these nations. The Church appears most likely to continue to experience the highest self-sufficiency in local membership in countries where government, legal, or societal restrictions prohibit the assignment of foreign missionaries and receptivity to nontraditional Christian faiths is high.

[1] "Baptist World Alliance - Member Body Statistics," www.bwanet.org, retrieved 10 April 2012. http://www.bwanet.org/bwa.php?site=Resources&id=258