LDS Growth Case Studies

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Raising the Bar and Increasing the Number of Members Serving Missions

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Overview

The LDS Church reports one of the largest full-time missionary forces of any Christian denomination. At year-end 2011, there were 55,410 members serving full-time missions and 22,299 church-service missionaries.[1] Notwithstanding this achievement, the Church has struggled to increase the number of members serving missions within the past decade. In the early 2000s, Church leaders raised the standard for missionary service. This coincided with a major decline in the size of the full-time missionary force of over 10,000. As of year-end 2011, the Church reported several thousand fewer members serving full-time missions than a decade earlier. This essay summarizes past trends in missionary service in the LDS Church, explores the attitudes of LDS leaders on increasing the quality and quantity of members serving missions, and identifies causes that have prevented an increase in the number of members serving missions within the past decade. Factors that increase the likelihood of members serving missions as well as recommendations to increase both the quality and quantity of full-time missionaries are also provided.

LDS Missionary History and Background

In 1830 - the year Joseph Smith officially organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - 16 members were called to serve as missionaries. In 1834, the Church for the first time called more than 100 members on a mission in a single year. However, the Church did not regularly call so many missionaries on a yearly basis until the mid 1870s. In 1899, the number of missionaries called a year surpassed 1,000 for the first time. Additional milestones included the first year when more than 5,000 were called (1961), more than 10,000 were called (1975), more than 20,000 were called (1986), and more than 30,000 were called (1996).[2]

In 1977, the Church began reporting the number of missionaries serving as of the end of the year along with other church statistics in annual general conference sessions. That year the Church reported 25,300 full-time missionaries serving worldwide. The number of full-time missionaries reached 30,000 in 1986, 40,000 in 1990, 50,000 in 1996, and 60,000 in 2000. Between 1977 and 2002, the number of full-time missionaries increased an average of four percent a year. In 2003 and 2004, the number of full-time missionaries declined by over 10,000; 17% of the missionary force reported in 2002. Between 2004 and 2010, the number of missionaries fluctuated from a high of 53,164 in 2006 to a low of 51,067 in 2004. In 2011, the number of missionaries increased by six percent to 55,410.

The percentage of young men from North America who serve full-time missions fluctuated for most of the twentieth century. Over a period of several decades, the Priesthood Executive Committee surveyed 10,000 young men in the United States and Canada on various indicators of member activity and missionary service. Researchers found that in the early 1940s approximately five percent of young men served missions and that this statistic increased to 20% in the late 1940s and 30% in the early 1960s. Between the early 1960s and early 1980s the percentage of young men serving missions varied from 25-35% and was 32% in 1981.[3] In the early 2010s, it was unclear what percentage of young men served missions. However, this percentage had appeared to noticeably decline in the 2000s from that of the 1970s and 1980s.

The Church has heavily relied on North American members to staff its worldwide missionary force from the 1830s to present day. North American missionaries appear to constitute approximately 80% of the Church's worldwide missionary force[4] notwithstanding church membership in the United States and Canada constituting only 44% of the world total. In 2010, two-thirds of missionaries were trained in the Church's Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Utah notwithstanding 14 other MTCs operating in other areas of the world.[5]

Raising the Bar and Recent Statements on Missionary Service from LDS Leaders

In 2002, the Church announced that the qualifications for members to serve missions had been increased - the same year that the Church reported the largest number of full-time missionaries serving since the organization of the Church over 170 years earlier. These standards referred particularly to worthiness standards and testimony development. In his talk "The Greatest Generation of Missionaries," Elder M. Russell Ballard spoke in the October 2002 Semiannual General Conference about the need to increase the worthiness and spiritual preparation standards by stating the following:

"We don't need spiritually weak and semicommitted young men. We don't need you to just fill a position; we need your whole heart and soul. We need vibrant, thinking, passionate missionaries who know how to listen to and respond to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. This isn't a time for spiritual weaklings. We cannot send you on a mission to be reactivated, reformed, or to receive a testimony. We just don't have time for that."[6]

Elder Ballard in his same talk iterated the standard for missionary service as follows:

"Please understand this: the bar that is the standard for missionary service is being raised. The day of the ‘repent and go' missionary is over. You know what I'm talking about, don't you, my young brothers? Some young men have the mistaken idea that they can be involved in sinful behavior and then repent when they're 18 1/2 so they can go on their mission at 19. While it is true that you can repent of sins, you may or you may not qualify to serve."

Worthiness issues could constitute a wide range of sins resulting from not following church teachings. However, local church leaders were particularly advised that many of these personal worthiness issues were related to immorality and the Law of Chastity.

The increased standard for missionary service was partially responsible for the number of full-time missionaries plummeting by 10,000 in the two years following the delivery of this talk as thousands of potential missionaries chose either not to pursue missionary service due to the heightened expectations required to serve or no longer qualified to serve. As a result of the massive decline in the number of missionaries serving, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley voiced the following in a 2004 worldwide leadership training meeting:

"We need more missionaries. The message to raise the bar on missionary qualifications was not a signal to send fewer missionaries but ... a call for parents and leaders to work with young men earlier to better prepare them for missionary service and to keep them worthy of such service. All young men who are worthy and who are physically and emotionally able should prepare to serve in this most important work."[7]

Elder Ballard spoke again on the subject of full-time missionary service in his April 2005 General Conference address entitled "One More":

"We are aware that you already know those who have cleared the bar and are preparing to accept mission calls during this year. What we are asking leaders in every unit to do is to counsel together with parents and pray to find at least one more young man, above those already committed, who can be called to serve. If the over 26,000 wards and branches in the Church will send all of those whom they are already planning to send into the mission field plus one more, the ranks of our full-time missionaries will swell and we will move much closer to our divine mandate to take the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people."[8]

With no noticeable improvement in augmenting the number of members serving full-time missions and making no direct references to the previous decision by the First Presidency to raise the standard for missionary service nearly a decade earlier, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland delivered a powerful talk in the priesthood session of the October 2011 Semiannual General Conference. Elder Holland stressed:

"So we have a dilemma tonight, you and I. It is that there are thousands of Aaronic Priesthood-age young men already on the records of this Church who constitute our pool of candidates for future missionary service. But the challenge is to have those deacons, teachers, and priests stay active enough and worthy enough to be ordained elders and serve as missionaries...My young friends, we need tens of thousands of more missionaries in the months and years that lie ahead. They must come from an increased percentage of the Aaronic Priesthood who will be ordained, active, clean, and worthy to serve."[9]

LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson has regularly encouraged church members to help augment the number of young men serving full-time missions. In the October 2010 Semiannual General Conference, President Monson stated:

"Now, before we hear from our speakers this morning, may I mention a matter close to my heart and which deserves our serious attention. I speak of missionary work. First, to young men of the Aaronic Priesthood and to you young men who are becoming elders: I repeat what prophets have long taught-that every worthy, able young man should prepare to serve a mission. Missionary service is a priesthood duty-an obligation the Lord expects of us who have been given so very much. Young men, I admonish you to prepare for service as a missionary. Keep yourselves clean and pure and worthy to represent the Lord. Maintain your health and strength. Study the scriptures. Where such is available, participate in seminary or institute. Familiarize

yourself with the missionary handbook Preach My Gospel...And now to you mature brothers and sisters: we need many, many more senior couples."[10]

Senior Missionary Couples

Like young full-time missionaries, the Church has struggled to augment the number of senior missionary couples worldwide over the past decade. The Church heavily relies on senior missionary couples to expand missionary work into previously unreached locations. With perhaps only a couple exceptions, all countries opened to formal LDS proselytism within the past decade had at least one senior missionary couple assigned prior to the arrival of young proselytizing missionaries. Senior missionary couples offer expertise in church administration, gospel instruction, public affairs, and leadership that surpasses the experience of young missionaries. Recent economic difficulties in the United States and health problems pose challenges for the Church to increase the number of senior missionary couples. Within the past couple years the Church has adapted its policies to help increase the number of senior couples serving missions. Emphasizing the importance of senior missionary couples, Elder Holland stated the following in the October 2011 Semiannual General Conference:

"We need thousands of more couples serving in the missions of the Church. Every mission president pleads for them. Everywhere they serve, our couples bring a maturity to the work that no number of 19-year-olds, however good they are, can provide... To encourage more couples to serve, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have made one of the boldest and most generous moves seen in missionary work in the last 50 years. In May of this year, priesthood leaders in the field received a notice that housing costs for couples (and we speak only of housing costs) would be supplemented by Church missionary funds if the cost exceeds a predetermined amount per month. What a blessing! This is heaven-sent assistance toward the single largest expense our couples face on their missions. The Brethren have also determined that couple missions can be for 6 or 12 months as well as the traditional 18 or 23. In another wonderful gesture, permission is given for couples, at their own expense, to return home briefly for critical family events. And stop worrying that you are going to have to knock on doors or keep the same schedule as the 19-year-olds! We don't ask you to do that, but we have a host of other things you can do, with a great deal of latitude in how you do them. Brethren, for good and sufficient health, family, or economic reasons, some of you, we realize, may not be able to go just now or perhaps ever. But with a little planning many of you can go."

Reformed church policies regarding senior missionary couples may help augment their numbers within the near future. However, in order for greater success to occur the Church will need to increase the number of senior couple serving missions from outside of North America where at present very few senior couples serve missions. Native senior missionary couples can provide invaluable assistance in opening unreached cities to proselytism, training local leadership, and conducting humanitarian and development work.

Causes for Decline and Stagnation of Members Serving Missions

There are many contributors for why the number of missionaries has not increased above levels in 2002. Major factors that have influenced the number of missionaries serving include declining Latter-day Saint family size in North America, low member activity rates for young single adults, the psychological impact of raising the standards for missionary service, inconsistent missionary preparation efforts by local church leaders outside of North America, the increasing influence of secularism on LDS populations, and counterproselytism efforts by detractors of the Church and other Christian groups.

In the 1980s, birth rates declined in American Latter-day Saint families. The increase in children of record ranged between 103,000 and 124,000 between 1979 and 1983 but ranged between 93,000 and 99,000 between 1984 and 1987 notwithstanding steady membership growth during this eight-year period. The annual children of record increase previously accounted for 2.1% to 2.4% of total church membership for all years between 1973 and 1983 but dropped to 1.5% to 1.7% of total church membership for all years between 1984 and 1987. The Church did not report annual increase of children on record from 1988 to 1996. During this period the Church reported baptisms of children of record and these numbers generally ranged from 70,000 to 90,000. In 1997, the Church began reporting annual increase of children of record again but this statistic was a mere 75,214; a 39% drop from the high in the early 1980s. This noticeable drop in children of record has been partially reflected in the decline in the number of missionaries serving two decades later when these individuals reached the minimum age for missionary service.

Young single adults exhibit some of the lowest member activity rates in the United States. Some stakes report that as few as 10% of young single adults on church records appear to attend church services regularly. Within the past decade the Church appears to have struggled keeping members active from their teenage years into adulthood more than during the past several decades. Due to low member activity rates among mission-aged Latter-day Saints, the Church has had a smaller percentage of church members that can potentially serve full-time missions.

The psychological impact on raising the standard for missionary service has appeared to reduce the number of members serving missions. Raising the spirituality and worthiness standards has discouraged some members from serving missions who would have previously served missions prior to raising the bar. Many member reports indicate that this increased standard has made many youth legitimize that missionary service is optional. Questioning faith and discovering personal and religious identity are essential characteristics of adolescence which ultimately solidify in adulthood. The common wavering of older teens and young adults in preparing for missionary service should not be taken as permanent, irreconcilable flaws in spiritual character that disqualify them from receiving the support and care of local church leaders. Rather, it is important for church

leaders to acknowledge this phase of psychological development, demonstrate consistency in preparing young men for missionary service through a myriad of activities and lessons, and establish a close personal relationship with these valuable youth.

Inconsistent efforts to prepare youth outside the United States for missionary service have been detrimental for many aspects of growth. Some areas of Latin America have increased the number of local youth serving missions by the hundreds yet seldom are these trends perpetuated for a period longer than a few years. These inconsistencies appear largely due to turnover in local leadership as the successive church leader changes policies implemented by his predecessor. Changing baptismal standards, availability of mission resources, and political conditions can also affect the consistency of missionary preparation programs internationally.

The influence of secularism on LDS population appears particularly pronounced on the percentage of young men serving full-time missions. Increasing secularism in American culture during the past several decades is manifest by the rapidly increasing percentage of Americans who identify as atheist, agnostic, or unaffiliated with a religious group and declining percentages of people who attend church or religious services regularly. These national trends appear to have influenced LDS populations as well, especially youth and young adults who are less steeped in meaningful personal religious experience espoused out of their own volition compared to their parents and older adult counterparts. Members report in some high-density Latter-day Saint communities in the Intermountain West that many LDS parents are less concerned with their children obtaining their own testimony of the Church and establishing appropriate boundaries due to the conceived notion that their children's peers and their communities are predominantly Latter-day Saint. As a result of this reduced sense of parental responsibility, Latter-day Saint youth in some locations may be less likely to serve missions as parents and local church leaders can be less concerned and committed to preparing their youth to remain active into adulthood and serve missions due to the prevailing LDS culture.

Lastly, some counterproselytism efforts by disaffiliated members and some Christian groups appear to have had an impact on reducing the number of members serving missions in some areas. Members and missionaries serving in Utah and in other locations with large LDS populations report that some youth fail to serve missions due to the efforts of these groups to villainize and discredit the LDS Church, resulting in some leaving the Church altogether. The influence of these "Anti-Mormon" groups appears most pronounced among young with little family support, shallow religious faith and understanding of LDS doctrine, and large numbers of non-LDS peers who are critical of the Church.

Factors that Promote Missionary Service

The Church's study on missionary service in young men identified several factors that increase the likelihood of a young man serving a full-time mission. Young men were five times more likely to serve a full-time mission if they were born into a family where the parents were sealed in the temple. Higher levels of religious experience and private religious behavior in young men were found to predict increased likelihood of missionary service. Additional factors that increased the likelihood of missionary service for young men included higher levels of religious activity in the family as a whole, a trusting relationship with a priesthood leader outside the family, and strong parental agreement on standards, values, and expectations for their children. [11]

Recommendations

Approaches for increasing the number of members serving full-time missions differ by country. In the United States, many young men are born into Latter-day Saint families whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa most young men join the Church at the same time their parents do, have only one parent or sibling who is a Latter-day Saint, or are the only member in their family. These different conditions of the level of involvement of the Church in young men's families necessitate differing protocol for improving the likelihood of missionary service.

Church leaders can focus on factors that increase the likelihood of missionary service to augment the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide. Simply pressuring and rushing the process of sealing spouses and parents to children will not guarantee greater results. However, focus on the basic teaching and testimony building that get families to want to be sealed in the temple will be the key element to ensure higher rates of missionary service in young men. LDS Apostle Boyd K. Packer noted the following at a new mission presidents seminar in Provo, Utah in 2009:

"It is a new thought to us across the Church that we are not to be duplicating the Wasatch Front out there with the number of buildings and the congregations and the large audiences and activities that go on and on...We are to establish the gospel...Building the Church seems to center around buildings and budgets and programs and procedures, but somewhere in the midst of it the gospel is struggling for breath."

Church leaders and parents can help improve the likelihood of their young men serving missions by providing opportunities for their children to have personal spiritual experiences. Examples of these experiences can include youth camps, firesides, scouting, young men programs like Duty to God, seminary, institute, and family activities with a gospel theme such as visiting church historical sites, family home evening, genealogy research, and service projects The Church can employ a vast variety of methods to increase the number of members serving full-time missions in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe such as the enforcement of higher baptismal standards for youth converts, beginning missionary preparation at an

earlier age, organizing missionary preparation classes, constructing missionary training centers in additional countries, and employment programs that help potential missionaries earn money to finance their missions.

Some of the most effective member-missionary work occurs during adolescence. Teaching and encouraging missionary skills and habits to youth many years prior to the age of missionary service can help encourage participation and arm prospective missionaries with greater confidence to speak openly about their religious faith and invite others to learn about the Church and attend worship services. Missionary preparation classes are often held sporadically or not at all in many areas where receptivity is high and the number of potential missionary candidates among members and new converts is large. The Church has experienced good success in baptizing converts in adolescence who later serve full-time missions. Opportunities abound for church leaders and parents to guide and mentor youth in missionary efforts. Over time, these efforts can not only improve the percentage of youth serving missions but also baptize more converts who may serve missions one day.

The financial cost to serve a mission can be a major barrier for young men to serve missions in many countries where they are the most needed. Local church leaders have a major responsibility over preparing youth to serve missions and with proper planning and vision can significantly augment the number of missionaries serving from their area. Church leaders can help establish programs in economically disadvantaged nations for youth to financially prepare for serving a mission. These programs may include finding part-time work, getting ideas from returned missionaries who financed their own missions, and implementing principles of economic self-reliance.

Future Prospects

The 2011 increase in the number of missionaries serving indicates some recent success in the Church reversing the decade-long trend of stagnant numbers of members serving missions worldwide. Consistent increases in the number of members serving missions and the maintenance of reasonably high standards for missionary service will be requisite for the Church to make greater proselytism inroads through the use of a professional full-time missionary force. Continued emphasis on earlier missionary preparation and focus on learning and teaching gospel principles instead of meeting quotas and numerical goals will be required to increase both quality and quantity of worldwide missionary manpower. Significant progress will especially require greater numbers of members serving missions from outside the United States where most Latter-day Saints reside, receptivity is higher, and opportunities to expand outreach into unreached areas abound. The construction and maintenance of additional MTCs may spark greater growth as church leaders focus on achieving self-sufficiency in staffing missions principally from native members. Augmenting the full-time missionary force especially in Africa, Oceania, and Latin America has great potential to accelerate growth, provide additional church leadership from larger numbers of returned missionaries, and expand outreach into countless areas with no LDS presence.

[1] "Statistical Report, 2011," Liahona, May 2012. http://www.lds.org/liahona/2012/05/statistical-report-2011

[2] Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 202

[3] "News of the Church," Ensign, December 1984. http://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/12/news-of-the-church

[4] Stewart, David G. Jr. Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work, p. 349. https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=law_harvest&chapter_id=30#ftn.id258

[5] Olaveson, Breanna. "International MTCs Play Important Role," Church News and Events, 5 August 2010. http://lds.org/church/news/international-mtcs-play-important-role

[6] Ballard, M. Russell. "The Greatest Generation of Missionaries," October 2002 Semiannual General Conference. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2002/10/the-greatest-generation-of-missionaries

[7] "To the Bishops of the Church," Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, June 19, 2004, 27

[8] Ballard, M. Russell. "One More," April 2005 Annual General Conference, http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/04/one-more

[9] Holland, Jeffrey R. "We Are All Enlisted," October 2011 Semiannual General Conference, http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/we-are-all-enlisted

[10] Monson, Thomas S. "As We Meet Together Again," October 2010 Semiannual General Conference, www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/as-we-meet-together-again

[11] "News of the Church," Ensign, December 1984. http://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/12/news-of-the-church