

LDS Growth Case Studies

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The Influence of Senior Missionary Couples on LDS Church Growth

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Overview

Few individuals have as far-reaching and long-lasting of an impact on LDS Church growth as senior missionary couples. Regularly visible in formal proselytism efforts since the late 1970s, senior missionary couples have helped orchestrate the opening of countries to missionary work whereas others have revitalized outreach efforts among a particular ethnolinguistic minority group, prepared for the Church to obtain legal recognition in specific countries, supervised and facilitated the expansion of missionary work into additional cities, and filled branch or district leadership positions prior to handing off these responsibilities to newly baptized or reactivated local members. Their seasoned experience accumulated over years of gospel living and church leadership service coupled with a strong desire to serve and build the Church make these members invaluable in their contributions for advancing missionary work around the world.

This case study reviews particular instances in which senior missionary couples have progressed LDS Church growth such as establishing a church presence in previously unreached countries, establishing an initial LDS presence or revitalizing outreach among a particular ethnolinguistic minority group, facilitating local leadership development, organizing additional branches and/or districts, expanding outreach in countries with an LDS presence, translation efforts, resolving or complying with legal issues, and maintaining an LDS presence in countries where growth conditions are relatively unfavorable. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for senior missionaries influencing contemporary church growth trends are discussed. A future prospects section predicts how senior couple missionaries may influence future church growth trends for the foreseeable future.

Establishing an LDS Presence in Previously Unreached Countries

One of the most prominent methods that senior missionary couples influence church growth is through the establishment of an LDS presence in previously unreached countries. The process of opening a country to the Church generally begins with the organization of a group or branch and obtaining legal recognition. Once these two steps are accomplished, senior missionary couples often prepare for the arrival of young, proselytizing missionaries.

Several instances of senior missionary couples establishing an LDS presence in previously unreached countries are provided below in alphabetical order by country name.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, senior missionary couples initiated the establishment of the Church in the early 2010s by initially performing humanitarian and development work. Previously based in neighboring Croatia, senior couples visited Bosnia and Herzegovina regularly to organize, execute, and complete development projects. Periodic efforts to locate isolated members and investigators occurred and senior couples were eventually assigned in Sarajevo and Banja Luka in 2011 and 2012, respectively. This decision resulted in the formation of dependent groups that met in senior missionaries' or members' homes that over time were transformed into groups or branches that met in rented facilities separate from senior missionary housing. In late 2012, a third city opened to proselytism (Tuzla) where a group was organized that held church services in the senior missionaries' apartment. By early 2013, the Tuzla group had nearly 20 attending church services on some Sundays and had six converts baptized within the first few months of senior missionaries living in the city.

In Burma, multiple senior missionary couples have served for many years although there remains no official LDS presence and no formal proselytism activity. Senior couples primary work on humanitarian and development projects and also provide some

training and mentoring for Burmese members and branch leadership. In 2006, a senior missionary served as the president of the Rangoon Branch but by early 2013 a local member served as branch president. Senior missionary couples have laid much of the groundwork needed for the assignment of young, proselytizing missionaries once legal status for the Church can be secured and mission and area leaders determine it is feasible to assign young, proselytizing missionaries.

In Burundi, senior missionaries played a central role in reopening the country to missionary activity and organizing a branch. After nearly two decades of no formal LDS proselytism, two senior missionary couples provided supervision and administrative support for the Church in Bujumbura upon the reestablishment of an official church presence in September 2010. Senior missionaries not only provided support to several young missionary companionships assigned but also facilitated the renovation of buildings for church meetings and the opening of the first branch in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in Uvira.

In Cambodia, senior missionaries in the early 1990s began teaching English prior to an official church establishment and the assignment of young proselytizing missionaries. Senior missionaries played a critical role in initial proselytism efforts as young missionaries were originally not permitted to leave their apartments in the evenings without the accompaniment of senior missionaries.

In the Republic of Georgia, senior missionaries under the Russia Rostov Mission were assigned shortly after the dedication of Georgia for missionary work in 1999. Senior missionaries primarily provided humanitarian and development work but performed some administrative support that ultimately led to the organization of the first branch in 2002, the attainment of legal status in 2005, and the assignment of full-time proselytizing missionaries in 2006.[1]

In Guyana, a senior missionary couple arrived in 1988 prior to any known LDS presence. Senior missionaries held the first sacrament meeting service that year and facilitated the organization of the first branch and the reception of government recognition in 1989.

In Laos, senior missionaries have served since the early 2000s[2] and have provided administrative support to the Church's sole branch in Vientiane that was organized in 2003.[3] In the late 2000s, senior missionaries participated in facilitating the organization of home and visiting teaching in the branch. In early 2013, the first young elders were assigned to Laos on humanitarian and education assignment and were locally supervised by senior missionary couples.

In Mongolia, the Mongolian government requested LDS assistance with adapting higher education institutions in the country following the transition from communism to democracy. Six senior couple missionaries were called and arrived in Mongolia in September 1992. Missionaries also came with the purpose of proselytism, which was understood by the Mongolian government. All six of the senior couples were assigned to serve in the capital of Ulaanbaatar[4] and eventually paved the way for the arrival of young, proselytizing missionaries and the organization of branches primarily comprised of Mongolian members.

In Nepal, senior couple missionaries began serving on humanitarian assignment as early as 2001 and assisted with branch leadership development at approximately the same time as the formation of the first branch in the country in Kathmandu. Nepali members have led the Kathmandu Branch under the supervision of a senior missionary couple and mission president. Senior missionary couples have continued to provide administrative support to the branch but primary focus on humanitarian and development projects.

In Rwanda, the Uganda Kampala Mission assigned the first senior missionary couple to serve in Kigali in 2010; the same year the Church dedicated Rwanda for missionary work. Humanitarian senior missionary couples have provided some leadership support and have raised public awareness through completing numerous humanitarian and development projects throughout the country. Senior missionary couples worked in coordination with mission and area officials to ensure the Church could legally assign foreign missionaries, resulting in the introduction of the first proselytizing missionaries in 2012.

In Suriname, senior missionaries arrived in 1988 and established an LDS presence that included the organization a branch in Paramaribo, monitoring the operation of dependent units operating in Lelydorp and Uitkjik, and establishment of a permanent missionary presence.[5]

In Turkey, senior missionaries served on humanitarian assignment for 15 years prior to the assignment of young, proselytizing missionaries in 2012.[6] Important tasks accomplished by missionaries included local member support and public relations.

In the Turks and Caicos Islands, a senior missionary couple was assigned in late 2008 and began the first formal missionary activity in Providenciales. High receptivity to missionaries' efforts resulted in scores of convert baptisms within less than a year, culminating in the organization of a branch in 2009 with over 70 attending sacrament meetings.[7] Young male missionaries were assigned shortly thereafter.

Establishing an Initial LDS Presence or Revitalizing Outreach among a Particular Ethnolinguistic Group

Some senior missionary couples receive special instruction to establish an LDS presence or revitalize outreach among a

particular ethnolinguistic minority group.

In Australia, senior missionaries have provided specialized outreach among Indigenous Australians in Northern Territory and northern Queensland.[8] These efforts have included coordinating with local leaders and young full-time missionaries in reaching rural Indigenous Australian communities without their own independent units and translating church materials into simple English to improve gospel comprehension and testimony development.

In Mexico, the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission assigned a senior missionary couple to work with Tzotzil Amerindian members in facilitating leadership development, finding new meetinghouses, teaching music skills needed for congregations to adequately sing hymns, setting up the Perpetual Education Fund, and conducting public affairs work. In September 2011, the four Tzotzil-speaking branches were organized into the newly organized Chojolhó México District and a senior missionary couple provided some leadership support for the new district. This same senior missionary couple orchestrated the opening of a group in Oxchuc providing the first outreach efforts among the Tzeltal Amerindians.

In the United States, senior missionary couples have served in various units in the Navajo Nation as "member support missionaries" to promote member activity and maintain LDS outreach in dozens of small communities.

Local Leadership Development, Organizing Additional Branches/Districts, Expanding Outreach in Countries with an LDS Presence

Senior missionary couples have acted as a catalyst for jumpstarting church growth in many areas of the world through local leadership development, participating in the organization of additional units, and the formation of districts.

In the Republic of Georgia, senior missionaries participated in the opening of Rustavi to missionary work in mid-2012; the first city outside Tbilisi to have missionaries assigned.

In Ghana, no organized LDS congregations functioned and no known Latter-day Saints were known to reside in Sunyani prior to the assignment of LDS missionaries from the Ghana Cape Coast Mission in late 2010. Initially six young full-time missionaries and a senior missionary couple were stationed in Sunyani and simultaneously organized three groups under the Ghana Cape Coast Mission Branch to facilitate growth in the communities of Estates, Nkwabeng, and Penkwase. A senior missionary served as the first district president of the Sunyani Ghana District in 2012 until his replacement by a local Ghanaian church leader.

In Kenya, one senior missionary couple serving in the Kilungu Hills reported that 163 convert baptisms occurred during their two-year service. This senior missionary couple also coordinated four temple trips that permitted 58 members to attend the Johannesburg South Africa Temple. By mid-2009, there were 11 members serving full-time missions or had received mission calls. Services and supports provided by the senior couple included leadership training, development projects, English classes, missionary preparation classes, music education, and temple trips. Missionary preparation classes and temple trips in particular have helped generate many stalwart members who become pillars of strength for their congregations. Temple trips often require six months to a year in planning to obtain the needed visas and documentation for members to make the long journey to Johannesburg, South Africa; the closest temple to Kenya.

In Malawi, a senior missionary couple provided leadership and member support to a recently organized branch that experienced major socialization challenges and was almost discontinued. Due to the efforts of senior missionaries, these challenges were resolved resulting in rapid membership growth and the formation of a second branch within the area a year later.

In East Malaysia, senior missionary couples have mentored new branch presidents and district leaders in locations such as Sibu and Kota Kinabalu where most members have joined the Church within the past five years.

In Mozambique, senior missionaries arrived to open Quelimane to missionary work in 2012. Active membership growth and leadership development permitted the organization of an independent branch within a year that had as many as100 attending meetings.

In the Solomon Islands, senior missionary couples played an important role in the establishment of the first district in the country and the first official branch off of the main island of Guadalcanal in 2011. A senior missionary served as the first district president and was replaced by a local member in 2012.

Translation Efforts

There have been some instances when senior missionary couples have promoted or facilitated translation efforts.

In the Republic of Georgia, a senior missionary couple facilitated the creation of a translation team to begin translating the Book

of Mormon into Georgian in the early 2010s.

In Kenya, senior missionaries serving in the Kilungu Hills were instrumental in advocating and encouraging the official approval by Church Headquarters to begin translation work into the Kikamba language.

In Laos, senior missionaries participated in a committee regarding the translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Lao in the late 2000s.

Resolving or Complying with Legal Issues

There have been instances of senior missionary couples resolving or complying with legal issues to maintain an LDS presence.

In Kazakhstan, senior missionary couples have served in Almaty and Astana for years on humanitarian assignment. In 2012, senior missionary couples facilitated the Church's official re-registration with the government to keep congregations operating by coordinating with local members and young full-time missionaries to have at least 50 consenting members and investigators in each city to secure registration. These efforts were successful and perpetuated the Church's presence in these two cities notwithstanding tightening religious freedom restrictions within the past decade.

In Namibia, senior missionary couples have continuously served notwithstanding the periodic withdrawal of missionaries due to visa renewal and issuance difficulties. In 2012, senior missionaries provided support despite the disruption of full-time missionary activity for a period lasting several months.

Maintaining an LDS Presence in Countries with Unfavorable Growth Conditions

Senior missionary couples have proven effective and instrumental in maintaining an LDS presence in some countries where societal or cultural conditions have deteriorated and threaten the continuity of any LDS presence. These locations generally have government restrictions on religious freedom or a tiny population located far from other mission outreach centers.

In Greenland, senior missionaries were assigned in the early 2010s and provided member support as there are fewer than 30 members nationwide and only one branch in Nuuk.

In Lebanon, humanitarian missionaries were reassigned to Beirut in the late 1990s and assisted a small branch.[9] Senior missionary couples have regularly served in Lebanon and may one day prepare the way for the assignment of young missionaries if religious freedom improves and political instability subsides.

In Syria, full-time senior missionaries served regularly as humanitarian workers prior to the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War. Due to safety concerns there have been no senior missionary couples assigned since early 2011.

Successes

Some mission leaders and senior missionary couples have achieved significant accomplishments in spurring church growth that appear almost unimaginable for a single missionary couple to accomplish within a period of two years or less. There have been numerous instances of the Church utilizing a single senior missionary couple to successfully establish the Church in a country or in a previously unreached city and the conversion of scores or hundreds of individuals by the end of their service, oftentimes with good convert retention and the organization of a branch that becomes more self-sufficient. These successes demonstrate the critical value of senior missionary couples to church growth, especially in locations without an LDS presence.

Opportunities

A single senior missionary couple can provide far-reaching outreach with relatively few resources and difficulties. For example, assigning a senior missionary couple to unreached countries where there are few, if any, restrictions on religious freedom such as Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Senegal, and Timor-Leste (East Timor) could have a long-term impact and lead to the successful, permanent establishment of an LDS presence. Senior missionaries can be assigned to lesser-reached or unreached ethnolinguistic minority groups and given the task to establish a church presence among a particular people such as among Amerindian groups in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Colombia and ethnolinguistic minority groups in Russia. Senior missionaries can provide valuable contributions to expanding LDS outreach in to previously unreached administrative divisions of countries with a limited church presence such as in virtually all countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A senior missionary couple can function like a mini-mission president for a newly opened area for missionary work or in a

location distant from mission headquarters that has full-time missionaries assigned. For example, the Church in Angola relied on a senior couple who acted as the mission president of the mission region for Angola under the Mozambique Maputo Mission in 2012. This approach has good potential for expanding outreach in locations with vast unreached areas such as Brazil, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Russia.

Senior missionary couples can provide invaluable assistance in addressing socialization problems in individual congregations and reversing stagnant growth trends. There have been numerous examples of senior missionary couples working closely with individual congregations and instilling greater self-sufficiency in leadership as they teach members correct procedures and doctrines for church administration and gospel living. The Church in Eastern Europe and East Asia has frequently experienced socialization and member activity problems that may be better addressed by a senior missionary couple rather than utilizing young full-time missionaries. Senior couples can educate and mentor active members and promote reactivation and member-missionary work.

Challenges

The Church remains highly dependent on North Americans to staff senior couple missionary manpower. The only other world region where sizable numbers of senior couples serve missions is Oceania. There have been extremely few senior missionary couples who have served full-time missions from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Europe. Insufficient funds to finance a mission, health problems, short life expectancies, few married members who qualify to serve senior missions, lower member activity rates compared to North America and Oceania, and little long-term vision from local and regional church leaders in encouraging senior members to serve missions has limited the number of senior couples who serve missions from outside North America and Oceania.

A lack of senior missionary couples has delayed or prevented the opening of some countries and cities to missionary work. For example, missionaries serving in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission reported that an insufficient number of senior missionary couples delayed the opening of Gabon to formal proselytism for several months as church leaders were awaiting for the assignment of a French-speaking couple to begin formal proselytism activity. In 2012, the Zambia Lusaka Mission president lamented that he endeavored to open additional provinces in Zambia to formal proselytism but that there were an insufficient number of senior couples to permit outreach expansion.

The Church in some locations is dependent on senior missionary couples to properly function. Oftentimes senior missionary couples designated as member and leadership support missionaries are assigned to locations where the Church may not be able to properly function without their support. The continued assignment of senior missionaries to some of these locations has appeared to hamper the development of self-sufficiency as members have relied on outsourced missionary manpower to meet their needs. This finding places emphasis on the importance of gradually handing off administrative and leadership responsibilities that are initially or briefly undertaken by senior missionary couples to avoid local member dependence on foreign missionaries.

Future Prospects

Continued economic challenges for some mission-aged couples in North America, increasing demand for senior missionary couples in many areas of the world as opportunities for outreach expansion remain favorable, and the lack of senior couples outside North America that serve full-time missions predict a mixed outlook for increasing the number of senior missionary couples worldwide. The surge in the number of young men and women serving missions presents an unprecedented opportunity to utilize senior missionary couples to orchestrate the opening of scores of previously unreached countries, administrative divisions, and proselytism efforts targeting ethnolinguistic groups that have not received concentrated LDS outreach. A commensurate increase in the number of senior couples serving missions will be required for the Church to accelerate outreach expansion at a time when resources are abundant and opportunities for growth remain favorable in many areas of the world. Church programs where stake and district presidents, mission presidents, bishops, and branch presidents identify senior couples within their congregations, stakes, or districts and encourage these couples to serve full-time missions may be an appropriate method to augment senior couple missionary manpower. Wise appropriation of limited senior missionary couples will be required regardless of changing numbers of senior couples serving missions in order to achieve greater growth worldwide.

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