LDS Growth Case Studies

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The Surge in the Full-time Missionary Force: Unprecedented Opportunities for Accelerating LDS Growth

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Overview

This case study reviews the announcement reducing the minimum age for missionary service and the subsequent surge in the number of members called to serve full-time missions. The potential impact on membership growth and the dynamics of supply and demand-sided factors are discussed. Opportunities for accelerating church growth are identified and examined for major regions in the world with the greatest potential for growth. Challenges for accelerating LDS growth through increasing the number of missionaries serving is analyzed. Limitations to this case study are reviewed and prospects for future growth are predicted.

Mission Age Revision and Impact on Missionary Numbers

During his opening remarks at the October 2012 General Conference, LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson announced a reduction in the minimum age for missionary service from age 19 to age 18 for men and age 21 to age 19 for women. The Church reported an unprecedented number of new missionary applications that were received during the weeks following the historic announcement. The number of missionary applications received at Church Headquarters increased from approximately 700 a week to over 4,000 a week, with women comprising slightly more than half of applications.[1] Consequently, the Church received 10,000 more missionary applications during the month of October than would have been otherwise been expected if no adjustment to the minimum mission age occurred. The number of missionary applications remained at least twice as high as the normal average for wintertime months during late 2012 and early 2013.[2]

Although no official statements were originally made on numerical projections for full-time missionaries serving in the coming months and years, Elder David F. Evans of the Seventy reported in February 2013 that "there will be a surge that will last for about three years" but that "even after the surge, the number of missionaries will be much higher than what it has heretofore been."[3] In February 2013, church leaders noted that the number of full-time missionaries serving recently surpassed 60,000[4] for the first time since early 2003. During the first three months of 2013, the Church issued an average of 1,300 mission calls per week and reported that 36% of new mission calls were issued to women;[5] a significantly increase as in 2007 the percentage of women in the full-time missionary force was only 13%.[6] In early April, LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson noted that there were 65,634 members currently serving full-time missions with over 20,000 members who have received their mission calls and over 6,000 currently in the interview process.[7] In late May 2013, the number of full-time missionaries serving reached 68,700 and church officials projected that this number would topple 85,000 by the one-year anniversary of the historic announcement of reducing the minimum mission age.[8] At the time the number of members who had received mission calls and were awaiting to be set apart as missionaries stood at more than 22,500 whereas an additional 6,200 were in the application process.[9] In June 2013, the number of missionaries surpassed 70,000 for the first time.[10]

Within the first six months of the announcement reducing the minimum mission age for men and women, the Church made several additional announcements regarding how it would accommodate such a massive, sudden surge in the number of members serving full-time missions. Immediately following the announcement, church leaders indicated that the duration of missionary training center (MTC) training would be reduced in order to house larger numbers of missionaries.[11] In late 2012, mission presidents throughout North America reported that the standard complement for most, if not all, missions would be increased to 250 to accommodate surplus missionary manpower. This revised complement was up to 100 more than the number of missionaries previously assigned to many of these missions. In January 2013, the Church reported that it would repurpose its high school in Mexico City (Benemérito de las Américas) into a new MTC for Mexico in order to provide sufficient facilities for thousands of additional missionaries soon to serve. The proposed MTC was anticipated to accommodate upwards of 1,500 missionaries; significantly more than the previous MTC that housed approximately 200 missionaries at a time.[12] In

February 2013, the Church announced that 58 new missions would be organized in July 2013 to accommodate the enormous influx in the number of full-time missionaries serving.[13] This marked the first time since 2008 that no mission consolidations were announced and the second highest percentage increase in the number of missions for a single year within the past century as the number of missions would increase from 347 to 405. In April 2013, the Church announced that the administrative organization of missions would be modified to provide separate leadership infrastructure for male (elder) and female (sister) missionaries.[14] During the first half of 2013, the Church considered options for expanding its flagship MTC in Provo, Utah as the number of missionaries anticipated to enter its doors that summer was projected to reach as high as 7,800; nearly twice the original capacity of the center of 4,000.[15] By late May, the Church had begun housing the first of up to 1,700 missionaries to be assigned to temporary MTC facilities in apartment buildings nearby the preexisting Provo MTC. As of mid-2013, the Church had not provided any demographic information regarding the country of origin for newly called missionaries since the revised mission age announcement but the vast majority of the surge in the full-time missionary force appeared attributed to North America but with noticeable improvements in the percentage of members serving missions in many other regions of the world.

In the first half of 2013, unofficial reports from international church leaders relayed from full-time missionaries and local church leaders suggest that the full-time missionary force may reach 90,000 to 100,000 by year-end 2013. During the first half of 2013, reports from full-time missionaries serving in several areas of the world suggested that the Church was making preparations for the organization of many more missions in 2014.

Supply-side versus Demand-side Factors

The surge in the number of full-time missionaries serving has many ramifications for changing the overall growth trends of the LDS Church. Sociology of religion researchers who study the growth of religious groups have identified two categories of factors that influence growth. These factors include supply-sided factors, namely the availability of resources within the religious group organization or variables that can be controlled by religious groups, and demand-side factors, or those variables and conditions that influence the receptivity of a religious group in a particular population.[16] Increasing numbers of missionaries significantly affects supply-sided factors in the LDS Church and has potential to augment growth if greater manpower is channeled into locations with receptive populations.

Potential for Membership Growth

The surge in the full-time missionary force suggests that there may be a noticeable increase in the number of convert baptisms within the next couple years. Within the past decade, the average missionary has baptized five converts a year. Maintaining this same ratio as the number of missionaries serving increases may yield as many as 425,000 convert baptisms in a single year if there are at least 85,000 missionaries serving throughout the year. Accelerated membership growth has potential to further increase the number of missionaries serving if converts who are mission-aged remain active and commit to serving a mission.

Opportunities for Accelerating LDS Growth

One of the greatest opportunities for accelerating LDS growth worldwide through the surge in the number of members serving full-time missions centers on opening additional locations to missionary activity and establishing a permanent LDS presence in these locations. This approach has the greatest potential for success in locations where receptivity to the Church is moderate to high and where the Church can obtain larger numbers of visas to accommodate additional foreign missionaries. Long-term success will require the maintenance of reasonably high convert baptismal standards.

In the United States, there are favorable opportunities for reaching lesser-reached and unreached cities and medium-sized towns in states such as Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. For example, in the Tennessee Nashville Mission missionaries have reported recent successes assigning missionary companionships to as many as 12 cities that have no ward or branch present but a small number of members and investigators. These cities have had family home evening (FHE) groups organized that convene in a cottage meeting format, presenting a casual but spiritual lesson providing a non-pressured approach to member-missionary work. One city experienced rapid growth in church attendance within the first six months of a member group functioning as sacrament meeting attendance increased from 20 to over 150. There are also opportunities for establishing language-specific outreach programs that target ethnic minorities groups in additional languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Russian, and Somali.

In Brazil, there are over 400 cities with over 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS ward or branch and where there are no full-time missionaries assigned and no known church presence. The Church has experienced good success in virtually all cities in Brazil recently opened to missionary work with often dozens of converts baptized within the first year and member groups quickly maturing into independent branches. The assignment of a single missionary companionship for each of these cities would require approximately 1,000 missionaries, or less than four percent of the anticipated increase in the worldwide missionary force within the first year of the revised mission age in effect. The potential impact of aggressively opening these cities to missionary work could be enormous on national membership and congregational growth trends. If the average companionship baptized 10 converts within the first year, as many as 4,000 more converts would be added nationwide - 11% more than the increase of membership for 2012. If half of these cities had a branch organized within the first year, the number of congregations would increase by 200, or 10% more than at present. Some of the more populous unreached cities could have multiple missionary companionships assigned and each missionary companionship can focus on starting a member group within their respective

proselytizing area.

In Central America, there are good opportunities to establish outreach programs for additional Amerindian groups that currently receive no specialized outreach in their native language or that have no specialized mission program that addresses unique cultural or societal conditions. In Mexico, there are no missionaries assigned to teach in the indigenous language of scores of Amerindian peoples, including many groups that have at least 50,000 people such as the Chinantec, Chol, Huastec, Mam, Mazahua, Mazatec, Me'phaa, Mixe, Mixtec, Nahuatl, Otomi, Popoluca, Purepecha (Tarascan), Tarahumara, Totonac, Tzeltal, and Zapotec. Only the Huave, Tzotzil, and Yucatan Maya receive specialized outreach in Mexico although at times this may include only a single church unit that provides church services in the native language. In Guatemala, there are no missionaries assigned to teach in the indigenous language of several Amerindian groups that number over 50,000 people such as the Achi, Ixil, Poqoman, Q'anjob'al, and Tz'utujil. The allocation of even a tiny portion of surplus missionary manpower to begin more careful and coordinated outreach efforts among these lesser-reached and unreached peoples could yield long lasting results.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, there are good opportunities in many countries to expand national outreach and more thoroughly saturate cities with a current church presence. In Ghana, there are 27 cities with over 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS presence - most of which are located in the predominantly Christian south. Within the past few years, the Church has followed a pattern for simultaneously organizing as many as four member groups in newly opened cities such as Sunyani and Tamale, and Techiman. Implementing this same approach in currently unreached cities such as Achiaman, Agogo, Aflao, Anloga, Berekum, Dunkwa, Ejura, Hohoe, Prestea, Tafo, and Wenchi has potential to accelerate growth. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with 175 million people yet only 23% of the population resides in locations where LDS units operate. Ethiopia is another of the most populous countries in Africa with nearly 100 million people yet LDS outreach occurs in areas populated by only four percent of the population. Assigning larger numbers of missionaries to these countries has potential to accelerate growth, especially if additional locations are opened to proselytism. In Tanzania, there are approximately 50 million people yet there are LDS congregations in only three cities. Cameroon, Malawi, and Tanzania each have a tiny LDS presence that and no mission based within the country notwithstanding no known restrictions on the number of foreign missionary visas and widespread religious freedom. Assigning larger numbers of full-time missionaries to Sub-Saharan Africa has excellent potential to accelerate growth, especially if missionaries are assigned to previously unreached cities and to locations where there are isolated members and investigators petitioning mission and area leaders for a formal church establishment in their communities.

In Asia, there are good opportunities for opening dozens of additional cities to missionary activity in countries where the Church can obtain larger numbers of foreign missionary visas. In Cambodia, the Church has not opened any additional cities to missionary activity since 2007 notwithstanding good receptivity nationwide and rapid membership and congregational growth occurring for many years in the 2000s. Currently only seven cities and towns have branches established whereas there are at least ten cities with 30,000 or more inhabitants without LDS presence. 18 of the 24 Cambodian provinces receive no LDS missionary outreach. During the first half of 2013, the size of the full-time missionary force in Cambodia increased to 150 yet there did not appear to be any plans to open more locations to missionary work. In the Philippines, the Church has a sizable presence nationwide with nearly 700,000 nominal members and over one thousand wards and branches yet there remain dozens of medium-sized and large cities and hundreds of small cities and towns without an LDS presence. Focus on opening FHE groups and member groups in lesser-reached communities has potential to improve member activity rates and accelerate congregational growth.

In Eastern Europe, there remain many countries where LDS missionaries do not serve in all cities with over 100,000 people such as Poland, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. With surplus missionary manpower in virtually all areas of the world where additional missionary visas can be secured, the Church can usher in a new era in outreach expansion efforts in countries like Romania and Ukraine. It is likely that proselytism efforts in previously unreached cities will yield comparatively few convert baptisms but this process will nonetheless be important to fulfilling the divine commission to take the gospel to all the world and establish branches in additional locations once a sufficient number of active members and church leaders can be attained.

In Oceania, larger numbers of full-time missionaries has potential to accelerate growth in several different ways. In countries with a pervasive LDS presence where the Church numbers among the largest religious groups such as Tonga and Samoa there remain dozens of villages that do not have a ward or branch that meets within the village. Additional numbers of missionaries assigned to these countries and given the task to establish member groups, branches, or wards in these locations has good potential to accelerate growth and revitalize reactivation work. Several countries in the region have populations that exhibit strong receptivity to LDS teachings but remain minimally reached by the Church such as Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Assigning larger numbers of missionaries and forming additional missions in these countries has good prospects to open provinces that have never receive an LDS witness. In Vanuatu, the Church has experienced rapid membership and congregational growth in recent years and currently two percent of the national population is nominally LDS. However there remain many islands with sizable populations that receive no LDS outreach. Appointing some missionary companionships as traveling missionaries who visit these islands and assess conditions for organizing member groups and permanently assigning missionary companionships has potential to accelerate national outreach expansion and membership and congregational growth.

Challenges

Visa regulations pose significant challenges for the Church to accelerate growth in many countries through utilizing surplus international missionary manpower. Rather, the Church in many countries will depend on larger numbers of local members serving full-time missions in order to augment the number of full-time missionaries serving and to open additional areas to proselytism. Some of the greatest foreign missionary visa problems are in countries that support populations of over 100 million

and that have a tiny LDS presence. In Indonesia, the Church has been restricted to an extremely limited number of foreign missionary visas with no significant increases in this number within the past couple decades. Larger numbers of Indonesian Latter-day Saint youth serving missions will be required to reverse a trend lasting at least a couple decades in which there has been no noticeable increase in the number of Indonesian members serving full-time missions. In India, political groups voicing concern regarding foreign Christian missionaries proselytizing Hindus has influenced legislation and severely limits the number of foreign missionary visas secured by the Church. Consequently the massive increases in the number of missionaries serving worldwide will likely have no noticeable effect on the number of missionaries assigned to serve in India unless larger numbers of Indian members serve missions and are assigned to the Church's two missions headquartered in India. In Russia, recent visa laws require foreign missionaries to leave the country every 90 days and renew their visas. This legislation has created significant logistical difficulties as missionaries must leave the country every three months. The travel costs and the disruption of missionary activity incurred by foreign missionary travel pose serious dilemmas of whether increasing the number of missionaries assigned to Russian missions is worth all of the hassle and expense.

The channeling of surplus missionary manpower into countries where the majority of church members reside and directing these missionaries to engage in relatively unproductive activities such as tracting, reactivation efforts, and service for members is counterintuitive toward making progress reaching areas of the world where the LDS Church has a limited presence if there is any presence at all. There remain approximately 35 sovereign countries where there are no LDS congregations operating and where no missionary activity occurs. Although many of these countries have predominantly Muslim populations where Islam has influenced government legislation that bars or severely restricts Christian proselytism, there are several countries where Christians comprise the majority or where there are no significant restrictions on religious freedom that prevent the assignment of foreign, Christian missionaries such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, and Timor-Leste (East Timor). There has never been a greater opportunity for the Church to concentrate on opening these countries to missionaries due to the oversupply of full-time missionaries worldwide. Delaying the planning of opening these countries to missionary activity may require the redistribution of mission resources in other areas of the world when the number of missionaries is more limited in order to free resources. Assigning the tens of thousands of additional missionaries in the coming years to locations that have had an LDS presence and modest or low receptivity to the Church could result in the Church missing the window of opportunity to reverse slow church growth that has persisted since the late 1990s.

Limitations

The Church has provided little information regarding the geographic allocation of the contemporary surplus in missionary manpower. Reports on the assignment of surplus missionaries have originated from mission presidents and full-time missionaries serving in many areas of the world. No official statistics or estimates are available regarding the geographic distribution of mission calls since the revised mission age announcement. It is unclear how the Church determines the size of mission complements aside from the availability of missionary visas and requests from mission and area presidencies. It is extremely difficult to accurately project the number of full-time missionaries that will serve in the coming years due to several dynamic variables. These variables include how reducing the minimum mission age will influence the percentage of male and female members who serve missions in the long-term, how much of an effect the passing of the double-cohort of missionaries will have on future missionary numbers, and whether additional adjustments occur in the length and age of missionary service such as lengthening missions for sister missionaries from 18 months to two years.

Future Prospects

Increases in the number of full-time missionaries serving in the tens of thousands, the creation of 58 new missions in a single year with prospects for many more missions to be organized in 2014, and encouraging reports from the Church in many countries that local members have begun serving missions in larger numbers than ever before suggest the beginning of a new era in LDS Church growth and missionary activity that has potential to radically accelerate virtually all statistical indicators of growth. Balancing surplus missionary manpower between areas of the world where there are vast areas untouched by the Church and areas where receptivity may be lower but where there is greater member and local leadership support will be required for the Church to experience progress addressing multiple types of missionary needs simultaneously. In 2014, the Church appears likely to organize dozens of additional missions in countries where the majority of surplus missionary manpower originates from such as the United States, Brazil, and Mexico. New missions that have the highest potential to experience rapid growth and make historically unprecedented headway establishing the LDS Church are most likely to be located in Sub-Saharan Africa and lesser-reached areas of Oceania and Latin America due to populations in these regions exhibiting historically high receptivity to the Church and past successes establishing the Church in these regions.

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