

LDS Growth Encyclopedia on Missionary Work and Church Growth (Missiology)

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Health and Safety Issues

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Posted: July 21st, 2014

Crime, corruption, government/societal restrictions and abuses of religious freedom, accidents, low living standards, and disease comprise many of the common health and safety issues which can influence church growth and missionary activity. These issues require church leaders and missionaries to implement certain standards and risk management policies in order to reduce potential harm to its members, missionaries, interests, and public image.

Crime and corruption have comprised one of the most pervasive and dangerous health and safety issues for the Church. In North America and Western Europe, urban areas with high crime rates pose safety concerns for assigning foreign missionaries. Homicide rates in Central America are among the highest worldwide and present safety and security threat for LDS missionaries. Illegal drug trafficking around the world poses safety concerns. Threats of violence and political instability have limited proselytism efforts in some locations. Missionaries serving in the Russia Samara Mission in 2011 reported that they were not allowed to enter some neighborhoods or cities because of threats of violence. In Serbia, threats directed at Americans have resulted in many precautionary evacuations of full-time missionaries, most of whom have been from North America. Ethnic violence and lawlessness in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands poses risks, especially for nonnative missionaries. Surges in political instability and violence have disrupted missionary work in Bolivia, limiting proselytism activities or requiring the periodic evacuation of North American missionaries. Government instability and lack of government control in many areas of Colombia have posed safety threats. High rates of violence in many larger cities in southwestern Colombia like Cali and Buenaventura are a concern. Kidnappings and narco-terrorism are common in some areas. Venezuela suffers from high crime rates and has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. In Afghanistan, conditions remain dangerous for foreigners living and working in the country due to a lack of government control in many regions and Taliban insurgency along the Pakistani border. Armed kidnappings and the murder of foreign aid workers have occurred on an ongoing basis. In Pakistan, suicide bombings frequently occur without warning in the largest cities and the most unstable areas near the Afghan border. Fighting in the Kashmiri region restricts missionary work. High crime and corruption in Karachi pose safety threats. No non-native LDS missionaries serve in Pakistan due to safety issues. In Sri Lanka, violence between ethnic groups poses some danger to native and foreign missionaries. In the Philippines, the LDS missionary department has not sent nonnatives to Mindanao for over a decade due to political instability and threats against Americans from Muslim separatist groups. In Haiti, severe corruption and lawlessness have prevented the assignment of nonnative full-time missionaries for a decade. In Angola, political instability and civil war prevented proselytism efforts until the late 2000s. In South Sudan, political instability, war, and ethno-religious conflicts remain ongoing concerns notwithstanding its recent independence. Millions have perished over the past few decades as a result of civil war and ethnic hostilities. In South Africa, violent crime poses major obstacles for church growth. Full-time missionaries limit proselytism based on location and time of day due to these safety concerns.

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Missionaries have been kidnapped, assaulted, and murdered although these more serious crimes have been relatively uncommon. Two LDS missionaries were assassinated in Bolivia in 1988. In 1997, a North American full-time missionary serving in Buenos Aires received a gunshot wound to the jaw but fully recovered.[1] In Russia, two LDS missionaries serving in Saratov were kidnapped for four days and were safely released in 1998.[2] That same year, a group of drunken men stabbed one missionary to death and wounded another in Ufa.[3] In the late 1990s, two missionaries in the Russia Novosibirsk Mission were assaulted in their apartment and one was injected with an unknown substance which was later found to be Novocain once he returned to the United States. In 1999, a full-time North American missionary serving in Cote d'Ivoire died from being stabbed in the chest in a random attack.[4] In 2001, a North American full-time missionary was wounded with a gunshot wound after being attacked in Rio de Janeiro.[5] In 2002, a senior missionary sister serving with her husband in Cote d'Ivoire was murdered in her apartment in a robbery attempt.[6] In 2005, a North American missionary received a head wound in a robbery attempt.[7] In 2006, a missionary in Virginia was shot and killed while proselytizing.[8] The sexual assault and robbery of a pair of sister missionaries serving in the South Africa Durban Mission in 2006 resulted in the withdrawal of all sister missionaries from South Africa that year.[9] In 2007, four missionaries serving in Nigeria were abducted and held hostage for five days.[10]

Government and societal restrictions and abuses of religious freedom have posed health and safety concerns for the Church in some locations resulting in diminished or nonexistent LDS outreach. In Russia, threats of violence against foreign missionaries have occurred and some LDS missionaries have experienced intimidation and wrongful accusations of violating the law. Religiously unstable areas such as the North Caucasus pose a safety threat to missionaries. In Central Asia, threats of violence or physical intimidation directed towards nontraditional Christian groups are greatest in Azerbaijan, outside of Georgia proper (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In Azerbaijan, non-traditional Christian groups report frequent government surveillance, arrests, and police raids. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, many religious groups that do not comply with the law are heavily persecuted by the government and have many of their members imprisoned in harsh conditions. In Pakistan, violence targeting religious minorities presents a safety concern for members and missionaries, which include intimidation, kidnapping, sexual and physical violence, and murder. In Sri Lanka, there are threats and acts of violence targeting Christian missionaries. In China, strict obedience to government policies pertaining to religious conduct is required for the perpetuation of positive relations between the Church and the government. Deviation from government approved activities jeopardizes the legitimacy of any Church activity among Chinese citizens and foreigners, is against LDS Church policy, and poses risks to individual members. Other religious groups that have disregarded local laws or suffer poor relations with the government have had many members arrested and sentenced to labor camps for charges of disrupting public order. In Egypt, terrorist attacks and violence directed towards non-Muslims is a major concern for the LDS Church and any potential missionary activity. Iranian Latter-day Saints face considerable persecution and harassment from government, family, and friends. There have been instances of Iranian LDS converts fleeing relatives who seek to physically harm them. Christian converts are typically harassed and sometimes arrested. Any travel of American nationals to Iran at present is extremely unsafe. It is not possible for United States citizens to obtain a visa to enter Iran due to the lack of diplomatic relations. Americans who have traveled to Iran or who have wandered into Iranian territory have been detained for extended and indefinite periods, and Iranian-Americans with dual citizenship and family ties to Iran have sometimes been arrested on allegations of spying. Travelers from the United Kingdom and other Western European nations have generally been able to obtain tourist visas, although any religious proselytism is strictly forbidden. In Iraq, lawlessness and societal abuses of religious freedom have been extreme in many areas. Religious minorities, Sunnis in predominately Shi'a neighborhoods, and Shi'as in predominately Sunni neighborhoods have frequently reported receiving death threats which demanded their departure. Failure to comply to such threats often results in death. The frequency of these threats has reportedly declined in recent years as stability has been restored, but remain a serious problem. Recent acts of violence that were religiously motivated include beheadings, drive-by shootings, suicide bombings, kidnappings, and church and mosque bombings. Islamist extremists and al-Qaeda operatives are common perpetrators of the crimes[11] but are rarely caught or brought to justice due to an inadequate and undertrained police force, widespread corruption, and endemic complicity of various ethnic and religious factions in obstructing investigation into members of their own groups. In Israel, Christian missionary groups are often physically intimated and harassed by some radical Jewish groups. Terrorist attacks pose a safety risk. In Palestine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to pose a safety threat due to terrorism and extremist groups targeting Christians that proselyte. In Yemen, conditions for foreign missionaries are very precarious and are currently unfavorable even for humanitarian assistance. Several missionaries have been kidnapped by Islamic extremists and remain missing. In Nepal, violence towards religious minority groups is a safety concern for missionaries and members.

Accidents account for the primary means that missionaries become injured or killed, including car accidents, boating accidents, and accidental asphyxiation. Dangerous roads, inconsistent enforcement of traffic laws, and drunk driving pose safety concerns in many areas. LDS sister missionaries serving in Comodoro Rivadavia died by accidental asphyxiation while they slept in their apartment in 1989.[12] In 1990, two full-time missionaries from the United States serving in Guatemala drowned in Lake Atitlan when their boat capsized.[13] That same year the mission president of the Zimbabwe Harare Mission was killed in a car accident and his wife was critically injured.[14] In 1993, the president of the Guatemala City North Mission and a mission counselor perished in a plane crash upon returning from a district conference in the remote Flores Guatemala District.[15] In 2003, a North American full-time missionary died by electrocution in a failed attempt to rescue a boy in a deep puddle in Gualeguaychu.[16] In 2006, a North American full-time missionary was killed by a drunk driver in San Luis, Argentina.[17] In 2007, President Ralph L. Duke of the Uganda Kampala Mission was killed in a car accident in Uganda.[18] In 2008, a North American missionary died in a hit-and-run car accident in the Brazil Salvador Mission.[19] That same year, a missionary in the South Africa Johannesburg Mission died in a car accident.[20] In early 2010, two missionaries died by natural gas asphyxiation in their apartment while sleeping in Romania.[21]

Low living standards create challenges for obtaining adequate medical care and avoiding disease. The Church has often delayed or limited outreach in locations with poor access to medical care and low living conditions. Southeast Asia and rural areas of industrializing East Asian nations experience poor standards of living and exhibit high risk for the spread of infectious disease. Waterborne diseases, malnutrition, and low quality medical care are major issues. In China, pollution and the negative environmental impact of rapid industrialization over the past few decades have deteriorated the health for many Chinese. Most of the largest cities have poor air quality. The leading cause of death is respiratory and health diseases resulting from air pollution. Approximately 300 million are estimated to drink contaminated water. Health issues exist in ultra-modernized Hong Kong where the SARS outbreak in 2003 interfered with the functioning of the church and missionary activity as the arrival of new missionaries was delayed and local members held small sacrament meetings in their homes.[22] In Thailand, the spread of the disease has been propagated by illicit sexual relations and drug use. In Bangladesh, health issues include threats typical of poorer, tropical nations such as hepatitis, typhoid, malaria, and rabies. In India, sanitation can be poor in both rural and urban locations. Many small islands have poor access to health care due to their small populations, remote locations, and low standards of living. Storms and travel by boat preset safety concerns. HIV/AIDS infects 10% of the adult population or more in Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique, and Malawi. Many Africans live below the poverty line.

Prospects appear favorable for the Church to become more adaptable and aggressive in achieving church growth despite health and safety issues due to some of the most volatile world regions becoming more self-sufficient in meeting their own missionary needs, improving living standards in most countries, and emphasis from mission leaders on missionary safety,

nutrition, medical care, hygiene, and preventative medicine. Augmentation of the international missionary force has potential to reduce some health and safety risks if there is less dependence on North American missionary manpower to staff international missions as North Americans are often the highest risk for safety and health issues due to sociopolitical conditions and unfamiliarity with local customs and lifestyles.

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