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

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LDS Community

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LDS community consists of the degree to which members form social networks with fellow members and apply church teachings within the family and within the Church. Developing a sense of community for the Church plays a critical role in reducing emigration to the United States, improving convert retention rates, increasing the prevalence of members marrying within the Church, and augmenting the rate at which young adults serve full-time missions. Although LDS community does not inoculate against inactivity and other problems that curtail growth, locations with a strong sense of LDS community often experience steady long-term church growth due to greater socialization opportunities and a shared sense of belongingness among members. LDS community is most effectively established when it is present on both a micro and macro level ranging from individual age cohorts within individual congregations to entire administrative church areas.

LDS apostle Elder L. Tom Perry admonished the following regarding the formation of LDS community:

”Our community of Saints is not one of exclusion but one of inclusion, built upon a foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. It is open to all of us who love, appreciate, and have compassion for our Father in Heaven’s children. The dual foundations of our economic welfare are the principles of charity and hard work. It is a progressive community in which we educate our youth in courtesy and civility and also in the deeper truths of the restored gospel. Our community has a spiritual center, allowing us to live with the companionship of the Holy Spirit that guides and directs us in our lives."[1]

Former member of the Presidency of the Seventy, Elder Charles Didier explained that LDS community is important in the spiritual development of members and how it promotes church activity and growth:

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"The Church blesses our lives in at least three ways. At church we develop caring relationships with others—relationships that can help sustain us during times of crisis. As we serve in callings, participate in sacred ordinances, and sacrifice, we feel needed and of worth, and we grow in charity. And as we gain knowledge about sacred things essential for our salvation, we learn what and how to worship, and we are able to have hope in the Resurrection and in the Atonement."[2]

Several factors influence the establishment of LDS community. The role of full-time missionaries in the functioning of wards and branches comprises a critical role in the initial development of community. Congregations that have little, if any, dependence on full-time missionaries to properly function and meet their own administrative and ecclesiastical needs generally develop a stronger sense of community than those where full-time missionaries play a critical role in staffing local church leadership, fellowshipping less-active members and new converts, and performing member responsibilities such as blessing the sacrament and home teaching. The lack of LDS community in congregations where the local church heavily depends on full-time missionaries appears attributed to the social assimilation of individual full-time missionaries into a congregation and the subsequent disruption of social relationships and local church administration when these missionaries transfer to new areas. New members and less-active individuals often become more socialized with full-time missionaries rather than fellow members in units where missionaries play a central role in running church services and meeting local leadership needs.

The operation of a missionary training centers (MTCs), temples, and church schools and universities is correlated with higher levels of LDS community. MTCs often carry a sense of tradition and local importance to Latter-day Saints as successive generations serve full-time missions. The operation of a temple in a country often conveys the image that the Church has established a full-fledged, self-sufficient presence where it can meet the basic spiritual needs of its members within their

homelands. The Church has a well-established community in many countries where there are church-owned and operated schools, colleges, and universities such as in a few locations in Polynesia and in the United States. The establishment of church schools and universities provides an invaluable resource for offering the opportunity for young adults to obtain advanced degrees in an LDS-friendly environment, and marrying within the Church.

Vibrant youth programs are often found in congregations where there is a strong sense of LDS community. These programs are crucial for retaining youth converts, a demographic which has historically comprised the majority of convert baptisms. Youth programs are generally available in these conditions due the Church concentrating resources on a younger demographic that tends to be more receptive than adults. Retained child and youth members provide long-term growth for the Church as members remain active into adulthood, serve missions, and marry within the Church. The most successful programs accommodate a wide range in diverse backgrounds of youth from the seasoned, ultra-active, born-in-the-covenant members to interested nonmember friends and less-active individuals.

Government restrictions on religious freedom often foster a sense of LDS community, although this condition generally coincides with reduced national outreach capabilities. The Church in Pakistan, mainland China, Nepal, Belarus, and Laos numbers among the most self-sufficient among countries with the fledgling LDS presence as members must rely on each other to live LDS teachings, conduct missionary work within the confides of the law, and develop leadership skills to meet local needs. Many of these countries produce a high number of full-time missionaries notwithstanding religious freedom restrictions.

One of the greatest benefits of the Church developing a sense of LDS community centers on convert retention efforts. LDS community encourages local members to provide service and care for one another, thereby providing a support system for new converts who may face challenges consistently attending church, living church teachings and standards, and facing opposition from nonmember family and friends. Home and visiting teaching often provide the apparatus of transitioning new converts from the support of missionaries to ordinary members. Not all congregations with a strong sense of community exhibit good member-missionary activity, but those that do often report good convert retention and higher numbers of convert baptisms. A disconnect between full-time missionaries and ordinary members in proselytism and conversion efforts often comprises the primary obstacle in achieving good convert retention rates in locations with established LDS community, especially when members become socially entrenched within their ward or branch.

The Church in Indonesia stands as an excellent example of where the Church has established a strong sense of community notwithstanding a tiny presence in the country, restrictions on missionary activity, and slow church growth over the past two decades. Limited numbers of missionary visas have prevented the assignment of sizable numbers of foreign missionaries for decades. Consequently, local members have comprised the majority of the full-time missionary force in Indonesia for most, if not all, of the history of the Church in the country. The Church in Indonesia has achieved some of the highest member activity rates in Southeast Asia due to the strong sense of LDS community as returned missionaries have remained in their home country and contribute to strengthen the Church. Due to these successes in the development of LDS community, the Church in Indonesia is one of the few countries in the world where there are two stakes and less than 10,000 members.

A lack of community has set back the growth of the Church in many countries. Single adult members frequently face the challenge of being unable to marry fellow members in the Church. Many choose to marry outside of the Church or to remain single. A large number of active members relocate to the United States or another country with a large LDS presence for socialization purposes. The often Americentric image of the Church in many areas of the world has exacerbated this problem as many active members consider relocating to the United States to pursue foreign study at an LDS university or college. Many of these members determine to seek long-term residency or immigration to the United States, thereby siphoning active membership from other areas of the world.

There are times when the presence of LDS community has deterred growth. Some returned missionaries and ordinary members report that LDS communities can become closed off to new move-ins, new converts, and investigators especially if active members have had a long-term presence in the area. Some wards or branches can become too aggressive to fellowship investigators who begin attending church. In South Korea, some small wards have a well-established, active community of members that immediately pressure investigators to get baptized. Additionally, these members urge investigators to become totally immersed in local church programs and activities, with little accommodation to help these individuals become accustomed to LDS teachings and practices. In Latin America, missionaries in many locations report a strong sense of community in individual congregations but indifference to welcoming new investigators and converts due to the expectation that they will become inactive shortly after baptism. Returned missionaries and church leaders from virtually all areas of the world report that many individuals stop attending church due to taking offense from a fellow member or church leader.

The outlook for the Church to strengthen its sense of community appears highest in countries where there is high receptivity, participation in organized religion, few opportunities for immigration to North America, and self-sufficient, full-time LDS missionary forces. The Church in Sub-Saharan Africa, lesser-reached countries in Oceania, and in countries in Asia where government restrictions on religious freedom occur appear the most likely to have a strengthening sense of LDS community within the coming two decades whereas the Church in Eastern Europe, the Lesser Antilles, and some areas of Latin America will likely make little progress because of unfavorable conditions for establishing LDS community. The establishment of additional church schools and universities may improve or accelerate the formation of LDS community in many of these less-favorable locations, although there appears no indication that the Church will found any additional educational institutions within the foreseeable future.

[1] Perry, L. Tom. "Building a Community of Saints," General Conference, April 2001. https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2001/04/building-a-community-of-saints

[2] Didier, Charles. "The Church: A Community of Saints," Ensign, April 2006. https://www.lds.org/ensign/2006/04/the-church-a-community-of-saints