

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

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Meetinghouses

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Posted: July 21st, 2014

The Church constructs and maintains meetinghouses to provide facilities for holding worship services, Sunday School classes, and other meetings for wards, branches, and dependent units. The style, architecture, size, construction, and function of meetinghouses varies significantly around the world. Meetinghouses often consist of rented spaces and makeshift structures built from local materials in locations with a recently established LDS presence whereas meetinghouses frequently consist of church-constructed buildings with a chapel, gymnasium, baptismal font, and other amenities in locations with an older church presence and a sufficient numbers of members to merit the construction of such facilities. In some urban locations, the Church has constructed multistory meetinghouses that include multiple chapels. In Hong Kong and New York City, the Church has constructed meetinghouses where a portion of the building consists of a temple whereas other space is utilized for housing local congregations and other church facilities such as mission offices.

Area presidencies have frequently placed minimal standards for congregations to reach before a church-built meetinghouse can be approved in a given area, specifically regarding sacrament meeting attendance and other measures of member activity. This logic stems from two assumptions: 1. The greater the number of active members in a given area, the more permanent of an LDS presence has been established which can support a meetinghouse for the long term and 2. Larger numbers of active members are better served by a church-built meetinghouse than by other alternatives. This philosophy has generated mixed results. Some congregations have become more self-sustainable as the focus has been placed on improving activity and retention rates. In other congregations, local leaders overemphasize goals to increase sacrament attendance in order for area leaders to approve the construction of a meetinghouse. This results in a temporary increase in sacrament meeting attendance that is sustained for the predetermined amount of time to qualify for approval, followed by a decline in church attendance after approval is granted. This result often occurs when increasing church membership does not represent high-quality and committed active membership, but rather represents superficial efforts to simply have people attend church. For example, in Croatia the Zagreb Branch had as many as 90 attending Sunday meetings in the mid-2000s resulting in the branch qualifying for a church-built meetinghouse. However, by the time the meetinghouse was completed church attendance plummeted to 30. Similar findings have occurred throughout the international church.

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Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, the LDS Church utilized local members for constructing chapels and raising funds to rent, remodel, and construct meetinghouses. There was little central authority in approving and standardizing meetinghouse construction resulting in a variety of designs and layouts. Meetinghouse architecture and designs were gradually standardized during the first half of the twentieth century and were fully standardized by the 1960s.[1] The Church called labor missionaries to construct meetinghouses in some areas of the world such as Polynesia in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s, the Church in Samoa implemented an aggressive meetinghouse construction program headed by labor missionaries.[2] Rapid membership and congregational growth often accompanied meetinghouse construction efforts in Polynesia during this period as outreach expanded to additional islands through church planting. In the mid-twentieth century, the Church began to transition from relying on its own members to provide the labor to construct meetinghouses to contracting construction companies to build meetinghouses. The Church began standardizing meetinghouse designs in some areas of the world around this time, such as in the western United States in order to maximize efficiency of building designs and minimize costs.

One of the most significant meetinghouse standardization efforts occurred in the 1980s. The Church announced that new designs would be utilized for meetinghouse construction and that new meetinghouse designs called for smaller buildings than previously constructed. Two generic designs for ordinary meetinghouses were approved named the "Aspen" and "Sage" plans. The Aspen Plan was the Church's smallest meetinghouse layout to be utilized for small branches. The meetinghouse design consisted of a large, square multi-purpose room surrounded by small classrooms. Expansion of the meetinghouse could occur through a series of add-on stages which included building a separate chapel, additional classrooms, and a separate cultural

center as the number of church attendees increased. The Sage Plan meetinghouse design met the needs of wards and reduced the number of square feet by 5,000 compared to previous ward meetinghouse designs. Smaller meetinghouse size was initiated to reduce energy costs. This meetinghouse design seated 200 in the chapel area as the average ward in the Church had fewer than 200 in attendance on any given Sunday.[3]

Shortly after the unveiling of new meetinghouse layouts, the Church announced in 1982 that financing policies for meetinghouse construction changed to not only consider the three previous requirements (reaching the minimal standard of the number of members attending sacrament meeting, identifying a need to construct a meetinghouse, and submitting a construction master plan) but also to consider tithe-paying faithfulness and consistency in financial and statistical reporting for each congregation. The standard of tithe-paying faithfulness demanded that a prescribed percentage of adult members had to be full-tithe payers for a meetinghouse proposal to be approved; a number often calculated by ascertaining the percentage of adult males holding the Melchizedek Priesthood.[4] In 1991, the Church requested that local members significantly contribute to meetinghouse care and cleaning.[5] This meetinghouse maintenance program was exclusively applied to the United States and Canada as congregations in these nations often had more active members and most members resided within reasonable proximity of their assigned meetinghouse.[6]

In the last couple decades, the Church has constructed meetinghouses in an increasingly more diverse number of locations and has utilized a more diverse range of designs to meet local needs. In 2002, the Church adopted a new meetinghouse standardization program for areas around the world which provided meetinghouse layouts to meet the needs of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Utilizing the same meetinghouse layouts throughout the world has facilitated the recognition of meetinghouses belonging to the LDS Church by those passing. However, the primary motivation to standardize church meetinghouse designs has centered on reducing construction costs. Current standardization programs appear to cut building costs by as much as 20%. Local architects are hired by the Church to construct meetinghouses according to standardized floor plans for approved meetinghouse layouts.[7] In recent years, the Church has appeared to promote more spacious meetinghouse designs throughout the world than in previous years. As congregational and membership growth rates have declined over the past couple decades, the number of meetinghouse construction projects have also decreased. In 1979, there were 750 new buildings or major meetinghouse expansion projects underway[8] whereas in 2004, there were only 451 meetinghouses under construction.[9]

The Church has built some meetinghouses with the expectation of future growth. In Malawi, the first meetinghouse built by the Church was dedicated in 2005 in Blantyre. The meetinghouse was built by the Church to handle future growth in the city and to become a stake center once a stake is organized.[10] The first district in Malawi was created in Blantyre in 2011. In Cambodia, the Church constructed a large meetinghouse in Phnom Pehn in 2004[11] that was planned as a stake center for when the Church created its first stake in the country. Other similar projects have occurred in additional countries where receptivity is moderate to strong and growth potential is high.

There have been challenges for the Church to build meetinghouses that meet local needs and are culturally appropriate. For example, in Mozambique missionaries report that some LDS chapels are ostentatious and convey an image of a wealthy, American church. Although the Church seeks to provide clean and beautiful chapels for worship, some of these structures are reported by missionaries to seem very out of place and perhaps even condescending in the context of Mozambican living standards, in addition to the high costs incurred in their construction and maintenance. In Mongolia, the Church has built several large meetinghouses that are reminiscent of meetinghouses in the Western United States rather than religious buildings in Asia.

There are times when insufficient meetinghouse space has slowed church growth. Most of these instances have occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Republic of the Congo, the Church has struggled to find adequate facilities to house congregations in Brazzaville resulting in significantly diminished congregational growth during the 2000s compared to the 1990s. In Togo, missionaries reported in 2012 that one of the primary barriers to organizing the country's first stake in Lome was waiting for construction to be completed for a stake center to accommodate enough members for stake meetings. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many congregations use outdoor space for Sunday School classes and many church attendees sit outside and view sacrament meeting services through open doors and windows.

Renting apartments or building space, holding meetings in members' homes, and constructing meetinghouses from natural materials in less-developed areas of the world present excellent opportunities for spurring greater LDS Church growth. Apartments or building space are often easily acquired and permit flexibility in meeting the number and location of active membership in an area. Holding meetings in members' homes provides extensive opportunities for growth as this is a thrifty approach which reinforces fellowship and congregation unity. In Papua New Guinea, LDS meetinghouse construction has accommodated local needs as many congregations meet outdoors or in large huts or tent-like structures built by local members. In Sub-Saharan Africa, members and missionaries report that some church services and meetings occur outdoors when building space is inadequate for accommodating those in attendance. Each of these approaches can occur within a short period of time, allowing church leaders to act quickly when a perceived need to expand outreach and form an LDS congregation arises. As active membership increases in a given area, mission leaders can evaluate where additional meetinghouse locations can be established to perpetuate growth. All three of these alternatives to constructing a church-built meetinghouse exact fewer costs to the international church, encourage frugal use of tithing funds, and foster dynamic growth and mission outreach expansion.

In 2012, senior missionaries reported that the Church had begun a new meetinghouse construction program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to build more modest chapels by training returned missionaries in construction techniques. The pilot program not only helped the Church resolve its challenge to more rapidly build additional meetinghouses to accommodate growing active membership but to provide the needed trained manpower to accomplish this feat. Trained meetinghouse

construction workers would later be able to apply their skills in other vocational settings, thereby providing education and improved employment opportunities to unemployed or under-employed returned missionaries. A senior missionary couple began teaching basic construction and masonry skills to successive teams of returned missionaries. By spring 2012, the Church had trained two meetinghouse construction teams and had plans to build approximately two dozen new meetinghouses throughout the country. As of 2014, the program appeared to be limited to the Democratic Republic of the Congo but similar programs have excellent potential to meet meetinghouse needs and accelerate church growth in other areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and Latin America.

Prospects for the Church to build additional meetinghouses and adapt its meetinghouses to local circumstances appear favorable for the foreseeable future as evidenced by recent efforts from church leaders to construct or rent facilities that are thrifty and culturally appropriate. The Church will likely continue to modify its standardized meetinghouse designs to meet changing needs and its increasingly more diverse membership. There remains a need for reevaluating the process for congregations qualifying for church-built meetinghouses in some areas of the world to curtail local church leaders and missionaries from temporarily or artificially inflating active membership and church attendance.

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