



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

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Church Planting

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Church planting is the process of opening a new congregation in a previously unreached or lesser-reached location. The term was coined by Protestant denominations and rarely used by the LDS Church and its members to refer to this process. Instead, the Church and members generally refer to this process as "opening a city", "creating a branch", or making a location its "own branch or ward." Church planting differs from splitting already functioning units to create new congregations (e.g. "church splitting" in that church planting traditionally starts from scratch in the target location. The first formal church services in a previously unreached location are generally held as a member group under the direction of a nearby branch or ward. The Church may plant new units in locations with or without known members.

Church planting does not entirely rely on geography to determine suitability to form a new congregation. A specific ethnic group may be targeted and a specialized language congregation that provides worship services and classes in the traditional language of the ethnic group may be established. The Church engages in language-specific church planting in a handful of nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. However, these efforts are overwhelmingly concentrated in the United States where nearly a thousand non-English wards and branches operate.

The Church has historically relied on two primary methods for church planting: fortuitous circumstances and the assignment of full-time missionaries. Fortuitous circumstances such as American expatriate members relocating to a location without a church presence for business purposes or converts joining the Church outside their native country and returning to their homelands thereafter have driven the expansion of the Church into previously unreached areas. For example, the Church entered many African nations through this process. In Kenya, American USAID employees and their families held the first church services in their homes.^[1] In Tanzania, the first church members were American and Canadian families.^[2] and the first Tanzanian convert joined the Church in Cairo, Egypt. In Uganda, the first indigenous members joined the Church in Europe and later returned to their homeland prior to the establishment of the Church. American members held the first church services. Church planting among non-English speaking peoples in the United States has often occurred following the baptism of sizable numbers of converts from a particular group by English-speaking missionaries, the relocation of refugees or immigration of members from countries with high percentages of Latter-day Saints such as in Oceania, or a combination of the two. Although these situations do not totally sync with the philosophy of church planting per se because these situations arise inadvertently and there are already members present in these locations, the effort to locate isolated members and organize a formal church group to meet their needs offers valuable opportunities for expanding outreach and establishing new congregations.

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The assignment of full-time missionaries invariably accompanies more overt and organized methods of church planting in the LDS Church. The Church has heavily relied on missionaries to open not only cities but establish an initial presence in a country. This was particularly evident in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s when missionaries opened most countries to proselytism and planted congregations with no preexisting church infrastructure or known members. In more recent times, the Church has continued to heavily rely on the efforts of full-time missionaries to establish an initial presence in previously unreached countries. The first congregations in Montenegro and Macedonia, for example, were organized principally through the efforts of full-time missionaries.

The opening of Sunyani, Ghana stands as the Church's crowning achievement in tactful and premeditated church planting within the past decade. In late 2010, the Church made a radical decision to open the city where there were no known members and assigned multiple full-time missionary companionships. Each missionary companionship held church services in a rented facility that doubled as a missionary living quarters and commissioned missionaries to form multiple member groups simultaneously. The diligent efforts of these missionaries and the excellent vision and foresight of mission and area leadership culminated in the maturation of all four church plants from groups into branches and the organization of a district to include all

four units by 2012. Success in Sunyani has sparked similar church planting initiatives in other cities in Ghana, such as Kumasi and Obuasi, and in other West African countries, including Benin and Togo.

The establishment of a Slovakian-speaking congregation in Sheffield, England constitutes the greatest recent success in the Church planting a congregation among a traditionally lesser-reached population in a country where the Church has generally extended little language-specific outreach among foreign-born individuals and communities. Success in organizing a group that had over 70 individuals attending church services within a matter of weeks after its formal organization has been unparalleled in other ethnic-specific church planting efforts within countries with similar LDS missionary approaches. Factors that influenced the startling success in Sheffield include mission leaders quickly mobilizing missionary resources for an ethnic minority group, church leaders understanding the value of community and church for nonnative peoples, and mission leaders maintaining close coordination with the missionary department and mission leaders in the Czech/Slovak Mission.

Church planting is invaluable and crucial for a church to grow in its active membership and outreach capabilities. Newer congregations are significantly more likely to baptize more converts, and split to form additional wards and branches than older congregations. Church planting provides for a dynamic method to opening more areas to proselytism, and establish congregations that become self-sufficient and future centers of strength.

With the recent exception of West Africa and a handful of non-English speaking ethnic minority groups in the United States, there have been few instances of LDS church planting within the past decade. Mission leaders have often advocated for concentrating surplus mission resources into wards and branches that experience the greatest or the least self-sufficiency in missionary activity rather than allocating these resources to unreached locations and populations. These hesitant missionary tactics have contributed to a noticeable slowdown in virtually every indicator of LDS growth over the past decade such as congregational growth, membership growth, stake growth, and an increasing members-to-units ratio (i.e. larger numbers of members per congregation on average, suggesting declining member activity rates).

There are abundant opportunities for church planting in nearly every nation that permits enough religious freedom for Christians to assemble and perform at least passive missionary approaches by member referral. A lack of strategic vision for church planting has left 95% of the population of India unreached notwithstanding sporadic missionary efforts for over the past 150 years and the headquartering of a mission for India since 1993. There has been no indication that mission and area leaders have attempted any significant outreach expansion efforts in Indonesia for decades resulting in 89% of the population unreached by the Church. In Brazil, there remain over 400 cities with over 20,000 inhabitants that have no LDS congregations notwithstanding 34 missions and a full-time missionary force in the country for nearly a century.

Reliance on fortuitous events and the assignment of full-time missionaries for church planting has many limitations for church growth. First, the Church relies on a series of uncontrollable events such as members relocating to unreached cities to fulfill the divine commission to take the gospel to the entire world. The speed and consistency of these unintentional and happenstance situations is wholly inadequate to expand outreach in a timely manner. Consequently, there remain dozens of countries that have only a few LDS congregations that operate in just one or two cities, resulting in only a tiny percentage of the population residing in locations where congregations operate. Second, full-time missionaries are limited in numbers. Although the recent surge of members serving full-time missions has prompted the organization of 58 new missions in 2013 alone, few efforts have been made in the least-reached and most populous countries in the world. Third, full-time missionaries provide no sense of enduring community and leadership base to allow for the development of self-sufficiency. Missionaries seldom stay assigned to the same congregation for longer than six to nine months. Rapid cycling of missionaries through missionary transfers culminates in reduced accountability for converts baptized and challenges in sustaining continuity in convert retention. Furthermore, mission leaders often assign multiple missionary companionships to a single fledgling congregation. Over time, the oversaturation of full-time missionaries in tiny units results in dependence on full-time missionaries to fulfill ordinary member duties like home and visiting teaching, and holding leadership positions. Fourth, there are some countries that exhibit good opportunities for church planting that prohibit the assignment of foreign full-time missionaries. Dependence on full-time missionaries for church planting results in little to no progress opening units in additional locations. Fifth, ordinary members experience a reduced sense of duty and responsibility in the church planting process as full-time missionaries unduly accomplish this feat. This results in the reinforcement of the expectation that overt missionary activity and opening unreached areas to the Church lays on the shoulders of full-time missionaries, who are limited in their numbers, effectiveness, and abilities to provide a long-term, enduring LDS presence.

Prospects appear most favorable for the Church to plant congregations in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines, and Brazil due to recent church planting successes, high receptivity in most locations, larger amounts of mission resources allocated to these areas, recent church planting vision implemented by mission and area leaders, and generally widespread religious freedom. A renewed church planting and outreach expansion emphasis in many of the most populous countries such as India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, and the United States is desperately needed to help reverse slowing church growth trends and increase the percentage of the population reached by the Church in these nations.

[1] "Three nations dedicated in Africa," LDS Church News, 23 November 1991.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21541/Three-nations-dedicated-in-Africa.html>

[2] "Tanzania," Facts and Statistics, retrieved 9 August 2012.
<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/tanzania/>