Introduction: The Need to Retool LDS Missionary Work

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Need to Retool LDS Missionary Work

Author: Matt Martinich

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The June 2013 announcement emphasizing member involvement in missionary work came at a time when the Church experienced diminishing returns from its full-time missionary force. The Church began instituting significant changes to its missionary program in the early 2000s due to concerns regarding the spiritual quality and maturity of its full-time missionaries, mediocre replica rolex watches convert retention rates in most areas of the world, and a disconnect between full-time missionaries and local members. A letter from the First Presidency of the Church dated December 11th, 2002 announced increased worthiness standards for full-time missionary service[1] and the number of full-time missionaries subsequently declined by approximately 10,000 - a 17% decline within a two-year period. In mid-2004, the Church released a new missionary guide called Preach My Gospel that restructured the missionary lessons for investigators, redefined and clarified the role of full-time missionaries, and provided additional information to improve the spiritual quality and readiness of new missionaries.

Little to no progress has been achieved despite these modifications to the missionary program. Although Preach My Gospel improved missionary worthiness standards, modest convert retention remains widespread in most areas of the world. Member activity rates have remained constant or have slightly decreased in nearly all countries around the world that support the largest LDS populations.

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The Church in Mexico boasts the second largest number of Latter-day Saints on church records in the world with approximately 1.37 million members as of year-end 2014. The Church experienced steady membership and congregational growth rates in Mexico during the late twentieth century, but reported severely incommensurate membership and congregational growth during the early 2010s. Consequently church-reported membership increased by approximately 170,000 between year-end 2009 and year-end 2014 (a 14% increase over five years), yet the Church reported a net decrease of nine congregations (wards and branches) during this five-year period. Increases in the number of congregations strongly correlates with active membership growth as new congregations must be organized to accommodate larger numbers of members attending and participating in church. As commensurate membership and congregational growth suggests good convert retention and stable member activity rates, these findings indicate severe convert retention problems for the Church in Mexico. Similar findings have occurred in many other countries within the past decade as membership growth rates have remained constant or have slightly decelerated yet congregational growth rates have been stagnant or have declined. The Church in Panama, for example, experienced some of the most discouraging LDS growth during this period as the number of members increased from 39,559 in 2002 to 48,669 in 2012 (a 23% increase) whereas the number of congregations declined from 111 (35 wards, 76 braches) to 72 (39 wards, 33 branches); a 35% decrease. Membership growth rates have far outpaced congregational growth rates in many other Latin American nations such as Brazil. The Church in Brazil reported an impressive increase of nearly 400,000 members between 2004 and 2014 yet the number of congregations increased by only 292. This suggests that one new congregation was added for every 1,340 new members during this 10-year period – an enormous number considering most congregations in Brazil report approximately 100-150 active members.

These concerning findings are not limited to Latin America. The Church in South Korea reported a net decline of 24 congregations (a 16% decrease) between 2004 and 2014 despite church-reported membership increasing by 10,000 (a 13% increase). The Church in the United Kingdom reported a net decline of 31 congregations (an 8.5% decrease) and an increase in church-reported membership of approximately 9,000 (a 5% increase) during this same period. The Church in Spain reported a net increase of one congregation (a 0.7% increase) and an increase of nearly 15,000 members (a 38% increase). Similar findings during the 10-year period from 2004 to 2014 have been reported for scores of other nations such as Russia (net decline of 19 congregations, net increase of 4,203 members), Mongolia (net increase of 3 congregations, net increase of 4,682 members), Indonesia (net increase of 1 congregation, net increase of 1,201 members), the Philippines (net increase of 96 congregations, net increase of 170,000 members), Jamaica (net decrease of 1 congregation, net increase of approximately 600 members), Germany (net decrease of 11 congregations, net increase of 2,338 members), Guatemala (net decrease of 11 congregations, net increase of approximately 60,000 members), and Mozambique (net increase of 12 congregations, net

increase of 4,992 members).

These findings suggest that the introduction of Preach My Gospel has made little to no progress in improving the productivity of missionary work in the LDS Church. Trends in the average number of converts baptized per missionary support this conclusion. The worldwide average number of converts baptized per missionary a year remained virtually unchanged between 2004 and 2012 at approximately five convert baptisms per missionary a year. The number of converts baptized per missionary noticeably declined following the surge in the number of members serving full-time missions to 3.4 convert baptisms per missionary in 2013 and 3.5 convert baptisms per missionary in 2014.

The Church in the United States reports the largest number of members and congregations in the world. The Church reported 6.47 million members and 14,000 congregations in the United States as of year-end 2014. The Church has appeared consistently maintain member activity and convert retention rates between 2004 and 2014 as evidenced by commensurate membership and congregational growth. The average LDS congregation in the United States slightly increased from 449 to 461 during this period and the nationwide member activity rate has appeared to remain at approximately 40%. However, membership growth rates have declined within the past decade despite increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to American missions. The number of missions increased from 106 to 120 yet the annual membership growth rate declined from 1.7% in 2004 to 1.1% in 2014. The annual net increase in the number of church-reported members for the United States decreased from approximately 96,000 to 67,000 during this 10-year period. Consequently the 2014 LDS membership growth rate for the United States was only a mere 0.3% higher than the 2014 population growth rate, suggesting nearly commensurate membership and population growth. This is an alarming statistic for several reasons. First, Latter-day Saint families report higher birthrates than the overall population. Consequently natural growth in the Church through increase in children of record should outpace the United States' overall population growth. Second, the Church baptizes tens of thousands of new converts a year in the Church's 100+ American missions. These converts should also bolster year-to-year membership growth for the Church at a rate higher than the growth of the overall population. Third, recent emphasis on convert retention and reactivation efforts should also correlate with greater success baptizing nonmember relatives in less-active or inactive Latter-day Saint families.

The lack of progress between 2004 and present-day appears attributed to several factors. Missionaries in many of the highest baptizing missions have reported inconsistent implementation of Preach My Gospel guidelines in their proselytism efforts and a persistent, mechanical approach to meeting arbitrary baptismal goals set by mission and local church leadership. Most converts baptized since the introduction of Preach My Gospel have been rushed through the prebaptismal process and baptized within the minimum amount of time for preparation. These approaches have often taken little care for the long-term activity of individual converts and have placed greater importance of setting and achieving arbitrary goals rather than making a lasting impact evidenced by true conversion and lifelong discipleship. There have been some reports of mission leadership approving the baptism of converts who have not even attended a single sacrament meeting service notwithstanding Preach My Gospel cautioning that converts should have attended "several" sacrament meeting services, live LDS teachings pertaining to chastity and the Word of Wisdom, and meet the bishop or branch president prior to baptism.[2] There have been some extreme cases in Brazil in which missionaries have baptized converts the same day that they began receiving the missionary lessons. This salesman, quota-driven approach to finding, teaching, and baptizing new converts has resulted in many missionaries sensationalizing the LDS gospel message without focus on instilling consistency in church attendance and integrating local church members in the conversion process. It is therefore no wonder that LDS member activity and convert retention rates have suffered in most areas since the implementation of Preach My Gospel as its principles, vision, and message has become distorted, misinterpreted, and improperly implemented in many areas of the Church. LDS apostle Elder Boyd K. Packard shared the following observation in a new mission president's seminar in 2009 that references a need for gospel-centered teaching and appropriate vision to achieve real growth: "Building the Church seems to center around buildings and budgets and programs and procedures, but somewhere in the midst of it the gospel is struggling for breath."[3]

LDS leadership has acknowledged a need for greater member-missionary participation in order to improve the success of its missionary program. Some church leaders have recommended that ordinary members and church leaders study Preach My Gospel and apply its principles within the realm of member-missionary activity, although the manual nowhere states that it is intended for this use. Although there are many parallels and some overlap between the guidelines, instruction, and principles of full-time missionary work and member-missionary work, this usage of the manual can become awkward and ineffective for resolving the primary challenges and needs for improving member-missionary participation among ordinary members in the Church. Many members have struggled with holding conversations with curious nonmembers about specific LDS beliefs and practices, let alone extending appropriate invitations for them to learn more. Many members have struggled with identifying opportunities to share the gospel with others and tailor specific invitations to the needs and circumstances of individuals or families. Consequently, there has been a need for the Church to develop greater resources to promote member-missionary activity and help ordinary members become more effective in sharing the gospel with their family, friends, and acquaintances.

Poor member-missionary participation has originated from several factors. Perhaps the greatest deterrent to member-missionary activity has been the erroneous belief of many members that full-time missionaries are primarily responsible for finding investigators to teach, preparing prospective converts for baptism, and reactivating less-active or inactive members. The operation of a full-time missionary force in the LDS Church complete with its own organizational infrastructure and guidelines has reinforced this attitude as full-time missionaries fall under the jurisdiction of their mission presidents and the Missionary Department. The finding and baptism of new converts through the missionaries' own efforts has created challenges for local ward, branch, and group leadership to sufficiently meet and evaluate the readiness of these individuals for baptism and to provide pre-baptismal fellowship and socialization within their congregation.

Social entrenchment within the LDS community stands as another major challenge for improving member-missionary participation. Active, lifelong Latter-day Saints often have few friends and family outside of the Church and intentionally or

subconsciously restrict their social lives to fellow active members of the Church. The motivation for this restricted interaction with nonmembers appears rooted in members desiring friendship and socialization with individuals who possess similar values and interests, fears and discomfort with asserting oneself with individuals who may not share the same beliefs and morals, and the large amounts of time many members spend with one another attending church and church-sponsored activities such as scouting, temple trips, activities for priesthood and Relief Society, and mutual. Thus, many Latter-day Saints report that their interactions with nonmembers frequently occur due to employment or education. Some researchers have identified that Latter-day Saints possess a defensiveness about their beliefs and insecurity with the way others perceive them.[4] Defensiveness and stereotype threat have likely contributed to Latter-day Saints intentionally and unintentionally restricting their social networks and openness with sharing the gospel.

The massive surge in the full-time missionary force instigated by the October 2012 lowering of the minimum age for missionary service has prompted church leaders to reevaluate the missionary program. During 2013, the number of members serving full-time missions jumped from 58,990[5] to approximately 83,000;[6] a 40.7% increase within a single year. The number of full-time missionaries peaked at approximately 89,000 and has more recently stabilized at approximately 84,000.[7] The massive increase in missionaries necessitated the organization of 58 new missions and an increased missionary complement to 250 for many missions around the world in 2013. Most surplus missionary manpower has been allocated to areas of the world where the largest numbers of Latter-day Saints reside. New missions in North, Central, and South America accounted for 74% of all new missions created in 2013 notwithstanding 83.6% of world church membership and approximately 15% of the world population residing in the Americas. The decision by church leaders to concentrate the majority of surplus missionary manpower to areas where the Church has been more established indicates an urgency to improve member-missionary participation.

The Church announced the broadcast "The Work of Salvation" to provide guidance on methods to improve missionary work and describe plans for retooling the LDS missionary program. Following the broadcast, the Church launched a new website to provide resources and instruction on improving member-missionary participation and coordination between full-time missionaries and ordinary members, local church leaders, and stake and area leaders.

[1] “Statement on Missionary Work,” First Presidency letter, 11 Dec. 2002, as cited in Preach My Gospel p. 46

[2] "Qualifications for Baptism," Preach My Gospel, p. 204

[3] Swensen, Jason. "Church advances as missionaries perform labor," LDS Church News, 4 July 2009. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/57557/Church-advances-as-missionaries-perform-labor.html

[4] "Apostle Urges Mormons to Speak Up, Avoid Defensiveness," www.mormonnewsroom.org, 14 August 2009. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/apostle-urges-mormons-to-speak-up-avoid-defensiveness

[5] "Statistical Report, 2012," General Conference, April 2013. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/statistical-report-2012

[6] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "In the Lord's vineyard," LDS Church News, 28 December 2013. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/64268/In-the-Lords-vineyard.html

[7] Lloyd, Scott R. "LDS Church announces 11 new missions, 2015 mission president assignments," Deseret News, 9 January 2015. http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865619186/Creation-of-11-new-missions-indicates-the-work-continues-apace.html?pg=all