Samuel Meyer
Mormon Missionaries

Overview
Every year, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the Mormon Church) sends 70,000 missionaries[1] around the world. While most Christian denominations send out some number of missionaries, the Mormon Church is unusual in its central organization of the details. The Church strongly encourages unmarried members to go on mission shortly after graduating from high school. Missionary journeys last two years for men and 18 months for women. Prospective missionaries fill out an application and interview with local leaders. If they are accepted, all missionaries are first sent to one of the fifteen Missionary Training Centers around the world, where they are trained in evangelism, and if needed, a new language. This training will last 1-3 months. Then they continue to their assigned mission site. Housing, training, and logistical support are all organized by the Mormon Church. Strict controls are kept on interactions with friends outside the mission to keep missionaries focused.

What is being organized?
The primary resources organized are the missionaries. They are mostly young single men and women. A small percentage of missionaries are older married couples, but their organization is run as a separate system, which will not be included here. The Mormon Church also provides secondary resources by finding housing, providing supplies, and choosing local leaders to lead the younger missionaries.

Why is it being organized?
Mormon missionaries stated purpose is to do work that will eventually bring new people to join their faith. This can include a variety of interactions. Some missionaries engage in direct proselytizing, while others will spend time doing social services projects. Some staff the Mormon temples and answer questions visitors ask. This is especially important in Salt Lake City at the headquarters of the Church where tourists from all over the world visit the temple. Missionaries from foreign countries are brought to Salt Lake City so they can answer questions in any language that visitors speak. Others sit in front of a computer and have conversations with anyone who goes to Mormon.org and clicks on “Chat with a Mormon.” Many missionaries will spend some time as office assistants in the mission office. In addition to the missionary purposes, the mission acts as a training ground for future Mormon leaders.[ii] In the larger organizing system of the entire Mormon Church, the mission program is a maintenance activity that trains individuals in many skills they will use for the rest of their lives. Many hours of a missionary’s day are dedicated to studying scriptures and training for mission activities. Also, missionaries are required to stay with their missionary companion at all times,[iii] which gives them practice living with other Mormons and encouraging each other to follow the rules. For the rest of their lives, the experience of going to a foreign country will make them more valuable members of the Church.

How much is it being organized?
Mission work is organized into 418 mission areas enumerated by the Church. Missionaries are assigned to one of these mission areas, each of which is in a host country. After training and traveling to the mission location, they are assigned a district, which is a subset of a zone within the mission area. Within a district, each missionary has a missionary companion. Men and women are assigned to the same districts, but are never missionary partners unless they are married. Missionaries are assigned to various jobs during their mission, and some are promoted to leadership positions based on their performance as a missionary.\textsuperscript{iv}

**When is it being organized?**
Assignments to a single mission area are decided at the beginning of a missionary’s service and are not changed during the mission. Zone, district, and companion assignments may be reassigned during the mission to better match skills and experience.

**How or by whom is it being organized?**
The Church mostly keeps the process of assigning missionaries to missions a secret (to prevent gaming the system to select certain locations or complaining about where people are sent), but one story from a high-ranking official reported that the missionary department uses resource descriptions including “comments from the bishops and stake presidents, medical notes, and other issues relating to each missionary,” plus prayer and a picture, to decide where each missionary will go.\textsuperscript{v} Ability to pay is explicitly not used, and all missionaries pay a flat rate. At least in some cases, the people making decisions are members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, one of the highest decision-making bodies in the Mormon Church. This shows how important the missionary program is to Church. Assignments of locations and tasks within a mission area are assigned by the mission president, a full-time employee of the Church. Decisions may be based on skills, personality, language ability, or other considerations.

**Where is it being organized?**
Mormon missions are active in 89 countries around the world. There are many countries that bar missionary activity, and the Church does not have missions in those locations.

**Other considerations**
This high level of organization is not unusual for the Mormon Church. All Mormons (and former Mormons) are kept in a database for the church to regularly contact them to encourage their religious life.\textsuperscript{vi} To maintain active membership in the church, members must maintain regular attendance, donate a percentage of their income to the Church, and follow various rules of living including abstaining from alcohol, coffee, and tea. Only active members can take part in some religious ceremonies, including entering a Mormon Temple. This helps to explain the ability of the Church to expect so many members to go on a mission.


The Mormon Church has a long history of missions, going all the way back to the beginning of the faith. The current missionary system has undergone changes in resource selection that affect the mission and culture of the church. All prospective missionaries must submit applications. Up until 2002, almost all prospective missionaries were accepted. Then the selection criteria were changed to require applicants to show a dedication to the Church for a few years before applying. This requirement change reduced the number of missionaries.

Another change happened in 2012. The Church changed to allow women to sign up at age 19 rather than 21. At the same time, men were allowed to start at age 18 rather than 19. This greatly increased the number of women involved, and reflected a changing cultural category where good Mormon women are now expected to be more personally involved in the church, and not get married and have kids. The new age changed to focus to have young women go on missions as a regular process.¹ The results are shown in the figure below.¹

Despite more women going on missions, there are still more than twice as many men going on missions, so there may be more changes to come.³

It is also worth considering what factors are used when deciding where to send missionaries. With tens of thousands of missionaries, which countries should receive the most of them? Are
there certain countries that are growth regions and need more missionaries? Or are missionaries sent to locations based on their abilities, and less on the needs of the missions? There are no publicly available numbers of missionaries in each country, but the number of mission areas for each country is available. This is likely to correlate to the number of missionaries. A scatter plot of missions and number of Mormons in each country is shown below, excluding the United States, as it is the home of Mormonism and has far more members and mission areas than other countries.

**Mormon Missions by Country**

The number of mission areas appears to be correlated with the number of Mormons already in the country. This is likely because running a mission requires significant support from local Mormons, so the number of mission areas is limited by the number of local Mormons. Also, no large country has a large percentage of the population as members of the Mormon Church, so there are non-Mormons to convert everywhere. A few small island nations have a large percentage of citizens who are Mormon populations, but the total population is too small to have ever needed more than one mission area.

---


