

“ORGANIZE YOURSELVES ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF MAN”

Ethical Challenges in Establishing the International Church

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Elder Adesina J. Olukanni, then an Area Authority Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, presented this essay at “Challenges in Establishing the International Church,” the International Society’s twenty-first annual conference, April 2010, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

June 1978 ushered in the revelation that extends priesthood and temple blessings to all worthy male members of the Church (Official Declaration 2). It signified a new beginning and understanding of the fulfillment of the words of various prophets, as contained in scriptures, that God will save all His children—irrespective of race or color, whether bond or free—thereby removing all previous restrictions. It also means the restored gospel, or the establishment of the Church, could extend to areas where it has hitherto not been, including Brazil and Africa, making the Church truly international and global in coverage. The enormous scale of this work cannot be overemphasized—Africa alone has over one thousand ethnic groups speaking over one thousand languages and having diverse cultures and political structures and laws.

The revelation depicts a continuation of the fulfillment of what Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration, saw 176 years ago on a Sunday

night. He stated, “I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother’s lap. You don’t comprehend it. . . . It is only a little handful of Priesthood you see here tonight, but this Church will fill North and South America—it will fill the world.”¹ This statement further defines the establishment of the international global Church amidst geographical, political, cultural, ethnic, or tribal divisions, as opposed to a small American church in Kirtland, Ohio, envisioned by the handful of priesthood holders gathered in a fourteen-by-fourteen-foot room who represented the entire leadership of the Church at that place and time.

History has shown that establishing the true church has always been fraught with challenges—from the times of Adam to Noah, from Moses to Jesus Christ and His Apostles, and more important, in these the latter days, defined by the Apostle Paul as “perilous times.”² Against this backdrop, the topic of this conference is timeless and of great importance. It calls for reflection upon the past in order to appreciate the present and contemplate the future in the light of truth. The topic is “‘Organize Yourselves According to the Laws of Man’: Ethical Challenges in Establishing the International Church.” I am expected to focus on successful experiences that show how “going through the front door” at times hinders the work but ultimately blesses the work beyond what we might have expected, with specific reference to Africa.

Going through the front door in the face of ethical challenges in principle implies keeping our actions consistent with agreed-upon principles of correct moral conduct at all times and in all places and in all circumstances. This is where the “rubber” of obedience meets the road, characterized by potholes of ethical challenges, leading to a well-established church. Going through the front door is also in keeping with the African adage that says, “If lies journey for twenty years, truth will overtake them in one day.” Used with appropriate stories and folklores, this adage facilitates teaching African children the art of ethics, the value of being truthful and trustworthy and virtuous, and the concept that truth will ultimately prevail against lying and deceit, no matter what.

The Lord expects us to organize according to the laws of man so we may be enabled to keep His laws and commandments, so we may be

preserved, and so our enemies will not have power over us.³ In doing this, we are expected to be honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and of good report.⁴ In other words, in the course of establishing the “international” Church, we cannot afford to be dishonest. The consequences of cutting corners, going through the back door because of expediency, or making the end justify the means portend evil and will negatively influence the work of establishing the Church.

What I have learned in my experience in the course of serving in the Church is that the issues of general interest in all countries involve a range of approvals from governmental and quasi-governmental bodies, which are required to permit the Church and its affiliates to perform the full range of gospel programs incidental to our establishing the Church. For example, some basic approvals include the rights to assemble, to become a legal entity recognized by government, to have self-governance, to declare our beliefs publicly, to worship according to the dictates of our conscience, and to travel freely. Permissions are required to enjoy those rights, such as visas for missionaries, the title documents necessary to own and enjoy assets, zoning approvals and building permits necessary to construct houses of worship, permits to perform marriages, and exoneration from taxes and duties with respect to social and humanitarian services provided by the Church. The front-door policy of the Church has helped in overcoming the challenges that face the Church in the process of establishing itself in Africa.

Beyond legal recognition lies public opinion of the Church in general. This is the summary of how we—the people and the community within which we operate—perceive our church after we have passed through the court of public opinion. This is how the media, business, government, and faith-based organizations and all the other entities see us.

In his address to this conference in 2008,⁵ Elder Lance B. Wickman classified being “organized according to the laws of man” into three phases. The first, the registration phase, means that a legal entity constituting “the Church” in the eyes of the government has been organized and registered as required by law. The second phase, credibility, he said, means that the Church must always be defined on the right side of what could be called the “cult line” and is a responsible and pacific organization. The third

phase, respectability, the ultimate phase of legal recognition, refers to a broad array of factors measuring the extent to which the institutions and representatives of government have recognized the Church as bona fide.

For example, the fact that the Church was legally registered did not stop the public from wanting to destroy Joseph Smith and the then-young Church. They simply ignored the law.

The goal of the established Church is to bring men unto Christ and ultimately to save them in the kingdom of God. In doing this, the Church is to preach the gospel, to help members perfect themselves in their endeavors to become more Christlike, to carry out the saving ordinances of the gospel by proxy for their kindred dead, and, lastly, to do good to all men through service and humanitarian projects—again according to the laws of man and of God. This goal is sought in various countries having different sociopolitical climates; diverse, often harsh economic conditions; varied but mostly antagonistic religious environments; and difficult-to-change traditional and cultural settings.

In order to succeed in these harsh environments and be more acceptable, the enticement of going through the back door or cutting corners, as expected by corrupt officials; of conforming to increasingly permissive polities; and of obtaining quick results becomes not only real but also almost inevitable. Herein lies the basis of the challenges facing the Church as described hereafter. An African adage is appropriate here to highlight the issues. It says, “The world abhors truth; the heavens forbid lying; yet there is no third option”—meaning you are either truthful and of the Lord or a liar and of the devil.

If I may, I wish to echo two thoughts that President Gordon B. Hinckley called the cornerstone of our responsibility: the Church’s overall challenge as it rolls forth in Africa, as in other parts of the world, is to keep the Church doctrinally pure first and morally clean second. This includes keeping the doctrines, principles, and practices of the gospel unaltered and unadulterated by the traditions of humankind. Stated another way, it is to avoid being assimilated into contemporary cultures or to ensure that the traditions of humankind and their corrupt practices are not assimilated into the restored gospel culture, that is, Latter-day Saint culture.

My purpose today is not to embark on the impossible task of identifying all the challenges faced by the Church nor to state all the successes recorded by the Church in every African country, tribe, and culture. I will, however, identify a few of the challenges, and, to keep it simple, I will classify them under various headings—religious, sociocultural, political and governmental, economic, and internal (within the Church itself). I will then provide a few successful examples of how going through the front door, though somewhat difficult and more time consuming, always results in success and consequently always blesses the work and the Church.

THE CHALLENGES

Broadly speaking, the Church in Africa faces ethical challenges arising from difficulties in four major areas: first, in obtaining needed permits and visas and securing duty-free status on customs fees and tariffs on Church curriculum items and humanitarian goods and avoiding excessive property transaction fees; second, in dealing with marriage issues as they affect the family, as well as the lack of recognition for temple marriages; third, in being fully accorded the status of a church by other religious denominations and individuals in the government offices with whom we do business (difficulties may arise from these individuals' personal religious indoctrinations, widespread ignorance, misconceptions that the Church is non-Christian, and the media, whose disposition is to present sensational stories about the Church); and fourth, in navigating the interplay between LDS culture and contemporary African traditions and culture.

The challenges I will mention are not borne out of judging the customs, cultures, or traditions of the African people, which have evolved over thousands of years, but they are a statement of what hinders the teachings of the restored gospel and consequently the establishment of the Church. Similar challenges exist all over the world in various forms or shades. Even the Savior chastised the Jews because their traditions posed similar challenges to His establishment of the Church amongst them. As mentioned earlier, Joseph Smith faced the same challenges borne out of traditions of humankind in the early days of the Church.

I will now proceed to present some of the challenges experienced across African countries.

RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES

Ecumenical

In almost all cases in Africa, there is one or more dominant religious faiths (be it Christian, Islamic, or other) that exerts tremendous influence on the government of each nation. Also, all faith organizations come under ecumenical bodies, or a council of religious bodies that has political power over any faith-based organization not belonging to this body. The ecumenical body may consider the faith-based organization to be nonreligious (a cult), and, consequently, it is difficult to enjoy privileges given to religious bodies, such as missionary allocations, exceptions from taxes, etc. In addition, the ecumenical body may make things difficult for those not belonging to the body, and these other organizations are treated as cults.

Mode of Worship

The manner of worship in the other churches has become the acceptable standard of worship and has embraced local traditions, which to a large extent include drumming, loud singing, clapping of hands, and dancing. The churches also carry out large crusades and conduct all-night services and vigils, among other things. Other orthodox churches and Islamic sects have changed or are changing their modes of worship to fit this mode. In addition, some local customs are permitted in church worship, social events, and activities; hence, in most African countries, the Church, whose mode of worship differs and remains reverent, is seen as somber and boring and is perceived as an organization not friendly to local customs and traditions.

Religious Disposition

Unlike most of the Western world, Africans are very religious. Workers in many offices start their day with prayers, and government institutions often have mosques and chapels built for employees' use. Many state and government agencies use scriptures or religious messages as mottos—for example, Lagos State Waste Management Company (LAWMA), which is a government body, has “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” as its motto. Africans believe in revelations; to them heaven is not closed. Herein lies

one of the secrets of the great success of the Church, manifested by its rapid growth, in sub-Saharan Africa; great numbers believe in the First Vision. The challenge this poses is that the people expect all leaders to see visions and to tell members how to conduct their personal daily affairs. Most religious organizations in Africa do this; their leaders are viewed as prophets. But this is not the way of the Church, nor is it the Lord's way. Some members think their local LDS leaders have lost their power and have become fallen prophets when they do not receive this guidance as leaders did in their former churches, and they sometimes wander away to other faiths after baptism for lack of these publicly expressed “visions.”

Representation and Continuity

Almost all religious organizations in Africa have an overseer (an ecclesiastical leader) who serves as the face of the organization and who is revered and consulted on matters of religion. There is no one overall face to represent the Church because of its local and geographical organization. This nonconformity has the effect that the Church does not have representation to interact with government and religious organizations, and, hence, we have little or no contributory voice when decisions affecting us are made. We are left to rely on third parties, who know little or nothing about the Church, to represent us. In addition, institutionalized knowledge is lost in the course of characteristic periodic changes of leadership in the Church; thus, relationships have to be formed over and over again.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Marriages

The good news is that with the exception of one or two countries, the issue of same-sex marriage remains yet a distant worry or challenge to the Church in Africa; a vast majority of Africans still hold the traditional interpretation of marriage as being the union of man and woman. Across Africa, marriage remains a major traditional and cultural event guided by the traditions of the fathers, some of which are not in conformity with the restored gospel.

The major challenges in this area are not always the issue of bride price, or dowry, but largely the mode of marriage celebration, child paternity (patriarchy versus matriarchy), plurality of wives (polygamy is acceptable to major religious sects, including orthodox churches), caste or intertribal restrictions, and divorce issues, to mention a few. Western “family law,” which has been introduced in Africa, has accommodated and incorporated polygamy, but this cannot be possible in the restored gospel culture. The expanded mode of celebration caused by the fusion of Western and local culture has become indeed very expensive and competitive, resulting in widespread delayed marriages and cohabitation, among other problems. These challenges have had a negative impact on the extent to which we are successful in establishing the Church across Africa.

Divorce proceedings also pose challenges. Even when a couple marries according to the legal laws of the land, couples wishing to dissolve their marriages often do not dissolve them legally. Most just separate and enter into other relationships and other marriages. The law and most religious organizations often turn a blind eye, and these people freely join with other religious bodies. The Church will not baptize the hundreds who desire baptism if they are not legally and lawfully married or if they are in a polygamous relationship, whereas many other churches will, so we are seen as not favorable to people or friendly to local customs, among other things.

Chastity

The advent of Western civilization and industrialization in Africa has eroded the high standard of morality that once existed among the various tribes. Whereas in the past one became an outcast for having sex outside marriage, it is no longer so. Following the contemporary Western cultures, cohabitation, trial marriages, multiple partners, sexual laxity, and promiscuity, especially in big cities, are now generally accepted by the polity. And many other churches turn a blind eye to these things, but the Church sees these practices as opposed to the teachings of the restored gospel.

Law of Inheritance

The hereditary system in some customs does not generally protect the wife and the children. At the drop of a hat, relatives of the dead husband can disown and dispossess the wife and children of all possessions and housing and throw them into the street. The teachings of the Church run counter to such customs. Even though some other sects allow or have embraced these customs, the Church will not; hence, it is perceived as not friendly to tradition.

Death

Widows face unhealthy practices in some places upon the death of their husbands. These practices are contrary to the teachings of the restored gospel.

Role and Position of Women

In many cultures, traditions have generally looked upon women as inferior and unequal to the men. This is also contrary to the teachings of the restored gospel. Some men will not sit with their wives in meetings, hug or walk with women, or allow women to teach them in classes because these practices are seen as taboo.

POLITICAL AND GOVERNMENTAL CHALLENGES

Political Neutrality

The Church remains neutral in politics and does not promote any political party or make any comment on government affairs in Africa. Sometimes, the government of the day sees us as a foe or may question where our allegiance lies. Or, in rare cases, when we have been seen as being too close to a ruling party and the opposing party comes into power afterward, we often face the wrath of such new political parties. In these circumstances, we may find ourselves between Pharaoh and the Red Sea, so to speak. It has always been helpful that we have continued to educate all comers that we are politically neutral.

Permits

It is often difficult and sometimes impossible to obtain from governmental and quasi-governmental bodies the approvals required by the Church to operate. These include visas for missionaries, title documents for owning and enjoying assets, zoning approvals and building permits to construct houses of worship, exoneration from taxes and duties, and so on. These challenges do not come from communities averse to the Church, as is the case in the Western world, but from corrupt officials who demand gratification, and things are made more difficult because of the perception that the “American” church is rich. Also, some view most churches as big businesses. Most government services cannot be obtained without offering gratification or bribes to the office or officers concerned, and the Church will not bribe nor pay gratification. This means long waits and delays that sometimes run into several years or, in a few cases, canceled projects.

Real Estate Acquisition and Tenancy

Another fundamental challenge arises from the fact that in some countries, property and rental laws are very complicated and thorny, and perfection of documents could be very expensive. In view of this, properties exchange hands without proper documentation, and often a buyer or tenant has to pay more than one person since it is easy to pay the wrong person. The problem with this is that in some cases, land purchases end up with litigations that take years to resolve. Tenancy is also fraught with excessive payments, and tenants are expected to do repairs and maintenance afterward, among other things. It is purely a seller’s market.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Due to the failure of governments at almost all levels and their inability to provide their citizenry with the basic necessities of life and enable them to become self-reliant, far too many Africans remain on or below the poverty line, living on less than a dollar a day. Against this backdrop, religious organizations like Catholics, Baptists, Anglican and Pentecostal churches, and a few NGOs have largely taken on the responsibilities to

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provide medical care for their members in church-owned and operated hospitals, clinics, and health centers;

build institutions (high schools, universities, etc.) that provide educational and vocational training for all their members;

engage the services of their own qualified members in all their professional services;

provide employment to a large number of their members by building bakeries and businesses;

network and employ each other in their personal businesses (hardly would you see such religious sects engage a nonmember to render any form of service to them when its members can provide such services); and

provide transportation for members to their worship meetings.

The Church is establishing itself in these environments. Thousands who are convinced the Church offers the true gospel will not join the Church because they cannot afford to lose all the services offered by other churches. I often receive email and text messages from investigators asking if the Church will provide them with employment, pay their school fees, or provide their Sunday-meeting transportation should they leave their current church and join ours.

Some are confused and wonder why the Church will not add this venture to its mission, due to its potential to alleviate poverty and because offering services is fast becoming the standard expected of a church.

The Church, however, took a high road by providing humanitarian services. Establishment of businesses provides its own myriad of challenges that may further exacerbate the challenges we face, part of which include the infringement of our status as a religious organization.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Being first-generation members, local members sometimes face the dilemma of operating the “Wasatch Front” institutions or programs. Therefore, they introduce some of what they know from their former

churches. Also, in some cases, when you release a leader, it is seen as an insult and loss of face, and he or she may leave the Church with his or her family; other churches do not release their ecclesiastical leaders. Women are not supposed to teach men (yet in corollary, many question why the Church will not allow female clergy), and boys are not expected to hold the priesthood. In some cultures, husbands and wives will refuse to sit together in meetings, nor will they hold hands in public. Men do not tell their wives they love them. These are but a few of the challenging traditions and customs, and it will take some generations to remove them through gospel teachings.

The growth enjoyed by the Church poses its own form of challenges. If we desire, we may sometimes baptize a whole village, but then we face the challenge of leadership as pertaining to depth of doctrinal understanding and sometimes as pertaining to level of literacy. This is a challenge our church is currently facing in many places in Africa as people join the Church in large numbers. The branches often outgrow the root, and we experience the problem described in Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon.

Again, while some things may be applied in general terms as the Church rolls forth, a number of issues must be localized in order to have more meaningful, effective, and lasting positive impact upon the lives of the local members and citizens as a whole. In addition, as the Church moves into the nations of the world, it must shed the image of being perceived as an American church or organization. There is need to allow the Spirit of God to be made manifest in the unfolding of this great work as it affects the peoples in each country. People understand things differently, and to the extent that misunderstandings exist, the rolling forth of the Church will be hindered.

THE SUCCESSES

“Going through the front door” sometimes looks like the work is being hindered; success looks elusive, and the smell of failure and disappointment is overwhelming. However, experience has proved that, ultimately, doing so blesses the work beyond what is expected. As people of faith, we recognize the hand of God in this work as we witness impossible situations turn

into successes or miracles, great or small. Truly, when we do this work the Lord’s way, impossibility becomes possible.

Before highlighting some such success, I would like to publicly thank all missionaries, couples, mission presidents, and Church officials who in no small measure have taught and lived by example in going through the front door to establish the Church in Africa over the years. Some have seen the success, while some merely lay the foundation but do not witness its fruition. Time will not permit me to list their names, neither do I know them all, but the Lord knows them, and I know that they will in nowise lose their reward from the Lord. Again, time will not permit me to record tens of situations in each of the countries from east, west, south, and central Africa in which difficult moments turned out to be blessings. The Lord continues to use them in teaching us that going through the front door—that is, operating according to the laws of man and following the best of ethics—is the only way that we can do His work. Now, I will talk about the successes.

RELIGIOUS SUCCESSES

Ghana Freeze

On 14 June 1989, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation announced the “freeze” of all Church activities, along with those of about three other churches. All our meetinghouses were locked and placed under guard, and we were prohibited from carrying out any Church activity.

The freeze was instigated by the mainline churches due to their fear of our church’s growth. Some of the reasons given for the act were that our Church was building apartheid in Ghana because blacks were not allowed to be in any leadership positions and could not enter some Church buildings, while all efforts were being put in place to end apartheid in South Africa, and, secondly, that the Church was an arm of the American CIA and was floating dollars to recruit followers.

Our Church officials held a series of meetings with government officials to clear all the allegations and show that we are law-abiding people in all our activities. After thorough investigation was extended to the other churches involved, our Church was the only one found to be duly and

legally constituted and truthful in all its presentations. On 30 November 1990, after eighteen months, the freeze was lifted and the Church was cleared to continue its programs.

The freeze, though painful, proved to be a blessing in disguise. During the length of the freeze, members continued to meet in homes. Because of publicity, investigators flocked to the Church and, upon discovering the truth, joined the Church in large numbers. Faith increased, the Church was brought out of obscurity in Ghana, and membership grew exponentially. In addition, public opinion became very favorable, and goodwill increased toward our Church—a situation that continues today.

On the contrary, if the Church had in any way broken any law, it would have taken many years to wade through the problem, and the stigma would have still remained. As the Lord has revealed in Doctrine and Covenants 44:5, our enemies could not have power over us because we went through the front door in all we did in establishing the Church.

Namibia

Following a series of interfaith activities and Helping Hands service projects, the Church's friends and popularity grew among other churches and the public. We were subsequently invited to a meeting of an ecumenical body, the Namibia Council of Churches. The leader of the body, as voice, offered that our Church would be granted membership in the body if our missionaries would cease to proselyte. This offer was declined with thanks and explanation.

It was clear that the success and increasing growth of the Church was worrisome to the ecumenical body. Though we have not obtained the various permits we require from the government and its agents, we remain respected and are seen as highly credible.

Nigeria

The city of Jos, situated in the heart of Nigeria, has been in the news for some time now due to the recurring religious crises it has been experiencing. Thousands have been killed as Christians and Muslims of various sects engage in a theater of politically motivated religious strife fueled by

tribal differences. The various sects are engaged in a macabre dance of supremacy.

In one such crisis in 2008, an Islamic group came to burn the only Church-owned chapel in town, but another group prevented the action, telling them that our Church is a friendly one which treated the Muslims with respect and honor; therefore, the Church was spared the touch of arsonists. This action was repeated each time the crisis erupted.

However, a year later, the church building was burned. Upon investigation, it was discovered that the arsonists were hired from the neighboring country and our protectors had to flee for their lives. This is a case of bitter success that I thought I should mention. Who knows what blessings lie in the future as a consequence of this event? The revealed word of God in similar circumstances in this dispensation, stated by Joseph Smith, declared that all things shall work together for the good and sanctification of the Church.⁶

South Africa

The first successful attempt by the Church to begin an interfaith outreach in Johannesburg in 2007 saw only three of many invited leaders of other religious organizations accepting our invitation. They were from the Salvation Army, the Methodist Church, and an Islamic sect. The outreach was a big success, and those who were invited took it upon themselves to invite other religious organizations. Today, we have relations with leaders of over twenty other faiths, including the Catholic Church, Dutch Reformed Church, Methodist Church, Salvation Army, some Islamic sects, and so forth.

Some of the successes we have experienced include the invitation to our Church to be part of a coalition of all churches in South Africa to draft a bill of religious rights. We refined, corrected, and resubmitted the bill, and it was accepted in whole. The greatest joy came one afternoon on the grounds of the area office in Johannesburg in October 2007, during the press briefing of the 2007 all-Africa Helping Hands project, when heads of about twenty-five religious organizations put on the “Mormon Helping Hands” vest and one of them said, “This is truly the Church of Jesus Christ.” Such an embrace is indeed comforting, and it gladdens the heart.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SUCCESSES

Marriages

Following the favorable disposition enjoyed by our Church over the years, the Church has been granted permission to perform civil marriages in many countries in the Africa Southeast Area and in all countries in the Africa West Area except Benin, Togo, and Ivory Coast. This guarantees monogamy and leads to temple marriage. The ability of our Church to perform civil marriages helps to remove in part some problems associated with traditional and customary marriages. We also see this as a necessary step toward securing the recognition of temple marriage in the future. The reason for this non-recognition is that temple marriage cannot be performed in a building accessible to the public, as currently required by law.

The remaining myriad of challenges facing marriage is slowly being taken care of as members become converted to the teachings of the restored gospel and as they go into temple marriage. In truth, the teaching of the word of God has more effect on the souls of children of men than the sword does.

POLITICAL SUCCESSES

Nigeria

In 2003, the government of Nigeria decided to enforce the city ordinance of the Federal Capital Territory, which was being flouted with impunity by the high and mighty, both in government and in business. This enforcement involved the demolition of hundreds of structures built illegally in and around the capital city of Abuja without approval, including those that ignored the zoning policy. Hundreds of houses, office complexes, and hospitals were affected. Lawsuits and appeals to the government, whether overt or covert, failed to dissuade the determination of the government.

The process of demolition continued in phases for years, and on a fateful day in 2006, the demolition team, led by the then-president of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory minister, came to Accra Street, a stretch of about three kilometers, where the only two Church-owned

buildings (a meetinghouse and an institute building) in the nation’s capital of Abuja were situated. All buildings on the street, including over fifty churches and a modern private hospital, were demolished. The president used our Church premises as his field office. Only the Church buildings were left standing because all necessary permits were obtained and all legal requirements were fulfilled before the land was cleared for construction to start.

Today, the whole length of the street has been restored to its original purpose—a public park—and the Church meetinghouse and institute building stand as icons of truth and beauty and a testimony that going through the front door is the only way—the Lord’s way.

Ivory Coast

In May 2009, eight missionaries went to the Ivory Coast Abidjan airport, headed for the Accra Ghana Missionary Training Center. When their luggage was scanned, an empty Kalashnikov (AK-47) cartridge case was discovered in the bag of one of the missionaries. Due to heightened national security in the country at the time, the missionary was immediately taken into police custody, and the heads of the airport police department, national police, and Ministry of the Interior were all notified.

Two hours later, a phone call came from the police headquarters asking for the release of the missionary. It seems the police chief recalled the previous fall’s all-Africa Mormon Helping Hands service project, which provided cleaning of the Abobo District Police Station, where police operations are headquartered.

One of the staff officers declared, “The Latter-day Saints are the friends of the police in Ivory Coast, for they cleaned our working place and environment last year, which nobody did before them.” Some police officers at the airport also attested that they were accustomed to regularly seeing Church members and missionaries travel without incident. The police officers apologized for the trouble they caused and allowed the missionaries to board their flight.

The empty cartridge case was seized after questioning. The missionary admitted he found that cartridge case in the street after the November 2004 unrest, when French troops fired on and killed young demonstrators

in Abidjan. He added that he kept it as a souvenir of that event and forgot to leave it before moving from home.

Once again, the good the Church continues to do through public affairs programs has proven to be a blessing in times of need.

GOVERNMENT SUCCESSES

Kenya

In 2008, all efforts to renew residence permits for our couple missionaries proved abortive. The director and deputy involved wanted gratification, and the Church would not comply. All previous attempts to build friendly relationships failed with the director and deputy. Further explanations and communications to show what good the Church had done and continued to do in Kenya made matters worse, and we ended up alienating the two officers who were responsible for the authorization. The Church took the only option left and wrote the minister in charge, explaining the problem and requesting his intervention. He approved the permit for all seventeen couples involved. Those officers who wanted gratification then invited the press and wrote a sensational story about our Church and vilified the minister, who in consequence had to face a ministerial panel of inquiry. It was indeed a gloomy period for our Church, and we were worried for the minister, but we were hopeful that as on previous occasions we would be justified.

The media (press and TV stations) came to the Church in droves, requesting interviews for the Church to state its side. This gave the Church the opportunity to educate people on Church programs. Individuals showed up to investigate the Church, thereby keeping the missionaries busy. A member helped in ensuring that the press published a release detailing the programs of the Church, including a summary of its humanitarian activities in Kenya and around the world. The Church and the minister were vindicated; the two officers' lies earned them a reprimand, and the truth prevailed. The difficulty proved to be a blessing in disguise.

ECONOMIC SUCCESSES

Africa

Unlike other religious organizations, the Church does not establish business entities—such as hospitals, clinics, bakeries, thrift societies, or money-lending concerns—that employ its members, provide education, or provide government services. Instead, the Church provides humanitarian services, helps those in need of education, provides employment services and training, provides clean water by digging hundreds of deep wells, and provides neonatal resuscitation training, vision clinics, health services, and various relief programs, to mention a few (with no strings attached, unlike other organizations).

The Church’s humanitarian projects have earned it more respectability, goodwill, friends, and admiration and have empowered more people—members and nonmembers alike. These projects continue to translate into more friendly press and free media coverage, and they also soften the hearts of people. Sometimes they also encourage people to receive the missionaries and to be less critical of the Church. To the extent that the work of establishing the Church continues to be smoother, we often see increased growth.

GENERAL SUCCESSES

Nigeria

In 2006, we received word that one newly constructed Church-owned building in Lagos had been sealed off, and our Church was warned not to come on the property and was told that if we did, we would be seen as trespassers. We later learned the group that did this had won a long and protracted court case to repossess hundreds of acres of land with hundreds of houses on the land. These people singled out the Church for reprisal and punishment.

At the time our Church purchased the land, we discovered the land was not registered in the current owner’s name in the land registry, even though he had duly purchased it. The land had also gone through many

hands before him. Following lengthy negotiations and at additional cost to the original owners, whose names appeared as possessing the title to the land in the land registry, we made sure all legal and due processes were completed. The land was then duly registered in our Church's name. Those who sealed off our Church building did not know this fact, and they did not care to investigate because it is not normal for people to follow due process in such matters.

When the group discovered their error, they were not only embarrassed; they feared we would draw our pound of flesh. We demanded only the minimal remedy required by the law by way of tendering their apology in writing, stating they were in error and indemnifying us from all the charges levied against us in the court that had granted them the leave to do what they did.

Once again, we were saved because the Church did not cut corners—we went in through the front door. It took nearly two years to complete the initial purchase transaction and required an additional cost to the initial owner. It looked like we would lose a choice piece of land for a future stake center. The Saints were disillusioned, and it appeared the Church was losing. Obeying the law of the land and applying the front-door policy delivered our Church from the loss of its building and investment and saved us from our enemies.

CONCLUSION

In responding to whatever challenges the Church may face, five fundamental principles have been helpful in order to be able to escape the designs of our enemies in their bid to hinder or frustrate the work. They are the following:

1. Our behaviors should never be specific to a region or country. When it comes to being disciples of Christ and members of the Church, respectful, consistent behaviors, wherever we are, will most likely engender respect and trust and provide the possibility of influencing societies for good. It may be essential for us to accommodate some appropriate local customs within the community as

far as doing so conforms to gospel laws and we are not required to violate our sacred covenants.

2. Going through the front door is the best and only policy. Applying this policy is often tedious, cumbersome, and sometimes apparently unproductive. However, if those who know and have covenanted to keep the law of God enter a society where it is not the norm to be honest, courteous, and evenhanded, how are we of the covenant ever to be the “salt of the earth” if we succumb to the traditions of mankind? We can make a difference, and the Lord expects us to make a difference.

3. We should always have a soft response to hard situations or roll with the punches. People generally are quick to find fault and to criticize. Some have found it a good practice to speak to all people of all walks of life kindly and with respect and to be patient and kind in the face of antagonism. This may be difficult, as many can attest, but most of the time it has the tendency to disarm the enemy, and when this is done, the tenor of some situations may change dramatically. If, however, the situation demands that we violate our covenants, we should simply walk away from it.

4. We should be proactive. Using the public affairs tools of the Church, we should continually identify the gatekeepers; lawmakers; opinion leaders in government, media, business, the community, and other religious organizations; and national icons, whose actions or inactions may hinder or help the Church. Then we should develop a friendly relationship of trust with them in order for them to understand our true beliefs and behaviors, to the end that they will not have the disposition to harm us but to assist the Church as expedient. Our humanitarian service projects in Africa have also been effective in showing the people that we are true followers of Jesus Christ and have been of help in dispelling rumors and falsity.

5. We should pray and counsel with the Lord for guidance. For Latter-day Saints, prayer and the inspiration of heaven are indispensable as we move within societies where our values may be a

tremendous blessing to the people. Almost always, the majority of people within the community are thirsting and praying for those who can make a difference and turn the tide for the better in their lives.

Challenges will always arise. It has been so since the beginning. The story of a poor old man helps me in particular to put the challenges in the right perspective. A poor old man lived in a fort on the top of a hill with his son and horse. One day the horse did not return home, and the neighbors came to sympathize with the old man because of his loss. The old man asked how they knew it was a bad thing. A couple of days later, the horse returned with a lot of wild horses, and suddenly the old man had many horses. The neighbors came again to rejoice with him on his good fortune. And the old man asked, "How do you know it is a good thing?" In the process of breaking one of the horses so he could now own and ride it, the old man's son broke his leg. Again, the neighbors came to sympathize with the old man, lamenting again at his bad fortune. The old man asked again, "How do you know it is a bad thing?" War broke out shortly afterward, and all sons were sent to the warfront except of course the old man's son because of his broken leg. His neighbors came to him as usual, congratulating him for his good luck. He replied yet again, "How do you know it is a good thing?" In effect, persecution cannot stop the progress of truth. Every dark cloud has a silver lining; that is, a positive aspect or an unseen benefit.

There is a Chinese saying that states, "May you live in interesting times." We are indeed living in such a time, a time of temple building, a time of the winding up of all things expedient for the salvation of humankind preparatory to the coming of the Savior, a time of working under the direction of and living with living prophets. What a marvelous time to live in—a time, it is said, when the Savior is in a hurry in Africa. It is a time to earn and lay treasure in heaven by doing our very best in obedience to the Lord's commandments, being anxiously engaged in good causes and thereby bringing to pass much righteousness.

Indeed, as the Prophet Joseph Smith declared, "The Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble,

calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”⁷

In the final analysis, while dealing with challenges, our basic premise is that as Latter-day Saints we should act as the covenant people of the Lord, remembering that we are agents of the Lord, that the Lord is our leader, and that we have to do what he wants. If we do this, our enemies will not have power over us.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, quoted by Wilford Woodruff, in Conference Report, April 1898, 57.
2. See 2 Timothy 3:1.
3. See Doctrine and Covenants 44:4–5.
4. See Articles of Faith 1:13.
5. See chapter 5 in this volume: Elder Lance B. Wickman, “The Church in the Twenty-First Century: Public Perceptions and the ‘Man with the Stamp,’” 33–49.
6. See Doctrine and Covenants 100:15; 105:40; 122:7.
7. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 142.