



Alec Crawley, left, and Andres Gonzalez, missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, give a woman a card with their phone number, at the edge of the Koreatown neighborhood in Los Angeles in March.

Latter-day Saint missionaries are embracing 'big, big changes'

The Utah-based church has loosened some rules for those proselytizing. And many members of Gen Z are loving the work.

By LAUREN JACKSON

Andres Gonzalez, 19, stands on the balcony of his Los Angeles apartment, his hands in his suit pockets. It is his first week as a missionary, but today, instead of approaching people on the street, he is shooting a video that he will later post on social media.

After about a dozen takes, he is successful. "Hello! If you would like to learn more about Jesus Christ," he says to the camera in Spanish, "contact me."

Gonzalez is the image of the modern missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has changed many of its practices — even how missionaries preach to how they dress. The faith, long known for sending tens of thousands of neatly and formally dressed young people across the globe each year to preach door to door, is now urging new missionaries to spread the gospel on social media and, for some, with acts of community service closer to home.

As a church leader, apostle Dieter F. Uchtdorf, put it, missionaries should feel comfortable sharing their faith in "normal and natural ways." In the past few years, the church has also changed some rules for missionaries themselves — loosening restrictions on dress codes (women can wear pants) and how often they can call family members back home (once a week, not just on Christmas and Mother's Day).

To outsiders, the adjustments may seem small. But to missionaries who adhere to strict rules while on assignment, the shifts are dramatic. "We've seen a lot of big, big changes," Jensen Diederich, 23, said. He served his mission in Peru and said it was "monumental" when the church allowed him to call home weekly, instead of just twice a year.

The church believes missionary work is essential for the world's salvation — that people must be baptized in the faith to get to the highest level of heaven after they die. Missionary work also helps increase the church's membership, and it deepens many young members' faith. Many missionaries begin their assignments just after they leave home. Instead of partying on a college campus, they commit themselves to the religion and develop habits that can last a lifetime.

ROMNEY'S MISSION

One of those members was Sen.



KIM RAFF



ISADORA KOSOFSKY

Top — Tanner Bird, third from left, a missionary in Brazil who did part of his training at home in Houston, sits with his a cappella group for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before performing at a Christ-mas concert at a stake center in Provo in December. **Above** — Andres Gonzalez stands in front of a statue of Jesus Christ as another missionary, Alec Crawley, films him for a social media video in Los Angeles in March 2023.

Mitt Romney, R-Utah, who was a missionary in France in the 1960s. He has said the isolation of his mission allowed him to examine his faith without distraction. When asked about the changes, he said, "For young people of my generation, I think the separation from family and friends served us well."

But he understands times have changed. "With today's youth in near constant contact with one another," he added, "maintaining greater connection during a mission fits their life experience."

Many young members say the new rules have made missionary service more attractive and realistic. Kate Kennington, a 19-year-old with a mission assignment to London, said finding people online and messaging them is a more successful way of approaching potential converts. "It's how I would want to be contacted," she said.

"Knocking on doors and approaching people on the street are no longer seen as useful as they once were because of shifts in American culture," said Matthew Bowman, a Latter-day Saint professor of religion

and history at Claremont Graduate University who holds the chair of Mormon studies.

For decades, missionaries' clean-cut suits were signs of prosperity, Bowman said, and an effective way of appealing to converts. They now feel "outdated."

Many of the changes, especially the push to evangelize on social media, were fueled by the pandemic, which shut down in-person church gatherings and forced Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses to find alternatives to door-to-door preaching.

The missionaries use their phones to film videos of themselves promoting the church or sharing messages of faith. In one video, a missionary rap about his faith. In another, two missionaries throw a football and a Frisbee through an obstacle course in a church gym — an object lesson meant to visualize how Jesus Christ can help people overcome challenges.

So far, the changes appear to be working. In the past three years, as pandemic restrictions lifted and young members responded to an appeal from the church's top leader

for them to serve, the number of full-time proselytizing missionaries has risen about 25%, according to church data. At the end of last year, the church had about 72,000 full-time missionaries serving around the world.

The church has 72.2 million members globally but has seen growth slow. From 1988 to 1989, during a surge in growth when the church expanded into West Africa, the church grew about 9%. Last year, the church grew about 1.5%.

A TRADITION OF TRAVEL

Missionary work is a rite of passage for Latter-day Saints — and has been since the church's founding in 1830.

The church's missionaries have traveled the world, growing their faith from a fledgling startup in upstate New York to a global religion that brings in billions of dollars in revenue.

Church leaders say it is men's responsibility to become missionaries for two years starting as young as age 18. Missionary work is optional for women, who serve for 18 months. The church has historically encouraged women to focus on marriage and motherhood. But since 2012, when the church lowered the age women could become missionaries to 19 from 21, more women have been going.

Missionaries leave their families and friends, learn new languages and spend the first years of their adulthood spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While on a mission, they cannot date and must follow the religion's ban on premarital sex, drinking, smoking, coffee and tea. Communication with friends and family back home is restricted. They commit to stay focused on their work and their proximity to their missionary partner, commonly called their companion, creates a sense of accountability that keeps most from breaking the rules.

Until recently, the experience of young missionaries was similar to that of their parents. They first attended a Missionary Training Center — a religious boot camp of sorts — before traveling to their missions.

Most missionaries now start their training online at home, where the transition is less jarring. They can adapt to a mission schedule with their family's support. Being home is also an opportunity for new missionaries to evangelize in their community.

"I've had friends who aren't members of the church," Tanner Bird, a 19-year-old missionary in Brazil who did part of his training at home in Houston, said. "And I just get super, super excited and talk to them about the gospel."

Once deployed, men in some areas are allowed to wear blue shirts and go without ties, while women can wear wrinkle-resistant dress

pants in "conservative colors." Most missionaries now have smartphones and call their families weekly.

Some traditions remain. Young missionaries still do not get to pick their destinations. Many teenagers throw parties to open their assignments, reading their "call letter" aloud for the first time in front of family and friends. Others film elaborate announcement videos — including on ice skates. Some serve close to home: there are 10 missions in Utah. Others go as far as Tahiti or Tokyo.

Gonzalez, the missionary in Los Angeles, said he first imagined going on a mission when he was a child in Venezuela. His parents, who converted to the faith, often had young missionaries over for meals. After the church helped the family settle in Utah, he said serving as a missionary was part of his "American dream."

Every morning, he wakes up at 6:30 a.m., the set time for many missionaries, with his companion. They are mandated to "never be alone," with few exceptions, and each day follow a missionary schedule.

On Facebook, they contact people they have met, including those they have approached on the street in downtown Los Angeles. They also search groups for people who may be open to their message and post videos to generate interest in their faith. They keep track of potential converts' progress, including lessons they teach. Every Monday, Gonzalez calls his parents.

Calls are also an opportunity for him to receive support. "It's a little bit hard," Gonzalez said of his mission work, describing people in downtown Los Angeles as "busy." Still, he remains hopeful. "Some of them, they really are ready. They make time, even just five minutes."

The missionary experience is not for everyone. Some people feel isolated, find it difficult to adjust to a location, or struggle with the rules or the pressure to keep their commitment. Some people do leave early; the church does not comment on those who do.

Alex McAlpin, a 23-year-old who went on a mission to Denver, almost did not put in a missionary application. Before her mission, she attended Pepperdine University, where she wrestled with some aspects of church doctrine and history.

Then the church made its dress code change, allowing women to wear pants in 2018.

"That was the first day of my life that I thought maybe I would go" on a mission, McAlpin said. She saw the new dress code and the church's changes as a sign the church was evolving and listening to its younger members, many of whom hope their church will modernize in larger ways. "I wanted to be a part of the change."

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