MISSIONARY IMPOSSIBLE: MITT ROMNEY’S FRENCH EDUCATION

The Republican candidate and devout Mormon spent 30 months in France in the 1960s, proselytizing and sharpening his leadership skills

BY ALEXANDRIA SAGE
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TO UNDERSTAND WHY Mitt Romney persists in the face of rejection, opposition and indifference from his own party, look no further than the two and a half years he spent in France, getting up at 6:30 a.m. every day to venture forth and have doors slammed in his face for 10 hours.

The fresh-faced Latter-Day Saints who came to France in the late 1960s to preach the message of Jesus Christ -- of whom Republican presidential candidate Romney is the best known -- discovered a secular and sceptical populace, and few willing converts.

On bad days, the young Americans were greeted with guns, or barking dogs chased at their heels. Romney has said his mission, which took him through Le Havre, Paris and Bordeaux, was testing.

But it was precisely this challenge that helped cement Romney’s tenacity and his faith, say current and former missionaries. “Being a missionary was not an easy thing,” said Christian Euvrard, director of the church-run Paris Institute of Religion, who remembers Romney as outgoing and enthusiastic in his work. “You can’t go home...
without having learned a lot of lessons.”

David Wood, who served at the same time as Romney, called their experience “character-building” and “life-changing”.

“It was difficult work, we spent a lot of time going from door to door ... It was tough going,” he said of the mission. “It solidified his beliefs in the church, certainly gave him ample opportunity to develop leadership skills, skills in motivating people.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or LDS church, today counts nearly 36,000 Mormons in France, many of whom are the product of the work of the missionaries who for decades have followed a similar path of rigorous proselytising.

Missionary work is a central tenet of the Mormon faith. Some 52,000 missionaries currently serve in 350 missions around the world, from France -- where Mormon missionaries first showed up midway through the 19th century -- to more recent, far-flung frontiers like Papua New Guinea or Madagascar.

Using missionaries to boost international growth -- a goal wherever the political climate allows, regardless of the predilection of the local populace -- has helped make the LDS church a 14 million-member global church with more Mormons outside the United States than in.

“The main focus of a mission is to go out and help people find the joy of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” said Kenneth Cope, a missionary in France in the 1980s. “But a very great by-product would be you grow into a man, you grow into a woman, you grow up.”

DURING THE COURSE of his 30-month stay in France -- July, 1966 to December, 1968 -- Romney’s people-skills landed him a plum assignment as assistant to the president of the mission in France, H. Duane Anderson.

It was a natural choice. People who knew Romney describe him as a well-spoken and charismatic young man who quickly showed himself to be a leader.

“A man of communication,” said Euvrard.
And he was very simple. Although he was the son of the governor of Michigan, he was a missionary just like everyone else.”

Alan Eastman, also a missionary at the time, remembers Romney as “an adaptable personality, kind of a born leader, and his mission positions reflected that. He was also one who was kind of gung-ho, “this is what the rules are, we will abide by the rules 100 percent.”

Those rules involved arising at 6:30 am and lights out by 10:30 pm; in between came a full day of prayer and proselytising, a gruelling schedule that has not changed much today.

Missionaries pay for their time abroad themselves, live in modest apartments, and travel in pairs with a same-sex companion — a strategy that provides moral support but also, say cynics, keeps the potential for waywardness, theological or moral, in check.

Male missionaries are instantly recognisable in their white shirts, ties and black trousers, women in their modest skirts.

Most time is taken up going door to door, following up on leads, or teaching potential converts. Missionaries study their Bibles, do charity work, and have one “free” day per week for laundry, letters home, or occasional sight-seeing. Missionaries do not go to parties. Sunday is church.

None of the former missionaries interviewed said they had ever been tempted to indulge in France’s best-loved export, wine, nor to while away the time in a cafe, or jazz club.

“Missionaries avoid entertainment, parties, or other activities common to this age group as long as they are on their missions, so they can focus entirely on the work of serving and of teaching others the gospel of Jesus Christ,” reads the LDS website.

Still, Romney helped organise an exhibition baseball game in the southwest city of Pau, and a talk about the United States at a youth club. One evening, he even ate a meal of coq au vin, the French country dish of stewed chicken in wine (while alcohol is banned, it boils off in cooking, so Mormons are divided on whether such a dish is taboo).

“The idea of being wooden, robotic, cold, calculating ... that is absolutely not Mitt Romney,” said Michael Bush, who was paired with Romney for a time and described him as a “good, fun-loving guy” who was “incredibly smart”.

Despite the strict and narrow path followed by most Mormons on their missions, it is nigh impossible to find a returned missionary -- whether still in the church or no -- who hasn't been altered by his or her experience, contends Carter Charles, who is writing his University of Bordeaux doctorate thesis on the role of Mormonism in U.S. politics.

“They have different world-views, they see the world in different ways,” said Charles.

“In that, you can say the Mormon church has something special that you don't see in other religious groups who send out missionaries. It is unique.”

“BONJOUR, WE'RE HERE to share a message about Jesus Christ,” is the perky message heard today by those who open their doors in Bordeaux to Sisters Bentley and Wiseman (female missionaries are called “Sisters” while males are ordained to be “Elders.”)

“People say, ‘No, that doesn't interest me,’ right off. It goes pretty quick,” said Allison Bentley, 23.

Nine times out of 10, missionaries say, the French will slam the door. Others recount having guns pulled on them, being chased by dogs, or having water dumped on their heads. But occasionally, someone will listen.

“We just appreciate that they stop and talk to us about God in the street,” said Rebecca Wiseman, 22. “I know it's a stretch for them.”

Once inside someone’s home, Romney and fellow missionary Bush would recite a passage from their King James Bibles, using the New Testament to try to explain how LDS church founder Joseph Smith was visited in the 19th century by Christ, and later the angel Moroni. “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.” — John 10:16

Of the missionaries, Romney was the most...
successful at leaving the Book of Mormon, the second witness for Christ’s message, with hosts, said Bush.

“He’s very disciplined. He’s a hard worker. There is no one who works harder than Mitt Romney,” Bush said. “He would put in the hours, he would knock on the doors, he would talk to people.”

The passage from John is often used to explain the Book of Mormon. It is also an apt metaphor for Mormons out in the world, endeavouring to increase their flock.

Mormons have had more difficulty convincing the local populace in France than in poorer countries such as the Pacific island nation of Tonga (where nearly half the population is now Mormon) or Nigeria, whose Mormon membership is now almost three times that of France despite the fact that proselytising began there only in the late 1970s. In Europe, France’s Mormon membership is well behind that of Britain and Spain.

The birthplace of free-thinking Voltaire, France is fiercely proud of its heritage, and, though nominally Catholic, has distrusted organised religion since its 1789 Revolution stripped the ecclesiastical hierarchy of its power.

Mormonism is little understood. The religion’s adherents are viewed as a bit odd -- and rather quaint -- though serious and hard-working. David Arnold, who serves as bishop of the central Paris ward, or congregation, said he remembers the 1985 film “Witness,” in which Harrison Ford goes undercover among the Amish. The French confused the Amish with the Mormons.

“They’d say, ‘We’ve heard of Mormons, but where’s your beard and hat?’” said Arnold.

Still, the undaunted LDS church has steadily increased its numbers in France -- membership grew from about 1,000 in 1950 to 10,000 in 1975 -- and church officials recently announced plans for the country’s first temple for the 36,000 French mainland Mormons today.

The early 1960s had seen a boom in conversions, helped by lingering post-World War Two goodwill to Americans, and despite a “French Mission apostasy” scandal in 1958 in which a handful of missionaries were excommunicated for teaching polygamy. Plural marriage has been banned in the church since 1890.

But things got harder as opposition to the Vietnam War strengthened in France -- “Yankee Go Home” was often seen scribbled in the Paris Metro -- and as the country exploded in student- and union-driven riots, challenging France’s social hierarchy and sexual mores, and questioning its former status as a colonial power.

“At first they found it rather amusing, something to write in their (missionary) journals,” said Euvrard. “Very quickly they were discouraged to go near where anything was happening.”

The closest the missionaries got to the rebellions shaking up France was a tear gas canister former missionary Eastman found on the street and brought back to the apartment, where it exploded. (He admits his action would likely have been frowned upon by church officials.)

The young Americans tended to have little success with native French and more luck with recent immigrants, in particular the Pieds Noirs French colonists of Algeria, who came home disillusioned after its independence.

“France was then, and probably still is in a transitional emotional state, and the LDS church offered for many people some basic principles and some eternal truths they feel like they can grab hold of,” Eastman said.

Sometimes, however, the missionaries -- eager to perform baptisms -- confronted situations for which their sheltered backgrounds had not prepared them. Utah church officials had to tell some missionaries...
they would not, in fact, be allowed to baptise a man who had just served time in prison for murder. Nor could they baptise a woman sharing her flat with a paramour until they had convinced him to hit the road.

Another faced the uncomfortable task of telling a recent immigrant from East Africa who was keen to be baptised that blacks in the LDS could not hold the priesthood, an authority given to adult male church members in good standing. In 1978, church leaders experienced a “revelation” and the policy was changed.

THE SMALL CHURCH IN the Bordeaux suburb of Talence looks the same today as it did in the late 1960s, when Romney and fellow missionaries were photographed in front of it during a rare visit by Howard Hunter, a future president of the church and at the time a member of the governing body the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

The simple structure, complete with blond wood pews and light mauve carpeting, could have sprung forth from any American suburb -- a visual representation of the Mormon message originating in Utah being preached across the world.

Harvey Morgan, an ex-Mormon who did his French mission in the 1960s, said that despite lip-service paid to multiculturalism, missionaries still live in a “bubble”, with the church showing little willingness to adapt to foreign cultures.

“Mormonism until recently was a Utah phenomenon,” said Morgan. “A heartland of America phenomenon and they’re damned provincial out there! The idea that France is different from America, that you’d preach the gospels differently ... never would occur to them.”

But still the tenacious missionaries -- whether Romney decades ago or the 300 young Mormons who still come to France each year -- press on, preaching their message of faith, moral responsibility and service.

“I would certainly feel comfortable with him being president of the United States based on the things we shared and the way we grew,” said Wood.

Romney’s role as assistant to the president of the mission in France forced him to grow up more quickly than others. It also landed the 21-year-old in a life-threatening car accident.

One afternoon in June 1968, Romney was at the wheel on a gently twisting road in the tiny town of Bernos-Beaulac south of Bordeaux. His church-member passengers included mission head Anderson and his wife Leola. They were heading back from a meeting in a southern region when an oncoming car hit them head-on.

Leola, a well-liked mother-figure to the missionaries, was killed. Romney, originally pronounced dead at the scene, was taken to a nearby hospital, but fully recovered soon thereafter.

Suzanne Farel, now 87, was in the back seat, and still remembers the other car suddenly appearing in their lane. Witnesses at the time said the other driver, a priest who had been drinking, had just passed another car and was undeniably at fault.

“There he is,” said Farel, leafing through her photo album to locate a picture of “Elder Romney” lying in a hospital bed with a black eye, his right arm in a cast. Another photo shows the smashed front ends of both vehicles. The LDS church never filed a lawsuit, said Farel.

The idea of a “President Romney” makes sense, she said.

“Why not? He’s a member,” said Farel. “He wouldn’t lie, he wouldn’t cheat. In politics, that’s something that doesn’t come around that often.”

The departure of Anderson following the death of his wife put Romney and a fellow missionary temporarily in charge of the mission for several weeks.

People who knew Romney say his optimistic nature remained intact after the accident, despite the shock and grief.

“We had lots of work to do. He especially had a lot of responsibility, so not a lot of time to sit around and philosophise,” said Wood, who had also been in the car but escaped with just a gash on his head.

It’s that sense of discipline, Mormons say, that keeps missionaries focused, despite constant rejection, occasional homesickness, and, in Romney’s case, sudden tragedy.

“There’s nothing like hard work and time to heal the pain and sorrow of a tragic loss,” Romney told the Boston Globe in 2007. “What we do with our time is not for frivolity, but for meaning.”

(Edited by Simon Robinson, Lee Aitken and Sara Ledwith)