

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in Nicaragua

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Overview

The Church in Nicaragua established a foothold at approximately the same time as other Spanish-speaking countries in Central America but did not achieve significant growth until the early 1990s. Rapid membership and congregational growth in the 1990s culminated in the number of stakes increasing from one to nine between 1999 and 2009. In 2010, the Church organized a second mission largely as a result of the increasing size of the full-time missionary force, large numbers of convert baptisms, and full-time missionary involvement in strengthening individual congregations and participating in reactivation efforts. Notwithstanding a substantial increase in the size of the full-time missionary force within the past three years, no progress has occurred in accelerating membership growth and achieving positive congregational growth within this period.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Nicaragua and identifies recent church growth and missionary successes. Opportunities and challenges for reversing recent stagnant growth trends are analyzed. The growth of the Church in other Spanish-speaking Central American countries is summarized and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Nicaragua is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

In the early 1950s, the Central American Mission assigned the first missionaries to Nicaragua audemars piguet replica watches and baptized the first converts. The Church in Nicaragua experienced slow membership and congregational growth during the first three decades of missionary activity. Political instability, limited numbers of full-time missionaries serving in the country, and poor relations between the Church and government officials were primarily responsible for slow to stagnant growth between the 1950s and late 1980s. In 1989, these difficult conditions necessitated the Church discontinuing its only stake in the country in Managua. By 1983, there were 3,270 members. In 1989, membership totaled 2,100 and nine branches functioned in the entire country.

Rapid church growth began in the early 1990s due to the stabilizing political situation, improving relations between the Church and the government, and the organization of a separate mission headquartered in Nicaragua in 1989. In the 1990s, number of members increased from 2,100 at year-end 1989 to 31,747 at year-end 1999 and the number of congregations increased from nine to 77 during this period. The average number of members per congregation substantially increased from 233 to 412 due to efforts to increase the number of members per congregation in order for these congregations to qualify as wards. Modest convert retention rates were also responsible for increases in the average number of members per congregation.

The organization of many new stakes constituted the crowning LDS growth achievement in the 2000s as the number of stakes increased from one at year-end 1999 to nine at year-end 2009. Many of these new stakes were organized from districts as the number of districts declined from 11 to six during this period. In 1998, the Church reinstated a stake in Managua. By year-end 2005, there were four stakes within the Managua metropolitan area.

The Church has experienced frustratingly few results that suggest real church growth has occurred during the early 2010s. The number of stakes and districts remained unchanged and the number of congregations increased by one from 100 to 101 between year-end 2009 and year-end 2013. Annual membership growth rates remained unaffected by stagnant congregational growth and continued to range between 5-7% between 2009 and 2012. Incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates within the past decade has resulted in the average number of members per ward or branch skyrocketing from 503

in 2002 to 790 in 2012. In 2012, Chile was the only other country in the world with a higher members-to-units ratio than Nicaragua as the average congregation had 929 members.

Successes

The organization of a second mission has coincided with revamped national outreach expansion efforts within both missions and increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Nicaragua. Several locations had missionaries assigned and member groups organized immediately prior to the organization of the Nicaragua Managua North Mission in 2010 and in the following years. Locations that had missionaries assigned on a temporary or permanent basis within the past four years where converts have joined the Church include Ocotal, Puerto Momotombo, Rio Branco, San Benito, Siuna, and Somoto. The Church has organized member groups in most of these locations and has worked towards developing local leadership capable of staffing each congregation's administrative and ecclesiastical needs.

The Church has experienced rapid membership and congregational growth in the Puerto Cabezas area within the past five years. Outreach efforts targeting the Amerindian Miskito population appear largely responsible for this recent growth. In 2010, there were a sufficient number of branches in the area for the Church to organize a district. The Church created its most recently organized branch in 2012 and currently has five branches that appear close to qualifying as wards in order for a stake to be organized. Full-time missionaries assigned to the Puerto Cabezas area often learn basic conversational and gospel instructional language skills in Miskito although the mission has not appeared to organize an official Miskito language program.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities for the Church to implement a church planting strategy within the Managua metropolitan area. Virtually stagnant congregational growth has occurred within Managua over the past five years notwithstanding 1.27 million inhabitants in the metropolitan area and two missions headquartered within the same city since 2010. The Church achieved some of its greatest advances in expanding outreach within the metropolitan area during the 1990s when mission leaders organized multiple districts and dozens of additional branches to spur growth. All wards and branches within Managua appear to have hundreds, and perhaps in some cases over a thousand, less-active and inactive members within their geographical boundaries. Organizing member groups that assemble in locations closer to members' homes can be an effective method for reclaiming lost members and spurring leadership development. Mission and stake leaders promoting the organization of family home evening (FHE) groups can be a cost-effective intervention that provides a more casual environment for less-active and inactive members to return to activity, socialize with fellow members, and receive basic gospel instruction. FHE groups can also serve as an assessment tool to ascertain where member groups or branches would be most appropriate to organize and provide a segue for establishing member groups or branches. There are also several lesser-reached areas in the Managua area that appear good candidates for church planting efforts. These locations include Cabana Grande, Monte Fresco, Praderas del Doral, and lesser-reached suburban communities in southern Managua.

The organization of mission branches for each mission to administer locations distant from areas where stakes and districts operate may be an effective intervention for mission leaders to take greater initiative in strengthening the Church in locations where member groups operate. Distance poses challenges for local leaders to effective train and support members in many of these locations. Mission leadership is often better equipped to travel to and visit these locations to expand national outreach and prepare member groups to become branches.

Challenges

Quick-baptism tactics that emphasize rushed, careless pre-baptismal teaching and preparation in order to achieve large numerical goals lay at the root of convert retention and member inactivity problems for the Church in Nicaragua. This quota-driven approach to finding, teaching, and baptizing new converts has had a disastrous effect on leadership development, the self-sufficiency of congregations, and convert retention and member activity rates. A lack of convert accountability exhibited by full-time missionaries and inconsistent member-missionary participation has resulted in post-baptism fellowshipping problems. Missionaries serving in the late 2000s reported that the Church added over 10,000 members but experienced only a minor increase in sacrament meeting attendance. These findings reinforce the erroneous assumption held by some church members and leaders that poor convert retention and low member activity rates always accompany rapid membership growth. Current member activity rates appear to range from 10% to 20% of nominal church membership for most locations. Rectifying convert retention and member inactivity problems will be essential towards the Church achieving real growth within the foreseeable future.

The Church has not achieved any improvement in accelerating membership and congregational growth rates since the organization of a second mission in 2010. The productivity of the original Nicaragua Managua Mission has outperformed the combined efforts of the two Nicaraguan missions between 2010 and 2013 as congregational growth has come to a total halt and convert retention rates do not appear to have noticeably improved following the organization of a second mission. These findings suggest that there has been no improvement with collaborative efforts between local church leaders and mission leadership in reactivating less-active members and fellowshipping new converts. The massive number of inactive and less-active members on most wards and branch membership rolls siphons mission resources from finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining new converts to often less productive reactivation efforts. Utilizing interventions such as seminary and institute, youth programs, full-time mission preparation classes, home and visiting teaching, and FHE groups may be appropriate for

reversing the ongoing trend of declining productivity from the Church's full-time missionary efforts.

The Church has experienced declining national outreach in some areas within recent years. The number of congregations has declined in some locations of the Nicaragua Managua South Mission since 2010. The Church closed the Rivas Nicaragua District and two of the three branches that previously pertained to the district (Buena Vista and Moyogalpa). In Bluefields, the Church closed one of its two branches (Bluefields Centro) in 2012. These findings indicate that the Church has not only been unsuccessful in augmenting the number of active members and strengthening local leadership but also in maintaining some previously functioning congregations to the point that congregation consolidations become necessary.

Local cultural and societal conditions pose some challenges for achieving real church growth. Most the population identifies as Catholic but few participate in religious services on a regular basis. Other denominations report challenges with retaining new converts and maintaining congregations in some locations. Poverty and emigration create challenges for achieving stability in the Church and strengthening congregations and leadership as some active, contributing church members move out of the country in search of better employment opportunities.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Central America has experienced widely varying membership and congregational growth trends by country within the past five years although all countries reported incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates suggesting widespread convert attrition problems. In Costa Rica, annual membership growth rates have fluctuated since 2007 from as low as 0.4% to as high as 4.1%. The number of congregations has declined by three during this period from 76 to 73. In 2012, the average congregation had 566 members. In El Salvador, the Church maintained annual membership growth rates between 2.0% and 3.5% since 2007 and the number of congregations has increased by eight from 156 to 164. In 2012, the average congregation had 708 members. In Guatemala, the Church has maintained annual membership growth rates between 2.0% and 3.5% since 2007 but the number of congregations decreased by 13 from 430 to 417. In 2012, the average congregation had 576 members. In Honduras, the Church has maintained annual membership growth rates of between 4.0-4.5% since 2007 but the number of congregations increased by only six during this period from 220 to 226. Some progress increasing active membership is evident in many branches became wards as the number of wards increased from 137 in 2010 to 149 in 2013. In 2012, the average congregation had 682 members. In Panama, the Church has experienced annual membership growth rates ranging between two and four percent since 2007 but has reported significant congregational decline as the number of congregations decreased by 21 from 93 to 72. In 2012, the average congregation had 676 members.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups report a substantial presence in Nicaragua and experience steady growth. Evangelicals claim 30% of the national population and report strong receptivity.[1] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence but has experienced declining growth rates. In 2012, Adventists reported 65,456 members, 122 churches (large congregations), and 96 companies (small congregations). The number of baptisms has declined from approximately 10,000 a year in the mid to late 2000s to less than 4,000 a year since 2011. The number of churches substantially declined between 2010 and 2012 from 209 to 122 and the number of companies substantially increased from 52 to 96,[2] suggesting problems with maintaining larger congregations and the need to consolidate smaller congregations with few active members. Jehovah's Witnesses report a pervasive presence in Nicaragua and have experienced slow but steady increases in the number of active members and congregations within the past five years. In 2012, Witnesses reported 24,480 active members, 371 congregations, and 738 converts baptized.[3] The Church of the Nazarene reports 12,698 full members, 184 congregations (178 organized churches, six churches not yet organized [recently planted congregations]), and an average weekly worship attendance of 8,452.[4] Nazarenes have experienced slow but steady growth within recent years.

Limitations

Abundant returned missionary reports were available during the writing of this case study. However, there were few current full-time missionary and local member reports available. The Church does not publish the number of active members by country or various statistical measurements pertinent to member activity such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of temple recommend holders, and the number of full-tithe paying members. There are no official data published regarding the number of convert baptisms by mission or by country.

Future Prospects

The outlook for reversing declining productivity of the two Nicaraguan missions and reversing the ongoing trend of incommensurate membership and congregational growth appears dim for the foreseeable future. The Church has appeared unable to noticeably augment the number of active members in most congregations and stake and mission leaders in the most populous urban areas have taken a congregation-splitting approach to church growth rather than a congregation planting approach. Success in improving the self-sufficiency of the Church in Nicaragua will be manifest by the announcement of a temple for Managua, the consistent organization of new stakes, districts, wards, and branches, and mission leaders readily opening additional cities and towns to formal missionary efforts and organizing member groups in these locations. Greater member-missionary participation and more consistent implementation of stricter prebaptismal preparations will be key towards improving prospects for future growth.

[1] "Nicaragua," Operation World, retrieved 11 January 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/country/nica/owtext.html

[2] "Nicaragua Mission (2003-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 7 January 2014. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10272

[3] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[4] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2002-2012," nazarene.org, retrieved 19 November 2013. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDwQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnazarene.org%2Ff

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