

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Decelerating LDS Growth in Taiwan

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Overview

Inhabited by 23.3 million people, Taiwan is an island nation in East Asia that is 98% Chinese (84% Taiwanese, 14% mainland Chinese) and 2% indigenous. Rapid economic growth and modernization has occurred over the past several decades resulting in Taiwan's current status as a major economic power in the region. In the late 1950s, the LDS Church established an initial presence and has experienced moderate growth over the past half century. The Church achieved nearly commensurate membership and congregational growth rates between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s but has since experienced a substantial slowdown in all church growth indicators.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Taiwan and discusses past church growth successes. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are discussed with particular emphasis on recent decelerating membership and congregational growth trends. LDS growth trends in other East Asian countries are compared to the Church in Taiwan and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

In the late 1950s, the Church organized the first branch, assigned the first missionaries, and dedicated Taiwan for missionary work. In 1958, there were 200 members.

Membership increased to 8,390 in 1975, 10,016 in 1983, 21,000 in 1993, 33,506 in 2001, 51,090 in 2009, and 55,805 in 2012. Annual membership growth rates widely fluctuated during the 1970s and 1980s from as low as -2.7% in 1977 to as high as 10.7% in 1989 but generally ranged from 2-8%. In the 1990s and 2000s, annual membership growth rates usually ranged from 4-6% with the exception of the three-year period from 1999 to 2002 when annual membership growth rates ranged from 9-12%. In the early 2010s, annual membership growth rates declined to 2.7% in 2011 and 2.3% in 2012.

In 1975, there were 30 branches. The total number of congregations reached 47 in 1987 (19 wards, 28 branches), 57 in 1995 (22 wards, 35 branches), 76 in 2000 (36 wards, 40 branches), 92 in 2005 (69 wards, 23 branches), and 102 in 2009 (80 wards, 22 branches). The total number of congregations declined in the early 2010s to 100 in 2012 (79 wards, 21 branches). In late 2013, there were 101 congregations (80 wards, 21 branches).

In 1975, there were three districts. The Church organized its first stake in 1976. The number of stakes reached two in 1981, three in 1982, five in 1997, seven in 2001, nine in 2004, and 11 in 2010 whereas the number of districts totaled two in 1987, three in 1991, four in 1993, five in 1999, four in 2001, three in 2003, two in 2004, one in 2010, and two in 2011.

In 1971, the Church organized its first mission in Taiwan in Taipei. In 1976, a second mission was organized in Kaohsiung and later relocated to Taichung in 1983. In 1998, the Church organized a third mission based in Kaohsiung but discontinued the mission in 2009.

The number of active members per congregation has appeared to remain consistent over the past decade. In the early 2000s, missionaries reported that most congregations had between 60 and 130 active members whereas in the early 2010s, most congregations appeared to have between 60 and 150 active members. In 2013, one ward in the Kaohsiung area had 140 attending sacrament meeting and one branch in the Chia Yi Taiwan District had over 90 attending church. Approximately 20% of members nationwide appear to be active.

In 2013, there were several church growth developments that suggested some improvement in reversing the trend of decelerating growth. Missionaries serving in the Hualien Taiwan District reported that the mission president focused on helping the district to become a stake in the next couple years and that a third branch would be organized in the Taidong area. The Taiwan Taichung Mission president placed considerable emphasis on helping the Chia Yi Taiwan District become a stake within the near future. Efforts in helping both districts become stakes yielded increases in active membership and church attendance. In July 2013, the Taiwan Taichung Mission organized the Church's first member group on Jinmen (Kinmen) Island. The mission president reported that the first known member to live on the island arrived in 2010. In mid-2013, there were approximately a dozen members in the group and the original member had referred two additional families to be taught by the visiting full-time missionaries. In August 2013, over 400 youth from units within the Taiwan Taichung Mission participated in a mission-wide youth conference. In October 2013, a mission president reported that a nationwide priesthood conference was held with the Asia Area Presidency, all four

Taiwanese area seventies, both Taiwanese mission presidents, and all stake and district presidencies in the country. The content of the conference focused on helping the Church increase the number of stakes from 11 to 20 within the foreseeable future although details on how this lofty goal would be accomplished were not disclosed.

Successes

The Church in Taiwan has steadily organized new stakes since the mid-1990s as the number of stakes has increased from three to 11 within less than two decades. Currently mission and area leadership have continued to emphasize the importance of stake growth in order to achieve real growth for the Church in Taiwan. Increases in the number of stakes serves as a strong indicator for increasing numbers of active members and Melchizedek Priesthood holders and improving self-sufficiency in local church leadership. The organization of districts from portions of stakes has proved effective in establishing additional stakes once branches in these districts become ward-sized and sufficient local leadership can support both ward and stake-level callings. The Church most recently organized a new district from portions of two stakes in 2011 when the Chia Yi Taiwan District was created from portions of the Chung Hsing Taiwan and Tainan Taiwan Stakes. The Church has created two stakes from splitting large stakes, such as the Kaohsiung Taiwan East (also created from the former Ping Tung Taiwan District) and Taichung Taiwan North Stakes. Renewed vision to accelerate growth for the entire country has potential to generate real, long-lasting results if these plans are consistently followed, member-missionary participation improves, and sufficiently strict convert baptismal standards are maintained.

The Church in Taiwan is the only industrialized East Asian nation that has not experienced widespread congregation consolidations as of late 2013. The Church in most industrialized countries in the region where decelerating membership growth has occurred have also experienced widespread ward and branch consolidations such as Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea. This finding suggests that the Church in Taiwan has achieved greater self-sufficiency in local leadership, higher member activity and convert retention rates, and stronger receptivity in the general population compared to other industrialized countries in the region.

The establishment of the first member group on Jinmen constitutes a major church growth and missionary success for the Church in Taiwan as this accomplishment occurred almost entirely through member-missionary efforts. This development may signal improvements in member-missionary participation and activity, which could have enormous potential in starting additional member groups in additional lesser-reached or unreached cities and towns. Mission leadership has facilitated the organization of the Jinmen Group but without initially assigning full-time missionaries prior to local members developing their own leadership to support a group and fellowshipping converts into the Church without outside assistance.

The Church in Taiwan has achieved some of the greatest penetration of LDS outreach among countries in Asia. There are several administrative counties in Taiwan that have some of the highest percentages of nominal Latter-day Saints in the population in East Asia. Estimated LDS membership accounts for at least 0.30% (one member per 330 or fewer people) in eight counties, including several counties with large populations such as Hsinchu (0.42%), Nantou (0.31%), and Taichung Shih (0.30%). This accomplishment appears the result of a combination of the population exhibiting moderate receptivity to the Church and the Church mobilizing greater mission resources to Taiwan than most other countries in the region.

The Church in Taiwan has played a significant role in the establishment of the Church in mainland China. Missionaries have reported small numbers of mainland Chinese joining the Church in Taiwan and later returning to mainland China. Similarities in culture, language, and religion have provided unique proselytism opportunities for the Church in reaching mainland Chinese who are currently unreached by traditional LDS missionary paradigms within their home country.

The Church remains relatively strong among youth and young adults as evidenced by good attendance at special youth or YSA conferences and good levels of seminary and institute participation. During the 2011-2012 school year, seminary and institute enrollment accounted for 4.3% of nominal church membership for year-end 2011; a higher percentage than most industrialized countries around the world.

Opportunities

Missionaries over the years have indicated that active members are often willing and excited to help missionaries in teaching investigators and new converts. Organizing congregation-by-congregation ward and branch mission plans to incorporate local members into the finding, teaching, baptizing, and retention processes presents a methodical approach to capitalizing on member enthusiasm for missionary work. The use of member-missionary programs and approaches that are increasingly implemented in North America such as members creating mormon.org profiles, using of social media in missionary efforts, and teaching investigators in members' homes has good potential to accelerate growth and take advantage of moderate to good receptivity exhibited by the population. Greater focus on ordinary members fulfilling their home and visiting teaching responsibilities may improve member involvement in reactivation and retention efforts. Missionaries are well recognized by many Taiwanese and the Church has frequently conducted nationwide services projects that have given many a positive or neutral opinion about the Church and its purpose. Including local members with service projects and finding activities has potential to capitalize on the Church's visibility in society.

There remain many medium-sized and small cities that do not have their own ward or branch, including several cities with over 50,000 inhabitants. Many of these cities are located west of Taipei and west of Taichung. Stake and district leaders visiting

members and investigators who reside in these locations and exploring options for organizing family home evening (FHE) groups, member groups, or branches that assemble in these cities may improve convert retention and member activity rates by reducing travel times to meetinghouses, fostering a sense of LDS community in these cities, and extending formal, purposeful outreach that specifically targets these cities as opposed to extending sporadic and limited outreach from a nearby city.

Youth and young adults exhibit good receptivity to LDS outreach and present some of the greatest opportunities for future growth. The Church has organized only one young single adult (YSA) unit in the country that currently operates in Taichung. Organizing a YSA unit in Taipei and Kaohsiung may improve prospects of more members marrying within the Church and attracting more YSA converts. Missionary preparation classes also have good potential for increasing the number of Taiwanese who serve missions, which could result in a larger body of leadership manpower for the Church in Taiwan and improved self-sustainability of the Church's two Taiwanese missions.

The Church has yet to organize English-speaking congregations in all major cities in Taiwan and to organize congregations that specifically service other ethnolinguistic minority groups such as Tagalog speakers and speakers of indigenous Taiwanese languages such as Amis. Appointing several missionary companionships to target ethnolinguistic minority groups has potential to accelerate LDS growth as many of these peoples appear to exhibit higher receptivity to Christian proselytism groups than the Taiwanese or mainland Chinese.

Challenges

Low member activity and convert retention rates constitute the primary influence on decelerating LDS growth in Taiwan. In the early 2000s, returned missionaries reported that some missions baptized hundreds of new converts within a period of several years yet mission-wide sacrament meeting attendance remained unchanged. This finding is consistent with other countries that experience very poor convert retention rates. Within the past five years, the number of LDS congregations has experienced no net change although membership has increased by 19%; suggesting significant convert attrition and activity problems. In late 2013, one missionary serving in a ward in Taichung reported that his ward had over 800 members within its boundaries. Another missionary serving in a branch in the Hua Lien Taiwan District reported that only 50 of the 200 members on branch records regularly attended church. One ward in the Kaohsiung area had only about 60 attending church on an average Sunday. A branch in one stake in the Taiwan Taichung Mission had only 13 members in attendance on most Sundays.

Returned missionaries over the past several decades indicate that inadequate prebaptismal preparation, cultural conditions, and a weak testimony in the Church were common reasons for members no longer attending church. Missionaries indicate that a lack of member involvement in member-missionary work, rushed baptismal preparation to achieve numerical goals, and the large number of youth converts who were often transient and inconsistent in church attendance were significant challenges. Family objections for some individuals who joined the Church resulted in these new converts becoming inactive. Cultural traditions discourage conversion from traditional Chinese religions such as Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism notwithstanding most followers of these religions in Taiwan exhibiting low levels of personal religiosity. Returned missionaries indicate that many Taiwanese struggle to see the need for organized religion and the purpose of going to a church that expects as much out of its members as the LDS Church (holding a calling, weekly church attendance, daily scripture study and personal prayer, ect.). East Asian religions emphasize more philosophical and abstract religious concepts to achieve balance and harmony in the universe. Consequently the Western religious concepts of sin, the need for a savior and saving ordinances, and repentance are foreign and misunderstood. Returned missionaries observe that some local church leaders go inactive once released from their calling due, in part, to feeling like they "lost face" and attributing their release to falling short of meeting leadership expectations.

The Church has experienced slower growth in some of the most populous cities and counties in Taiwan in comparison to other less populated areas. Some of the most populated cities and counties in Taiwan also appear to have some of the lowest percentages of Latter-day Saints. Estimated membership accounts for less than 0.20% (one LDS per 530 or more inhabitants) for seven counties that have a ward or branch, including New Taipei City (population: 3.94 million), Taoyuan (population: 2.03 million), and Yunlin (population: 0.71 million).

Comparative Growth

Decelerating LDS growth has occurred in other industrialized East Asian countries within the past two decaes. In Japan, annual membership growth rates have declined from 1-5% in the 1990s and early 2000s to less than one percent since 2003. The total number of wards and branches steadily increased over the decades to a high of 317 in 1999 but has since declined to 281 as of year-end 2012. The Church in Japan has discontinued several stakes within the past two decades and has organized only two new stakes since 1999. In South Korea, annual membership growth rates have declined from 1-2% for most years in the 1990s and 2000s to less than one percent in 2011 and 2012. The total number of wards and branches steadily increased in the 1980s and 1900s to 175 in 1999 but has since plummeted to 128 as of year-end 2012. In 2012, the Church discontinued a stake in South Korea for the first time in the Church's history in the country. In Hong Kong, the Church experienced steady membership and congregational growth in the 1980s but this growth decelerated in the 1990s. Annual membership growth rates have varied year to year but have been less than two percent for over a decade. The total number of wards and branches steadily increased prior to 2001 whereas congregational decline occurred between 2002 and 2008 as the number of congregations declined from a high of 41 to a low of 32. In 2006, the Church discontinued a stake in Hong Kong for the first time. In 2012 and 2013, the Church began to experience a reversal in stagnant or declining congregational growth as two new wards were created and no units were discontinued.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups have reported membership and congregational growth rates that are either comparable to the LDS Church or that are more rapid. Evangelicals claim 2.8% of the national population and account for approximately half of Christians in the country.[1] In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 8,577 active members, 125 congregations, and 541 convert baptisms in Taiwan.[2] Provided with the number of language-specific congregations in parentheses, Witnesses hold worship services in six languages including Mandarin Chinese (117), English (7), Taiwanese Sign Language (2 congregations, 5 groups), Indonesian (3 groups), Vietnamese (2 groups), and Tagalog (1 group).[3] Witness have achieved steady growth in the number of congregations and active members over the past five years as the number of congregations has increased by 38% and the number of active members has increased by 28%. In addition to traditional and simplified Chinese, Witnesses translate proselytism materials into one indigenous Taiwanese language (Amis).[4] In 2012, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 6,224 members, 55 churches, and 30 companies. Adventists have experienced slow congregational growth and steady membership growth within the past decade as the combined number of churches and companies increased from 77 to 85 and the number of members increased by 45%.[5] The Church of the Nazarene currently reports 43 churches in Taiwan[6] and in 2012 reported 2,658 full members.[7]

Limitations

Estimated LDS membership was ascertained by multiplying the number of congregations in each administrative county by the average number of members per congregation in Taiwan for 2012 (545). One study assessing the accuracy of estimated membership figures ascertained through this method found that estimated membership figures usually fall within 20% of the actual membership total.[8] The Church does not publish official member activity and convert retention rates. No official membership statistics are released for Taiwan on an administrative county or city level. The Church does not publish the annual number of convert baptisms per country or mission or a breakdown in the membership increase attributed to children of record, member reinstatements, or convert baptisms. Although abundant returned missionary reports were available, few local member and church leader reports were available during the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth trends in Taiwan appears mixed as regional and local church leadership have recently refocused on accelerating growth through member-missionary participation and goals to organize additional stakes but the Church in Taiwan has historically experienced low member activity and convert retention rates. Past experience for the Church in other industrialized East Asian countries suggests that the Church in Taiwan will continue to experience a slowdown in membership and congregational growth. However, steady increases in the number of wards in some stakes and the two remaining districts becoming closer to reaching the minimum qualifications to operate as stakes suggests that additional stakes may be organized in the near future such as from the Taipei Taiwan West Stake (10 wards) and the Chia Yi Taiwan and Hua Lien Taiwan Districts. The organization of member groups or branches in lesser-reached and unreached cities and towns will be an important step towards reversing recent decelerating church growth trends in Taiwan. Increasing numbers of Taiwanese Latter-day Saints serving full-time missions will also be crucial towards increasing the number of members qualified to fill leadership positions and improving the self-sufficiency of the Church in Taiwan.

[1] "Republic of China, Taiwan," Operation World, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/country/chnt/owtext.html

[2] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[3] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[4] "Publications," jw.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=ami

[5] "Taiwan Conference (2012-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2246813

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=TW&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[7] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2002-2012," nazarene.org, retrieved 16 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

[8] Martinich, Matt. "Estimated LDS Membership by Administrative Division through the Members-to-Units Ratio," cumorah.com, 24 June 2013. http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_other_articles&story_id=578&cat_id=30