

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in Mindanao, Philippines

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Overview

Inhabited by approximately 22 million, Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines. A 2000 survey found that approximately 75% of the population is Christian with the vast majority of Christians adhering to Roman Catholicism. The remaining 25% of the Mindanao population is Muslim.[1] Arab traders visited Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and introduced Islam whereas the Spanish explored and colonized the swisseta.org Philippines beginning in the sixteenth century and introduced Christianity. Filipinos followed indigenous beliefs prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Mindanao since as early as 1968[2] and achieved rapid growth during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s but has experienced stagnant growth since 2000 as evidenced by no additional stakes or districts organized and a net decrease in the number of wards and branches over the past decade.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Mindanao and identifies past missionary and church growth successes. Opportunities and challenges for growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church in other regions of the Philippines is compared to growth experienced in Mindanao and the size and growth of other outreach-focused Christian groups is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

The Church assigned missionaries and established its first branches in most major cities in Mindanao during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1977, the Church created its first mission in Mindanao headquartered in Davao. In 1981, the first stake was organized in Davao. Additional stakes were organized in Cagayan de Oro (1985), Davao (1985), Zamboanga (1985), Butuan (1989), Cagayan de Oro East (1990), Ozamiz (1990), Digos (1992), Iligan (1992), Kidapawan (1992), General Santos (1995), Oroquieta (1997), and Cagayan de Oro West (1999). Two of these stakes have been discontinued and returned to district status (Ozamiz in 1993 and Kidapawan in 1995). The number of stakes increased to four in 1985, seven in 1990, nine in 1995, and 11 in 2000.

In late 2013, there were 17 districts in Mindanao. These districts included Bislig (1987), Dipolog (1987), Gingoog (1987), Mati (1988), Pagadian (1990), Marbel (1991), Surigao (1991), Malaybalay (1992), Monkayo (1992), Ozamiz (1993), Panabo (1993), Tagum (1993), Cotabato (1995), Kidapawan (1995), Placer (1996), Balingasag (1999), and Trento (1999).

During the 2000s, congregational declined occurred in Mindanao as the number of wards and branches decreased by more than 20. Only four of the 23 stakes and districts (Balingasag, General Santos, Ozamiz, and Pagadian) reported an increase in the number of congregations between 2001 and 2013 and this increase was only one or two units per stake or district. Six of these 23 stakes and districts reported no increase in the number of wards and branches (Cagayan de Oro East, Dipolog, Kidapawan, Mati, Oroquieta, and Tagum). Provided with the decrease in the number of congregations in parentheses, there were 13 stakes and districts that reported a net decrease in congregations during this period including Iligan (-4), Davao Buhangin (-3), Malaybalay (-3), Panabo (-3), Cagayan de Oro West (-2), Cotabato (-2), Digos (-2), Zamboanga (-2), Cagayan de Oro (-1), Davao (-1), Gingoog (-1), Marbel (-1), and Monkayo (-1). No 2001 congregational data was available for one stake (Butuan) and four districts (Bislig, Placer, Surigao, and Trento), making it unclear whether this stake and these districts experienced congregational growth or decline. In October 2013, there were 183 official congregations in Mindanao (65 wards, 118 branches).

In the early 2010s, the Church began reversing the trend of declining congregational growth as net increases in the number of congregations occurred for several consecutive years. Recently organized units in Mindanao have included the Canitoan Branch in the Cagayan de Oro Philippines Stake in 2011, the Matina 2nd Ward in the Davao Philippines Stake in 2011, the San Pablo and Ipil Branches in the Pagadian Philippines District in 2012 and 2013, respectively, and the General Santos 5th Ward in the General Santos Philippines Stake in 2013.

Provided with the year of organization, there are currently three missions in Mindanao located in Davao (1977), Cagayan de Oro (1988), and Butuan (2006).

In 2006, the Church reported 60,000 members in Mindanao,[3] indicating that slightly less than 0.3% of the population was nominally LDS at the time.

Successes

In the early 2010s, the Church in Mindanao reversed the decade-long trend of congregational decline. The Church organized four new units in Mindanao during the two-year period from mid-2011 to mid-2013; a mere two percent increase over a two-year period. Although extremely slow congregational growth has occurred within the past couple years, this achievement marks a significant shift from consolidating units to avoiding additional unit consolidations and opening a couple new units a year.

The Church has maintained a presence in many towns and villages notwithstanding small target populations, often greater difficulty for missionaries and mission leaders to access these locations compared to cities, and poverty and low living standards. In 2013, there were 67 towns and villages in Mindanao with an LDS ward, branch, or member group functioning that appeared to have less than 15,000 inhabitants. Some small towns and villages have strong wards or branches established. At least a couple branches in the Gingoog Philippines District, for example, had approximately 100 attending church services in the early 2010s notwithstanding all these branches functioning in cities, towns, and villages inhabited by less than 20,000 people. The success of the Church in creating strong units in these remote, less populated areas may encourage church leaders to continue assessing conditions for opening member groups and branches in additional locations.

The Church has appeared to convert some of the highest percentages of provincial populations in the Philippines in a couple Mindanao provinces with comparatively small populations and low population densities. The Church appears to have one of the highest percentages of members in Surigao del Norte (1.74%) as calculated by taking the average number of members per ward or branch in the Philippines of 592 for the year 2012, multiplying this number by the number of congregations in the province at present, and dividing this number by the provincial population. Other provinces in Mindanao that appear to be at least one percent LDS include Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental, and Agusan del Norte.

Widespread usage of Cebuano in Mindanao facilitates missionary efforts and usage of Cebuano translations of LDS scriptures and church materials. Returned missionaries from the Philippines Butuan Mission report no need for the translation of materials into other indigenous languages spoken in the mission such as Surigaonon. The Church has translated a large number of gospel study and proselytism materials and all LDS scriptures into Cebuano.

Opportunities

The Church in Mindanao has a sizable base of active members in most areas that provide resources for outreach expansion and member-missionary activity. Considerable progress can be achieved with minimal involvement from full-time missionaries if ordinary members and local church leaders focus on effective interventions for finding investigators and teaching and preparing converts for baptism. The organization of additional branches and member groups that assemble in communities closer to the homes of members and investigators can help spur growth and revitalize missionary activity in locations where little or no growth has occurred within the past 15 years. There are likely dozens of villages and small towns located nearby LDS chapels that could benefit from local leaders and full-time missionaries organizing cottage meetings or family home evening (FHE) groups in order to reduce travel times and provide more penetrating outreach.

The Church may be able to reverse stagnant growth in Mindanao through renewed emphasis on seminary and institute attendance for investigators, recent converts, and less-active members. Higher convert retention rates may occur if church leaders require prospective members to regularly attended seminary or institute prior to baptism in order to solidify their testimonies, encourage personal religious habits such as prayer and scripture study, and foster social relationships with fellow members. Holding activities that provide engaging and meaningful interaction with fellow members and testimony development such as community service projects appear likely to spur growth. Returned missionaries report that community-based service projects carried out by full-time missionaries and local members, ordinary members living LDS teachings, and home and visiting teaching have facilitated growth.

Good receptivity to the Church and full-time missionaries in many areas of Mindanao suggest that there are favorable opportunities to expand outreach into currently unreached areas. The Church continues to maintain a limited presence in many areas of Mindanao. In 2013, 24 of the 72 cities with 15,000 or more inhabitants had no known LDS presence. One of these cities (Marawi) has nearly 200,000 inhabitants and no ward or branch functioning. Many of these cities are located in predominantly Muslim areas or are distant from the nearest ward or branch but nonetheless present realistic opportunities for outreach if mission leaders regularly visit these locations to meet with isolated members and investigators. The assignment of full-time missionaries to some of these locations may be unfeasible due to distance and safety concerns but significant progress can occur if mission leaders visit these locations on a routine basis and hold cottage meetings and organize member groups when warranted. Many of these locations likely have small numbers of Latter-day Saints who could be effectively reactivated if an LDS presence is established in their communities. A map of Mindanao displaying the status of LDS outreach by city and the towns and villages with an LDS presence can be found here.

The status of religious freedom in Mindanao has improved in recent years suggesting fewer safety concerns and problems for conducting traditional LDS outreach. There have been no recent government abuses of religious freedom in Mindanao notwithstanding ongoing political conflict and instability with Islamist separatists.[4] It may become feasible to assign non-Filipino missionaries to some locations in Mindanao within the foreseeable future due to greater stability in major cities and in locations distant from predominantly Muslim areas such as in the Philippines Butuan Mission.

Challenges

Inactivity and convert retention problems have constituted the greatest barriers to LDS growth throughout the Philippines. Returned missionaries who have recently served in Mindanao report that members getting offended by a member or church leader, poor fellowshipping from members, and inadequate prebaptismal preparation as the three greatest reasons for inactivity. Many members on church records who are inactive were rushed into baptism prior to developing habitual church attendance and other indicators of testimony development and member activity. One recently returned missionary who served in the Philippines Butuan Mission reported that approximately 25% of converts he baptized during his mission remained active two to three years later. Another missionary who recently returned from the Philippines Cagayan de Oro Mission estimated that half of converts remained active one year after baptism. Problems with local members and leaders following church teachings and actively participating in church administration and public affairs appear another major concern for inactivity and stagnant growth. Returned missionaries report that members who did not follow LDS teachings and displayed negative examples of LDS lifestyle to nonmembers, proselytism efforts of other faiths outperforming the LDS Church, and a lack of good local leadership deterred growth.

The absence of non-Filipino missionaries from serving in Mindanao missions and stagnant growth that has occurred for over a decade suggest serious challenges for the indigenous Filipino missionary force to expand outreach without the assistance of foreign missionary manpower. Although it is not entirely clear whether there is any relationship between the lack of nonnative missionaries serving in Mindanao and stagnant growth, the Church cannot utilize larger numbers of foreign missionaries to expand the ranks of Mindanao missions due to this restriction. The LDS missionary department has not sent foreign missionaries to Mindanao for over a decade due to political instability and threats against Americans from Muslim separatist groups. The number of Filipino missionaries serving in Mindanao has appeared to increase within the past decade as the Church opened a third mission in Mindanao in 2006 but nonetheless there has been virtually no progress expanding missionary activity in Mindanao and helping remaining districts progress into stakes.

There have been recent instances of societal abuses of religious freedom in Mindanao. Radical Islamist groups have carried out violent attacks on Christian buildings. Many Muslims have resented the resettlement of Christians from other areas of the Philippines to Mindanao. Muslim groups have viewed Christian proselytism has an attack on the cultural and religious identity of the indigenous Muslim population of southern Mindanao. These tensions have also been fueled by reports of some Christians discriminating Muslims in regards to housing and employment. Notwithstanding this ethnoreligious conflict, most Christian and Muslims maintain amicable ties and work together to alleviate poverty and foster religious tolerance.[5] Missionary activity encounters some restrictions in Mindanao among the Muslim population. Full-time missionaries avoid proselytizing Muslims out of respect for local customs and due to ongoing conflict with Christians in Mindanao. This policy has resulted in reduced outreach potential as no active proselytism occurs among the approximately 5.5 million Muslims who reside on Mindanao.

Distance to the nearest meetinghouse constitutes another major barrier for LDS growth in Mindanao. Most cannot afford transportation costs to frequently travel to church if travel to church occurs at all. Some members and investigators must work on Sundays due to their job requirements resulting in problematic church attendance.

There has been very limited success opening additional locations to missionary work and establishing congregations within the past decade. Mission leaders have withdrawn proposed efforts to open some cities that currently remain unreached by LDS missionary efforts. Missionaries report that plans have been retracted due to concerns regarding the isolation of missionaries from the nearest city with missionaries assigned, safety concerns, transportation costs, and greater ease in opening locations closer to established LDS centers.

Comparative Growth

Most other islands in the Philippines reported a decline in the number of wards and branches between 2003 and 2006 and a slight increase between 2007 and 2013. The Church has organized additional stakes or districts on most major islands in the Philippines within the past decade. On Cebu, the Church organized one new stake in 2013 (Cebu Consolacion). On Leyte, the Church organized two new stakes from districts (Tacloban in 2007 and Carigara in 2012) and one new district (Sogod in 2007). On Luzon, the Church created eight new stakes (Lopez in 2003, Paniqui in 2010, Makati East in 2011, Santiago North in 2011, Tuguegarao South in 2011, Bacoor in 2012, San Jose del Monte in 2013, and San Gabriel in 2013) and eight new districts (Ballesteros in 2003, Camiling East in 2003, Mapandan in 2003, Baliwag in 2004, Bongabon in 2004, Gonzaga in 2005, Roxas Isabela in 2005, and Baler in 2009). Five stakes on Luzon were also discontinued during this period and reverted to district status (Bauang in 2003, Camiling West in 2003, Mangaldan in 2003, Agoo in 2004, and Burgos in 2005). On Negros, the Church organized one new stake from a district in 2009 (Sagay) and discontinued one stake and returned it to district status (La Carlota in 2004). On Samar, the Church organized one new stake from a district in 2008 (Catarman). No new stakes or districts have been created or discontinued within the past decade on Bohol, Mindoro, Palawan, Panay, or other smaller islands. In the early 2010s, the Church has appeared more aggressive and proactive in opening additional congregations and proselytism areas on other islands in the Philippines compared to Mindanao. The Church has struggled with low member activity rates, quick-baptism tactics resulting in poor convert retention, and significant local leadership development problems throughout the Philippines.

Most nontraditional proselytism-focused Christian groups that engage in missionary activity on a worldwide scale report a widespread presence in Mindanao and have achieved steady growth. Evangelicals maintain a significant following on Mindanao and claim 12.3% of the national population of the Philippines.[6] The Seventh Day Adventist Church has reported steady congregational growth and slow membership growth in Mindanao within the past 15 years. In 1997, Adventists reported 345,637 members, 1,442 churches, and 920 companies whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 367,730 members, 1,965 churches, and 1,066 companies. Adventists generally baptize between 20,000 and 40,000 new converts a year in Mindanao.[7]

Adventists maintain a widespread presence in Mindanao and appear to operate congregations in every city and most large towns. Jehovah's Witnesses report over 800 congregations in Mindanao. Provided with the number of congregations in parentheses, Witnesses report a presence in Agusan Norte (30), Agusan Sur (38), Bukidnon (62), Camiguin (7), Compostela Valley (41), Davao Oriental (33), Davao Norte (65), Davao Sur (144), Lanao Norte (21), Lanao Sur (4), Maguindanao (11), Misamis Occidental (22), Misamis Oriental (58), Sarangani (17), South Cotabato (48), Sultan Kudarat (22), Surigao Norte (41), Surigao Sur (36), Zamboanga Norte (36), Zamboanga Sibugay (26), and Zamboanga Sur (49).[8] The Church of the Nazarene maintains a limited presence in Mindanao and reports moderate growth. In 2012, Nazarenes reported 3,486 members, 61 churches, and an average weekly worship attendance of 1,385.[9]

Limitations

Only a handful of returned missionary reports were available during the writing of this case study. Member or leader reports were extremely limited. Returned missionaries reported no particular reasons as to why congregational decline occurred in Mindanao during most years in the 2000s and why extremely slow congregational growth has occurred within the past couple years other than emphasis on individual congregations meeting particular activity requirements to continue to operate. The Church does not publish regular data on the number of members residing in Mindanao or other major islands or administrative divisions of the Philippines. No official data on member activity and convert retention rates are provided to the public. The Church does not release figures on the annual number of converts baptized in each mission or the number of missionaries assigned to each mission per year.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Mindanao appears mixed as the trend of congregation consolidations has been reversed within the past few years yet there has been extremely slow congregational growth since this reversal occurred. Noticeable progress in achieving real church growth will be evident in accelerated congregational growth in the coming years as certain member activity and leadership requirements must be met for a particular location in order for the Church to organize additional congregations. Some member districts may become stakes within the foreseeable future due to efforts by mission and district leaders to prepare branches to meet the minimal qualifications to function as wards. Renewed emphasis on reactivation efforts from area leadership in the early 2010s may signal greater progress in rectifying inactivity and convert retention woes and culminate in the creation of new stakes and districts within the coming decade. However, little progress will likely occur unless mission leadership focuses on opening additional locations to missionary activity and establishing member groups and branches closer to the homes of target populations. Much of the success in achieving real growth for the Church in Mindanao will hinge on ordinary members and local church leaders taking the initiative in sharing the gospel with others and participating in fellowshipping, retention, and reactivation.

[1] "Philippines," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 October 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208260

[2] Teh, Michael John U. "I Had Questions," New Era, May 2009. http://www.lds.org/new-era/2009/05/i-had-questions

[3] Stahle, Shaun D. "New missions created in Brazil, Philippines, Pacific," LDS Church News, 15 July 2006. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49194/New-missions-created-in-Brazil-Philippines-Pacific.html

[4] "Philippines," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 October 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208260

[5] "Philippines," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 October 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208260

[6] "Philippines," Operation World, retrieved 11 October 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/phil

[7] "South Philippine Union Conference (1997-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 10 October 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10098

[8] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 10 October 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E

[9] "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