

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Slow LDS Growth in Bangladesh

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Overview

Bangladesh is inhabited by 164 million people and ranks as the world's eighth most populous country. No other country populated by more than 10 million people has a higher population density than Bangladesh. The LDS Church established its initial presence in Bangladesh during the 1980s and early 1990s but has since experienced very slow membership growth and has not created any new congregations.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Bangladesh. Past church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future church growth and the establishment of formal missionary activity are analyzed. The growth of the Church in other South Asian countries is summarized and the size and growth of other missionary-focused groups that operate in Bangladesh is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

LDS Background

The Church baptized the first Bangladeshi converts in the 1970s and 1980s in other countries. In the 1985, the Church published select passages of the Book of Mormon into Bengali. During the mid-1980s, foreign members began residing in Bangladesh for employment purposes and shared the gospel with native friends and acquaintances. Church meetings began to be held and the Church organized its first branch in March 1992 in Dhaka. In 1993, the first native Bangladeshis served full-time missions. At year-end 1993, there were 40 members in the country; the majority of whom were expatriates from Canada and the United States. During most of the mid to late 1990s, the Dhaka Branch averaged between 30 and 40 members. By the early 2000s, most foreign members had moved away and only a couple native families were in the branch.[1]

The India New Delhi Mission began administering Bangladesh in late 2007 when the Church created the mission from the India Bangalore and Singapore Missions. Prior to this time the Singapore Mission administered Bangladesh. Local Bangladeshis began joining the Church more regularly following the reassignment of Bangladesh to the India New Delhi Mission. In 2008, there were three convert baptisms. In 2011, there were approximately two dozen Bangladeshi members and investigators in the Dhaka Branch who met with the mission president. Seven native converts were baptized in a single weekend that year. In 2012, a local member began serving a full-time mission in the Philippines Cauayan Mission. At the time there were 43 members in the Dhaka Branch, including several expatriate Americans who worked in the U.S. Embassy.[2]

Successes

The Church has achieved some small successes in Bangladesh. The Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Bengali at a time when there were only a handful of Bengali Latter-day Saints worldwide. The Dhaka Branch has appeared to continuously operate since its organization two decades ago notwithstanding the transient nature of expatriate members who have filled most leadership positions. Convert baptisms have begun to occur more frequently in the branch since the reassignment of Bangladesh to the India New Delhi Mission, resulting in more frequent visits by mission leaders. A native member beginning full-time missionary service in 2012 stands as another small success for the Church beginning to increase its self-sufficiency and strength in active membership.

Opportunities

The status of religious freedom in Bangladesh has steadily improved within the past decade. The government once monitored the activities of foreign missionaries but in recent years no government surveillance appeared to occur. Foreign missionaries once complained of long delays to obtain foreign missionary visas[3] whereas no such reports have been made within the past couple years. The Bangladeshi government upholds religious freedom for religious minority groups and these groups operate in the country with relatively few restrictions notwithstanding the status of Islam as the state religion. The constitution permits the practice, propagation, and profession of all religions as long as their operations fall within the confides of the law. The government has indicated that strict, severe penalties may be imposed on those who have a malicious intent to insult the religious beliefs of others. There have been no recent reports of government abuses of religious freedom although there have been reports of societal abuses of religious freedom that generally consist of violence between Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

The assignment of a senior missionary couple to Dhaka provides excellent opportunities to accelerate church growth. Senior missionaries could serve in a variety of meaningful functions such as providing member and leader support, assisting branch missionary efforts, visiting members and investigators residing in areas distant from the branch meetinghouse, assessing conditions for assigning young full-time missionaries, and organizing and executing humanitarian and development projects.

There are several locations with sizable numbers of Christians. Several local members who have joined the Church in Bangladesh previously attended other Christian denominations. This suggests that higher receptivity may occur among the Christian population compared to Muslim and Hindu populations. Mission leaders, senior missionary couples, and local church leaders visiting these communities and holding cottage meetings for interested individuals and isolated members may be an effective approach to establishing the Church in additional locations especially considering open proselytism and the conversion of Muslims to Christianity is frowned upon. Click here to view a map displaying the locations of cities and communities with sizable numbers of Christians.

Challenges

Local members who have joined the Church within the past 25 years have been unable to consistently baptize and retain new converts. Leadership positions continue to be staffed by foreign members. Minimal levels of self-sufficiency combined with no mission resources specifically dedicated to the country have been responsible for stagnant growth within the past two decades. Consequently little change in these growth trends will likely occur until local leadership takes a more active role in leadership and member-missionary activity, the mission establishes a permanent full-time missionary presence, or a combination of the two.

Bangladesh has been isolated from mission headquarters since the Church established its initial presence in the country. The Singapore Mission made virtually no inroads in progressing missionary work and church growth in Bangladesh due to its enormous geographical area it once covered prior to the creation of the India New Delhi Mission. Long distance from mission headquarters, mission leadership undertaking administrative responsibilities for four member districts and several mission branches that span thousands of miles from one another, and concerns assigning full-time missionaries to a location distant from mission headquarters and in a different country all present major challenges that have contributed to the lack of an active missionary presence in Bangladesh. Delays in assigning missionaries to Bangladesh may result in the Church missing its window of opportunity to proselyte the population at a time when this predominantly Muslim country grants such accommodating and widespread religious freedom to proselytizing Christian groups. Religious freedom conditions may deteriorate in the future considering the status of Islam as the state religion and changes in societal and political conditions.

There are few LDS materials and scriptures translated into Bengali. The Church has yet to translate the entire Book of Mormon into Bengali and does not translate any General Conferences addresses into Bengali notwithstanding a quarter of a billion people who speak Bengali as a first or second language.[4] Only four Bengali translations of basic church materials are available, including the old edition of Gospel Principles, The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, the 13 Articles of Faith, and a family guidebook.[5] The current number of materials and scriptures translated into Bengali constitutes a small success considering the Church rarely has translated selections of the Book of Mormon into languages spoken by as small of a number of members as Bengali. However, such a small number of gospel study materials and minimal amounts of LDS scriptures translated pose testimony development barriers for monolingual Bengali speakers.

The Church does not publish any contact information for members and investigators seeking to locate the Dhaka Branch. No address, phone number, or email contact information is available for the Dhaka Branch on the Church's online meetinghouse locator due to the sensitive nature of the Church in the country. Many members and investigators have likely been unable to make contact with the Church in Bangladesh due to the lack of information available to the public. No official LDS contact information for the branch and for members and investigators in Bangladesh erroneously suggests that there is no LDS presence, further hampering efforts to accelerate growth.

Corruption stands a major obstacle for the Church. Bangladesh numbers among the most corrupt countries in the world. In 2011, Bangladesh scored 26 out of 100 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.[6] Corruption may create difficulties for foreign missionaries to serve in the country and poses challenges for the Church to dispel the influence of corruption on how members and leaders handle church finances and follow LDS teachings.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Bangladesh has experienced the slowest growth of any country in South Asia that currently has at least one official LDS branch operating. In Pakistan, there were 130 members and three branches in mid-1993[7] whereas there were an estimated 3,500 members that met in as many as 13 branches in 2012. The Church in Pakistan has achieved substantial growth within the past two decades notwithstanding similar societal and cultural conditions as in Bangladesh. If the Church in Bangladesh had the same percentage of members in the population as in Pakistan (0.0019%), there would be 3,200 members in Bangladesh. In India, there were 1,300 members and 14 branches in 1993 whereas there were 10,958 members, six wards, and 34 branches in 2012. In Sri Lanka, there were 100 members and one branch in 1993 whereas there were 1,319 members and three branches in 2012. In Nepal, there were 17 members and no branches in 1993[8] whereas there were an estimated 160 members and one branch in 2012.

Other outreach-focused Christian groups report a larger and more widespread presence in Bangladesh compared to the LDS Church. Evangelicals report over 600,000 followers nationwide.[9] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence and numbers among the largest Christian denominations. Adventists have experienced rapid growth within the past 15 years. In 1997, Adventists reported 11,858 members, 70 churches, and 104 companies whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 36,881 members, 121 churches, and 296 companies in Bangladesh.[10] In 2012, Witnesses reported 168 active members that assembled in four congregations.[11] In September 2013, Jehovah's Witnesses reported six congregations in Bangladesh that assembled in Dhaka (4), Chittagong (1), and Mymensingh (1). All Witness congregations are conducted in Bengali.[12] Witnesses translate basic proselytism materials into Bengali and Chin (Hakka).

Limitations

No reports from local leaders or members in Bangladesh were available at the time of the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish official membership statistics for Bangladesh due to its sensitive nature in the country. It is unclear where the Dhaka Branch meetinghouse is located in the city and its proximity to communities with sizable numbers of Christians. Demographic data on LDS membership in Bangladesh such as ethnicity, language use, and religious background is unavailable. With no official statistics on membership growth and the annual number of convert baptisms in the country, it is unclear how much these growth indicators have changed over the past two decades. Reports from mission presidents or full-time missionaries regarding the Church in Bangladesh have not been available since 2012.

Future Prospects

The outlook for reversing slow LDS growth in Bangladesh will hinge on local membership more aggressively and consistently engaging in member-missionary efforts among their friends, family, and acquaintances. Prospects appear dim for the India New Delhi Mission to assign a senior missionary couple to Bangladesh for member and leader support as well as other missionary and humanitarian responsibilities due to the immense geographic size of the mission and the lack of resources allocated to the mission due to severely limited numbers of religious visas granted to the Church in India. The outlook for an official missionary presence in Bangladesh will become more likely once an official missionary presence is established in nearby Kolkata, India where the Church has maintained a branch for nearly two decades but has never appeared to assign missionaries to the branch likely for similar reasons as why no missionaries have been assigned to Bangladesh. Increasing numbers of Bengali-speaking Latter-day Saints worldwide may warrant translations of General Conference talks into Bengali within the next decade.

[1] "Bangladesh," Deseret News 2013 Church News Almanac, p. 429-430

[2] "First Mormon Missionary from Bangladesh Arrives in the Philippines," Newsroom - Philippines, 22 June 2012. http://www.mormonnewsroom.ph/article/first-mormon-missionary-from-bangladesh-arrives-in-the-philippines

[3] "Bangladesh," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm

[4] "Bengali," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 21 September 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ben

[5] store.lds.org, retrieved 21 September 2013.

[6] "Bangladesh," Transparency International, retrieved 21 September 2013. http://www.transparency.org/country#BGD_DataResearch_SurveysIndices

[7] Sheffield, Sheridan R. “Asia area: Welcome mat is out in several countries,” LDS Church News, 19 June 1993. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/22920/Asia-area--Welcome-mat-is-out-in-several-countries.html

[8] Sheffield, Sheridan R. “Asia area: Welcome mat is out in several countries,” LDS Church News, 19 June 1993. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/22920/Asia-area--Welcome-mat-is-out-in-several-countries.html

[9] "Bangladesh," Operation World, retrieved 21 September 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/bang

[10] "Bangladesh Union Mission (1997-Present), www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 21 September 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2211370

[11] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[12] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 21 September 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT