Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

>

Recent Stagnant LDS Growth in Mongolia

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: August 9th, 2013

Overview

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Church achieved some of its most rapid growth ever experienced in a non-Christian country in Mongolia. In 1993, the Church reported 100 members and one branch in Mongolia whereas by 2003 the Church reported 5,455 members and 22 branches. Annual membership growth rates during this period ranged from 25-150%, resulting in church membership increasing to 55-times its size within a single decade. This impressive membership growth coincided with rapid congregational growth as 21 additional branches were organized during this period. By the early 2000s, the percentage of members serving full-time missions likely surpassed all other countries in the world and the Church in Mongolia not only met its own missionary needs but had sufficient manpower to export missionaries to other countries worldwide. The percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in the Mongolian population reached 0.22%, or one in 456, in 2003 - one of the highest percentages of members among mainland Asian countries at the time.

In the mid and late 2000s, the Church reported a significant slowdown in membership and congregational growth. Annual membership growth rates declined from over 25% a year to as low as 5.7% in 2007. No new congregations were organized between 2004 and 2006. In 2009, the Church organized its first stake in Ulaanbaatar with six wards and created one member district in Ulaanbaatar. In the early 2010s, membership growth rates continued to decline to as low as 3.2% in 2011 and no additional branches have been organized since 2010. The number of Mongolian young adults serving full-time missions also appeared to decline during this period as missionaries reported difficulties for mission leaders to adequately staff the Mongolia Ulaanbaatar Mission with a sufficient number of missionaries. By 2012, there were 10,591 members, one stake, two districts, and 23 congregations. At the time nominal membership constituted 0.37% of the Mongolian population (one in 269) - the highest percentage of members in any mainland Asian country. The most recent estimates for the representation of Latter-day Saints among Mongolian Christians suggests that approximately 10% of Mongolian Christians are Latter-day Saints whereas the remaining 90% predominantly adhere to Protestant denominations.

//

This case study identifies and explores reasons for why the growth of the Church in Mongolia has decelerated in recent years. Solutions for reversing stagnant growth trends are provided and opportunities for growth are discussed. Challenges to reversing stagnant growth trends are examined. The growth of the Church in Mongolia is compared to other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups. Prospects for future growth are predicted and discussed.

Reasons for Decelerating Growth Since the Mid-2000s

Determining the cause for reduced church growth in Mongolia is a complex matter. There have been several factors that have contributed to the slowdown of LDS Church growth in Mongolia since the mid-2000s.

One factor has been the number of missionaries assigned to the country. In the late 2000s, the government implemented greater restrictions on the issuance of religious visas to foreign missionaries resulting in difficulties maintaining the full-time missionary force when there were times when few native Mongolians assigned to the Mongolia Ulaanbaatar Mission. Some foreign missionaries had to leave the country due to visa problems resulting in the disruption of missionary activity in some locations. Many foreign members called to serve in Mongolia were reassigned to other missions and never got to serve in Mongolia because of visa problems. The impact of changes in visa regulations is reflected in trends in the number of missionaries assigned to Mongolia. The number of missionaries increased from 16 in 1995 to 34 in 1997, 100 in 1999, and 200 in 2009. Beginning in the early 2010s, foreign missionaries have been required to have a English education sponsor in order to

receive a visa to enter the country. Foreign missionaries must teach a certain number of hours a week and meet responsibilities to prepare lessons, teach classes, and fulfill other requirements. By late 2010, the number of missionaries serving in Mongolia declined to 125 and only seven non-Mongolian missionaries remained in the mission.[1] In early 2013, the handful of non-Mongolian missionaries could only serve in the approximately 20 proselytism areas in Ulaanbaatar. At the time missionaries reported that foreign missionaries were not allowed to engage in open proselytism whereas native missionaries were able to approach strangers and proselyte with few to no restrictions.

Modest convert retention and declining overall member activity rates have been additional factors that have reduced growth. The Church in Mongolia experienced good rates of member activity and convert retention within the first decade of operation. The vast majority of converts joined the Church through member and investigator referrals and high levels of member-missionary involvement resulted in moderate member activity and convert retention levels. Within the past decade, returned missionaries have reported that member activity and convert retention rates have declined by perhaps as much as 10-20%. The number of members enrolled in seminary and institute increased from 739 in the 2007-2008 school year[2] to 1,195 in the 2009-2010 school year[3] but declined to 848 in the 2011-2012 school year.[4] Reduced convert retention and member activity rates have been evident in the number of official congregations in Mongolia increasing by only one between 2003 and 2012 and membership nearly doubling from 5,455 to 10,591. Stagnant congregational growth is not solely attributed to church leaders delaying the creation of additional branches in order to augment active membership in existing church units to create ward-sized congregations. The average congregation in 2012 had 460 members on its roles - more than twice the nominal number of members required for a ward to operate. To contrast, there were only 248 members in the average branch in 2003. In mid-2013, one missionary serving in Ulaanbaatar reported that his branch had 70-80 active members out of approximately 500 on the records. Low member activity rates have delayed the organization of a second stake in Ulaanbaatar from the Ulaanbaatar Mongolia East District. In 2013, a senior missionary was sustained in the district presidency, suggesting problems with leadership development and maintaining a sufficient number of qualified local church leaders to fill all district leadership positions. Missionaries serving in 2013 reported that the mission implemented a standard for investigators to attend church for five consecutive weeks to be baptized in order to combat quick-baptismal practices that have result in low convert retention. A lack of full-member families has also appeared to contribute to member activity problems due to a lack of family support in making religious decisions and following LDS teachings. In 2007, 70% of members in the Ulaanbaatar Mongolia District were single.[5]

Moderate member activity levels among Mongolian returned missionaries has also contributed to sluggish growth within the past five years as many returned missionaries fill leadership positions. In 2009, one senior couple assigned to reactivation efforts among returned missionaries reported that only 59% of returned missionaries residing in Mongolia were active. With more than one third of returned missionaries no longer attending church regularly, this has resulted in reduced leadership manpower as the vast majority of local church leadership has been staffed by returned missionaries. The vital role of returned missionaries in leadership is illustrated by all but one of the 12 members in the stake and district presidencies and their wives being returned missionaries for the Ulaanbaatar West Stake and the Ulaanbaatar East District in 2009. Reasons for returned missionaries becoming inactive include becoming engaged in activities and habits prohibited by LDS teachings, marrying a nonmember, testimony development problems, pressure from family and friends to adhere to Buddhist traditions, and moving to a location without an established church presence. Member activity challenges among returned missionaries has likely delayed the organization of additional congregations and stakes within the past five years. The emigration of Mongolian returned missionaries to other countries has also been a major challenge preventing the Church from achieving greater leadership development. In late 2009, 39% of Mongolian returned missionaries no longer lived in Mongolia.

In recent years, there has been a lack of focus in opening additional cities and towns to missionary activity and organizing new congregations in lesser-reached areas of cities with an LDS presence. Hesitancy from mission and area leadership to approve and coordinate the opening of more cities and towns to missionary work has likely corresponded with tightening government regulations for Christian missionary activity but these restrictions do not make outreach expansion insurmountable. One additional city has opened to missionary activity within the past five years. In 2010, the Church assigned the first proselytizing missionaries to Bulgan. By 2013, the Bulgan Group had only six or seven active members and had not reached the minimum number of members needed for a branch to be officially organized. Senior missionaries have regularly visited the group and a full-time missionary companionship has been assigned. Delays in organizing a branch in Bulgan and fewer numbers of convert baptisms in Bulgan compared to other cities that opened to missionary activity in the 1990s and early 2000s may have deterred mission leaders from considering the placement of full-time missionaries in other previously unreached cities. Mission resources have also been channeled into reactivation work and teaching English for nonnative missionaries in Ulaanbaatar and other major cities, resulting in diminished resources for outreach expansion.

The receptivity of the general population to the LDS Church may have declined within the past five years due to increasing modernization, the novelty of foreign religious groups wearing off, and a resurgence in Buddhist identity following the establishment of a democratic government in the early 1990s. However it is too early to tell whether any cultural or societal changes have made a significant impact on receptivity to the LDS Church compared to previous years due to the confounding variables of member activity problems, changes in mission policies that direct outreach expansion, and visa problems for foreign missionaries reducing the size and composition of the missionary force.

Solutions for Reversing Stagnant Growth

Consistently holding special youth and young adult activities that provide socialization opportunities will be essential towards the Church reaching young adults and youth and helping build the Church for years to come. These activities should be designed to permit members to invite nonmember family and friends to associate with members and passively learn about the Church in a non-pressured environment. Socialization opportunities can provide an ideal environment for testimony development and

gospel instruction. The Church has recently organized special events that have served this purpose. In 2013, the Church conducted a large-scale pioneer handcart trek for youth. Approximately 320 youth and 80 church leaders attended the trek. Other interventions that may be successful include added emphasis on seminary and institute attendance, organizing family home evening (FHE) activities for part-member families and single members in individual wards and branches, and pairing youth and young adults with a full-time missionary for several hours to observe and participate in missionary work.

Leadership development has been one of the primary struggles for the Church preventing the organization of additional congregations. Carefully and methodologically planning efforts for establishing additional branches and wards has potential to reverse stagnant congregational growth trends and spur greater real growth as reflected by increasing numbers of active members. Holding cottage meetings in the homes of members in lesser-reached areas of Ulaanbaatar and in locations distant from the church meetinghouse in cities such as Erdenet and Khovd can lay the groundwork for fostering a sense of LDS community in targeted locations and provide a welcoming and spiritually uplifting environment to prepare active members for leadership positions, reactive less-active members, and invite and teach investigators. Once a sizable number of members regularly attend cottage meetings or family home evening (FHE) groups, a member group can be organized to hold sacrament meeting services and Sunday school classes. An official branch can be organized once the member group sufficiently staffs the leadership needs for a branch to properly function and once church leaders determine that members in the group will likely consistently attend church services and provided needed service to maintain the operation of the congregation.

The Church around the world has generally experienced more rapid growth in recently opened cities and towns to missionary work compared to locations with an older presence. Reversing stagnant growth will require the opening of additional locations to missionary activity where there has been no previous LDS outreach. The sizable percentage of the Mongolian population nominally affiliating with the LDS Church combined with the transient nature of many Mongolians relocating from major cities to small cities, towns, and rural areas suggests that there are likely multiple active and less-active members who currently reside in unreached cities and towns. Mongolian church leaders conducting exploratory visits to these locations has the best potential to make headway in establishing the Church in these locations while complying with recent changes in government legislation restricting the activities of foreign Christian missionaries. With approximately 30,000 inhabitants in 2010, Bayankhongor is the sixth most populous city and the most populous city without an LDS presence. Several cities that receive outreach at present have smaller populations than Bayankhongor. Bulgan ranks as the 21st most populous city with a mere 11,000 inhabitants and has one member group functioning. All cities with at least 10,000 appear favorable locations for prospective LDS outreach expansion including Ölgii, Ulaangom, Tsetserleg, Sainshand, Arvaikheer, Öndörkhaan, Dalanzadgad, Uliastai, Altai, Baruun-Urt, Mandalgovi, and Züünmod. The recent tightening of laws and policies governing foreign missionaries will require greater local leadership involvement in the opening of these and other unreached cities and towns to missionary activity and the establishment of an official church presence. Selecting which cities to target for missionary activity will likely be most successful if cities have small numbers of known members from which to begin establishing local leadership and member-missionary efforts among interested family and friends. It is possible that local government authorities may not grant registration to newly organized church units, requiring meetings to occur in private and in members' homes. Improving activity rates among isolated members in small towns and rural communities may be most effectively addressed through organizing a "virtual branch" which provides members the opportunity of using teleconferencing technology to participate in Sunday church services.

The development of specialized teaching methods and lessons specifically tailored to those with a Buddhist background has potential to improve gospel comprehension and the effectiveness of missionary teaching. Skills and lessons that focus on the importance of weekly church attendance, reconciling conversion to the Church and respecting and following cultural traditions, and explaining the restoration of the gospel in simple terminology to those with little to no understanding of basic Judeo-Christian principles and theology may augment the number of convert baptisms and improve convert retention.

Recent Successes

Although membership and congregational figures indicate reduced church growth within the past five years, there have been a few positive missionary developments that suggest that the Church in Mongolia has achieved some progress. The number of Mongolian members serving a full-time mission mushroomed from 40 to 226 within a two-and-a-half year timeframe in the late 2000s and at present appears to range somewhere between 100 and 200. In early 2011, nearly half of the missionary force was comprised of Mongolian sister missionaries;[6] a major achievement considering the reduced minimum age for missionary service was not announced until October 2012. In mid-2013, the first Mongolian senior couple was called on a full-time mission.

Comparative Growth

The dynamic growth of the Church in Mongolia during the 1990s and early 2000s has shared many similarities with growth trends experienced by the Church in Cambodia during the same time period. The Church in Cambodia grew from 200 members and three branches in 1995 to 7,465 members and 20 branches in 2005. Both countries have homogenous Buddhist populations and have had outreach efforts primarily focused on the capital city. The Church in Cambodia has also experienced a dramatic slowdown in membership growth within recent years but has achieved greater congregational growth than the Church in Mongolia. In 2006, there were 7,874 members and 20 congregations whereas in 2012 there were 11,469 members and 27 congregations.

The number of Christians in Mongolia remains extremely small. The 2010 census report that two percent of the population was Christian.[7] Nearly all outreach-focused Christian groups report a smaller presence in Mongolia than the LDS Church. In 2013,

Jehovah's Witnesses reported six congregations that met in Ulaanbaatar (4), Darkhan (1), and Erdenet (1).[8] Witnesses report less than 300 active members nationwide. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported four churches, six companies, and 1,760 members. Adventists generally baptize 100 converts a year and have not organized a new congregation since 2006.[9] Evangelicals report approximately three times as many adherents as the LDS Church but rate major ethnic groups among the least reached in the world.[10]

Limitations

Although abundant data was available from returned missionaries during the writing of this case study, there were no member and local leader reports that were directly obtained. Consequently the perspective of Mongolian members in regards to slowing church growth in the past decade was not able to be assessed. No official church statistics on member activity such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders is available to the public. Data is scant on the representation on Latter-day Saints among Christians in Mongolia, making it difficult to determine how prominent the LDS Church is among Mongolian Christians. The Church does not publish statistics on the number of convert baptisms in the Mongolia Ulaanbaatar Mission and the total number of Mongolian-speaking members worldwide.

Future Prospects

The recent slowdown and almost total stagnant of all growth indicators for the LDS Church in Mongolia illustrates that, contrary to the beliefs and attitudes of some church members and leaders, larger numbers of members and the establishment of a stake in a country with a relatively recent church establishment does not ensure greater growth potential for the immediate future. The Church's record for achieving steady, strong rates of real growth has largely depended on the receptivity of populations, the dynamic mobilization of mission resources to capitalize on reaching receptive areas, maintaining reasonably high baptismal standards for new converts, and the consistent involvement of local members and church leaders in missionary activity. Reversing decelerating church growth in Mongolia will likely require the implementation of several different strategies aimed to improve member-missionary involvement, establishing greater outreach expansion vision that respects local laws and customs, increasing member activity rates among ordinary members and returned missionaries, and methods for tailoring teaching approaches to the understanding and religious background of nominal and practicing Buddhists. Effective interventions have potential to increase the number of convert baptisms and convert retention and member activity rates which over time will be reflected in the organization of additional wards and branches. The likelihood of a temple announcement for Mongolia will hinge on the organization of additional stakes and augmentation of active membership in order to sufficiently staff and utilize a temple.

[1] Stewart, Briana. "The LDS Church in Mongolia," LDS Living, 22 January 2013. http://ldsliving.com/story/71398-the-lds-church-in-mongolia

[2] Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2009

[3] Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2011

[4] Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2013

[5] Searle, Don L. "Mongolia: Steppes of Faith," Liahona, Dec 2007, 18-23.

[6] Stewart, Briana. "The LDS Church in Mongolia," LDS Living, 22 January 2013. http://ldsliving.com/story/71398-the-lds-church-in-mongolia

[7] "Mongolia," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 20 July 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208250

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

[9] "Mongolia Mission Field (2000-2011)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 July 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C12034

[10] "Mongolia," Joshua Project, retrieved 20 June 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/countries.php?rog3=MG