

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in Sri Lanka

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Overview

Inhabited by 21.7 million people, Sri Lanka has had an LDS presence for over 30 years. Notwithstanding a continual presence for over a quarter of a century, the Church in Sri Lanka remains very small with less than 1,400 members and three branches as of year-end 2012. The Church experienced rapid membership growth and steady outreach expansion during years that foreign, young proselytizing missionaries were assigned but has been unable to achieve any noticeable membership growth and outreach expansion in recent years when only native full-time missionaries and senior missionary couples have been assigned.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Sri Lanka and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges to growth. A comparative growth section examines church growth in other countries in South Asia and contrasts LDS growth in Sri Lanka with other proselytizing Christian groups operating in the country. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are discussed.

LDS Background

In 1978, the Church organized its first branch in Colombo. The Singapore Mission assigned its first senior missionary couples to Sri Lanka in the late 1970s and the first nonnative, young full-time missionaries in the late 1990s. In 2000, the Church established its first member district in Colombo. Additional congregations have since been organized in Negombo (2000) and Kandy (2002). A second branch designated for Sinhala-speaking members began functioning in 1998 but was discontinued in 2008; the same time that nonnative, young missionaries were withdrawn from the country due to visa problems and safety concerns from anti-Christian sentiment. Senior missionary couples have consistently served since the departure of young foreign missionaries but are assigned in small numbers and primarily engage in humanitarian and development work and leadership and member support. Several Sri Lankan members have served missions within their home country since the withdrawal of foreign missionaries. In 2011, senior missionaries visiting Sri Lanka reported that one branch had seven members serving missions or that were preparing to serve missions. In the late 2000s, missionaries and church leaders reported that a member group operated in Chilaw but it was unclear whether the member group continued to operate into the early 2010s.

The Church in Sri Lanka reported 100 members in 1989. Membership increased to 280 in 1999, 783 in 2003, 1,128 in 2007, and 1,319 in 2012. The number of branches totaled one in 1978, two in 1998, three in 2000, and four in 2002 and declined to three in 2008. In the late 2000s, missionaries reported that the three remaining branches had between 100 and 200 active members.

Successes

The Church achieved steady membership growth during the years that full-time missionaries were assigned as indicated by membership increasing from 280 in 1999 to 1,277 in 2008. It took 20 years for the Church to reach 280 members from when the first branch was organized to when the first missionaries were assigned whereas it took a decade for membership to increase by a thousand. The assignment of full-time missionaries during these years corresponded with other significant church growth developments including the organization of the first branches outside of Colombo, the establishment of the first member district, and increasing numbers of Sri Lankans serving full-time missions. The Church in Sri Lanka has been self-sufficient in meeting its leadership needs and maintaining moderate member activity rates as evidenced by all three branches appearing to have over 100 active members at present. The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and sizable numbers of church

materials into Sinhala and Tamil; the two most commonly spoken languages notwithstanding a fledgling church presence and relatively few members who speak these languages worldwide.

Opportunities

LDS outreach efforts in Sri Lanka have experienced strong receptivity during years when sizable numbers of full-time missionaries have been assigned. This finding suggests that the Sri Lankan population exhibits good receptivity to LDS outreach when there is a sufficient supply of missionaries. Overcoming visa challenges in order to assign sizable numbers of foreign missionaries will be critical for the Church in Sri Lanka to reverse recent stagnant growth trends as the Sri Lankan full-time missionary force has demonstrated no progress baptizing noticeable numbers of converts and opening additional areas to missionary activity.

Prospects appear most favorable for opening additional congregations in western areas of Sri Lanka where Christians are most highly concentrated and where these populations can be easily reached by the small number of native full-time missionaries, senior missionary couples, and branch and district presidency members. Approximately 80% of Sri Lankan Christians are Catholic.[1] Sinhalese Christians are primary concentrated in coastal areas between Colombo and Puttalam whereas Tamil Christians are primary concentrated in the Mannar Island area and in isolated pockets in the Jaffna area. These Christian communities may be more favorable to target than Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim populations as Christians in South Asia generally present fewer safety concerns for LDS proselytism. Several large cities are located in these areas that appear favorable for outreach in the near and medium terms. Five of the ten most populous unreached cities in Sri Lanka are located in the southwest (Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia, Galle, Katunayaka, Moratuwa, and Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte). With current conditions preventing the assignment of foreign missionaries, senior missionary couples, district and branch presidencies, and Sri Lankan full-time missionaries can engage in exploratory efforts in lesser-reached and unreached cities to assess conditions for establishing an LDS presence through holding cottage meetings in member and investigator homes, conductive passive proselytism activities through service, and, when permitted, cost-effective advertizing and media campaigns that utilize social media outlets like Facebook or newspaper or radio announcements.

Challenges

The Church in Sri Lanka remains totally dependent on foreign missionaries to baptize sizable numbers of converts and to open additional cities to missionary work notwithstanding a largely self-sufficient church leadership infrastructure that supports three descent-sized branches and a member district. This finding demonstrates that strong local leadership and maturing church membership do not always correlate with active member-missionary programs as the Church in Sri Lanka has appeared unable to accomplish much progress expanding outreach and sustaining previous numbers of convert baptisms during the years sizable numbers of young full-time missionaries were assigned. The Church has experienced stagnant growth between 2008 and 2012 as demonstrated by membership increasing from 1,277 to 1,319; a mere increase of 42 during a four-year period - one of the lowest increases in the world among countries with at least 1,000 nominal Latter-day Saints. A few local members have served missions in Sri Lanka at any give time since the departure of foreign, full-time missionaries but their numbers are insufficient to staff current needs in the three branches let alone focusing on opening additional areas to missionary work.

The Church has experienced moderate member activity rates within the past decade. It is unclear whether the surge in church membership and the opening of Negombo and Kandy to missionary work corresponded with convert retention challenges that may have decreased member activity rates during this period of rapid growth. There has appeared to be some challenges with limited numbers of active priesthood holders to fill leadership positions as evidenced by the closure of the Colombo 2nd Branch in 2008. Rushed baptismal preparation may be responsible for some of these member activity difficulties that have channeled limited mission resources into reactivation work. Declining seminary and institute enrollment has occurred in recent years as only 22 students were reportedly enrolled in institute and no seminary program appeared to operate during the 2011-2012 school year.[2] This suggests difficulties with providing manpower to effectively run these programs, member activity problems with youth and young adult members, or a combination of the two.

The status of religious freedom limits missionary activity and poses safety concerns although the Church enjoys greater religious freedom in Sri Lanka than in many other Asian nations. Buddhist extremists have pushed for passing anti-conversion legislation but these efforts have waned in recent years.[3] Nonetheless, there have been widespread reports of Buddhist extremists circulating false reports that Christian missionary groups coerce Buddhists to convert to Christianity. Many Christian missionaries and pastors have been murdered or been reported missing and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted. The influence of Buddhism on government has likely influenced recent challenges for the Church in obtaining visas for foreign missionaries.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Sri Lanka has experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth among South Asian countries that have an LDS presence and no foreign missionaries assigned. The Church in Pakistan has not had foreign missionaries assigned for many years but has achieved rapid growth as demonstrated by the organization of two additional member districts within the past five years, the doubling of the number of branches within the past decade, and generally between 20 and 30 Pakistani members serving full-time missions within their home country at any given time. The Church in India has experienced significant challenges assigning North American missionaries for many years but has nonetheless achieved significant church growth within the past decade as annual membership growth rates have held steady at

approximately 10%, the number of congregations has doubled from 21 to 40, four new districts have been organized, and the first stake has been created. The Church in Nepal has never had young proselytizing missionaries assigned but has experienced steady active membership growth and excellent progress sending young adults on full-time missions to other countries. No native proselytizing missionaries have ever served in Nepal. The Church in Bangladesh has experienced the slowest growth of any South Asian country as church membership remains less than 100 and only one small branch operates in the entire country in Dhaka. Proselytizing missionaries have never been assigned to Bangladesh and only a couple Bangladeshi members have served full-time missions.

Other proselytizing Christian groups have reported little growth in Sri Lanka in recent years and reported more rapid growth in previous decades. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Sri Lanka reported 3,900 members, 37 churches, and 22 companies. Adventists have reported slow membership growth and stagnant congregational growth within the past five years as membership increased by approximately 300 and the total number of congregations has been unchanged. In recent years Adventists have baptized between 70 and 120 coverts a year.[4] Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 300 convert baptisms a year and maintained 91 congregations as of 2012.[5] Societal and governmental abuses of religious freedom within the past decade have appeared to reduce the growth of these denominations due to safety and security concerns for missionaries and members who openly proselyte. The Church of the Nazarene reports a widespread presence in Sri Lanka with over 300 congregations.[6]

Limitations

No local member reports were available during the writing of this case study. All data regarding active membership figures and reasons for why no young, foreign missionaries have recently served in Sri Lanka were obtained from returned missionary and senior missionary reports. The Church does not publish data on the annual number of convert baptisms per country. Consequently it is unclear how many fewer converts have joined the Church a year in Sri Lanka before and after the removal of young, foreign missionaries. It is unclear whether emigration has played a role in stagnant membership. Data on member-missionary programs is sparse. No recent reports were available regarding the operation of member groups or trends in member activity rates over the past four years. No reports on nationwide member activity rates were available for the late 1990s or early 2000s.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Sri Lanka reversing stagnant membership and congregational growth appears poor for the foreseeable future due to the inability of the local church to adequate meet its own missionary needs and replicate previous growth achieved during years that young, proselytizing foreign missionaries were assigned. Any improvement in church growth trends in the near and medium term will likely require senior missionary couples, district and branch presidencies, and the limited number of native full-time missionaries to work collaboratively on implementing judicious, cost-effective missionary interventions such as holding cottage meetings, promoting member-missionary work, and regularly visiting lesser-reached and unreached cities to assess conditions for establishing an LDS presence.

[1] "Sri Lanka," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127371.htm

[2] "Seminaries and Institutes 2013 Annual Report," http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormon-seminary-reaches-enrollment-high

[3] "Sri Lanka," International Religious Freedom Report 2011, www.state.gov, retrieved 15 May 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192935

[4] "Sri Lanka Mission of SDA (2004-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 15 May 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10488

[5] "2013 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," accessed 15 May 2013. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDoQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jw.org%2Fapp

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," retrieved 16 May 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=CE&s=&z=&l=&recaptcha_challenge_field=03AHJ_VuuwoKgAcHEB4Z1