

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Slow LDS Growth in Nepal

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Overview

Nepal is inhabited by 31 million people and located in South Asia. Nepali is the official language and spoken by 44.6% of the population. Other major languages provided with the percentage of the population who speak these languages include Maithali (11.7%), Bhojpuri (6.0%), Tharu (5.8%), Tamang (5.1%), Newar (3.2%), Magar (3.0%), Bajjka (3.0%), Urdu (2.6%), Avadhi (1.9%), Limbu (1.3%), and Gurung (1.2%). Hindus comprise 81.3% of the population. Sizable religious minorities include Buddhists (9.0%), Muslims (4.4%), Kirants [followers of a syncretic religion that incorporates animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism] (3.1%), and Christians (1.4%). The LDS Church has experienced slow growth in Nepal since it established its first branch in 2001. Today the Church in Nepal reports only one congregation and appears to have less than 200 members. cartier replica watches

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Nepal. Past church growth and missionary successes are identified. 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 Nepal is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

LDS Background

In February 1993, Elder Carmack and Elder Tai from the Asia Area Presidency made an investigatory trip to meet local members and expatriates in Kathmandu: the national capital of Nepal. Senior couple missionaries began serving on humanitarian assignment as early as 2001 and assisted with local leadership development. In 2001, the Church formally organized the Kathmandu Branch. In 2003, there were 50 active members in the Kathmandu Branch. Members, particularly youth, took responsibility to share the Church's teachings and invite friends and family to meetings. The Church reported 13 students enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008-2009 school year.

Nepal was assigned to the India New Delhi Mission in 2007. Prior to this time Nepal appeared to be assigned to the Singapore Mission. The branch baptized 15 converts in 2008. In late 2008, there were 10 young men serving missions from the branch; an extraordinarily high amount for a branch with less than 150 members. In 2010, the Church reported 133 members in Nepal. Active membership has appeared to average around 100 since late 2009.

In the late 2000s, there were two humanitarian senior couples serving in Nepal. In recent years, senior missionary couples have focused on projects such as wheelchair and hygiene kit donations, clean water initiatives, neonatal resuscitation trainings, and the installment of bio-digesters to generate methane gas from cow dung to supply energy to homes in rural areas.

As of late 2014, the Church was not officially registered with the Nepalese government. No young, full-time missionaries have ever been assigned to serve in Nepal possibly due to a lack of government recognition. No formal missionary efforts have ever occurred.

In late 2014, the Church had translated at least six materials into Nepali including The Family: A Proclamation to the World, The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, the 13 Articles of Faith, and Gospel Fundamentals.

Successes

The Church in Nepal demonstrates some progress in achieving self-sufficiency in local church administration despite its tiny size and extremely limited presence. A local member has appeared to serve as branch president since the organization of the branch. Native members have also participated in member-missionary efforts since the branch's initial establishment. These efforts have yielded likely over 100 baptisms within the past decade. Essentially all church growth progress achieved within recent memory has appeared to stem from the invaluable efforts of youth sharing the gospel with family and friends and local members remaining active.

The Church in Nepal has had many members serve full-time missions notwithstanding few known Latter-day Saints. This stands as a startling achievement as the Church in most countries with less than 5,000 members struggles to have sizable numbers of members serve missions. Members who have served full-time missions provide valuable experience to the Church in Nepal. Opportunities for leadership and church administration training and experience are extremely limited within Nepal due to a minimal church presence and no formal missionary activity. Returned missionaries present good opportunities to staff local leadership positions and instill greater self-sufficiency in the fledgling Kathmandu Branch.

Senior missionaries have engaged in a wide range of humanitarian and development projects for over a decade notwithstanding the Church lacking official recognition from the government. These projects have not only alleviated the economic, physical, and medical needs of many less fortunate people but have also strengthened the Church's relationship with government and community officials. Humanitarian and development work may facilitate the Church obtaining official government recognition and the assignment of young, full-time missionaries one day through relationships established and the development of a positive reputation with government officials.

Opportunities

Nepalese who have joined the Church abroad present good opportunities to help establish the Church in Nepal. Nepalese have exhibited good receptivity to LDS outreach in locations where proselytizing missionaries operate. The Church has converted hundreds, if not thousands, of Nepalese worldwide. Some of the greatest missionary successes have occurred within the United States as a result of Nepali-Bhutanese refugee resettlement. Areas in the United States where sizable numbers of Nepalese have joined the Church include Utah, Idaho, and Minnesota. In early 2012, the Church organized its first Nepali-speaking branch outside of Nepal in Salt Lake City, Utah. Nepalese members from other countries serving full-time missions may be instrumental in the Church assigning the first young missionaries to serve in Nepal as these members speak the Nepali language, likely do not have any personal connections to members in the Kathmandu Branch, and can work off of member referral and participate in reactivation work within the confides of the law.

There appear some favorable opportunities for the Church to establish member groups in urban areas of Kathmandu distant from the branch meetinghouse and in additional cities. One branch cannot effectively administer Kathmandu as the metropolitan area has a population of 2.78 million people.[1] The establishment of additional member groups that assemble in the homes of members or in rented spaces appears an effective approach to reducing travel times and providing additional mission outreach centers. The Church in New Delhi, India opened multiple member groups during the late 2000s. This initiative resulted in the number of branches in New Delhi doubling within only a few years. Similar results may occur in Kathmandu. The sizable number of returned missionaries among local membership may be able to serve as group leaders. Reports from senior missionaries also indicate that there are some members who reside outside of Kathmandu. Regular meetings with isolated members, encouragement to share the gospel with friends and families, and consideration for establishing member groups in locations where active, worthy priesthood holders reside may result in the establishment of an LDS presence outside of Kathmandu. Nepalese members serving full-time missions from the Kathmandu Branch could potentially serve within their home country in major cities nearby Kathmandu where there may be a handful of isolated Latter-day Saints such as Pokhara. These Nepalese missionaries could be supervised by humanitarian senior missionary couples and lay the groundwork for the establishment of member groups in additional areas of the country. A map displaying the most populous cities in Nepal without an LDS presence can be found here.

Bans on open proselytism constitute the only legal barrier to missionary activity in Nepal. The 2007 interim constitution protects religious freedom and the government generally upholds this right. However, the constitution specifically bans proselytism. Punishments for violating this prohibition may include fines and imprisonment for citizens and expulsion for foreigners. The government has not imposed punishments for individuals accused of proselytism in recent years. There are no restrictions on individuals changing their religious affiliation. Government registration is not required for religious groups to operate in the country. The government permits the sale and possession of religious literature. Foreign religious workers regularly obtain visas and provide support to local clergy, but these individuals are not permitted to proselyte. Religious conflict in Nepal primarily consists of disagreements between Hindus and religious minorities regarding the use of cemeteries for the burial of religious minorities and Hindu opposition to efforts to convert Hindus to other religions.[2] These conditions suggest that full-time missionaries could serve in Nepal as religious workers who solely work of member referral.

Challenges

A lack of LDS materials and scriptures translated into Nepali poses serious challenges for the Church to achieve growth and conduct effective missionary work in Nepal. The Church has not translated the Book of Mormon or any other volume of LDS

scripture into Nepali. General Conference sessions have never been translated into Nepali. Consequently most in Nepal have little church literature to study to gain a testimony of the Church and to learn LDS teachings. Translations of the Book of Mormon and basic gospel study materials such as Gospel Principles will be vital to help Nepali speakers learn the gospel and gain a strong testimony of the Church. Failure to translate additional materials into Nepali will likely result in reduced receptivity to the Church and the perception that the Church is incompatible with Nepalese culture.

Delays in the Church assigning foreign missionaries, translating additional materials into the Nepali language, and obtaining government registration, albeit registration is not required for religious groups to operate in Nepal, may result in the Church missing the window of opportunity to achieve growth when the government and society generally respect religious freedom . Past experience has illustrated that these conditions do not always remain constant or continue to improve. This may result in the Church missing the time-sensitive window of opportunity to establish an official presence when government policies and societal attitudes are more tolerant of foreign-based, outreach-oriented Christian groups.

The Church considers its presence in Nepal as "sensitive." Consequently, the public cannot obtain information on the location of the Kathmandu Branch meetinghouse. The Church has provided the branch president's email address and the meeting times for the branch on its India version of lds.org. However, no additional information is provided.[3] A lack of information on the Church in Nepal may mislead some members and investigators to believe that no LDS presence exists in the country. This may result in some members and investigators being unable to contact the Church and receive information on the location of the Kathmandu Branch meetinghouse.

South Asia has an extremely limited LDS presence despite its massive population. If the Church in Nepal operated as many missions as the Church in Peru, then the Church would operate 12 missions in Nepal. The India New Delhi Mission services the largest population of any mission in the Church. The mission includes over 1.35 billion people within its geographical boundaries including approximately 957 million in India, 196 million in Pakistan, 166 million in Bangladesh, 31 million in Nepal, and 734,000 in Bhutan. The Church may take greater interest in expanding outreach into India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh prior to the assignment of full-time missionaries to Nepal due to the Church already maintaining an active missionary presence in India and Pakistan, and all three of these countries supporting significantly larger populations than Nepal.

There are many areas of Nepal where extreme ethnolinguistic diversity exists. Rugged terrain has traditionally separated people groups for hundreds or thousands of years, resulting in rich in cultural and linguistic diversity. Some areas of Nepal have dozens of ethnic groups who each speak their own language clustered within a small geographical areas. The Church may experience significant challenges in establishing a presence in these locations due to remote location, a rural population, and linguistic diversity. However, the prospects for the Church to establish a presence in rural Nepal appears highly unlike for many decades following the assignment of proselytizing, full-time missionaries based on previous experience in other countries.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Nepal has experienced some of 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,[4] whereas there were an estimated 3,500 members that worshipped in as many as 13 branches in 2014. The Church in Pakistan has achieved substantial growth within the past two decades notwithstanding significant government restrictions on religious freedom and societal abuses of religious freedom. In India, there were 1,300 members and 14 branches in 1993 whereas there were 11,690 members, six wards, and 36 branches in 2013. In Sri Lanka, there were 100 members and one branch in 1993 whereas there were 1,338 members and three branches in 2013. The Church in Bangladesh has experienced the slowest growth in the region as there is only one branch and less than 100 members in the entire country. The Church in Bangladesh has experienced essentially stagnant growth within the past two decades.

Most major missionary-focused Christian groups operate in Nepal and claim significantly more members and maintain a more widespread national presence than the LDS Church. Essentially all these denominations experience rapid growth. Evangelicals account for the majority of Christians. Evangelicals report significant progress achieving growth and developing self-sufficient congregations.[5] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has maintained a presence in Nepal for several decades. Adventists have experienced rapid growth within the past decade. In 2003, Adventists reported nine churches, 23 companies, and 1,851 members[6] whereas in 2013 Adventists reported 8,859 members, 26 churches, and 80 companies.[7] Adventists have generally baptized between 500 and 1,000 new members a year. Adventists translate basic church publications into the Nepali language. Jehovah's Witnesses report a widespread presence in Kathmandu and a presence in at least 11 additional cities. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 1,833 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 30 congregations, and 126 baptisms.[8] In late 2014, there were approximately two dozen congregations within the Kathmandu metropolitan area. A map displaying the location of Witness congregations in Nepal as of late 2014 can be found here. Witnesses translate proselytism materials into Nepali, Nepali Sign Language, and Newar.[9] The Church of the Nazarene has reported rapid growth in recent years. In 2013, Nazarenes reported 5,105 full members, 1,218 conversions, 582 baptisms, an average weekly worship of 2,231, and 122 congregations (71 organized churches, 51 not yet organized churches).

Limitations

No reports from Nepalese LDS leadership or local members were available during the writing of this case study, although several reports from senior missionaries were examined. The Church does not publish official membership statistics for Nepal

due to its sensitive nature in the country. The location of the Kathmandu Branch meetinghouse is unknown. LDS demographic data regarding ethnicity, language use, and religious background is unavailable to the public. With no official statistics on membership growth and the annual number of convert baptisms in the country, it is unclear how these growth indicators have fluctuated over the past decade.

Future Prospects

Nepal is the tenth most populous country in the world without young, proselytizing full-time missionaries assigned. The size of the population and current opportunities for missionary work deserve serious consideration by international church leaders. There appear good prospects for the Church to assign Nepalese members as missionaries to Kathmandu and additional cities. The outlook for future growth appears uncertain. The Asia Area and India New Delhi Mission may assign young, full-time missionaries to Kathmandu and limit missionary activity to a member-referral basis. However, this decision will likely hinge on the availability of mission resources in an area of the world where billons are underserviced by the Church's current missionary force. Additionally, the Church may avoid any perception of missionary activity due to the strong language in the constitution that bars proselytism. Prospects appear poor for the Church to establish a presence in any additional cities within Nepal during the foreseeable future.

[1] "Major Agglomerations of the World," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 8 November 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] "Nepal," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 7 November 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222337

[3] "Kathmandu," lds.org.in, retrieved 7 November 2014. http://lds.org.in/katmandu

[4] 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

[5] "Nepal," Operation World, retrieved 7 November 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/nepa

[6] "Nepal Section (2013-Present)," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 7 November 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2497763

[7] "Nepal Section (2013-Present)," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 7 November 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2497763

[8] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[9] "Publications," jw.org, retrieved 7 November 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications