

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in French Guiana

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Posted: February 9th, 2015

Overview

French Guiana is an oversea department of France inhabited by almost a quarter of a million people. French is the official language and is spoken by the vast majority of the population. Most speak Guianese Creole French. Commonly spoken minority languages include Spanish, Arabic, Hmong, Haitian Creole, English, Portuguese, and Amerindian languages indigenous to the region. Blacks (descendents of African slaves brought to French Guiana and the Caribbean) and mulattos (mixed black African and Amerindian) constitute the majority. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in French Guiana since the late 1980s but has experienced stagnant growth within the past two decades.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in French Guiana. LDS growth successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for overcoming stagnant growth are examined. The growth of the LDS Church in French Guiana is compared to the Church in other countries and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused groups in French Guiana are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

In March 1988, Elder Charles Didier organized the first member group among members who had relocated to French Guiana. The first branches were organized in 1989 in Cayenne and Kourou. The West Indies Mission has administered French Guiana since the establishment of an LDS presence with the exception of a three-year period from 1991 to 1994 when French Guiana was administered by the Trinidad and Tobago Mission.

In 1993, the Church reported 100 members in French Guiana. Membership reached 200 in 1995 and 300 in 2008. In 2013, the Church reported 357 members.

In 2009, the Church created a third branch (the Matoury Branch) and organized the three branches into its own district called the Cayenne French Guiana District. In 2011, the Church discontinued the district, closed the Matoury and Kourou Branches, and returned the Cayenne Branch to the direct administration of the West Indies Mission.

In 2015, the Church divided the West Indies Mission and reassigned French Guiana to the Barbados Bridgetown Mission.

Successes

The consistent assignment of full-time missionaries for decades despite slow growth and remote location constitutes the Church's crowning success in French Guiana. The Church has regularly assigned missionaries and has maintained a presence notwithstanding few convert baptisms, a transient LDS population, the massive administrative burden of the West Indies Mission, and isolation from mission headquarters. The Church has often maintained an inconsistent missionary presence in other locations with similar conditions due to limited missionary manpower, administration challenges, distance to mission headquarters, and low productivity.

Missionaries have reported regularly baptizing converts from specific ethnolinguistic minority groups, such as Haitians and Latin

Americans. Good receptivity among some ethnolinguistic groups presents opportunities for specialized outreach and the establishment of an LDS community among these people groups. The Church has been effective in teaching and baptizing converts among ethnolinguistic minority groups despite full-time missionaries exhibiting limited to no fluency in the traditional languages spoken by these peoples. The Church has translated LDS scriptures and many gospel study materials into the most commonly spoken minority languages.

Opportunities

The division of the West Indies Mission in 2015 may result in greater resource allocation and mission president oversight to French Guiana. It is anticipated that the Barbados Bridgetown Mission will administer all French-speaking islands and multiple English-speaking islands in the Lesser Antilles in addition to French Guiana. A reduced geographical area for the mission may result in larger numbers of missionaries assigned to French Guiana and the exploration of national outreach expansion opportunities. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missionaries since 2012 provides greater missionary manpower to utilize in missionary efforts in lesser-reached areas such as French Guiana.

There appear good opportunities for the Church to establish language-specific congregations due to the large number of foreign workers who reside in the country. Missionaries report that many members in the Cayenne Branch speak languages other than French such as Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole. The establishment of Sunday School classes that operate in these languages may be an appropriate solution to meet language needs without straining limited priesthood manpower and mission resources. The Church can also organize language-specific cottage meetings and firesides to foster a sense of LDS community among individual people groups and lay the groundwork to explore opportunities for organizing member groups or branches that conduct worship services in these languages.

The Church has maintained a presence only in the capital city of Cayenne since 2011. There have not appeared to have been any diligent efforts to reach Amerindian populations or populated places outside of the Cayenne metropolitan area and Kourou. Missionaries, branch leadership, and mission leadership carefully identifying known members who reside in other areas of French Guiana and assessing conditions for missionaries to regularly visit these locations may result in the opening of additional cities and towns to proselytism and the establishment of member groups in these locations.

Challenges

The Church in French Guiana has experienced extremely slow membership growth since the establishment of the Church in the late 1980s. There remain less than 400 members on church records despite missionaries regularly serving in French Guiana for over a quarter century. LDS outreach restricted to only two cities, minimal supervision and allocation of mission resources due to distance from mission headquarters, and the lack of language-specific congregations appear responsible for this minimal presence.

Member activity challenges, convert retention difficulties, and insufficient priesthood manpower to staff leadership positions appeared responsible for the discontinuation of the Cayenne French Guiana District and the closing of two of the three branches in 2011. French Guiana carries the unfortunate distinction as one of the few countries in the world where the Church has discontinued the only member district and all but one of the branches. This decision was likely prompted by mission leadership to conserve resources and strengthen active membership. Self-sufficiency problems have posed serious challenges for church administration due to chronic challenges maintaining sufficient numbers of active members to serve in leadership positions for extended periods of time. A lack of local leadership manpower has discouraged the opening of language-specific congregations due to challenges maintaining a single branch. The transient nature of many Latter-day Saints in French Guiana has frustrated efforts to achieve growth considering many members only temporarily reside in the country for employment purposes.

Conditions in French Guiana suggest that the Church will likely continue to maintain a minimal church presence and assign only small numbers of full-time missionaries. Remote location from mission headquarters, a relatively small population, and modest receptivity to LDS proselytism have discouraged greater mission resource allocation and the opening of additional cities to proselytism. Cities outside of the Cayenne metropolitan area support small populations, indicating that mission leaders will likely delay the opening of these areas to proselytism in favor of opening more populous cities in other countries.

European secularism has exhibited a strong influence on society and culture. French Guiana has strong cultural and societal ties to France where most Christians are only nominally affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. Individuals with ties to France have exhibited low levels of receptivity to LDS proselytism.

Comparative Growth

French Guiana ranks among the countries and dependencies in the Americas with the most limited LDS presence. Only two other locations with an LDS presence in the Guianas and Lesser Antilles have a lower percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population than French Guiana: Guadeloupe and Martinique. French Guiana numbers among the few countries and dependencies in the Americas where the Church operates only one congregation. Membership growth has also ranked among the slowest in the region. The Church established a presence in neighboring Guyana and Suriname at approximately the same time as French Guiana. However, the Church in Guyana and Suriname experienced slow membership growth in the 1990s and

early 2000s and rapid membership growth in the mid to late 2000s. In 2013, the Church reported 5,474 members and 13 branches in Guyana and 1,390 members and six branches in Suriname.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups report a more widespread presence in French Guiana than the LDS Church. Evangelicals are the largest nontraditional Christian denomination and claim 4.5% of the population.[1] The Seventh Day Adventist Church has experienced slow but steady growth in French Guiana. In 2003, Adventists reported seven churches (large or well-established congregations), eight companies (small or recently-established congregations), and 1,996 members whereas in 2013 Adventists reported 11 churches, six companies, and 2,482 members. Adventists have baptized an average of 100 new members a year within the past decade.[2] In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 2,211 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 35 congregations, and 74 baptisms. In late 2014, Witnesses reported 36 congregations in French Guiana that operated in the greater Cayenne area (26), Kourou (6), Macouria (3), and Sinnamary (1). Witnesses operate many language-specific congregations in minority languages such as English, Guianese Creole, Haitian Creole, Mandarin Chinese, Palikúr, Portuguese, Saramaccan, and Sranantongo. The Church of the Nazarene reports a limited presence in French Guiana. In late 2014, Nazarenes reported three congregations in the country that operated in Cayenne and Kourou.[3]

Limitations

Although current and returned missionaries and mission presidents have provided high-quality reports utilized in this case study, no reports from local members were available. The Church does not publish official data for French Guiana or any country on an annual basis regarding sacrament meeting attendance, the number of converts baptized a year, the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the number of temple recommend holders. No worldwide or country-by-country data is published regarding the number and location of member groups.

Future Prospects

Past LDS growth trends in French Guiana suggest little to no change in membership and congregational growth rates within the foreseeable future. The Barbados Bridgetown Mission will begin to administer French Guiana as well as all other French-speaking locations in the Lesser Antilles starting in July 2015. The new mission has potential to channel greater resources, vision, and interest into reversing stagnant growth trends that have persisted for decades. Prospects for national outreach expansion appear most favorable in lesser-reached areas of Cayenne and Kourou. Remote location, a relatively small target population, persistent challenges with local leadership development, the native population historically exhibiting low receptivity to LDS outreach, and a transient LDS population implicate serious challenges for mission leadership to overcome.

[1] "French Guiana," Operation World, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/freg

[2] "French Guiana Mission (1990-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2504939

[3] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=FG&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=