

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in Guyana

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Overview

Guyana is the most populous of the three countries that comprise the Guianas of northeastern South America. There are approximately 736,000 inhabitants in Guyana. English is the most widely spoken language although many speak Amerindian languages, Creole, Hindi, and Urdu as a first language. East Indians constitute 43.5% of the population. Other major ethnic groups include blacks (30%), multiracial (17%), and Amerindian peoples (9%). Christians constitute 58% of the population. The largest Christian denominations include Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Seventh Day Adventists. Hindus constitute 28% of the population whereas Muslims constitute 7% of the population. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Guyana since the late 1980s and experienced rapid growth until the late 2000s. The Church has experienced stagnant growth in the 2010s as evidenced by congregational decline and extremely slow membership growth.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Guyana. Past church growth successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are examined. The size and growth of the LDS Church in other nearby nations is reviewed. The size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Guyana is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

The West Indies Mission assigned a senior missionary couple to open Guyana to missionary work in September 1988. The Church organized a member group shortly thereafter and created the first official branch in March 1989. The Church obtained government recognition in February 1989. The Church reassigned Guyana to the Trinidad and Tobago Mission in 1991. Administrative supervision of Guyana was transferred back to the jurisdiction of the West Indies Mission in 1994 when the Trinidad and Tobago Mission closed. In 2009, 40 foreign Latter-day Saint missionaries were detained and requested to depart Guyana due to problems with visa regulations. News media reported that the government was suspicious of the LDS Church for its independent charity work in the interior and alleged ties with opposition figures.[1] Local members reported no difficulties with the Church securing visas for foreign missionaries in the mid-2010s. The Church reported plans to divide the West Indies Mission in mid-2015 and rename the West Indies Mission as the Trinidad Port of Spain Mission.

The number of congregations increased from one in 1989 to two in 1994, three in 1996, four in 2000, five in 2003, six in 2004, eight in 2005, 11 in 2006, 12 in 2007, and 16 in 2008. The number of congregations declined to 15 in 2009 and 13 in 2011. There were 13 branches as of April 2015. Four branches have been discontinued within the past decade including the Parika, Georgetown 2nd, Georgetown 3rd, and New Amsterdam 2nd Branches. Member groups previously operated in multiple locations such as East Linden and Skeldon in the late 2000s. However, none of these groups appeared to operate as of the early 2010s. The most recently organized branch was the Linden Branch in approximately 2009 or 2010. All branch presidents appeared to be native members as of early 2015 with the possible exception of one or two branches in the New Amsterdam area. A map displaying the location of LDS congregations in Guyana can be found here.

The Church in Guyana reported less than 100 members in 1989. Church membership increased to 100 in 1991, 500 in 1995, 1,026 in 1999, 1,607 in 2004, 2,572 in 2007, 4,846 in 2009, and 5,575 in 2014.

The Church organized its first district in Guyana in Georgetown in 2003. Two additional districts were organized in 2005 (Canje and Diamond). The Church discontinued the Diamond Guyana District in 2006 and the Canje Guyana District in 2011.

Missionaries reported that there were initial plans to submit an application for the Georgetown Guyana District to become a stake in approximately 2010. However, these ambitions have yet to come to fruition due to inactivity problems and local leadership self-sufficiency difficulties.

Missionaries and local members have reported that most branches have had between 50 and 100 active members within the past few years. Member activity rates significantly vary by congregation from as low as 20% to as high as 60%. Likewise the retention for converts one year after baptism widely varies by congregation from as low as 0-10% to as high as 70-79%.

No LDS materials have been translated into Amerindian languages indigenous to Guyana.

Successes

The Church in Guyana has achieved rapid membership and congregational growth during some years within the past decade. The most rapid membership growth occurred from 2004 to 2009 when annual membership growth rates ranged from 12% to 53%. These findings indicate that the Guyanese population has exhibited good receptivity to LDS outreach. Steady increases in the number of branches operating suggest that many converts were retained for the medium-term or longer during this period. Rapid membership and congregational growth rates achieved during most years in the 2000s were also attributed to the expansion of the Church into previously unreached cities and towns. The Church opened its first branches in several cities and towns during this time such as Bushlot, Corriverton (Crabwood Creek), Linden, and Parika. Additional branches were also organized in the most populous cities of Georgetown and New Amsterdam. The number of branches subsequently doubled from eight to 16 between 2005 and 2008.

The Georgetown Guyana District appears close to reaching the minimal qualifications to become a stake. The district has seven branches – six of which are located within the Georgetown metropolitan area. The district appears to currently have a sufficient number of nominal members and congregations to become a stake. Local member reports indicate that the district meets all requirements to become a stake with the exception of the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. Focus from mission, district, and branch leadership to strengthen member testimonies and augment the number of full-tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders has good potential for the district to meet outstanding criteria for a stake to operate. Generally this criteria consists of at least 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders who are distributed throughout the congregations of the prospective stake with a ratio of no less than one per 25 members on church records.

The Church has experienced some modest improvements in augmenting the number of active members in some branches in Georgetown. Recent reports from senior missionary couples indicate that some branches have made significant strides in increasing church attendance. Reactivation efforts, member-missionary initiatives, and emphasis on Church Education System programs (i.e. seminary and institute) appear likely to make additional gains in reactivating less-active or inactive members.

Opportunities

There are no legal obstacles to proselytism as religious freedom is upheld in Guyana. The government has not restricted the practice of religious freedom and society has been tolerant of nontraditional Christian groups. These conditions present good conditions for the Church to expand its missionary presence into additional locations in Guyana. The recent worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions also provides the needed manpower to orchestrate greater saturation of Guyana with LDS missionaries. There have been no recent reports of the Church in Guyana experiencing challenges obtaining foreign missionary visas, suggesting that the Church could significantly augment the number of missionaries assigned in order to orchestrate greater national outreach expansion. These conditions indicate good opportunities for growth as the Church has historically had limited numbers of members serving full-time missionaries and has experienced difficulties adequately staffing its current missions and proselytism areas.

Recent rapid LDS growth in Guyana during the 2000s indicates that the Guyanese population likely continues to exhibit good receptivity to LDS outreach and that there are good prospects for growth if effective tactics are consistently implemented by mission leaders. Opportunities for growth appear greatest in lesser-reached areas with the highest population densities such as the many towns between Georgetown and New Amsterdam. There are five unreached areas of Guyana where there are many towns and villages and no nearby LDS congregations. These locations include coastal areas between Georgetown and Bushlot, coastal areas between Rose Hall and Corriverton, coastal areas along the Essequibo River delta west of Georgetown, areas along the Demerara River south of Georgetown, and the Anna Regina area. Church-planting tactics that use full-time missionaries to organize a member group that assembles in a rented facility in each of these five areas has good potential to accelerate growth and increase the penetration of LDS outreach in Guyana. A map displaying the location of these areas can be found here.

The pending division of the West Indies Mission in July 2015 to organize a separate mission based in Barbados to administer the northern Lesser Antilles has good potential to channel greater mission president oversight and resources into missionary work and church growth efforts in Guyana. The division of the mission may permit more frequent visits from the mission president and greater resource allotment. Prospects to advance the Georgetown Guyana District into a stake will likely greatly improve as a result of a reduced administrative burden on the future Trinidad Port of Spain Mission. The downsized geographical area of the mission may also result in the mission reestablishing a district to administer the six branches in the

New Amsterdam area.

Guyana appears a favorable candidate to have its own LDS mission. The Trinidad Port of Spain Mission will continue to have a large geographic jurisdiction as the mission will include Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, Suriname, and Guyana. A prospective mission to administer Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana would service 1.5 million people and over 7,000 Latter-day Saints.

Challenges

The sudden removal of foreign full-time missionaries in 2009 coincided with a significant decline in LDS growth rates for the Church in Guyana. Former mission leaders noted challenges with church administration and missionary activity following the removal of foreign missionaries due to the large number of new converts baptized in the late 2000s, local members depending on full-time missionaries to meet their member and leadership responsibilities, and mediocre member activity and convert retention rates. Member activity rates have appeared to decline within the past decade as evidenced by the average number of members per congregation (members-to-units ratio) skyrocketing from 188 in 2006 to 429 in 2014. The Church in Guyana has since experienced extremely slow membership growth and a net decline in the number of branches in operation. The severity of local leadership sustainability problems necessitated the closure of four branches, the dissolution of the Canje Guyana District in 2011, and the merger of all outstanding member groups into nearby branches. Initial plans to advance the Georgetown Guyana District into a stake have been delayed due to leadership problems and a lack of full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. This contraction of LDS outreach has resulted in the loss of an LDS presence in some locations where branches previously operated such as Parika. Thus, there is little argument that the Church has achieved any "real growth" within the past five years as there has been no measureable progress within this period in regards to the various numerical indicators of LDS growth.

Distance from mission headquarters in Port of Spain, Trinidad has likely reduced missionary accountability for baptizing converts and exacerbated convert attrition issues. The West Indies Mission has numbered among the most overburdened missions in the worldwide church as evidenced by the mission administering approximately 10 nations or dependencies where there is an active LDS presence. Less emphasis appeared to be placed on the quality of missionary's teaching and prebaptismal preparation for converts who were baptized in the late 2000s due to rushed prebaptismal preparation to reach arbitrary goals. The Church in Guyana has experienced similar problems in many other nations where the Church has assigned a significant number of full-time missionaries in a country administered by a mission headquartered in another country. Notable examples of the Church baptizing large numbers of converts with little to no progress augmenting the number of active members in countries with similar church administration characteristics include Sierra Leone during the 2000s and Suriname during the late 2000s.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Guyana has more members, a higher percentage of members in the population, and more congregations than most nations in the Lesser Antilles and the Guianas. However, the Church in Guyana appears to experience some of the greatest challenges with member inactivity, convert attrition, and local leadership development among countries in the region where there are at least one thousand members. As of April 2015, Guyana was the country with the fifth most members without a stake according to year-end 2014 membership data. Guyana is currently the nation in the Americans with the most members and congregations without a stake. Other nations in the Americas with similarly-sized LDS memberships have stakes including Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Guyana is the country in the worldwide church that has experienced the most extreme transition from rapid growth to stagnant growth during the past decade. The Church has experienced more consistent growth rates in Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago. The Church in Guyana has experienced congregational growth trends comparable to most nations and dependencies within the region as evidenced by net increases in the number of congregations during the 2000s, net decreases in the number of congregations during the 2010s, and slowing annual membership growth rates during the 2010s.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups report a significantly larger presence in Guyana than the LDS Church. All of these groups have reported slow or stagnant growth within recent years. Evangelicals claim approximately 20% of the population and report slow growth.[2] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reports a pervasive presence in Guyana and claims eight percent of the national population. Adventists have experienced slow but steady growth within the past decade. Adventists reported 137 churches (large or well-established congregations), 45 companies (small or recently established congregations), and 45,730 members in 2004 and 149 churches, 52 companies, and 61,389 members in 2014. Adventists have generally baptized between 100 and 200 new members a year within the past decade.[3] Adventists translate printed materials into Akawaio and English. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence and have experienced slow membership growth and stagnant congregational growth in recent years. Witnesses report congregations in approximately two dozen cities. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 2,846 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 45 congregations, and 151 baptisms in Guyana.[4] Witnesses appear to conduct all worship services in English. Witnesses translate their official website, jw.org, into two Amerindian language native to Guyana: Carib and Pemon.[5] The Church of the Nazarene operates a widespread presence in Guyana. Nazarenes reported 3,798 full members, 537 fellowship members, an average weekly worship of 1,855, 47 organized churches (large or well-established congregations), and one church not yet organized (small or recently-established congregations) in 2014.[6] Nazarenes have appeared to experience slow membership growth and stagnant congregational growth in recent years. Nazarenes operate congregations in approximately 40 populated places.[7]

Limitations

The Church does not publish official statistics on the number of converts baptized per country or mission. Consequently it is unclear how many converts join the Church a year in Guyana and how these trends have changed over the years. The Church in Guyana does not publish membership figures by administrative province or city. There are no official statistics that provide the number of members who reside in locations without a branch. The Church does not annually publish data on the number of missionaries serving per country or the number of missionaries assigned per country or mission. No official statistics on member activity or convert retention rates are available to the public. Although missionaries indicate no member groups operate within the country, the Church does not publish data on member groups for individual countries or the Church as a whole.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Guyana to reverse stagnant growth trends appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The division of the overburdened West Indies Mission has good potential for mission leadership to invest greater vision and resources into the establishment of stakes, the reactivation of less-active or inactive members, and the expansion of the Church into currently unreached areas of Guyana. However, challenges within the past five years regarding local leadership self-sufficiency, low member activity rates, and relatively few active priesthood holders pose significant challenges to be overcome. The Georgetown Guyana District appears likely to become a stake within the foreseeable future as the district meets nearly all requirements to become a stake. The Church may reestablish a member district to administer the six branches in the New Amsterdam area. Guyana appears a likely nation to have its own LDS mission organized one day that may also administer Suriname and French Guiana due to distance from mission headquarters in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; a sizable target population in the Guianas; and over 7,000 members in these three nations.

[1] "Guyana," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148760.htm

[2] "Guyana," Operation World, retrieved 11 April 2015. http://www.operationworld.org/guya

[3] "Georgian Mission (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 19 April 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2356944

[4] “2015 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 18 March 2015. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2015-yearbook/

[5] http://www.jw.org/en/, retrieved 11 April 2015

[6] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2004-2014," nazarene.org, retrieved 24 February 2015. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&sqi=2&ved

[7] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 11 April 2015. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=GY&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=