

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Slow LDS Growth in Guam

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Guam is the most populous nation or territory in the Oceanian sub-region of Micronesia with 162,000 inhabitants. The Chamorro are the indigenous people of Guam and constitute 37% of the population. Other major ethnic groups include Filipinos (26%), other Pacific Islanders (12%), mixed ethnicities (9%), and whites (7%). The most commonly spoken languages are English (44%), Filipino [Tagalog] (21%), and Chamorro (18%). The population is homogenously Christian and most adhere to Roman Catholicism. The LDS Church has experienced slow growth in Guam over the past several decades.
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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Guam. Past church growth and missionary successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future church growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church in other Micronesian countries is summarized. The size and growth of other missionary-focused groups that operate in Guam are reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

LDS Background

The Church maintained a temporary presence in Guam during World War II to service American swiss replica watches military personnel. A dependent branch on Guam was assigned to the Oahu Hawaii Stake in 1953. The first Chamorro converts joined the Church in 1977 and the first Chamorro to serve a full-time mission began his service in 1979. The Church organized the Micronesia Guam Mission from a division of the Hawaii Honolulu and Fiji Suva Missions in 1980 – the same year that the Guam District was organized with four branches.[1]

The Church has experienced no congregational growth within the past 35 years. The number of official congregations (wards and branches) totaled one in 1970, two in 1976, three in 1978, four in 1980, three in 1989, four in 1993, five in 1995, three in 1997, four in 1999, three in 2006, and four in 2009. Church-reported membership steadily increased from 271 in 1950 to 300 in 1960, 469 in 1970, 826 in 1983, 1,700 in 1995, and 2,200 in 1989. Membership growth declined to 1,000 in 1991 and slowly grew during the next 24 years to 1,400 in 1995, 1,574 in 2000, 1,669 in 2005, 2,140 in 2010, and 2,265 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have widely fluctuated over the past 20 years from as high as 10.9% in 2008 to as low as -7.3% in 2006.

The Church organized the Barrigada Guam Stake in 2010. All four branches in the Guam District became wards in the newly organized stake. A fifth ward in the stake was organized from the Saipan Branch in the Northern Mariana Islands. A member group began functioning in Merizo sometime during the early 2010s. As of late 2015, local members reported that most wards had between 100 and 250 active members. Members noted that most wards are primarily comprised of Filipinos, Micronesians (particularly Chuukese), and white Americans.

As of late 2015, the Church had translated only two materials into Chamorro: select passages from the Book of Mormon (published in 1989) and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.[2] All LDS scriptures and a large body of church materials have been translated into Tagalog, Cebuano, and Ilokano. The entire Book of Mormon and a small number of gospel study and missionary materials have been translated into Chuukese.

Successes

Local church leadership in Guam has maintained adequate self-sufficiency to operate one stake and four wards. With a combined population of approximately 3,000 members in Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, the Barrigada Guam Stake was organized with fewer members in the geographical boundaries of the stake in comparison to other stakes in nations or territories in Oceania. The establishment of the stake indicates that there are a sufficient number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders (i.e. likely 120 or more) to staff both stake and wards callings. The operation of the stake has provided local members and leaders with greater responsibilities and opportunities to head missionary efforts and leadership positions.

The Church has headquartered a mission on Guam for 35 years. The Guam Micronesia Mission has been instrumental in the establishment of the Church throughout Micronesia. The operation of the mission on Guam has provided the Church ample opportunities to station full-time missionaries in various cities on Guam.

The Church has translated LDS materials in many of the most commonly spoken languages. These materials have helped the Church proselyte a diverse population that speaks many languages. With the exception of Chamorro, the Church has translated LDS scriptures and many gospel study materials into the most commonly spoken languages.

Opportunities

Guam is the most populous nation/territory in Micronesia and supports a population of over 160,000 people. The population is predominantly Christian and generally receptive to LDS outreach. A larger population than other countries or territories in the region provides opportunities for missionaries to reach more people compared to less-populated countries and territories. The geography of Guam also presents fewer challenges than other locations in the region. Unlike other Micronesian entities, Guam's highly urbanized population (95% urban)[3] resides on a single island. Urban areas require fewer mission resources to saturate with LDS outreach due to high population densities. Additionally, logistical concerns are greatly simplified as no overseas travel is needed between the various congregations or proselytism areas on Guam.

Lesser-reached communities present good opportunities for the Church to establish additional congregations. Many of these communities have sizable numbers of church members to staff essential callings. The organization of member groups or branches that assemble in areas distant from current LDS meetinghouses provides an effective approach to spur growth. Renting spaces to hold church meetings appears an effective and thrifty approach to establishing additional congregations in lesser-reached communities. Many members and investigators have struggled to regularly attend church due, in part, to travel constraints. Thus, the establishment of congregations that assemble closer to the homes of members and investigators may accelerate growth. Communities that appear most favorable for the establishment of branches or member groups include Ordot, Talofofo, Tamuning, and Yona. Additionally, there may be good opportunities for the Church to establish language-specific congregations. The organization of a Tagalog-speaking branch and a Chuukese-speaking branch may be effective at strengthening the sense of LDS community among Filipino and Chuukese members.

There appear good opportunities for the Church to reverse slow LDS growth trends on Guam through focus on reactivating less-active or inactive male members. The Church in Cabo Verde (Cape Verde) experienced stagnant growth for over a decade in the 2000s primarily due to significant problems with local leadership development and member inactivity. Returned missionaries reported that the mission president challenged local church leaders to reactivate five Melchizedek Priesthood holders in each branch and to train these reactivated priesthood holders for leadership positions. This challenge also included improved member-missionary efforts from local members. Reactivation and proselytism efforts were driven by a collaborative effort of local leaders and full-time missionaries and successfully rekindled testimonies in many less-active and inactive male members, resulting in improved self-sufficiency of congregations. As a result, the Church in Cabo Verde has experienced rapid growth within the past five years. Similar results may occur in Guam if stake and mission leaders exhibit sufficient vision to address inactivity and local leadership development problems that have stifled growth.

Challenges

Member inactivity and convert attrition have appeared primarily responsible for slow LDS growth in Guam during the past several decades. The organization of the Barrigada Guam Stake appeared to hinge on the inclusion of the Saipan Branch in the Northern Mariana Islands. The Saipan Branch was one of the strongest branches in the Micronesia Guam Mission as of 2010. Local members estimate that member activity rates may be as low as 10% in some wards on Guam. Limited Melchizedek Priesthood manpower has likely prevented the organization of additional congregations. One member reported that over 80% of households in his ward had no Melchizedek Priesthood holder. All four wards appear to have hundreds of inactive members. The average ward including 566 members on its rolls in 2014, significantly more than the 100-200 active members in most wards on Guam. Local members indicate that many, if not most, converts have been rushed into baptism with little preparation for lifelong discipleship. This has resulted in significant struggles to reactive inactive members who have had minimal experience living LDS teachings and have never developed habitual church attendance.

Some cultural and societal conditions have created challenges for growth. Returned missionaries report that many Guam natives exhibit little interest in religions that require regular church attendance and active member participation. Itinerant military families have posed challenges for the stability of LDS congregations. Past fluctuations in membership growth has appeared to be strongly influenced by American military personnel moving to and from the island. Many of these seasoned military members have provided strength to the Church for decades and have appeared crucial towards the creation of the first stake. However,

native members have likely had fewer opportunities for church leadership service due to their more limited experience serving in leadership positions, especially compared to their lifelong LDS counterparts from the continental United States. Additionally, the Church has openly opposed the consumption of the areca nut, which is frequently chewed as a social pastime.

Transportation is a challenge for some members and investigators to attend church. There are only three LDS meetinghouses on Guam resulting in limited accessibility to the Church. Many members live on meager incomes and transportation is costly and limited.

A lack of LDS materials and scriptures translated into Chamorro may present some challenges to convey that the Church is compatible with Guamanian culture. No additional materials have been translated into Chamorro in over 25 years. Although English serves as a language to unify the families of American military, Filipinos, and Guamanian natives, the Church has yet to establish an endemic community on the island of stalwart LDS members capable of administering the Church without the assistance of nonlocal members.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Guam has experienced some of the slowest growth in the Micronesian region notwithstanding a continuous LDS presence since the mid-twentieth century. Stagnant growth has also occurred in the Northern Mariana Islands and Palau within the past two decades. The Church in the Northern Mariana Islands reported 500 members and four branches in 1995, whereas the Church reported 789 members and one ward in 2014. Little progress has occurred despite the permanent establishment of an LDS presence approximately four decades ago as evidenced by nominal LDS membership accounting for 1.5% of the territory's population. The Church in Palau has reported slight membership growth and a decrease in the number of branches during the past 25 years. Today there is only one branch that accommodates all 457 members in Palau, whereas there were four branches and a district that serviced Palau in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Church-reported membership constitutes 2.1% of the Palauan population notwithstanding a continuous LDS presence for nearly four decades.

Some nations in Micronesia have experienced significant growth within the past two decades. The Church in Kiribati established an initial presence in 1975 and experienced rapid growth for several decades. Today the Church claims 15.9% of the I-Kiribati population and operates two stakes, one district, and 28 congregations. The Church in the Federated States of Micronesia established an initial presence in the late 1970s. Today the Church claims 5.4% of the national population and reports 22 congregations (5 wards, 17 branches), one stake, and three districts. Accelerated membership growth has occurred in the Federated States of Micronesia within the past decade as annual membership growth rates have increased from 0.3% in 2004 to 3.9% in 2009, 6.1% in 2012, and 12.9% in 2014. Steady growth has also occurred in the Marshall Islands. The first LDS congregations began operating in the Marshall Islands during the 1970s. Membership increased to 1,142 in 1983, 2,200 in 1993, 3,524 in 2000, 5,093 in 2010, and 6,865 in 2014. The Church organized its first Marshallese stake in 2009. The Church currently claims 9.5% of the population of the Marshall Islands.

Most major missionary-focused Christian groups operate in Guam and claim significantly more members and maintain a more widespread national presence than the LDS Church. Essentially all these denominations experience rapid growth. Evangelicals claim 15% of the Guamanian population and report the strongest followings among white, Palauan, Korean, and Chamorro populations.[4] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 733 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), nine congregations, and 26 baptisms.[5] Witnesses operate congregations that conduct worship services in English (6 congregations), Chuukese (1 congregation), Iloko (1 congregation), and Tagalog (1 congregation). Witnesses also hold some meetings in Chinese [Mandarin/Cantonese], Japanese, and Ponapean. Witnesses translate proselytism materials into Chamorro, Chuukese, Ponapean, and various Philippine languages such as Tagalog and Iloko.[6] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to operate at least three congregations in Guam.[7] The Church of the Nazarene appears to operate one congregation in Guam.[8]

Limitations

No demographic data on the ethnicity or language use of LDS membership in Guam was available. The Church does not publish official statistics on the number of converts baptized per country or mission. 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 and convert retention rates are available to the public.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth on Guam appears mixed. Although the Church has headquartered a mission on Guam for 35 years and has recently achieved progress establishing the first stake in 2010, the Church experiences significant challenges with member inactivity and convert attrition, a transient military population, and few meetinghouses. Efforts from mission leadership to establish the Church in Guam for several decades have yielded disappointingly limited results as attested by only four wards and one stake in operation of Guam today notwithstanding Guam supporting the largest population of any nation or territory in Micronesia. Progress reversing slow growth trends will likely hinge on effective, revitalized reactivation efforts among male members and the establishment of branches or member groups in several communities distant from the nearest LDS meetinghouse. The establishment of language-specific units to administer Filipino members may be effective at accelerating growth.

[1] “Guam,” Country Profile, retrieved 24 October 2015. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/guam

[2] Store.lds.org, retrieved 24 October 2015.

[3] “Guam,” CIA World Factbook, retrieved 1 December 2015. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gq.html

[4] "Country: Guam," Joshua Project, retrieved 2 October 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/GQ

[5] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[6] "Publications," jw.org, retrieved 2 October 2015. http://www.jw.org/en/publications

[7] https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=seventh+day+adventists+guam&rflfq=1&rlha=0&tbm=lcl, retrieved 2 October 2015.

[8] “Nazarene Church Data Search,” retrieved 2 October 2015. http://nazarene.org/find-a-church