

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in Palau

Author: Matt Martinich, M.A.

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Palau is the least populous nation or territory in the Oceanian sub-region of Micronesia with approximately 21,000 inhabitants spread over six island groups. Palauans constitute approximately 73% of the population. Other major ethnic groups include Filipinos (16%), Asians (7%), and other Micronesian peoples (3.4%). The most commonly spoken languages are Palauan (67%), English (16%), Filipino [Tagalog] (11%), and Chinese (2%). The population is predominantly Christian. Catholics constitute half of the Palauan population. Protestant groups account for approximately one-third of the population. The LDS Church has experienced stagnant growth in Palau for over two decades notwithstanding initially steady growth in the 1980s.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Palau. 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 Palau are reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church maintained a temporary presence in Palau during World War II to service American military personnel. Full-time missionaries from the Hawaii Honolulu Mission were assigned in 1978 and were restricted by the government to work only on the islands of Koror, Arakabesan, Malakal, and Airai. The first Palauan Latter-day Saints joined the Church in late 1978 and the Meyungs Branch was organized shortly thereafter. Palau was reassigned to the Micronesia Guam Mission in 1980.

Membership totaled 400 in 1997, 384 in 2000, 437 in 2005, and 424 in 2009. In 2010, there were approximately 60 active members in the Koror Topside Branch, or 15% of church-reported membership. At the time, church attendance sometimes reached as high as 80 on holidays. In 2010, there were four elders and a senior missionary couple assigned to Palau. The sole LDS branch meets in a church-built meetinghouse in Koror. In 2010, the branch president of the Koror Topside Branch was the Ngardmau State delegate for the government. Senior missionaries indicated that church attendance sometimes reached as high as 100, but noted problems with members showing up to give talks assigned for sacrament meeting. In 2015, reports from missionaries serving in the branch indicated little improvement has been made in the past five years addressing inactivity problems. There were four proselytism areas in mid-2014: Airai, Koror Central, Koror Topside, and Meyungs.

The Church has experienced no net increase in the number of branches between 1978 and 2015. Three additional congregations were organized in the late 1980s (Airai, Koror Topside, Koror Central). An LDS Chinese congregation briefly operated in the early 1990s to meet the needs of converts from mainland China but was discontinued after many of the converts returned to China.[1] All of the LDS congregations were consolidated into a single branch by 1997. The number of official congregations (wards and branches) totaled one in 1978, four in 1989, two in 1993, and one in 1997. Church-reported membership totaled 59 in 1989, 200 in 1987, 300 in 1989, 400 in 1995, 384 in 2000, 437 in 2005, 443 in 2010, and 457 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have widely fluctuated over the past 20 years from as high as 9.0% in 2003 to as low as -3.8% in 1999 and 2007. Church-reported membership constituted 2.1% of the national population in 2014, or one LDS per 47 people.

As of late 2015, the Church had translated select passages from the Book of Mormon into Palauan (published in 1990)[2] and many basic gospel study and missionary materials including church proclamations such as The Living Christ and The Family: A

Proclamation to the World, the 13 Articles of Faith, pamphlets to accompany the missionary lessons, Preach My Gospel, Sunday School manuals for primary, Melchizedek Priesthood training resources, resources for teaching youth, and monthly First Presidency messages for home and visiting teaching.[3]All LDS scriptures and a large body of church materials have been translated into Tagalog, Cebuano, and Ilokano.

Successes

The Church has translated a sizable number of gospel study and missionary materials into Palauan despite less than 20,000 speakers, only one Palauan-speaking branch in the worldwide Church, and chronic problems with member inactivity in Palau. Palauan translations provide opportunities for local members who exhibit limited fluency in English to learn church teachings, serve in callings, and share the gospel with others. The official LDS missionary guide, Preach My Gospel, has also been translated into Palauan, providing full-time missionaries with opportunities to study and teach in the native language of most of the population.

The Church has maintained an active proselytism presence in Palau for nearly 40 years despite essentially stagnant growth during most of this time. The mission has assigned a senior missionary couple to Palau for many years. Senior missionary couples have provided valuable service strengthening active members, overseeing young full-time missionaries, and conducting auditing for the branch. The Church has maintained several proselytism areas in Palau to extend outreach in several of the most populous towns. Diligence and persistence by mission leadership to maintain a separate language program in the Guam Micronesia Mission to administer Palau has required consistent vision and resources.

Opportunities

The segregation of members into Palauan and English-speaking branches appears warranted. The history of the Church in Palau during the past two decades has illustrated that the consolidation of previous branches into a single branch to strengthen membership has been ineffective. Language barriers between Palauan natives who exhibit limited English abilities and nonnative members, who often live temporarily in the country, has created significant challenges to meet member needs. The use of English in Church meetings has also appeared to hamper efforts by full-time missionaries to learn the Palauan language. Additionally, distance from the meetinghouse has also appeared to result in member inactivity problems. The organization of an English-speaking branch and the designation of the Koror Branch as Palauan-speaking may be effective to reactivate hundreds of inactive or less-active Palauan-speaking members. Utilization of the same meetinghouse in Koror for both branches can conserve church resources and provide a common center for members in either branch to interact outside of worship services.

Unreached towns and villages present good opportunities for growth. Babeldaob Island is connected by a bridge to Koror Island, permitting easy accessibility by missionaries and branch leadership. There are approximately one dozen villages on Babeldaob Island, most of which likely have small numbers of Latter-day Saints. Full-time missionaries visiting isolated members in these villages and holding cottage meetings in member or investigator homes has good potential for the Church to identify locations that appear most favorable for concentrated missionary efforts and the ultimate establishment of member groups in these locations. 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. Holding worship services with the Koror Branch once a month may be beneficial to provide additional fellowship and ecclesiastical support for member groups that become established. Similar opportunities to open a member group in Meyungs may also result in accelerated growth and greater penetration of LDS outreach.

There appear good opportunities for the Church to reverse slow LDS growth trends on Palau 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 Palau if branch 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 stagnant LDS growth in Palau during the past several decades. Nearly all of the 43 LDS households were inactive or less active in 2010. Full-time missionaries have worked for years to reintroduce the Church and reestablish church attendance among these members with little noticeable success. The Church in Palau has historically struggled with conducting worship services in Palauan. As a result, many Palauan members who exhibit limited English abilities appear to struggle to engage in church activity. The assignment of several full-time missionary companionships to a single branch with few active members has likely exacerbated poor member-missionary participation. Many administrative and ecclesiastical tasks are placed upon full-time missionaries, resulting in reduced member participation.

Some cultural conditions pose barriers for growth. Only one meetinghouse operates in the entire country, resulting in limited accessibility to the Church. Many members live on meager incomes and transportation is costly and limited. The Church has openly opposed the consumption of the areca nut, which is frequently chewed as a social pastime.

The Church has yet to translate the Doctrine and Covenant and The Pearl of Great Price into Palauan. No translations of these LDS scriptures may present some challenges to convey that the Church is compatible with Palauan culture, and to promote gospel study and testimony development in members who exhibit limited fluency in English.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Palau has arguably experienced the slowest growth in the Micronesian region notwithstanding a continuous LDS presence since the late 1970s. Stagnant growth has also occurred in Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands within the past two decades. The Church in Guam has reported no net increase in the number of congregations since 1980. The creation of the first and only stake in Guam in 2010 appeared to be the byproduct of over half a century of slow growth. The organization of the stake also required the inclusion of the Saipan Branch in the Northern Mariana Islands due to an inadequate number of congregations to organize a stake. 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.

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, two districts, 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.

Although the size of other missionary-focused Christian groups significantly varies by denomination, essentially all of these churches report slow or stagnant growth. Evangelicals claim approximately one-quarter of the population[4] and appear to operate a pervasive presence in Palau. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a minimal presence. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 78 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), two congregations, and three baptisms.[5] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to operate at least one congregation in Palau. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence in Palau.

Limitations

No demographic data on the ethnicity or language use of LDS membership in Palau were 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 from each country or the number of missionaries assigned to each country or mission. No official statistics on member activity and convert retention rates are available to the public.

Future Prospects

Stagnant LDS growth for approximately two decades, significant member inactivity problems, a tiny target population, no measureable progress by mission leaders to establish additional member groups or branches, and the population exhibiting modest receptivity to LDS outreach indicate a bleak outlook for growth in the foreseeable future. Although some slight increases in church attendance have appeared to occur in the past five years, there has been little indication of measurable success in regards to other indicators of growth. The establishment of separate branches to administer English and Palauan speakers appears needed to improve the sense of Palauan community in the Church and address language needs among members who exhibit limited proficiency in English. The organization of member groups in Airai and Meyungs may serve as a catalyst for greater success reactivating members in these locations.

[1] “Palau,” Facts and Statistics, retrieved 21 December 2015. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/palau

[2] “BABIER ER A MORMON,” lds.org, retrieved 21 December 2015. https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/palauan/pdf/language-materials/34406_pau.pdf?lang=pau

[3] “Palauan,” lds.org, retrieved 21 December 2015. https://www.lds.org/languages/pau?lang=pau

[4] “Palau,” Operation World, retrieved 21 December 2015. http://www.opworld.net/pala

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