Case Studies on Analyzing Growth Trends by City or Administrative Division

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

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Posted: August 5th, 2013

Overview

Consisting of the city of Santo Domingo and surrounding cities and towns, the Santo Domingo metropolitan area is the most populous metropolitan area in the Caribbean with 3.425 million inhabitants.[1] This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church in Santo Domingo by examining past trends in stake and congregational growth. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for LDS growth are discussed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in Santo Domingo to other major cities in the Caribbean and Latin America and contrasts LDS growth in Santo Domingo with other outreach-oriented Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are discussed.

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LDS Background

The Church organized its first branch in Santo Domingo in 1978.[2] In 1981, the Church organized its first mission in Santo Domingo. A second mission (Santo Domingo East) was organized in 1991. In the mid-1990s, a missionary training center (MTC) was established in Santo Domingo to service the Caribbean. In 1993, the Church announced a temple for Santo Domingo and dedicated it in 2000. In 2006, Santo Domingo became the headquarters of the newly organized Caribbean Area.

In 1986, the Church created its first stake in Santo Domingo - the Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Stake. Additional stakes organized include the Santo Domingo San Gerónimo (1988), Santo Domingo Oriental (1989), Santo Domingo Ozama (1992), Santo Domingo Independencia (1992), Santo Domingo Villa Mella (1996), San Cristóbal (1997), Santo Domingo Las Caobas (2003), Los Alcarrizos (2005), Santo Domingo Hainamosa (2008), Santo Domingo Las Americas (2008), and Santo Domingo Los Restauradores (2008). The number of stakes increased from three in 1990 to seven in 2000 and twelve in 2010.

In 2002, there were 79 congregations (40 wards, 39 branches) in Santo Domingo. By early 2013, there were 97 congregations (79 wards, 18 branches). During this eleven-year period, the number of wards increased by 39 (98%) whereas the number of branches declined by 21 (54%). According to the configuration of stake boundaries in 2002 and provided with the net change in the number of congregations between 2002 and mid-2013 in parentheses, stakes that reported a net increase in the number of congregations included the Santo Domingo Oriental (5), Santo Domingo Villa Mella (4), Los Alcarrizos (2), Santo Domingo Ozama (2), and Santo Domingo San Geronimo (1) Stakes whereas stakes that reported a net decrease in the number of congregations included the Santo Domingo (-1) and the Santo Domingo Independencia (-1) Stakes. No net change in the number of congregations occurred in the San Cristóbal Dominican Republic Stake during this period. The most rapid congregational growth occurred on the northern and eastern areas of the metropolitan area whereas slow congregational growth occurred in the west and stagnant growth or negative growth occurred in the central, southern, and southwest. Maps displaying the wards and branches in the Santo Domingo are available for 2002 and 2013.

In 2002, the average ward or branch serviced approximately 35,600 people. Currently the average ward or branch services a population of 35,300 people.

Successes

Santo Domingo serves as the Church's headquarters for the Caribbean area and is a major center of strength for the Church in

Spanish-speaking Latin America. Two missions are based in Santo Domingo that service the southern Dominican Republic and Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao. The operation of twelve stakes indicates that there are sizable numbers of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders and active members to staff callings in the city as a whole.

The Church has organized several new stakes in Santo Domingo within the past decade whereas most major metropolitan areas in Latin America had only one or no stakes organized during this period. No stakes have ever been discontinued in Santo Domingo. The creation of new stakes suggests increases in active membership and in the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. One of the most significant successes for the Church during the past decade has been the number of wards doubling between 2002 and 2013, indicating that many branches have experienced active membership growth and reached sufficient leadership manpower to become wards.

The Church in Santo Domingo and in the country as a whole recently became self-sufficient in meeting its full-time missionary needs notwithstanding low member activity and convert retention rates. In 1990, 30-40% of the full-time missionary force in the Dominican Republic was Dominican[3] but by late 2009 the number of Dominicans serving full-time missionaries equaled the number of full-time missionaries serving in the country. The self-sufficiency of the Dominican full-time missionary force provides for wise allocation of international missionary resources by reducing the need for foreign missionaries in the Dominican Republic. A Dominican-majority full-time missionary force may over time improve member activity and convert retention rates if mission leaders and missionaries consistently maintain reasonably high baptismal standards and if Dominican full-time missionaries maintain the perspective that converts they baptize on their missions may one day be members within their home wards and branches. This perspective has potential to increase the responsibility of missionaries to avoid baptizing poorly prepared investigators. Many of these converts rushed into baptism become a long-term burden on local unit leadership and mission resources if they quickly become inactive after baptism and never develop meaningful church activity and gain personal testimony of the truthfulness of the Church. North American missionaries continue to serve in sizable numbers in the Dominican Republic as many Dominican missionaries serving outside their home country.

Opportunities

There remain many lesser-reached areas of the city that appear favorable for the establishment of member groups or branches. Holding cottage meetings in lesser-reached neighborhoods has potential to foster a sense of LDS community, reactivate less-active members, and find and teach investigators with an emphasis on member involvement. Church leaders can organize member groups or branches in locations where there are a sufficient number of investigators and members who could potentially attend church services. These congregations can later become branches and wards according to the size and strength of local leadership and active membership.

The Church has not implemented Haitian-specific outreach efforts notwithstanding some estimates placing the number of Haitian-born individuals living in the Dominican Republic as high as 800,000,[4] or nearly one-tenth of the population of the Dominican Republic. Specialized outreach efforts among Haitians in Santo Domingo that include the organization of Haitian-Creole-speaking Sunday school classes, member groups, or branches will require careful coordination of local leadership and mission resources and accommodation to the unique cultural and socioeconomic needs of this population.

Challenges

Inactivity and convert retention problems pose the greatest barrier to achieving greater growth in Santo Domingo. In the late 1990s, returned missionaries serving in Santo Domingo reported that as few as 20% of converts remained active one year after baptism. At the time most wards and branches appeared to have between 20 and 80 active members. Full-time missionaries regularly served as branch presidents in many branches due to not even one or two male members exhibiting sufficient leadership and administrative skills to fill this leadership position. Member-missionary participation has historically been mediocre resulting in full-time missionaries finding, teaching, and baptizing the majority of new members. In more recent years, the percentage of converts remaining active one year after baptism has appeared to slightly improve but the average number of members per ward or branch in the Dominican Republic has substantially increased. In 1999, the average congregation had 406 members on its records whereas in 2012 the average ward or branch had 616 members on its records; a 52% increase over a 13-year period. In early 2013, most wards and branches appeared to have between 50 and 100 active members. With perhaps a couple exceptions, all congregations in Santo Domingo have hundreds of less-active and inactive members that reside within their boundaries. The massive number of inactive and less-active members in each ward and branch siphon mission resources for reactivation and member support, reducing proselytism efforts directed toward the nonmember population. Member activity and convert retention problems are also evident in the modest utilization of the Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Temple. In 2013, the temple appeared well utilized on Saturdays as endowment sessions were scheduled every hour from six in the morning to five in the evening but modestly utilized on weekdays as only five endowment sessions per day occurred Tuesdays through Fridays.[5]

Some cultural conditions pose difficulties for achieving greater LDS growth. The common association of LDS Church with the United States and American culture results in some converts joining the Church simply because many Dominicans favorably view the United States. Returned missionaries report that many Dominicans exhibit warmth and friendliness to American missionaries and agree to receive missionary lessons and to get baptized out of politeness rather than genuine interest in learning about the Church and experiencing testimony building experiences. The misconception held by some Dominicans that becoming a member of the Church improves the odds of immigrating to the United States has also contributed to large numbers of spiritually shallow and noncontributing converts who quickly go inactive after baptism and may never return to church activity.

Returned missionaries report that the widespread use of substances prohibited by the Word of Wisdom such as alcohol and coffee and the cultural acceptance of immorality and infidelity are significant obstacles for prospective members to totally overcome prior to baptism. These conditions also pose difficulties for active members to follow LDS teachings and standards and remain socially integrated into their communities. False ideas and rumors about Latter-day Saints are widely circulated and detract many Dominicans from seriously studying about the Church.

Within the past decade, no progress occurred in increasing the saturation of LDS outreach in Santo Domingo as evidenced by the average ward or branch servicing the same population in 2002 as it did in early 2013 of approximately 35,000. Compounding inactivity problems and emphasis on branches reaching ward status appear the primary reasons for LDS unit growth perfectly correlating with city population growth during this period. Improved church planting vision and higher convert retention and member activity rates will be required for greater progress in increasing the penetration of LDS outreach.

Comparative Growth

In early 2013, Santo Domingo was the metropolitan area in the Caribbean with the largest population and was the metropolitan area in the region with the most LDS stakes. Three other metropolitan areas in the Caribbean have populations over one million (Port-au-Prince, Haiti; San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Havana, Cuba) but only one of these cities (Port-au-Prince) has at least four stakes. One of these cities (Havana) has only one LDS branch. Other major cities in Spanish-speaking Latin America generally have a larger number of stakes than Santo Domingo but have experienced slower congregational and stake growth within the past decade. For example, in Guatemala City there were 2.85 million inhabitants and twenty stakes in early 2013 but the number of stakes had been unchanged from a decade earlier. In Guayaquil, Ecuador there were 2.65 million inhabitants and fourteen stakes in early 2013 but only one of these stakes had been organized within the past decade. Santo Domingo has numbered among the major cities in Latin America that have experienced the most rapid congregational growth as most other major cities have had little, if any, net increase in the number of wards and branches within the past decade due to widespread unit consolidations during the early 2000s and slow or stagnant growth since this time.

Other outreach-oriented Christian groups report a pervasive presence in Santo Domingo. Most denominations maintain a larger number of congregations and have operated in Santo Domingo for decades longer than the LDS Church. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 175 churches, 57 companies, and approximately 60,000 members in the Santo Domingo area. Adventists generally baptize between two and three thousand converts a year in the Santo Domingo area.[6] Jehovah's Witnesses report nearly 200 congregations in the Santo Domingo area including several non-Spanish speaking congregations that service speakers of Haitian-Creole, English, French, American Sign Language, and Mandarin Chinese. The outreach extended to Haitian-Creole speakers is particularly impressive with approximately two dozen Haitian-Creole speaking congregations.[7] Adventists, Witnesses, and evangelicals have reported steady increases in active membership for many years.

Limitations

No population figures for administrative divisions within the city of Santo Domingo were available and no geospatial analysis was conducted to determine which areas of the city experience the highest and the lowest penetration of LDS outreach. Although many full-time missionary reports were available during the writing of this case study, there were no local member reports regarding church growth and missionary work. The Church does not publish data on many statistical indicators of member activity such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of temple recommend holders, and the number of members on the address unknown file. Consequently it is unclear how much member activity rates have changed over the past decade. There are limited official LDS media articles and references that provide information on church policies regulating the organization of new units and recent church growth trends in Santo Domingo.

Future Prospects

Conditions for missionary work and church growth remain favorable in Santo Domingo as the population overall exhibits good receptivity to the LDS Church and the Dominican full-time missionary force has reached self-sufficiency. However, inadequate prebaptismal preparation and cultural conditions that make it difficult for missionaries to differentiate between sincerely interested investigators and those who want to socialize with Americans have resulted in historically low convert retention rates and will continue to pose challenges for achieving greater real growth. Only one stake (Santo Domingo Ozama) appears likely to divide within the near future unless greater congregational growth occurs in other stakes. It is likely that Santo Domingo will remain a vital center of strength for the Church in the Caribbean for many years and decades to come due to the large number of stakes clustered within a single metropolitan area, the presence of the only temple and MTC in the Caribbean, the large population and connectedness in the regional economy, and a centralized location within the region.

[1] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 4 June 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] VanDenBerghe, Elizabeth and Jed. "A Second Decade for Dominican Saints," Ensign, Oct 1990, 32

[3] VanDenBerghe, Elizabeth and Jed. "A Second Decade for Dominican Saints," Ensign, Oct 1990, 32

[4] Pina, Diogenes. "DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Deport Thy (Darker-Skinned) Neighbor," Inter Press Service News Agency, 21 March 2007. http://www.ipsnews.net/2007/03/dominican-republic-deport-thy-darker-skinned-neighbour/

[5] "Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Temple," lds.org, retrieved 7 June 2013. http://www.lds.org/church/temples/santo-domingo-dominican-republic?lang=eng#tab=schedule

[6] "Central Dominican Conference (1994-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 4 June 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10060

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 4 June 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT