

Case Studies on Analyzing Growth Trends by City or Administrative Division

>

Analysis of LDS Growth in Bangkok, Thailand

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: September 24th, 2014

Overview

The Bangkok metropolitan area ranked as the 21st most populous urban agglomeration in the world as of mid-2014 with 14.9 million inhabitants.[1] At the time approximately 22% of the national population resided in the Bangkok area and 79 administrative city districts pertained to the Bangkok metropolitan area. Although the Church has maintained a presence in Bangkok for over half a century, little growth has historically occurred as evidenced by only one stake in the city until 2014.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Bangkok. Past church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. LDS growth in Bangkok is compared to other major mainland Southeast Asian metropolitan areas and the growth and size of other Christian denominations that operate in Bangkok is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

The Church began holding informal meetings in Bangkok primarily for foreign members beginning the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1961, an English branch was organized. In November 1966, the Church dedicated Thailand for missionary work[2] and assigned young, proselytizing missionaries in March 1968 - the same time that the first church services in the Thai language began.[3] In 1973, the Church organized the Thailand Bangkok Mission from a division of the Southeast Asian Mission (later renamed the Singapore Mission). At the time there appeared to be no more than five branches in the Bangkok area.[4]

//

In 1995, the Church organized its first stake in Bangkok with five wards and one branch in the Bangkok area (the Asoke, Bangkapi, Bangkhen, Bangnaa, and Thonburi Wards, and the Bangkok (English) Branch).[5] In 1999, the Church organized the Pakhret Thailand District (later realigned and renamed the Bangkok Thailand North District) to service branches in the northern Bangkok area and in nearby provinces. In 2001, the Church reported nine congregations (five wards, four branches) in the Bangkok area, including six (five wards, one branch) in the Bangkok Thailand Stake (the Bangkapi, Bangkhen, Bangnaa, Srinakharin, and Thonburi Wards, and the Bangkhae Branch) and three (all branches) in the Pakhret Thailand District (the Bangbuathong, Bangkok [English], and Pakhret Branches).

Several noteworthy LDS growth developments in Bangkok have occurred in the past decade. In the mid-2000s, a Cambodian-speaking branch operated for a few years but closed by the late 2000s. In 2010, the Church started construction in Pakhret on its largest meetinghouse to be built in Bangkok to serve as a future stake center.[6] In 2012, the Thai government granted the Church work visas to foreign full-time missionaries for the first time. Prior to this time, foreign missionaries served in the country on tourist visas.[7] In 2013, mission leaders experimented with organizing member groups that assembled in lesser-reached areas of the city, namely in Lat Phrao and Phasi Charoen. However, by mid-2014 mission leaders had disbanded the two member groups. During late 2013 and early 2014, the Thailand Bangkok Mission repeatedly broke records for the number of converts baptized within a single month. Missionaries reported that many of these converts had been baptized in the Bangkok area. By mid-2014, the Thailand Bangkok Mission had baptized over 1,000 converts for the first half of the year.

In 2014, the Church organized a second stake in Bangkok (Bangkok North) and organized a new district (Bangkok West). Missionaries reported that the new district was organized to prepare for the creation of a third stake one day. In mid-2014, the

Church reported 15 congregations (11 wards, four branches) in the Bangkok area, including six congregations (all wards) in the Bangkok Thailand Stake (the Bangkapi, Bangkok [English], Bangnaa, Sapansung, Srinakharin, and Samutprakarn Wards), six congregations (five wards, one branch) in the Bangkok Thailand North Stake (the Bangbuathong, Bangkhen, Chaengwattana [English], Donmuang, and Rangsit Wards, and the Pakhret Branch), and three congregations (all branches) in the Bangkok Thailand West District (Asoke, Bangkhae, and Thonburi Branches). A map displaying the location of current LDS congregations in the Bangkok area can be found here.

Currently the average ward or branch services approximately one million people. Generally speaking, the Church extends its most penetrating outreach in east-central districts of the city where more than half of districts have an LDS congregation. Central, western, and suburban districts are the least reached by the Church. Districts in some of these areas are located several districts away from the nearest district with a ward or branch.

A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by administrative district can be found here.

Translations of all LDS scriptures and many church materials are available in Thai.

Successes

Within the past five years, missionaries and members report that notable progress has occurred augmenting the number of active members in the Bangkok area. Increasing numbers of active members and priesthood holders has been evidenced by the organization of a second stake, the creation of a new district, and the advancement of several branches into wards within the former boundaries of the Bangkok Thailand Stake as all of these types of congregations and organizations require certain numbers of active members to operate. The Church has tried for many years to organize a second stake in Bangkok due to the number and members and congregations coming close to reaching the minimum qualifications for another stake to operate. Recent efforts by mission, stake, and district leaders has not only culminated in the organization of a new stake, but also the creation of a new district. This suggests that the Church in Bangkok has more than exceeded the qualifications for a second stake to operate and, in the process, has laid the groundwork for a third stake to operate one day. Local members also report that greater member-missionary participation has occurred in Bangkok as a result of recent converts sharing the gospel with others.

Within the past 15 years, stake and mission leaders have implemented church-planting tactics instead of traditional church-splitting tactics in the Bangkok area. This has resulted the organization of new branches and mission and stake leaders nurturing these branches until they become wards; a much more speedy and effective process to achieving growth rather than concentrating on increasing the number of active members in individual wards until they are enough members to necessitate the creation of another ward. The Church has also made a concerted effort to establish separate meetinghouses for each congregation. With the exception of one congregation (the Donmuang Ward), all Thai-speaking wards and branches have their own meetinghouses located within their geographical boundaries. Consequently the Church currently possesses greater outreach capabilities at present than compared to two decades earlier. The effectiveness of this approach is evident in how the Church continues to operate six new branches that were initially organized during the 2000s and early 2010s, and that five of these branches had become wards as of mid-2014. The decision to simultaneously organize the Bangkok Thailand West District when the Bangkok Thailand North District became a stake points to future plans by mission leadership to organize additional branches within the district in order to organize a third stake as the district remains at least two branches shy of the minimum number of congregations needed for a stake to operate.

Rapid growth has occurred among English speakers within the past decade. In 2001, there was only one English-speaking branch in the Bangkok area, whereas by mid-2014 there were two English-speaking wards. Growth has appeared attributed to a combination of new member move-ins from outside the country and convert baptisms.

The Church has made progress with increasing the number of full-time missionaries assigned and the number of Thai members serving full-time missions. The Church increased the number of missionaries assigned to the country to approximately 150 by mid-2014; a significant increase from the approximately 100 missionaries serving just a year earlier. Improvements made between the Church and the government pertaining to foreign missionary visa allotments and larger numbers of Thai members serving missions has good potential to channel greater mission resources into the Bangkok area.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities to continue to implement church-planting tactics in the Bangkok area. With the average ward or branch servicing approximately one million people within its boundaries, the Church in Bangkok has barely scratched the surface in proselytizing the population and establishing a citywide presence. Only 13 of the 66 administrative districts within the Bangkok metropolitan area have an LDS congregation headquartered within their jurisdictions, indicating that the population in 80% of the city's districts does not have a congregation based within their districts. On average, each city district appears easily able to provide the Church with a sufficiently large target population to support a missionary companionship and a congregation as the average city district included over 225,000 people in mid-2014. To put this figure in perspective, most cities in Thailand with an LDS presence have fewer than 150,000 people. With larger numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Thailand than that have served in recent memory, the Thailand Bangkok Mission has the unprecedented opportunity to utilize missionary manpower in coordinating with stake and district leaders to organize member groups and branches that assemble in rented

facilities in lesser-reached areas of the city. The implementation of Thai translations of the Church's Hastening of the Work of Salvation broadcast and website has good potential to harness member-missionary manpower in the establishment of additional congregations in the Bangkok area. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by city district can be found here.

Bangkok presents good opportunities for the Church to establish a missionary training center (MTC) and construct a temple due to the city's geopolitical prominence in the region and burgeoning LDS presence. Currently Thai members receive training at the Philippines MTC located in Manila.[8] With increasing numbers of Thais serving missions, combined with the lack of a nearby MTC for members serving missions from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, there appears a greater need for a closer facility. A prospective MTC in Bangkok could also provide training and language instruction to nonnative members called to serve full-time missions in Thailand and surrounding countries. The Church has publicly proposed a temple in Bangkok since 2000[9] and mission and area presidencies have subsequently created goals to have several stakes in Bangkok so that a temple could be announced one day. Currently the Church in Thailand and surrounding countries is assigned to the Hong Kong China Temple, located over 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) away.

There also appear good opportunities to explore additional language-specific outreach among minority groups. The Church has previously extended Cambodian-specific outreach and once had a Cambodian-speaking branch in northern Bangkok. The establishment of Cambodian-speaking Sunday School classes and introduction of Cambodian-speaking full-time missionaries has good potential to capitalize on growth opportunities among this demographic. There also appear some good opportunities for specialized outreach among Chinese, Burmese, and hill tribe peoples such as the Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, and Lü. Language barriers pose challenges for missionaries to teach these individuals and for these peoples to understand church services conducted in Thai or English. The illegal status of many of these peoples has historically prohibited many from getting baptized. In recent years, the mission has permitted married individuals to get baptized even if they do not have legal status in the country. However, members indicate that some investigators who are illegally in the country and reside with a significant other are not eligible for baptism because they cannot become married due to their legal status.

Challenges

The Church in Bangkok has historically experienced slow growth and member inactivity and convert attrition challenges. Local leadership development problems have limited the self-sufficiency of the Church to meet the administrative and ecclesiastical needs of its members. Church employees have frequently served in the Bangkok Stake Presidency since the organization of the stake, suggesting that there are insufficient numbers of Thai priesthood leaders with the needed experience, devotion, and activity to serve in this type of leadership position. The overrepresentation of church employees in leadership positions can create challenges for some members to sustain these leaders as this phenomenon can create the illusion of paid clergy for the Church. Members and missionaries report in many congregations that there are sizable numbers of inactive members on church records whose whereabouts are unknown. The congregations with the highest member activity rates appear to have no more than 30% of members on church records regularly attending church. Missionaries report problems with stake and mission leaders collaborating in the initial establishment of member groups in 2013. The failure of these member groups to reactive a sufficiently-large number of less-active members to organize branches resulted in the dissolution of these groups by 2014. Mission and stake leaders may become discouraged to engage in future church planting efforts due to the lack of success with these most recent efforts.

Missionaries report many cultural challenges that have limited growth such as teaching the gospel to Buddhists with little to no background in understanding Judeo-Christian doctrines and practices, the lack of acceptance of Christianity in Thai society, and practices and societal norms that conflict with LDS teachings. Missionaries report that many Thais who are willing to listen to missionaries and receive the missionary lessons generally exhibit fleeting curiosity as opposed to sincere religious interest in studying about the Church and contemplating membership. The strong ethnoreligious ties of Thais to Theravada Buddhism pose significant challenges for LDS missionary work to overcome. The homogenous Buddhist population is largely unaware of any LDS presence in the country due to the small size of the Church in the country.

The Thai government has limited the number of foreign missionary visas issued to the Church for over two decades. In 1976, the Church had 170 missionaries serving in its 20 branches. However, by 1995 the Church had only 100 missionaries serving in the country due to government-imposed quotas on foreign missionary visas.[10] The Church has experienced long-term problems with securing sufficient numbers of missionary visas. In 2006, returned missionaries reported that most foreign missionary visas were lost to the Church due to the government recategorizing the Church's legal status in the country from a charitable organization to a religious one. These problems were relieved several months later when the Church obtained larger numbers of visas. Although there appears to be increasing numbers of Thai members serving full-time missions, the Church in Thailand remains highly reliant on North American missionaries to staff its ranks resulting in potential challenges in maintaining the missionary force should any disruption to foreign missionary visas occur. Augmenting the size of the native Thai missionary force has the greatest long-term potential to improve the outreach capabilities of the Thailand Bangkok Mission and promote greater church planting efforts within the Bangkok area.

Poor access and low visibility of meetinghouses has deterred growth in some locations in Bangkok, particularly in western areas of the city. Local members have observed that meetinghouses in eastern areas of the city have generally experienced greater success with increasing church attendance due to greater accessibility and visibility. These findings suggest that the Church may need to relocate some of its meetinghouses in order to achieve real growth.

There are few full-member families in the Church in Thailand, posing challenges for fostering natural growth and maintaining

active auxiliary programs. The Church has encouraged members to marry within the Church but with relatively little progress in generating larger numbers of full-member families. Some members express frustration that there are large numbers of active single members who have postponed marriage for many years. The establishment of larger numbers of LDS families will be important for the Church to achieve greater stability in local leadership and administrative self-sufficiency.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Bangkok constitutes one of the primary evolving centers of strength among major metropolitan areas in mainland Southeast Asia as evidenced by the establishment of multiple stakes, the headquartering of a mission, and recent active membership growth. Notwithstanding this progress the Church in Phnom Penh, Cambodia has experienced significantly more rapid growth and has established a more widespread presence than the Church in Bangkok. In 1994, the Church established an initial presence in Phnom Penh. Today the average ward or branch includes less than 100,000 people within its boundaries and two stakes, two districts, and one mission operate in the city. The disparity in church growth between Bangkok and Phnom Penh becomes even more dramatic when taking into account both cities have comparable religious demographics yet Bangkok's population is nearly nine times the size of Phnom Penh's population.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a limited or minimal presence in Bangkok and experience slow or stagnant growth. Evangelicals experience slow growth and maintain a very limited presence in the Bangkok area. In mid-2014, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 24 congregations in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Almost all of these congregations were Thai speaking, although several congregations provided services or outreach in minority or foreign languages including English (one congregation), Japanese (one congregation), Tagalog (one congregation), Thai Sign Language (one congregation), Burmese (one group), and Mandarin Chinese (one group).[11] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church does not report any Bangkok-specific statistics, but Adventists appear to have a presence comparable in size to the LDS Church. Nationwide, Adventists reported 15,160 members and 47 churches (large congregations) in 2013,[12] and 79 companies (small congregations) in 2012. Adventists have experienced virtually stagnant congregational growth in Thailand within the past five years and reported no noticeable changes in the number of new converts baptized a year within the past three decades.[13] The Church of the Nazarene reports a minimal presence in the Bangkok area which appears limited to less than 300 members, a handful of congregations, and less than 100 attending church services.[14]

Limitations

Many high-quality reports from returned mission presidents, senior missionary couples, young full-time missionaries, and local members were utilized during the writing of this case study. The Church does not annually publish the number of members by major city or by administrative division in Thailand. Consequently it is unclear how many members currently reside in the Bangkok area, and how this number has changed over time. The Church does not publish stake-by-stake or country-by-country data on the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the number of converts baptized. No statistics on member activity or convert retention rates are published for worldwide church membership or for individual countries. No geospatial analysis that examined city district population figures was conducted due to district population data being unavailable for some districts.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Bangkok appears positive as the Church has recently reached several meaningful church-growth milestones, greater amounts of mission resources have been channeled into the Thailand Bangkok Mission, the recent acceleration in the number of convert baptisms, and greater member-missionary participation. However, historically low member activity and convert retention rates, combined with the cultural need to tailor LDS teaching approaches to those without a Christian background, will likely continue to create challenges for growth. The establishment of additional branches and member groups that assemble closer to target populations and fledgling clusters of Latter-day Saints will be essential towards making additional headway in the coming years. The establishment of a Thailand MTC and a temple in Bangkok has good potential to solidify the Church's presence in the country, increase the accessibility to these vital resources and supports to Thai members, strengthen the sense of LDS community in the city, and channel greater mission resources into the country.

[1] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 7 August 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] "Thailand," mormonnewsroom.org, retrieved 7 August 2014. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/thailand/

[3] Ford, Joan Porter; Gaunt, Larene Porter. "The Gospel Dawning in Thailand," Ensign, September 1995. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1995/09/the-gospel-dawning-in-thailand

[4] Smith, G. Carlos. "The Saints in Southeast Asia," Ensign, September 1973. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1973/09/the-saints-in-southeast-asia

[5] "New stake presidencies," LDS Church News, 15 July 1995. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/26765/New-stake-presidencies.html

[6] Hardy, Annette. "Construction begins on largest Latter-day Saint meetinghouse in Thailand," LDS Church News, 2 February 2010. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/58684/Construction-begins-on-largest-Latter-day-Saint-meetinghouse-in-Thailand.htm

[7] "March 30, 2012 - Eleven New Thai Missionaries prepare to depart for the Missionary Training Center in Manila Philippines," retrieved 14 October 2013. http://www.lds-thailand.org/

[8] "Philippines Missionary Training Center," lds.org, retrieved 9 August 2014. https://www.lds.org/locations/missionary-training-centers/philippines

[9] "Bangkok Thailand Temple," www.ldschurchtemples.com, retrieved 9 August 2014. http://www.ldschurchtemples.com/bangkok/

[10] Ford, Joan Porter; Gaunt, Larene Porter. "The Gospel Dawning in Thailand," Ensign, September 1995. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1995/09/the-gospel-dawning-in-thailand

[11] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 7 August 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[12] "Thailand Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 9 August 2014. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=THLM

[13] "Thailand Mission (1959-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 9 August 2014. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10485

[14] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," nazarene.org, retrieved 9 June 2014. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCwQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fn