



# Case Studies on Analyzing Growth Trends by City or Administrative Division

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## Analysis of LDS Growth in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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### Overview

Phnom Penh is the most populous city and administrative capital of Cambodia. Recent estimates place the population of the metropolitan area at 1.7 million.<sup>[1]</sup> 1.33 million people reside within the Phnom Penh Municipality<sup>[2]</sup> whereas several hundred thousand people reside in urban areas of Kandal Province surrounding Phnom Penh Municipality. The LDS Church has experienced significant growth in Phnom Penh notwithstanding the first missionaries arriving in the mid-1990s, a homogenously Buddhist population, and historically few mission resources allocated to the country.

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

### LDS Background

The Church in Phnom Penh organized its first branch in 1994. By year-end 1996, there were four branches in the city (three Khmer [Cambodian]-speaking, one Vietnamese-speaking). In 2001, there were 11 branches in Phnom Penh (Phnom Penh 1st, Phnom Penh 2nd, Phnom Penh 3rd [Vietnamese], Phnom Penh 4th, Phnom Penh 5th, Phnom Penh 6th [Vietnamese], Phnom Penh 7th, Phnom Penh 8th, Phnom Penh 9th, Phnom Penh 10th, and Ta Khmau). In late 2014, there were 17 official congregations (10 wards, 7 branches) within the Municipality of Phnom Penh and three official congregations (3 branches) that operated in adjacent areas of Kandal Province. Of these 17 congregations, 13 were Khmer-speaking, three were Vietnamese-speaking, and one was English-speaking. The Church began operating a member group in Baku in 2013. A map displaying the location and year organized for LDS units in the Phnom Penh metropolitan area can be found [here](#).

The Church in Phnom Penh organized its first district in 1995 which was later renamed the Phnom Penh Cambodia North District. The Church organized a second district in 2001 (Phnom Penh Central [Vietnamese]) and a third district in 2002 (Phnom Penh South). In 2012, the Church organized a fourth district (Phnom Penh East). In 2014, the Phnom Penh Cambodia North and Phnom Penh Cambodia South Districts became stakes.

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Missionaries have reported chronic problems with inactivity in Phnom Penh, although there have been some improvements in ameliorating these problems in recent years. Returned missionaries who served in Cambodia during the early 2010s reported that the average national church attendance grew from 2,200 to nearly 3,000. However, only about 40% of converts baptized during this period became fully active in the Church. Recently returned missionaries have estimated that 20% of converts eventually become completely inactive whereas approximately 40% become less-active. Poor attendance at sacrament meeting have been indicative of inactivity problems. In the early 2010s, returned missionaries reported that most congregations in Phnom Penh had between 100 and 150 active members notwithstanding most branches reporting more than 400 members on church records. Returned missionaries have identified poor fellowshiping from local members, a weak testimony of the Church, being offended by a church leader, and long distance to the nearest meetinghouse as the primary reasons for inactivity problems.

Returned missionaries indicate that ordinary members in the Church in Phnom Penh have struggled to participate in missionary

work and fellowship investigators and new converts. Missionaries reported that full-time missionaries spearhead reactivation efforts to locate "lost" members on church records who no longer attend church. Some local church leaders have emphasized the importance of member-missionary participation. Missionaries reported in late 2014 that one stake president challenged all the members in a stake conference to share a copy of the Book of Mormon with a friend for Christmas. The stake had 500 copies of the Book of Mormon available to distribute to members in the stake. The Church has appeared to baptize upwards of 500 converts a year within Phnom Penh alone during the early 2010s notwithstanding challenges with member-missionary participation.

In late 2014, the average congregation within the Phnom Penh metropolitan area included 85,000 inhabitants.

## Successes

Phnom Penh is the best-reached metropolitan area in Southeast Asia with one million or more inhabitants. In 2013, nominal LDS membership appeared to comprise approximately 0.50%, or one LDS member per 200 people. Phnom Penh is one of the few major cities in Asia where the average LDS congregation includes less than 100,000 people within its geographical boundaries.

Success in the establishment of a widespread LDS presence in Phnom Penh has been attributed to long-term mission and area focus on the establishment of additional congregations and member districts rather than the immediate establishment of a stake. Rarely has the Church in Asia organized multiple member districts within the same metropolitan area. At one point, the Church in Phnom Penh boasted the largest number of districts (4) of any city in the world. The Church has often advocated for the consolidation of smaller branches to create larger, ward-sized units in order to expedite the process of organizing a stake. The merger of smaller branches to organize larger ones has posed challenges for long-term growth as many members fail to socially integrate into realigned congregations and longer distance to meetinghouses becomes prohibitive for some members to regularly attend church. Church leaders in Phnom Penh could have possibly been able to organize a stake as early as 2001 when the Church began to meet some of the qualifications for a stake to operate such as a sufficient number of congregations (11) and nominal members (more than 2,000). However, Church leaders have been successful in maintaining the vision to organize multiple stakes one day. These diligent efforts came to fruition when the Church organized two stakes in Phnom Penh on the same day in May 2014 - marking the second time in LDS history that the Church has organized its first two stakes within a country where no stakes previously operated. Church leaders continue to be dedicated in the goal to establish additional stakes through strengthening and preparing the two remaining districts (Phnom Penh East and Phnom Penh Central [Vietnamese]).

Mission leadership has continued to focus on expanding outreach in Phnom Penh notwithstanding the creation of stakes constituting one of the primary goals for the Church in Phnom Penh for many years. The Church has continued to organize new congregations within the past few years despite focus from mission leaders to augment the number of active members in operating branches so these congregations meet the minimal requirements to become wards in order for stakes to be established. Since 2010, the Church has organized five new congregations including the Teuk Thla Branch (2011), Ta Khmau 2nd Branch (2011), Steung Mean Chey 3rd Branch (2012), Baku Group (2013), and Chbar Ampov (2014) Branch.

The Church in Phnom Penh has improved its self-sufficiency in church administration and missionary work within recent years. The establishment of stakes has indicated major progress in local church leadership exhibiting sufficient maturity and numbers to fill the needed callings for stakes to operate. Many of the administrative functions of a stake president were carried out by the mission president prior to the organization of stakes. Today church leaders in the two stakes exhibit significant leadership autonomy to conduct temple, priesthood, and missionary preparation interviews and approve members to receive their patriarchal blessings from the stake patriarch. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Church heavily depended on foreign full-time missionaries to staff the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission. Larger numbers of Cambodian members have served missions in recent years. This has resulted in Cambodian members comprising approximately half of the full-time missionary force in Phnom Penh in 2014.

The Church has extended specialized outreach among ethnolinguistic minority groups for many years. Vietnamese-specific outreach began in the mid-1990s and has included Vietnamese-speaking full-time missionaries, the establishment of three Vietnamese-speaking branches, and the organization of a Vietnamese-speaking district in 2001. The Church has operated an English-speaking branch since the late 2000s and has assigned full-time missionaries to the branch.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and many gospel study and proselytism materials into Khmer. Translations of General Conference addresses on the internet have been available since 2004.<sup>[3]</sup> Many of the Church's translations of materials are available for free on its official website.<sup>[4]</sup> The Church has developed a Cambodia version of lds.org that provides news and information in the Khmer-language.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Opportunities

Cambodia numbers among the few countries in Southeast Asia where the Church experiences few restrictions on religious freedom and where foreign religious visas can be acquired with little difficulty. There do not appear to be any restrictions or difficulties for the Church to obtain larger numbers foreign missionary visas, suggesting that greater numbers of foreign missionaries can be assigned to provide the needed manpower to further saturation Phnom Penh with additional full-time

missionary companionships. Cambodia presents some of the highest levels of religious freedom for proselytizing Christian groups among Asian countries. There have been no recent reports of governmental or societal abuses of religious freedom and foreign Christian missionaries may proselyte without restrictions.<sup>[6]</sup> However, the Church has taken care to respect cultural and societal norms regarding missionary activity and has avoided aggressive proselytism tactics such as door-to-door proselytism and street preaching. These conditions suggests good opportunities for the Church to open a second mission in order for the Church to take greater advantage of religious freedom conditions and good receptivity to LDS outreach.

There are good opportunities for the Church to experience growth in currently established wards and branches. Recently returned missionaries note that the population continues to exhibit strong receptivity to LDS outreach. Missionaries often easily find new investigators with little difficulty. Many Cambodians have little to no knowledge of the LDS Church and its teachings but exhibit curiosity and are friendly with missionaries. Although the population is homogenously Buddhists, many Cambodians are open to learning about Christianity and conversion.

Good receptivity, improving local leadership self-sufficiency, and increasing numbers of members serving full-time missions present excellent opportunities for ongoing efforts to organize additional branches and member groups and further saturate the city with LDS congregations. The opening of additional meetinghouses in rented facilities located closer to members' homes may assist reactivation efforts. There are likely small numbers of members and investigators in most lesser-reached neighborhood who can provide the needed personnel to help establish additional congregations. Locations that appear favorable for the establishment of member groups or branches include Chaom Chau (currently within the boundaries of the Steung Mean Chey 2nd Ward), Khan Russei Keo (currently within the boundaries of the Tuol Sang Ke Ward), Sangkat Chrouy Changva (currently within the boundaries of the Tuol Sang Ke Ward), Tonle Basak (currently within the boundaries of the Chaktomuk Ward and the Chamkarmorn Branch), and the Trapeang Pou area (currently within the boundaries of the Pochentong Ward). Suburban areas on the outskirts of the city located in Kandal Province appear highly favorable for the assignment of missionaries and the establishment of member groups or branches.

There are good opportunities for the Phnom Penh Cambodia East District to become a stake within the near future. The district recently reached the minimal number of congregations (five) to become a stake and likely has the needed number of nominal members to qualify for stakehood. However, local leadership development and reactivation efforts will be necessary for the district to reach the needed member activity requirements for a stake to operate such as at least 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders.

## Challenges

The Church experiences low to moderate levels of member activity in Phnom Penh. Convert retention and member inactivity problems have delayed the creation of stakes and likely deter the organization of additional congregations at present. Most congregations appear to have hundreds of less-active or inactive members. Some missionaries have engaged in quick-baptism tactics that have resulted in new converts becoming inactively shortly after baptism. Many converts fail to develop habitual church attendance or fully live in accordance with LDS teachings prior to baptism. Consequently many new converts have been poorly prepared for long-term activity in the Church and present as liabilities instead of assets to their congregations. Full-time missionaries indicate that locating less-active and inactive members can be challenging and note that there has been minimal involvement from local members and church leaders in reactivation and retention efforts. Missionaries indicate that many converts have been found through member referral but note that member-missionary participation in the teaching, conversion, and fellowshiping processes has been mediocre.

LDS Church growth efforts have relied on a congregation-splitting approach rather than a church-planting approach. In other words, church leaders have generally organized new congregations when the number of active members reaches an arbitrary number and warrants the creation of another congregation. This tactic has contributed to a major slowdown in LDS congregational growth trends in Phnom Penh during the past decade. Conditions in Phnom Penh suggest that a church-splitting approach to growth is ineffective to achieve steady, "real" growth. These conditions include distance to the nearest meetinghouse, cultural difficulties associated with more than 100 active members in a single congregation, and challenges obtaining a significant number of active members in a lesser-reached area in order for a congregation to be organized.

The Church in Phnom Penh continues to experience challenges with self-sufficiency and a lack of LDS community. Many church leaders have had relatively limited experience in leadership positions. Consequently the Church has lacked mature leadership in many congregations within Phnom Penh. Poverty and a lack of education have posed challenges for members to become more financially self-sufficient and better able to monetarily contribute to the establishment of the Church within their country. There are comparatively few full-member families in the Church due, in part, to the young age of the overall Cambodian population and the establishment of the Church only two decades ago. Youth and young adults constitute the majority of active church membership. The Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission remains reliant on foreign missionaries to fully staff its ranks as the number of native members serving full-time missions appears to constitute only half of the number of missionaries assigned to the mission.

Some cultural conditions pose challenges for growth. Many Cambodians exhibit strong ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism. Family relations have dissuaded some investigators from joining the Church and have discouraged some members from full participation. Alcohol use is a challenge for some to overcome in order to live in accordance with LDS teachings.

The Church has experienced slow growth among the Vietnamese population since the early 2000s. The most recently

organized Vietnamese-speaking branch was created in 2001. The Church has continued to extend specialized mission outreach among the Vietnamese population despite significantly slower growth than among the Khmer population. Prospects for the Vietnamese-speaking member district to become a stake within the foreseeable future appear poor as the district does not appear to meet any of the qualifications to become a stake. The district will need to have at least five ward-sized congregations, at least 1,900 members on its records, and more than 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders equally distributed throughout its congregations in order to become a stake one day.

## Comparative Growth

The Church in Phnom Penh 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 operation of a mission, recent active membership growth, the population exhibiting strong receptivity to LDS proselytism, the average ward or branch including less than 100,000 people within its boundaries, and one of the highest percentages of Latter-day Saints in the region. No other metropolitan area with one million or more inhabitants in East Asia, Southeast Asia, or South Asia has as pervasive of an LDS presence as Phnom Penh with the exception of Cebu City, Philippines and Davao City, Philippines. The Church reports half a million or more people within the geographical boundaries of the average ward or branch in all other metropolitan areas with one million or more inhabitants located in mainland Southeast Asia. The Church has experienced significantly slower and less penetrating growth in Bangkok, Thailand. The Church in Bangkok organized its first congregation for Thai members and assigned the first full-time missionaries in 1968. In 2014, the average ward or branch had over one million people within its geographical boundaries. At year-end 2014, the Church in Bangkok reported two stakes and one member district. The Church maintains a minimal presence in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Vietnam. In late 2014, the Church reported two branches in Ho Chi Minh City and one branch in Hanoi. The Church organized its first branches in these two cities in 1995 and assigned the first full-time missionaries in the mid-2000s. The Church has maintained a presence in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia since 1973. In late 2014, the Church reported six branches and one district. The average branch included 1.3 million people within its geographical boundaries. The Church in Yangon, Burma has maintained a presence for more than a decade and operates only one branch to service the metropolitan area's 5.1 million people. The first young full-time missionaries arrived in late 2013.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups appear to have a presence in Phnom Penh that is similar in size to the LDS Church or smaller. However, growth trends dramatically vary by denomination. Evangelicals are the largest nontraditional Christian group and claim 1.6% of the national population. Evangelicals have experienced rapid growth within recent years and report an annual membership growth rate of 8.8%.<sup>[7]</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses have reported slow growth in recent years and few convert baptisms. In 2013, Witnesses reported only 27 baptisms for the entire country.<sup>[8]</sup> In late 2014, Witnesses reported nine congregations that operated in the greater Phnom Penh area. Eight of these congregations conducted worship services in Khmer whereas one congregation conducted worship services in Vietnamese.<sup>[9]</sup> The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to maintain a smaller presence in Phnom Penh than the LDS Church. Adventists do not report the number of congregations that operate in Phnom Penh at present, but reported 6,164 members, six churches (large or well-established congregations), and 27 companies (small or recently-established congregations) for the entire country in 2013. Many of these companies appear to operate outside of Phnom Penh. Adventists have reported decelerating membership growth and stagnant congregational growth within the past five years.<sup>[10]</sup> The Church of the Nazarene in Cambodia does not report the location of its 76 congregations but appears to have a sizable presence in Phnom Penh that may be similar in size to the LDS Church. In 2013, Nazarenes reported 7,986 full members, an average weekly worship of 1,341, 73 organized churches (large or well-established congregations), and three churches not yet organized (small or recently-established congregations).<sup>[11]</sup>

## Limitations

Many high-quality reports from mission presidents, senior missionary couples, and young, full-time missionaries were utilized during the writing of this case study. However, no reports were available from local church leaders or Cambodian members. The Church does not publish a breakdown of its membership by major city or administrative division for Cambodia. Consequently it is unclear how many members currently reside in the Phnom Penh area and the number of members in the city 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 individual countries. No geospatial analysis that examined city district population figures was conducted due to district population data being unavailable for some outlying districts and mismatches between LDS congregational boundaries and city district boundaries.

## Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Phnom Penh appears favorable as evidenced by the recent maturation of two of the four member districts into stakes, the continued organization of additional branches within the metropolitan area, increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission, and the population continuing to exhibit good receptivity to LDS outreach. The Phnom Penh Cambodia East District may become a stake within the foreseeable future. A congregation-splitting versus a congregation-planting approach to growth (i.e. church leaders delaying the organization of additional congregations until current congregations reach certain thresholds in the number of active members) has been implemented since the mid-2000s and has potential to further decelerate real growth trends if efforts to open branches or member groups lesser-reached areas of the city area delayed. Low to moderate member activity rates also pose challenges for the Church to perpetuate the rapid growth the Church has experienced in Phnom Penh since the mid-1990s. The organization of a second mission headquartered in Cambodia or a separate mission based in Vietnam may be likely within the foreseeable future due to the good opportunities for growth within the current boundaries of the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission. The



Church may announce a temple for Phnom Penh once local members reach sufficient levels of activity and maturity to support one.

[1] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html), retrieved 9 December 2014.

[2] "CAMBODIA: Phnom Penh," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/php/cambodia-phnompenh-admin.php), retrieved 9 December 2014.

[3] "General Conference," retrieved 23 December 2014. <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/conferences?lang=khm>

[4] "Cambodian," retrieved 23 December 2014. <https://www.lds.org/languages/khm?lang=khm>

[5] <http://lds.org.kh/>, retrieved 23 December 2014.

[6] "Cambodia," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 14 September 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208220>

[7] "Cambodia," Operation World, retrieved 23 December 2014. <http://www.operationworld.org/camb>

[8] "2013 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," [jw.org](http://jw.org).

[9] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org/apps/E_YBBXHC), retrieved 23 December 2014.

[10] "Cambodia Adventist Mission (2002-Present)," [www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org), retrieved 23 December 2014.

[11] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," [nazarene.org](http://www.nazarene.org), retrieved 18 October 2014.