



# Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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## Accelerated Stake Growth in Oceania

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### Overview

Oceania stands as a bulwark for the international church due to the relatively high percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population, regional self-sufficiency in staffing the full-time missionary force, and a long-term LDS presence in many countries and dependencies. The Church experienced rapid growth in many locations during the latter-half of the twentieth century as illustrated by membership growth and increasing numbers of congregations and stakes. In the 2000s, the Church experienced a dramatic slowdown in stake creations and congregational growth although membership growth trends were largely unaffected. During the early 2010s, accelerated stake growth occurred throughout the region for the first time in over a decade.

This case study reviews the history of LDS stake growth in each country in Oceania with a stake operating as of early 2014. Stakes organized since 2010 are identified by country. Successes that correlate with accelerated stake growth are identified and opportunities and challenges for perpetuating recent accelerated stake growth trends are analyzed. Stake growth trends in other world regions are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for continued stake growth in Oceania are predicted.

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### Recent Stake Growth Trends

Provided with the number of stakes organized since 2010 in parentheses, the Church has organized 20 new stakes in Australia (5), Samoa (4), New Zealand (3), Tonga (2), French Polynesia (2), American Samoa (1), Guam (1), New Caledonia (1), and Papua New Guinea (1). The number of stakes in Oceania increased from 109 at year-end 2009 to 127 at year-end 2013; a 16.5% increase over a four-year period. To contrast, the number of stakes in the worldwide church increased from 2,865 to 3,050 during this period; a mere 6.5% increase.

### Recent Stake Growth Trends By Country and Dependency

In Australia, the Church organized new stakes during the early 2010s in Brisbane Cleveland (2012), Coomera (2012), Melbourne Gippsland (2013), Melbourne Craigieburn (2013), and Sydney Fairfield (2013). The Church closed one stake during this period in 2011 (Sydney Parramatta). During the 2000s, only two new stakes were organized in Brisbane Logan (2002) and Brisbane Centenary (2007). At year-end 2013, there were 37 stakes and nine districts.

In New Zealand, the Church organized three new stakes during the early 2010s in Hamilton Rotokauri (2012), Auckland Otara (2013), and Auckland Redoubt (2013). No new stakes were organized in the 2000s and the last new stake organized prior to 2012 was in 1997 in Auckland Waterview and Tauranga. At year-end 2013, there were 28 stakes and three districts.

In Samoa, the Church organized four new stakes during the early 2010s in Savaii Pu'apu'a (2012), Upolu Malie (2012), Apia Central (2013), and Upolu Tafuaupolu (2014). The last new stake organized prior to 2012 was in 1996 (Upolu Faleasi'u).

In Tonga, the Church organized two new stakes during the early 2010s in Nuku'alofa Matahau (2012) and Nuku'alofa Malapo

(2013). During the 2000s, one new stake was organized (Nuku'alofa Harbour in 2008). Prior to this time the last new stake organized was in 1996 (Nuku'alofa Mu'a).

In French Polynesia, the Church organized two new stakes during the early 2010s in Punaauia (2011) and Mahina (2012). One new district was also created during this time period in Taiohae Marquesas Islands (2013). The last new stake organized in French Polynesia was in 1997 (Faaa).

In American Samoa, the Church organized one new stake in Pago Pago Malaeimi (2012). The last new stake to be organized in American Samoa was in 1997 (Pago Pago Mapusaga).

In Papua New Guinea, the Church organized one new stake in Daru (2011) and six new districts in Minj (2010), Sogere (2010), Suki (2011), Moveave (2011), Madang (2012), and Sepik River (2012). The last new stake to be organized in Papua New Guinea was in 1995 (Port Moresby).

Since 2009 the Church organized its first stakes in three countries and dependencies in Oceania including the Marshall Islands (2009), Guam (2010), and New Caledonia (2012). The Church organized its first district in one country during this time period in the Solomon Islands (2011).

No new stakes have yet been organized in the early 2010s for three countries in Oceania with at least one stake operating (Fiji, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands). No stakes are headquartered in 10 countries and dependencies where an LDS presence is established including the Cook Islands, Easter Island, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Northern Mariana Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

## **Successes**

Larger numbers of stake organizations in Oceania suggests that the Church has increased the number of active members and has larger numbers of active priesthood holders qualified to serve in stake leadership positions. The Church avoids the organization of new stakes simply because there are enough nominal members, active priesthood holders, and congregations to do so but rather creates new stakes to accommodate recent growth and to provide sufficient administrative infrastructure to handle anticipated growth. Consequently the recent acceleration of stake growth in Oceania can be interpreted as advancements in increasing the number of active members, anticipation for future accelerated membership and congregational growth, and successes in improving convert retention and reactivation efforts.

The Church has not only reversed stagnant stake growth in several countries but has also reversed stagnant congregational growth in several countries. Accelerated congregational growth has nonetheless remained slow and ranged between two and four percent for most countries between 2010 and 2013. In Australia, the Church experienced virtually stagnant congregational growth between 1997 and 2011 as the number of congregations increased from 282 to 285. The Church reported similar growth trends for stake growth during this period as the number of stakes increased from 31 in 1999 to 32 in 2011. Within the two-year period between year-end 2011 and year-end 2013, the number congregations increased from 285 to 296 and the number of stakes increased from 32 to 37. In New Zealand, the Church experienced a net decrease in the number of congregations from 216 in 1997 to a low of 200 in 2002-2003 and an increase to 203 in 2009. The Church reported congregational growth during the 2010s as the number of congregations increased from 203 at year-end 2009 to 211 by year-end 2013. The number of stakes in New Zealand did not change between 1997 and 2011 but increased from 25 to 28 between year-end 2011 and year-end 2013. In Samoa, the Church reported no increase in the number of congregations between year-end 2006 and year-end 2011 but reported a slight increase in congregations between year-end 2011 and year-end 2013 from 134 to 137. In French Polynesia, the Church reported no increase in the number of congregations between year-end 2007 and year-end 2011 but reported a slight increase in the number of congregations between year-end 2011 and year-end 2013 from 82 to 85.

## **Opportunities**

Opportunities for perpetuating recent accelerated stake growth trends in Oceania will hinge on perpetuating recent accelerated congregational growth trends. Increasing numbers of active members, the opening of congregations in locations where no LDS units previously functioned, and achieving good convert retention are vital towards maintaining congregational growth. Area, mission, stake, and district leaders examining opportunities to expand missionary activity into additional locations and church leaders in Australia and New Zealand organizing additional specialized congregations to service ethnolinguistic minority groups provide good opportunities for achieving congregational growth that will one day lead to the organization of additional stakes. The Church may continue to organize new stakes in Oceania within countries where no stakes have recently been organized. In Fiji, the Church reported almost stagnant growth between 1999 and 2009 as the number of congregations increased from 41 to 45. The number of congregations has increased from 45 to 50 between year-end 2009 and year-end 2013. A couple new stakes may be organized in Fiji within the foreseeable future from a member district and the division of stakes.

The organization of stakes in countries that currently have no stakes presents opportunities to further accelerate stake growth in Oceania. There are three countries and dependencies currently without a stake that appear likely to have a stake organized sometime within the foreseeable future due increasing active membership and a sufficient number of congregations for a stake

to operate. In Vanuatu, mission and area leaders assessed whether the Port Vila Vanuatu District sufficiently met the criteria to become a stake in late 2013. The Church in Vanuatu has experienced rapid membership and congregational growth within the past decade and will likely have the first stake organized within the next couple years. In the Federated States of Micronesia, senior missionaries reported that the Pohnpei Caroline Islands District reached the minimum criteria to function as a stake in late 2013. The district experienced steady congregational and membership growth within the past decade and surpassed 1,900 nominal members and 125 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders in late 2013. In the Cook Islands, the Church reports a sufficient number of congregations and almost enough nominal members for a stake to operate but an insufficient number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders has likely contributed to delays in organizing a stake.

## **Challenges**

Within the past decade, very slow or stagnant congregational growth rates have occurred in most countries and dependencies in Oceania that have a stake. The Church will likely organize few additional stakes in the region until congregational growth rates accelerate. In Tonga, the Church has reported a net increase of only one congregation within the past five years as the number of congregations has increased from 165 to 166 although several branches became wards during this period. In American Samoa, the Church has increased the number of congregations at a rate of one per every two to five years within the past decade. In the Marshall Islands, the number of wards and branches increased by only one within the past decade from 11 to 12. In Guam and New Caledonia, there has been no net change in the number of congregations within the past decade.

Severely incommensurate membership and congregational growth has occurred in a few countries, suggesting poor convert retention and high rates of member inactivity. In Kiribati, the average number of members per officially reported congregation increased from 371 in 2002 to 626 in 2012. Membership increased from approximately 10,000 in 2002 to over 16,000 in 2012 yet no branches advanced to ward status and a net decline in the number of congregations occurred during this period from 27 to 26.

## **Comparative Growth**

The Church in Oceania experienced one of the greatest accelerations in stake growth among major world regions within the past four years. Only the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa experienced more rapid stake growth during this period as the number of stakes in this region increased from 50 at year-end 2009 to 78 at year-end 2013; a 56% increase. In South America, the number of stakes increased from 607 to 678; a 11.7% increase. In Europe, the number of stakes increased from 114 to 126; a 10.5% increase. In Asia, the number of stakes increased from 64 at year-end 2009 to 69 at year-end 2013; a 7.8% increase. In Central America and the Caribbean, the number of stakes increased from 344 to 359, a 4.4% increase. In the United States, the number of stakes increased from 1,451 to 1,510; a 4.1% increase.

## **Limitations**

With the exception of a few isolated cases, the Church does not publish specific information on why individual new stakes are created. There have been few statements from area leaders for the Pacific Area regarding why the Church has recently experienced accelerated stake growth in the region. The Church does not publish information regarding the annual number of active members per country or dependency or other data pertaining to member activity and convert retention rates. It is unclear whether recent changes have occurred in member activity and convert retention rates and if any changes have affected recent changes in stake growth trends

## **Future Prospects**

The outlook for the Church to perpetuate its accelerated stake growth in Oceania appears mixed as only a handful of stakes appear close to dividing and only a few districts appear close to becoming stakes. Accelerated congregational growth rates in most nations in the region suggests that additional stakes will be organized as long as this trend of accelerated congregational growth continues. Past experience for the Church in Oceania has illustrated that the Church often experiences spurts of new stake creations followed by many consecutive years of few to no stake creations. This pattern may continue into the coming decade or two due to the large number of new stake creations during the 2010s, few stakes appearing likely to divide as of early 2014, and accelerated congregational growth rates remaining too slow to perpetuate recent rates of stake growth in Oceania.