

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS National Outreach Expansion in Fiji

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Overview

Located in the South Pacific, Fiji is one of the most populous island nations in the Melanesia sub region with nearly 900,000 inhabitants. The population is 57% ethnic Fijian, 38% Indo-Fijian, and 5% other ethnicities and 65% Christian, 28% Hindu, 6% Muslim, and 1% other religions. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Fiji for over half a century and has experienced relatively limited growth in comparison to other countries in Oceania. Notwithstanding overall slow growth trends for decades, the Church has begun to experience accelerated growth in recent years. Currently there are highly favorable conditions to initiate more aggressive national outreach expansion.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Fiji and summarizes recent church growth and national outreach expansion developments. Past growth successes are described and opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The extent of LDS national outreach in other countries in Oceania is compared to the Church in Fiji and the size and growth trends of other nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups in Fiji are compared to the LDS Church. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church in Fiji established its initial presence in the 1950s. Extremely limited numbers of foreign missionary visas delayed LDS growth for many years. Noticeable progress expanding outreach into additional locations outside of Suva occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, the Church experienced rapid growth as membership increased from 3,351 in 1981 to 8,700 in 1991 and the Church organized its first stake in 1983. Strong congregational growth occurred between 1987 and 1999 as the number of official congregations increased from 16 (nine wards, seven branches) to 41 (23 wards, 18 branches), respectively. Slow to stagnant congregational growth occurred between 1999 and 2010 as the number of congregations inched up to 46 in 2010.

Census data has shed insight into member activity rates and membership demographics. The 1996 census reported that 3,475 identified as Latter-day Saints, including 2,253 native Fijians, 633 Indians, and 589 claiming a different ethnicity. At the time there were around 11,000 LDS members listed on Church records, indicating that 32% of total church membership at the time identified themselves as Latter-day Saints on the census.[1] The proportion of self-affiliated members that was Fijian (65%) was higher than the proportion of Fijians in the general population (51%) whereas the percentage of self-affiliated members that were Indians (18%) was less than the proportion of Indians in the general population (44%). However, 1996 census data indicates that three percent of Indo-Fijian Christians identified as Latter-day Saints whereas 0.5% of indigenous Fijian Christians claimed membership in the LDS Church. This suggests that the LDS Church has a more visible presence among Indo-Fijian Christians than ethnic Fijian Christians.

In the early 2010s, the Church began to experience accelerated growth for the first time in many years. In early 2010, the Church opened the southern island of Kadavu to missionary work and organized its first branch in Vunisea shortly thereafter. In 2012, missionaries reported that the number of missionaries assigned to the Fiji Suva Mission would double within a single year between mid-2012 and mid-2013. In 2012, the annual membership growth rate (4.2%) was the highest the Church had experienced since 2002. The number of congregations increased from 46 in 2011 to 48 in 2012 and 50 in 2013. The four new

official congregations created in 2012 and 2013 included the Naduna Branch (2012), the Samabula 2nd Ward (2012), the Tacirua Ward (2013), and the Vuna Branch (2013). Missionaries reported that several member groups began functioning throughout Fiji during the early 2010s such as in Bua, Dratabu, Moturiki, Nasivikoso, Waimaula, and Yako. Missionaries also related that receptivity was significantly higher in rural villages compared to urban areas such as Suva. Sacrament meeting attendance also substantially increased in some wards in the Suva area during this period.

In late 2013, the Church had a ward, branch, or group that meet for church services in at least 35 of the more than 500 cities, towns, and villages in Fiji. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by city, town, and village can be found here.

Successes

The assignment of significantly more full-time missionaries to the Fiji Suva Mission and a reduction in the geographic size of the mission have played a crucial role in recent national outreach expansion successes. This has resulted in mission leaders concentrating on a smaller geographical area with larger numbers of full-time missionaries than in previous years and decades. Greater availability and saturation of mission resources in Fiji has correlated with recent accelerated congregational and membership growth. Congregational growth has not been limited to the expansion of the Church into previously unreached locations but has also occurred in urban areas. Within the past two years, the Church has opened additional congregations in both urban and rural areas. However, the expansion of missionary activity into lesser-reached and previously unreached villages has stood as the primary success of recent national outreach expansion as opposed to further saturating urban areas with additional congregations and missionary companionships.

The assignment of missionaries to the village of Nasivikoso on Viti Levu constitutes a major success for the Church in realizing its potential to reach locations that are distant from the nearest ward or branch and that have relatively small populations. In 2013, missionaries reported over 20 convert baptisms in Nasivikoso and a sizable number of members and investigators attending church services notwithstanding the village supporting an estimated population of less than 1,000 people. The opening of Nasivikoso to missionary activity also served as a springboard to outreach expansion into surrounding areas. In late 2013, missionaries reported preliminary plans to open nearby villages to missionary activity such as Bukuya and Wauosi. Although the Nasivikoso Group continues to fall short of meeting the minimum qualifications set by stake, mission, and area leaders for a branch to function, the Church has experienced significant growth when taking the size of the target population and the recent conversion of most members in the area into perspective.

Local church leaders have played a critical role in organizing member groups in previously unreached or lesser-reached villages. Missionaries report that stake presidents generally determine what villages open for missionary work. Stake leadership has appeared to carefully coordinate with mission leadership in outreach expansion efforts as evidenced by new missionary proselytism areas opening in conjunction with the establishment of new member groups. This harmonious, collaborative effort has yielded good results in many locations thus far. The Church may experience rapid national outreach expansion if stake, district, and mission leaders continue this approach in the coming years and decades to come so long as receptivity to LDS outreach remains constant or improves.

Mission and local church leaders have grasped the importance of creating smaller church units that assemble closer to the homes of members and investigators rather than establishing large congregations that require members and investigators to travel longer distances. Half of the national population resides in rural areas where transportation infrastructure is poorly developed and expensive. Church leaders and missionaries have readily secured or constructed suitable meetinghouse spaces for newly organized branches and groups. This approach has not only improved the accessibility of LDS Church services to the national population but has also channeled more missionary resources into the Church in Fiji.

Opportunities

Surplus missionary manpower in the Fiji Suva Mission provides abundant opportunities for national outreach expansion. The Fijian population is predominantly Christian and the government and society uphold religious freedom, indicating that traditional LDS missionary efforts would likely see success with greater mission resource allocation. This surge in available missionary manpower has coincided with a reduction in the size of the mission boundaries from the mission previously administering Fiji, New Caledonia, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna to the mission now administering Fiji, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna. Greater numbers of missionaries called to serve in Fiji presents mission, stake, and district leadership the opportunity to expand outreach into lesser-reached and unreached towns and villages. The reduced geographic size of the mission reduces the administrative strain on mission leadership to now primarily concentrate on missionary efforts within Fiji as opposed to several countries with sizable populations. This permits the mission to concentrate greater energy, vision, and resources into national outreach expansion efforts. Collaborative efforts between local and mission leadership will be essential towards achieving maximum success in identifying favorable locations to target and helping newly established member groups or branches to become more self-sufficient.

Opportunities for opening additional locations to missionary activity appear most favorable in areas where there are clusters of villages, particularly on the islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Sizable numbers of villages are clustered in several unreached areas of Viti Levu such as the Navua River Area (22 villages), Lawaki River area (17 villages), the upper Upper Rewa River/ Wainimala River area (16 villages), the Vunanui Bay area (10 villages), and the Momi Bay area (8 villages). The assignment of one or two missionary companionships to a prominent village in each of these five areas would be an efficient method to provide

minimal LDS outreach for scores of additional villages that have never appeared to receive an LDS gospel witness. This approach would permit missionaries to concentrate their efforts on locations where receptivity is highest and orchestrate the establishment of multiple member groups if necessary. Missionaries could hold cottage meetings and family home evening (FHE) groups in various villages within each village cluster as part of the process of establishing a sense of LDS community, encouraging local members and investigators to invite others to these meetings, and being adaptable and flexible in expanding outreach while conserving limited mission resources.

The establishment of a mission branch may be necessary to facilitate the opening of additional locations to missionary work, particularly those that are located on islands that currently have no LDS presence. Approximately two dozen populated islands appear to have no LDS presence and none of these islands currently pertain to a stake or district. The assignment of these islands to stakes on Viti Levu or the Taveuni Fiji District on Vanua Levu would likely yield little progress in organizing member groups and assigning missionaries due to distance and transportation challenges. Mission leadership appears better equipped to travel to these islands and identify suitable locations to assign missionaries and organize member groups in a similar fashion as when the mission opened Kadavu to missionary work in 2010.

Challenges

The Church in Fiji has experienced dramatically slower growth than most other countries in Oceania notwithstanding a continuous LDS presence for approximately 60 years. A combination of the Fijian population exhibiting lower receptivity to the Church than many other ethnolinguistic groups in the Pacific and relatively few mission resources available to Fiji as a result of the previous assignment of other countries to the Fiji Suva Mission appear responsible for relatively little growth over the past six decades. LDS outreach in towns and villages in rural areas has also been historically limited notwithstanding missionaries reporting higher receptivity in these areas. Consequently the bulk of mission resources have been and continue to be allocated to the largest cities rather than rural communities.

There have been some mission policies and local cultural conditions that have hampered national outreach expansion. Missionaries report that they are not allowed to openly contact people they meet when traveling to villages that are not designated by the mission or a stake as opened for missionary work. This has resulted in problems assessing receptivity in lesser-reached and unreached locations and has discouraged national outreach expansion. The logic for this restriction appears centered on discouraging individuals from joining the Church in locations where distance from the nearest congregation would likely prevent regular church attendance. Fijian chiefs in some villages have discouraged nontraditional Christian groups from proselytism and openly endorse the Methodist Church although there have been no recent reports of significant religious freedom restrictions.[2] These conditions warrant missionaries and local church leaders to meet with community leaders and obtain permission to visit and teach investigators and members in order to foster positive relations between the Church and these communities.

Some efforts to expand outreach have been delayed for months at a time. These delays have occurred due to organizational and logistical problems within the Church as opposed to external factors. Full-time missionaries report some plans falling through due to transportation difficulties and stake leadership reconsidering the opening of additional areas to missionary activity.

The Church in Fiji lacks natural increase due to relatively few full-member families. In 2013, senior missionaries reported that there were over 200 single Melchizedek Priesthood holders within the two Suva stakes. There have been difficulties for single members to marry within the Church and raise families within the Church and remain active. Little natural increase in the Church poses challenges to achieve self-sufficiency within individual congregations and the Church in Fiji becoming self-reliant in meeting its own missionary needs.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Fiji extends less penetrating national outreach than most other countries in Oceania. However, even the countries with the highest nominal percentages of Latter-day Saints continue to have dozens or scores of lesser-reached and unreached villages. In Tonga, nominal LDS membership constitutes 58% of the national population yet there remain 19 lesser-reached villages that have no LDS congregations that solely administer these villages. In Samoa, the Church claims 40% of the national population yet there remain three dozen lesser-reached villages that do not have congregations that solely administer these villages. In French Polynesia, the Church claims 8.2% of the population yet there remain scores of lesser-reached and unreached villages that do not have congregations that solely administer these villages. The percentage of the population in Fiji that resides in a location with an LDS congregation is higher than many other countries in Melanesia but remains significantly less than most countries in Polynesia and Micronesia. The Church has experienced more rapid membership and congregational growth in several other Melanesian nations such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a more widespread presence in Fiji and have achieved more rapid growth than the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 25% of the population.[3] Jehovah's Witnesses report 2,900 active members[4] and 70 congregations in Fiji that hold church services in seven languages including Fijian (55), English (7), Hindi (5 congregations, 2 groups), Rotuman (2), Australian Sign Language (1), Tuvaluan (1), and Chinese (1 group).[5] The vast majority of Witness congregations operate in coastal areas on Viti Levu whereas only a handful of Witnesses congregations assemble in interior areas of Viti Levu. Several Witness congregations operate on Vanua Levu and additional islands such as Gau, Kadavu,

Ovalau, Rotuma, and Taveuni. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports 23,600 members, 154 churches (large congregations), and 106 companies (small congregations).[6] The Church of the Nazarene reports approximately 50 congregations in Fiji.[7]

Limitations

The Church does not report the official number of member groups that operate in Fiji. It is unclear where and how many of these groups function. No recent data was available on the number of nominal or active members in individual administrative divisions or populated places in Fiji. Although there were many returned and current missionary reports available providing data on national outreach expansion, member activity, and other church-growth related issues, there were no local member and leader reports available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish information regarding member activity and convert retention rates or the annual number of full-time missionaries assigned per country or mission.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future national outreach expansion and accelerated growth in Fiji appears favorable due to a substantial increase in the number of missionaries assigned to Fiji, the involvement of stake leadership in opening additional member groups and coordinating with mission leadership to assign missionaries to these groups, and recent acceleration in membership and congregational growth during the early 2010s. Prospects appear most favorable for the expansion of missionary work on Viti Levu due to its large population, close proximity to mission headquarters in Suva, and recent successes opening additional member groups and branches. The Church may organize a mission branch to administer currently unreached islands. Based on growth patterns in other nations, accelerated national outreach expansion will likely occur once the last remaining district in the country becomes a stake and mission resources are refocused from preparing members and leaders for stake responsibilities to national outreach expansion efforts.

[1] "Religion," Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, retrieved 15 June 2010. http://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/Social/religion_stats.htm

[2] "Fiji," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 14 November 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208230

[3] "Fiji," Operation World, retrieved 14 November 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/fiji

[4] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[5] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 8 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[6] "Fiji Mission (2001-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 14 November 2013. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2246536

[7] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 14 November 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=FJ&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=