

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Church Growth and Missionary Developments in Thailand

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Posted: December 21st, 2013

Overview

The LDS Church has experienced slow membership and congregational growth in Thailand for the majority of its over half-a-century presence. In 2012, the Church reported 17,424 members, 38 wards and branches, and one stake and five districts. Member activity rates have been historically low as evidenced by Thailand holding the dubious position of the country with the most members with only one stake for many years. Returned missionaries, mission presidents, and local church leaders have complained of a lack of active priesthood manpower and poor self-sufficiency of the Thai full-time missionary force due to few members choosing to serve missions. Notwithstanding these challenges, missionaries and members in 2013 reported substantial progress reversing slow to stagnant growth trends as evidenced by a revitalization of member-missionary work, several districts rapidly achieving the minimal standards to become stakes, and efforts by mission leaders to open member groups in additional locations.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Thailand. Past church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are discussed. A comparative growth section compares church growth and missionary activity in Thailand to other Southeast Asian countries and summarizes the growth and size of other Christian denominations that operate in Thailand. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

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LDS Background

Foreign members began periodically holding church services in Thailand during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Church organized its first branch in 1961 and assigned the first permanent proselytizing missionaries in 1968. In 1973, the Church created the Thailand Bangkok Mission.

Slow membership growth has occurred for most years. Membership totaled 779 in 1976, 2,800 in 1988, 5,300 in 1994, 10,808 in 1999, 13,394 in 2003, 15,457 in 2007, and 17,424 in 2012. The most rapid membership growth occurred between 1995 and 2005 as membership increased from 6,300 to 14,652. Returned missionaries and past mission presidents indicate that few converts were retained during the mid-1990s and that the number of converts baptized during the late 1990s significantly falls short of official church-reported membership increases during these years. A combination of poor convert retention of as low as 10% for one-year after baptism and unexplained increases in church membership are evidenced by the average number of members per congregation increasing from 242 to 396. This increase suggests that there were an insufficient number of active members and priesthood holders to achieve commensurate congregational growth rates. Annual membership growth rates declined during the 2000s from 8.2% in 2001 to a low of 0.8% in 2010. In the early 2010s, annual membership growth rates increased to 3.3% for 2011 and 2012.

The Church in Thailand has historically experienced low member activity rates. Sacrament meeting attendance increased from 1,150 in 1997 (~15% of year-end 1997 membership) to 1,600 in early 2000 (~15% of year-end 1999 membership) and approximately 3,000 in late 2006 (~20% of year-end 2006 membership). In 2013, members in several congregations estimate that approximately 30% of members on church records in their respective congregations were active. However, most church units report large numbers of unaccounted members whose whereabouts have been unknown for many years or even decades.

Slow or stagnant congregational growth and stake and district growth has also occurred during most years. The number of congregations totaled 17 in 1987, 23 in 1993, 29 in 1999, 35 in 2003, 39 in 2006, 37 in 2010, and 38 in 2012. The Church in Thailand created its first and only stake in Bangkok in 1995. Provided with the year of creation, the Church currently maintains districts in Chiang Mai (1979), Khon Kaen (1989), Ubon (1991), Udorn (1995), and Bangkok North [formerly Pakkret] (1999). In 1975, there were four districts whereas there were three districts in 1987, four districts in 1991, one stake and four districts in 1995, and one stake and five districts in 1999. The number of stakes and districts has remained unchanged since 1999.

Several impressive church growth developments occurred in 2012 and 2013. 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.[1] In early 2012, 11 Thai members began serving full-time missions at the same time.[2] In 2013, there were widespread church growth developments pertaining to increasing sacrament meeting attendance, larger numbers of male members ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood, and greater member-missionary participation. Local members in Bangkok reported that some wards and branches had had over 20 convert baptisms within the past year. Recently baptized converts have played a significant role in accelerated growth by participating in member-missionary work and supplying full-time missionaries with teaching referrals. In mid-2013, missionaries serving in the Bangkok Thailand North District reported that there were a sufficient number of branches in the district with 15 or more active Melchizedek Priesthood holders to potentially qualify as wards in order for the district to become a stake. Members indicated that the district would likely become a stake sometime in 2014. In late 2013, members in the Chiang Mai Thailand District reported that one branch had 10-14 converts baptized within the past year and that sacrament meeting attendance doubled during this period, suggesting success in reactivating less-active members. Missionaries serving in Udorn reported significant progress with increased member-missionary involvement that contributed to substantial increases in sacrament meeting attendance in several branches in the area. In the Khon Kaen Thailand District, missionaries reported that 24 male members were presented for ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood in a 2013 district conference.

In 2013, the Thailand Bangkok Mission also made noteworthy progress on expanding outreach and augmenting the size of the full-time missionary force. In early 2013, the mission permitted members residing in Trakan, Ubon Ratchathani Province to hold sacrament meeting services as a member group under the supervision of the Ubon Branch. In fall 2013, mission leadership started two member groups in Bangkok in Lat Phrao and Phasi Charoen. Full-time missionaries only worked with less-active members and investigators in establishing these member groups and reported poor church attendance during the first month of operation. Missionaries serving in additional cities reported efforts to organize additional groups or branches in the foreseeable future. The mission reported unusually large numbers of new missionaries arriving to the mission in mid to late 2013. In late 2013, members reported efforts by mission leadership to increase the number of foreign missionary visas granted to the Church from 150 to 500, suggesting plans to open a second mission in Thailand if the government grants these requests by mission leaders to increase the number of foreign missionary visas available

Successes

Significant increases in sacrament meeting attendance and the number of convert baptisms for some congregations constitutes a major success for the Church in Thailand. This finding suggests that the Church has made some meaningful progress in improving historically low member activity rates. Good member-missionary participation, especially among recent converts, has helped fuel and maintain growth for at least the short term. Improved member-missionary programs have been desperately needed considering the long-term low member activity rate for the Church in Thailand, limited numbers of foreign missionary visas available, and challenges with the Church effectively carrying out a full-time missionary program that is compatible with cultural and societal conditions. The steady stream of recent converts in many congregations has provided ongoing teaching referrals for full-time missionaries and has perpetuated growth after initial increases in convert baptisms. Increases in sacrament meeting attendance appear attributed to a combination of higher convert retention rates and greater numbers of convert baptisms as well as successful reactivation efforts.

The Thailand Bangkok Mission has refocused its efforts on expanding outreach and church planting. Experimental efforts by mission leaders to open multiple member groups in Bangkok and organizing a member group in the Ubon area imply renewed efforts to reduce travel times and bring the Church closer to its members and target populations. Increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the mission combined with the vision to organize a second mission in Thailand pose considerable opportunities to revitalize outreach expansion after over a decade of largely stagnant growth throughout the country.

Several districts continue to become closer to reaching the minimal qualifications to become stakes. The advancement of several districts into stakes presents many opportunities for mission leadership to redistribute mission resources from strengthening branches and districts to opening new areas to proselytism as districts require significant administrative and ecclesiastical support from mission leaders and siphon sizable amounts of mission resources. Improved self-sufficiency of local church leadership could enable more aggressive outreach expansion efforts where missionaries open several of the most populous unreached cities to missionary activity.

Opportunities

Thailand presents many good opportunities to expand the LDS outreach. In the early 2010s, only 14% of the national population resided in locations where LDS congregations operated. There are currently over a dozen cities with 100,000 or more inhabitants that have no LDS presence. The Church likely has small numbers of members residing in more than a dozen

large and medium-sized cities that currently have no official LDS unit operating. Mission leadership, full-time missionaries, and local church leaders visiting these locations, meeting with isolated members and investigators, holding cottage meetings, and assessing conditions for organizing member groups and assigning missionaries presents as one of the most effective methods for opening additional cities to missionary activity. Unreached cities within close proximity to Bangkok appear easy to reach and have large populations such as Chon Buri, Nakhon Pathom, Pattaya, and Si Racha. The Church has yet to establish an official branch in southern Thailand notwithstanding several major cities with over 100,000 inhabitants. Prospects may improve for mission leaders to visit locations such as Hat Yai once a couple districts become stakes and subsequently free up mission resources for national outreach expansion.

Several Southeast Asian ethnic minority groups present good opportunities for church growth due to high receptivity. These peoples include the Burmese, Hmong, Karen, and other hill tribes. 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 get married due to their legal status.

Challenges

It is unclear whether the recent resurgence of missionary activity in Thailand will be maintained for the long-term due to the sluggish growth experienced by the Church for the vast majority of its history in the country. 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 scope of missionary efforts remains only a tiny fraction of its potential due to limited numbers of foreign missionary visas and the poor self-sufficiency of the Thai full-time missionary force. 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 national outreach expansion.

The Church in Thailand has experienced long-term frustrations with member inactivity and convert attrition. Members and missionaries report in many congregations that there are sizable numbers of inactive members on church records whose whereabouts are unknown. Leadership development problems have also occurred in several current districts and the Bangkok Thailand Stake, requiring assistance and intervention from the mission president. Church employees regularly serve in stake leadership positions in the Bangkok Thailand Stake, indicating problems with developing self-sufficiency in leadership independent of the handful of members employed by the Church. The Church continues to experience leadership development problems in the Bangkok Thailand Stake and mission leaders continue to head some aspects of missionary work and outreach expansion within the stake boundaries. For example, both member groups organized in Bangkok during 2013 were under the jurisdiction of the mission yet they operated within the boundaries of the stake. Missionaries reported problems with stake and mission leaders collaborating in the initial establishment of these groups. Failure of these member groups to reactive less-active members and experience increasing church attendance may result in the closure of these groups and mission and stake leaders becoming discouraged to engage in future church planting efforts.

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 Thailand has experienced slower growth than most Southeast Asian countries with an official LDS presence and

reports member activity and convert retention rates that are representative of most countries in the region. The Church in other Southeast Asian countries generally has a higher percentage of members in the population, a more established LDS presence, and greater national outreach expansion than in Thailand. In the Philippines, the Church established its first branch at approximately the same time as in Thailand yet in 2012 the Church in the Philippines reported 675,000 members, 1,134 wards and branches, 85 stakes, 84 districts, 21 missions, and three temples. The percentage of nominal members in the population of the Philippines (0.70%) is 28 times higher than in Thailand. Annual membership growth rates have been similar for both countries within the past five years. In Cambodia, the Church experienced rapid growth during the first decade of missionary activity and in 2012 reported 11,469 members, 27 branches, six districts, and one mission. The percentage of nominal members in the population of Cambodia (0.079%) is three times higher than in Thailand. In Singapore, the Church has experienced steady growth within the past two decades and in 2012 reported 3,573 members, 10 wards, one stake, and one mission. The percentage of nominal members in the population was nearly three times greater than in Thailand. In Malaysia, the Church has experienced rapid growth within the past 15 years and in 2012 reported 8,967 members, 33 branches, and eight districts. The percentage of nominal members in the population of Malaysia is 24% higher than in Thailand. In Indonesia, the Church has experienced the slowest growth in Southeast Asia over the past four decades. In 2012, there were 6,904 members, 23 wards and branches, two stakes, one district, and one mission and the percentage of nominal members in the population was approximately one-tenth of the percentage of nominal members in the population of Thailand.

All missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in Thailand report slow growth and few members. However most of these groups report a more widespread presence in Thailand compared to the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 0.5% of the population and report that the vast majority of sub-districts in the country have no evangelical church.[3] In 2012, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Thailand reported 14,880 members, 46 churches, and 79 companies. Adventists have experienced virtually stagnant congregational growth within the past five years and reported no noticeable changes in the number of new converts baptized a year within the past three decades. In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 3,631 active members, 89 congregations, and 132 baptisms.[4] Witnesses report a widespread presence in Thailand extending from provinces in the extreme north to the Malay Peninsula in the south notwithstanding only a few thousand active members. Most provinces with a Witness presence have only one or two congregations. In 2012, the Church of the Nazarene reported 1,350 members, an average of 1,460 attending church services each week, and 36 congregations in Thailand.[5]

Limitations

Substantial data on missionary activity, church growth trends, and member activity and convert retention rates was obtained from high-quality reports provided by past mission presidents, current and returned full-time missionaries, and local members. The Church does not officially release data on the number, names, and locations of member groups in Thailand or worldwide. It is unclear how many member groups operate in Thailand and data on all known member groups were obtained from missionary and member reports. The Church does not publish official statistics on member activity and convert retention rates and the number of missionaries assigned to each country or mission per year.

Future Prospects

Accelerated church growth and missionary activity is a welcomed development that has enormous potential to make significant inroads in expanding outreach and strengthening the Church in Thailand. Districts in Bangkok North, Chiang Mai, and Khon Kaen may become stakes within the near future. Missionaries report efforts by the current mission president to have three stakes in Bangkok within the next couple years. However, it is unclear whether the creation of a third stake in so short a period of time is realistic. The Church may organize a second mission in Thailand if increasing numbers of missionary visas are granted. Prospects for the announcement of a temple for Bangkok appear likely within the medium-term once there are several stakes in the country.

[1] "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/

[2] "April 27th, 2012 - Real Progress on Visas," retrieved 14 October 2013. http://www.lds-thailand.org/

[3] "Thailand," Operation World, retrieved 11 October 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/thai

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

[5] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2002-2012," nazarene.org, retrieved 19 November 2013. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDwQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnazarene.org%2Ff