

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Missionary Successes in Tuvalu

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Overview

Inhabited by 10,700, Tuvalu is a tiny island archipelago nation located in Polynesia. The first Tuvaluan Latter-day Saints joined the Church in Tonga and Fiji and returned to Tuvalu in the early 1980s. In 1984, the Church organized a branch in Funafuti, Tuvalu. At the time there were approximately two dozen members. The Church experienced very slow or stagnant membership growth until the early 2010s when membership growth substantially accelerated.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Tuvalu and identifies factors that have driven accelerated membership growth. Recent growth successes and opportunities and challenges for future growth are provided. The growth of the Church in other island nations with a minimal LDS presence is compared to the Church in Tuvalu. A summary of the growth of other missionary-focused groups that operate in Tuvalu is provided. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Recent LDS Background

Full-time missionaries were removed from Tuvalu in the mid-2000s and were reassigned in September 2010. 67 were attending church services in September 2010, which included several nonmembers. At the time member activity rates appeared to range from 50-60%. A month later church attendance increased to 90. Missionaries focused on helping male members fulfilling their home teaching responsibilities which appeared to jumpstart reactivation efforts in the branch. Nearly 100 were attending church meetings in late 2010 and by early 2011 approximately two dozen new converts had been baptized. At the time nationwide active membership was estimated at 80, or 50-60% of total church membership. Two full-time missionaries were permanently assigned to the branch in early 2011.

In 2013, mission leaders began more regularly visit Tuvalu. In April 2013, missionaries reported that the branch had approximately 100 active members and several investigators attending church meetings. At the time member activity rates appeared to range from 50-60%. Missionaries reported that they had large numbers of investigators and members to teach. In August, missionaries reported that the branch president had served in this leadership position for 26 years.

Local members utilize Samoan translations of LDS scriptures; Tuvaluan translations of a few basic church materials are available.

The Funafuti Tuvalu Branch likely meets in a renovated building or rented space. Tuvalu is assigned to the Fiji Suva Temple district.

Successes

The Church in Tuvalu has reversed its trend of stagnant or very slow membership growth that occurred from the late 1990s to 2010. The nominal membership increase for the two-year period from year-end 2010 to year-end 2012 (65) was greater than

the nominal membership increase for the 11-year period from year-end 1999 to year-end 2010 (47). The influx of new converts presents exciting opportunities for leadership development and revamping member-missionary activity as many new members likely have more personal and family connections with nonmembers than seasoned church members on the island. Accelerated membership growth on Funafuti allows for greater exposure of the Church to island and government officials, which may help dispel negative attitudes and misinformation about the Church.

Member activity rates in the Funafuti Tuvalu Branch have remained constant notwithstanding the significant increase in the number of new converts who joined the Church in the early 2010s. This suggests that convert retention rates have been good and that the branch has greater resources for member and investigator fellowship.

Opportunities

The assignment of a senior missionary couple to provide member and leadership support has tremendous potential to strengthen the Church and prepare a foundation for greater growth. Senior missionaries often provide more effective interventions and more seasoned experience in leadership than young missionaries, especially in regards to organizing special events, seminary and institute programs, and weekly family home evening (FHE) groups. Senior missionaries in other areas of Oceania have made significant contributions for encouraging and preparing local members to serve full-time missions such as helping them submit their missionary applications and complete tasks needed before entering a missionary training center (MTC) such as completing medical exams and acquiring missionary attire and supplies. Augmenting the number of members serving missions from Tuvalu has potential to increase the size and strength of local priesthood manpower over time as long as returned missionaries remain in the country. Senior missionaries can help jumpstart regular youth and young single adult activities as well as provide mentoring and feedback to branch leadership. The success in assigning a senior missionary couple full-time to Tuvalu will hinge on senior missionaries successfully implementing these interventions without taking over leadership duties currently fulfilled by local members in order to preserve self-sufficiency for the local church.

There appear good prospects to organize a second branch or member group in Funafuti. The current branch meetinghouse is located in northern Funafuti several kilometers from where the majority of the atoll population resides. The creation of a second unit that assembles in a location in southern Funafuti may help increase member activity rates and church growth potential. Opening a second unit on the island may be warranted when the branch outgrows its current meetinghouse facilities. The creation of a second unit that assembles at a separate location has greater potential to accelerate growth and implement a proactive approach to expanding outreach and establishing a second mission outreach center on the most populous atoll of Tuvalu.

Some Tuvaluans from other islands without an LDS presence have joined the Church. One member who joined the Church from Nanumea Atoll was serving a mission in the early 2010s. There are a few islands where local chiefs may permit the assembly of an LDS unit if there are members who already reside on the island. Mission leaders may find success traveling to islands with known members to assess conditions for routine visits and perhaps the establishment of member groups if feasible.

Challenges

The Church in Tuvalu has extremely limited numbers of active priesthood holders, creating challenges for the Church to become more self-sufficient in local church administration and member-missionary activity. These conditions have potential to burnout the few members serving in leadership positions due to the heavy burden of administering the Church and no additional male members to staff leadership positions when needed. The current branch president has served in this position for 26 consecutive years as only a handful of other priesthood holders, if any, have met the qualifications to serve as a branch president during this period. Mission and branch leadership can help improve the self-sufficiency of the branch and supply larger numbers of capable priesthood holders for leadership positions if recently baptized converts are retained and trained in leadership responsibilities. Programs such as home and visiting teaching have potential to help local members become more engaged in their branch and gain experience teaching and sharing the gospel with fellow members, whether active or less-active.

Tuvalu's tiny population and isolated location provide few employment and educational opportunities. These conditions have consequently encouraged many members to relocate elsewhere in Oceania in search of higher-paying employment and educational opportunities. Sizable numbers of Tuvaluan members currently reside in countries like Australia and New Zealand. The 2006 New Zealand census, for example, reported 57 Tuvaluan Latter-day Saints in the country;[1] 51% of nominal LDS membership for the country of Tuvalu at the time. Missionaries serving in Australia and New Zealand report occasionally teaching and baptizing Tuvaluan members but seldom do these members appear to relocate back to Tuvalu.

A Protestant denomination, the Church of Tuvalu exerts significant influence on government, politics, and society. The government reports that 91% of the country's population adheres to the Church of Tuvalu. The lack of religious pluralism has created challenges for members of religious minority groups such as Latter-day Saints and other more recently arrived proselytizing groups to be tolerated and accepted into society. All island chiefs in the country are members of the Church of Tuvalu and chiefs on some islands have banned public meetings of certain denominations such as Jehovah's Witnesses.[2] The LDS Church has experienced a significant reversal in stagnant membership growth on Funafuti notwithstanding these conditions but at present has no realistic prospects for actively establishing a presence on additional islands due to limited religious freedom, distance from mission headquarters in Fiji, and tiny target populations. Limited religious freedom has also appeared related to some recent reports by missionaries that assert government officials have at times not granted requested

foreign missionary visas to the Church. The Fiji Suva Mission has significantly increased the size of its missionary complement, with scores more missionaries serving in the mission at present compared to one year ago. It is unlikely that the Church will assign more than a single missionary companionship to Tuvalu due to visa complications.

Comparative Growth

Tuvalu numbers among the handful of countries or dependencies in Oceania that have only one ward or branch operating. Other countries or dependencies with only one unit at present include Easter Island, Nauru, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Palau. All of these locations have experienced stagnant or declining membership growth within the past decade. A handful of countries in Oceania have experienced a reversal of stagnant or very slow membership growth within the past few years. In Fiji, the Church in 2012 reported its highest annual increase in membership (4.2%) since 2000. In the Marshall Islands, the Church reported a 14.9% annual increase in membership for 2011 and has generally experienced strong membership growth for most years within the past five years.

Other missionary-focused, nontraditional Christian groups report a tiny presence in Tuvalu if any present at all. Evangelicals have maintained a long-term presence and currently claim 17.8% of the population, suggesting that some evangelicals are doubly affiliated with the Church of Tuvalu.[3] The Seventh Day Adventist Church numbers among the largest missionary-focused groups and in 2012 reported 271 members, one church, and two companies. Adventists generally baptized two to three dozen new converts a year and have experienced declining congregation growth within the past decade as the number of churches has remained unchanged but the number of companies declined from five to two.[4] In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 75 active members and one congregation that assembles on Funafuti.[5]

Limitations

Data on member activity rates, the number of convert baptisms, and local leadership characteristics was obtained from full-time missionary reports. No official data on member activity rates, the number of convert baptisms per country per year, and island-by-island membership breakdowns were available at the writing of this case study. No reports from local Tuvaluan members were available. The Church does not publish the number of members who speak Tuvaluan or the number of members who were born in Tuvalu. There were no official Church reports regarding challenges with securing foreign missionary visas or the possibility of assigning a senior missionary couple to the islands.

Future Prospects

Continued active membership growth, good receptivity to LDS missionaries, and the consistent assignment of a missionary companionship to Funafuti suggest that the Church will likely continue to experience steady membership growth for the foreseeable future. Prospects for organizing a second congregation on Funafuti will hinge on the number of available priesthood holders to fill leadership positions for two congregations, the sustainability of good convert retention rates, the ease of finding a second meetinghouse location to service southern areas of the island, and the outreach expansion vision of mission leadership. Challenging religious freedom conditions inflicted by the lack of religious pluralism and the central role of the Church of Tuvalu in government and society may create difficulties for assigning additional missionary companionships to the islands and commencing outreach on additional islands.

[1] “Religion,” Statistics New Zealand, retrieved 1 July 2010. http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/pacific-peoples/religion.aspx

[2] "Tuvalu," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 4 October 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208276

[3] "Tuvalu," Operation World, retrieved 4 October 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/tuva

[4] "Tuvalu Attached District (2002-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 4 October 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2217723

[5] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.