

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

>

Recent Missionary Successes on Chuuk, Micronesia

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: November 26th, 2013

Overview

Inhabited by 48,654 people in 2010,[1] Chuuk is the most populous state of the Federated States of Micronesia. The LDS Church initially experienced rapid growth during the 1980s followed by nearly two decades of stagnant membership and congregational growth. During the early 2010s, significant progress occurred reversing stagnant growth trends as evidenced by the Micronesia Guam Mission setting new records for baptizing larger numbers of new converts and the opening of additional proselytism areas throughout islands in the Chuuk Lagoon.

This case study briefly reviews the history, culture, and demographics of Chuuk. The history of the LDS Church and recent church growth developments are examined. Successes, opportunities, and future prospects for growth are analyzed. The growth and size of the LDS Church on Chuuk is compared to other states in the Federated States of Micronesia and other countries in Oceania. The size of nontraditional proselytism groups is highlighted. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

Chuuk Background

Chuuk, or also spelled as Truk, is located in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia. Chuuk is divided into two areas: Chuuk Lagoon and the "outer islands." There are five island groups that comprise Chuuk State, three of which are located in Chuuk Lagoon (Northern Namoneas, Southern Namoneas, and Faichuk) and two of which are located in the outer islands (Mortlocks and Oksoritod). According to the most recent statistics released by the 2000 census, 40,465 of the 53,595 people in Chuuk State (76%) resided in the three islands groups within Chuuk Lagoon.[2] The Chuukese language pertains to the Micronesian language family and has 51,330 speakers worldwide; 45,900 of whom reside in the Federated States of Micronesia.[3]

Archaeologists estimate that the first inhabitants settled the islands around the birth of Christ. The Spanish began colonizing Chuuk during the sixteenth century. Protestant missionaries arrived on the islands during the late nineteenth century and Catholic missionaries began proselytism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Germany began administering Chuuk following the Spanish-American War and Japan oversaw the islands beginning in World War I. The United States administered Chuuk between 1945 and 1986 until the islands became a state in the newly independent Federated States of Micronesia.[4] Currently approximately 60% of the population is Catholic and 40% is Protestant.[5]

LDS Background

The Church assigned its first missionaries to Chuuk in 1977 from the Hawaii Honolulu Mission. In 1979, the Church organized its first branch (Mwan). By 1980, there were 170 members in Chuuk[6] and the Church organized a new mission based in Guam to service Chuuk and other islands in Micronesia. Additional branches were organized in Sapuk (1981), Uman (1983), Romanum (1984), Tonowas (1985), Nechocho (1986), Pata (1986), Wichap (1988), and Mechitiw (1995). In 1985, the Church created the Namoneas Chuuk District. By 1988, there were 1,200 members on Chuuk and the Church published select passages of the Book of Mormon into Chuukese.[7] In 2001, there were nine branches in Chuuk State.

No branches have been organized or have been discontinued within the past 12 years. In 2006, the Church reported one senior missionary couple and 16 young elders serving in Chuuk. At the time, approximately 1,300 members lived in Chuuk State.[8] In 2010, the Church reported 1,200 members in Chuuk. That same year the Church dedicated a new district center meetinghouse that provided convenient access for members arriving to meetings by boat.[9]

In 2012 and 2013, missionaries reported accelerated numbers of convert baptisms and several other significant church growth developments. In October 2012, missionaries reported approximately 50 attending sacrament meeting in the Uman Branch and that the branch had higher church attendance than many of the other branches in Chuuk. In June 2013, 11 young men requested missionary packets from senior missionaries to begin preparations for full-time missionary service. Missionaries reported that an exploratory trip to the unreached island of Udot included a full-time missionary companionship, the district president, a senior missionary couple, and a couple more individuals. Senior missionaries reported strong receptivity on the island and success distributing literature and copies of the Book of Mormon. In August 2013, missionaries opened Udot to missionary activity. The district presidency began holding branch conferences for the nine branches in the district and focused on getting priesthood holders more engaged in fulfilling their priesthood duties within their branches. That month the mission set a record for the number of converts baptized within a single month (117) and baptized 44 converts in Chuuk alone. In September, missionaries reported that 21 converts were baptized in Udot during a single weekend. A second proselytism area opened in Pata to better manage membership growth. That month the number of young elder missionaries serving in Chuuk State reached 26.

Currently there appear to be between 1,300 and 1,400 members. Approximately 2.7% of the Chuuk State population is estimated to be LDS. The average branch on the most populous island of Weno services approximately 3,500 people. A map displaying the locations of branches and branch boundaries can be found here.

Senior missionaries have helped teach temple preparation classes. Members attend the Manila Philippines Temple and frequently organize temple trips. Senior missionaries also play an important role in preparing youth and young adults for full-time missionary service. Full-time missionaries use English classes for service and finding investigators.

Successes

Within the past two years, the Church in Chuuk has begun experiencing real growth for the first time in many years. Larger numbers of convert baptisms, increased district leadership involvement in strengthening branches and expanding missionary outreach, and a larger number of full-time missionaries assigned to the islands have all contributed to accelerated growth. Sacrament meeting attendance has also appeared to increase within the past couple years due to successes retaining converts and reactivating less active members. Senior missionary couples have provided valuable training and vision to strengthen the testimonies of young adults and youth. This has contributed to increased interested in local members preparing to serve full-time missions. This has potential to improve the self-sufficiency of the Church in Chuuk as larger numbers of returned missionaries remain in Chuuk and staff leadership positions.

The opening of the Udot Group constitutes one of the greatest church growth successes within the past two decades as no additional islands have had missionaries assigned since 1986. The Church carefully evaluated prospects for opening Udot to missionary activity and did so in a timely manner as evidenced by missionaries permanently serving on the island within just a couple months after the initial investigatory visit by district and mission leaders. Dozens of new converts have been baptized within just a matter of a few months following the arrival of missionaries and the establishment of a member group. High receptivity has occurred notwithstanding the island population numbering less than 2,000. The successful establishment of an LDS presence on Udot may encourage mission and district leaders to visit additional unreached islands in Chuuk and conduct similar investigatory and church planting efforts.

The Church has translated select passages of the Book of Mormon and up to 40 church materials into Chuukese.[10] General Conference sessions are translated into Chuukese and the Church publishes its monthly First Presidency message on its main website.[11] These materials provide valuable proselytism and gospel study resources to facilitate gospel comprehension and testimony development.

Opportunities

With dozens of lesser-reached and unreached villages scattered throughout Chuuk Lagoon, there are excellent opportunities for opening additional areas to missionary activity and organizing member groups.

Lesser-reached villages located on islands where only one branch operates such as Paata, Tol, and Tonoas Islands may be reached by missionary companionships already assigned to branches on these islands if missionaries regularly visit these areas and hold cottage meetings. On Tonoas, for example, the Church's online meetinghouse locator indicates that the Tonoas Branch meetinghouse is located in the small village of Wonpiepi on the northern coast of the island. Consequently villages on the southern end of the island such as Nukan and Pwene received little, if any, outreach and likely experience lower member activity and convert retention rates due to distance from the meetinghouse. Member groups may be organized in lesser-reached villages on Tonoas and other islands once there is an active priesthood holder to preside and bless and pass the sacrament and a small number of members and investigators who regularly attend church. Church services can be held in a members' home, outdoors, in makeshift shelters, or in rented facilities. A nearby branch can provide the administrative support and member groups may be required to travel to the branch on a monthly basis to participate in church services in order to provide for greater socialization opportunities and to ensure that the group receives proper ecclesiastical and spiritual support. This approach has potential to improve convert retention and reactivation efforts due to the instilment of LDS community closer to the homes of members and investigators and it may also accelerate the number of converts baptized due to more penetrating outreach extended. Few mission resources are needed to organize member groups in lesser-reached villages and there are few risks if these efforts are unsuccessful. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by village in Chuuk Lagoon can be found here.

Islands with 1,000 or more inhabitants in Chuuk Lagoon appear favorable for the expansion of formal proselytism efforts due to sizable populations such as Fefan (4,062 inhabitants), Polle (1,851 inhabitants), and Wonei (1,271 inhabitants). The recent success in opening Udot to missionary work illustrates that impressive results that can be achieved if local church leaders and missionaries take a proactive approach to reaching previously unreached islands. Missionaries and district presidency leaders can visit these islands to locate isolated members, teach investigators, and assess conditions for conducting regular visits and establishing an LDS presence. Less populated islands also present good opportunities for outreach including F'panges (681), Eot (382), and Etten. The Church can engage in church planting strategies in these locations by holding cottage meetings and organizing member groups once there are a small group of investigators and members present.

There appear some limited opportunities for the Church to establish an initial presence in outer islands, particularly those where

there are several islands clustered together and where there is a combined population of several thousand. Locations that may benefit from receiving visits from mission and district leaders include the Mortlocks Islands in the Satowan area and the Halls Islands. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by island in Chuuk State can be found here.

With accelerated membership growth in Chuuk, there appear realistic opportunities for the Micronesia Guam Mission and local church leadership to concentrate on advancing the district into a stake within the foreseeable future. Stakes outside the United States generally require 1,900 nominal members, 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and at least five congregations that have sufficient numbers of active members to become wards. The district has had enough congregations to become a stake for many years but lacks the needed number of nominal and active members. Currently branches on Weno Island appear closest to reaching the qualifications to become wards. With increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Chuuk and greater district leadership involvement in strengthening individual congregations, there are now greater mission resources available and a more clear vision extended by district leaders that can make considerable progress advancing the district into a stake. The district remains possibly as many as 500 nominal members away from reaching the minimal qualifications to become a stake. However, with up to 40 converts baptized per month in Chuuk within some months of 2013 suggests that the district may reach the qualifications to become a stake within the next few years if accelerated growth continues and good convert retention is achieved.

Challenges

The Church in Chuuk has experienced stagnant membership growth for approximately 25 years. Emigration of members to other islands in Micronesia or to the United States has been a significant challenge for the Church to strength units and to maintain sufficiently large numbers of local leaders. This has resulted in self-sufficiency problems and reliance on full-time missionaries for the Church to properly function in some locations. Full-time missionaries have generally baptized few converts in Chuuk compared to other islands in Micronesia.

The Church extends no known outreach on the outer islands of Chuuk State. Remote location and tiny populations scattered among many islands present the greatest challenges for future outreach. These conditions make the assignment of missionary companionships to individual islands impractical due to a tiny target population and isolation from mission leadership. There are opportunities for traveling missionaries to be assigned to visit these remote areas and assess conditions for establishing member groups when feasible. There are no translations of LDS scriptures or even basic proselytism materials into the languages spoken in these outer islands. Provided with the estimated number of speakers in parentheses, these languages include Mortlockese (5,900), Puluwatese (1,360), Pááfang (1,320), and Namonuito (940). These four languages have extremely few speakers and share many similarities with Chuukese.[12] A lack of written materials in these languages and common use of Chuukese as a second language suggest that no translations of LDS materials appear warranted unless sizable numbers of speakers of these languages join the Church and are unable to adequately utilize Chuukese translations or English language scriptures and gospel study resources.

The Church has not translated the entire Book of Mormon into Chuukese and has yet to translate other LDS scriptures. The translation of remaining LDS scriptures into Chuukese will be required for greater gospel scholarship and testimony development to occur.

There are some cultural and societal conditions that pose barriers for LDS growth. Corruption in government, child abuse, and domestic violence are problematic in Chuuk.[13] These practices stand in opposition to LDS teachings. There may be some challenges for local Chuukese leaders to understand the importance of living LDS teachings that are not commonly followed or valued in society.

Comparative Growth

The Church has achieved similar levels of outreach in Chuuk as in other island groups in the Federated States of Micronesia. The average branch on Chuuk includes 5,400 people within its boundaries whereas the average branch on Kosrae includes 3,300 people within its boundaries, the average branch on Pohnpei includes 4,500 people within its boundaries, and the average branch on Yap includes 5,700 within its boundaries. However, only the Church in Pohnpei has experienced congregational growth within the past decade among these four states. The Church in Pohnpei ranks average among countries in Oceania in terms of the extent of LDS outreach and the percentage of the population on LDS Church records (~4%). The Solomon Islands is the least reached country in Oceania (0.090% nominally LDS) whereas Tonga ranks as the most reached country (58% nominally LDS). The Church has established a significantly more pervasive presence in most Polynesian nations than in Chuuk. If the ratio of LDS units to country population for Tonga (one unit per 633 inhabitants) were applied to Chuuk, there would be 77 units on Chuuk. The number of members from Chuuk beginning full-time missions within the past year has appeared to increase more rapidly than at any other time within recent memory although this increase does not appear to be as rapid as the increase experienced in the Church in Pohnpei.

Most outreach-oriented Christian groups report a smaller presence in Chuuk than the LDS Church. Evangelicals operate the most widespread presence among missionary-focused groups and currently claim approximately one-quarter of the Chuukese population in the Federated States of Micronesia.[14] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a tiny presence in Chuuk and in late 2013 reported only one congregation in Chuuk State that assembled in Moen. Witnesses maintain two Chuukese-speaking congregations outside of the Federated States of Micronesia in Guam and Honolulu, Hawaii.[15] The Seventh Day Adventist

Church does not publish data on the number of congregations on Chuuk but reported 1,478 members, seven churches, and one company in the Federated States of Micronesia in 2011. Adventists report that membership growth in the country has increased by 72% within the past decade.[16] There are likely only a few hundred Adventists and a handful of congregations that operate in Chuuk.

Limitations

There were no reports available within the past year that provide member activity and convert retention data. It is unclear how much success has occurred within the past few years regarding reactivation efforts and retaining the increasing number of new converts. All data on recent missionary successes originated from senior missionary and young full-time missionary reports. No reports were available from local leaders. No data is available on whether any branches have been discontinued on Chuuk since the arrival of the Church in the late 1970s. The Church does not publish official membership figures for Chuuk on a yearly basis. No official measurements of member activity and convert retention for the Federated States of Micronesia or for the Church as a whole are available to the public. It is unclear how many members reside on islands without LDS units established and whether any additional member groups operate in the islands.

Future Prospects

The resurgence in convert baptisms and the opening of a previously unreached island to missionary work are significant church growth developments for the Church in Chuuk. However, past experience has shown that the Church in Chuuk suffers from anemic, stagnant membership growth due to low levels of local leadership self-sufficiency inflicted by emigration, generally few convert baptisms year to year, and member activity problems. The surge in the worldwide full-time missionary force and increased interested among Chuukese youth and young adults in serving full-time missions may provide for continued increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the islands and encourage mission leaders to open additional islands to missionary activity. Time will tell whether recent missionary successes will be propagated into the coming years and mark a long-term change in reversing stagnant growth trends that have endured for over two decades.

[1] "Micronesia," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 28 September 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/Micronesia.html

[2] "Table B1. Age by Usual Residence, Chuuk: 2000," Population Characteristics - Federated States of Micronesia Division of Statistics, http://www.spc.int/prism/country/fm/stats/Census%20&%20Surveys/2000/Chuuk-BT.pdf

[3] "Chuukese," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/chk

[4] "Truk - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Truk-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html

[5] "Micronesia, Federated States of," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208248

[6] "Micronesia," Deseret News 2013 Church Almanac, p.524

[7] Warnick, Lee. "Book of Mormon in 80th language," LDS Church News, 9 January 1988. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/18233/Book-of-Mormon-in-80th-language.html

[8] "Saints from Tiny Pacific Island Attend Temple on a Landmark Trip," Liahona, March 2006. http://www.lds.org/liahona/2006/03/news-of-the-church/saints-from-tiny-pacific-island-attend-temple-on-a-landmark-trip

[9] Dimick, Merrill and Myrle; Robertson, David. "Members in Chuuk open arms to apostle," LDS Church News, 5 June 2010. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/59433/Members-in-Chuuk-open-arms-to-apostle.html

[10] store.lds.org, retrieved 28 September 2013.

[11] "Fosun Chuuk," lds.org, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.lds.org/languages/chk

[12] "Micronesia," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/country/FM/languages

[13] "2008 Human Rights Report: Federated States of Micronesia," 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 25 February 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eap/119048.htm

[14] "Chuukese," Joshua Project, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/languages.php?rol3=chk

[15] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 1 October 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[16] "2013 Annual Statistical Report," www.sda.org, retrieved 1st October 2013. http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR2013.pdf