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Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Rapid LDS Growth in Vanuatu

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Overview

Located in Melanesia, Vanuatu has 61 inhabited islands^[1] and supports a population of a quarter of a million. The Church in Vanuatu has recently experienced rapid growth as evidenced by accelerated membership and congregational growth and national outreach expansion. In 2001, the Church had 1,631 members and 11 branches operating on five islands whereas in mid-2013 there were over 5,500 members and 31 branches operating on nine islands.

This case study analyzes LDS growth trends within the past decade. Past church growth and missionary successes are discussed and opportunities and challenges for growth are analyzed. Recent LDS growth trends in other countries are compared to the Church in Vanuatu and the growth of other outreach-focused Christian groups is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1973, the Church received official recognition and organized the first branch in Port Vila. In 1995, there were 500 members and two branches. At year-end 2001, the Church reported 1,631 members and 11 branches in Vanuatu. In mid-2001, there were nine branches nationwide, including four branches on Efate (Mele, Port Vila 1st, Port Vila 2nd, and Port Vila 3rd), two branches on Ambae, and one branch each on Espiritu Santo (Luganville), Uripiv (Uripiv), and Tanna (White Sands). At the time branches functioned on five major islands and 0.86% of the population was nominally LDS.

Rapid growth occurred throughout the 2000s and early 2010s as evidenced by official statistics released by the Church and observations by other religious faiths.^[2] At year-end 2012, there were 5,491 members and 30 branches nationwide, including seven branches on Efate, six branches on Ambae, five branches on Espiritu Santo, five branches on Tanna, four branches on Malekula, and one branch each on Gaua, Mere Lava, Uripiv, and Wala. In mid-2013, branches functioned on nine islands and 2.18% of the population was nominally LDS. Several member groups, also known as annexes in the Church in Oceania, operated throughout the Vanuatu in mid-2013 such as on Gaua (Kaska), Malekula (Leviamp and Tisman), Nguna, and Tanna (Lemdewakel). Based on 2009 census population figures^[3] and mid-2013 LDS congregational totals, the average branch serviced 9,404 people on Efate, 7,921 people on Santo, 5,760 people on Tanna, 5,734 people on Malekula, and 1,735 people on Ambae. In mid-2013, the average branch in Vanuatu included 8,400 people within its boundaries.

The number of active members widely varies by branch. Senior missionaries report that there are several branches with over 200 active members. Some branches have large numbers of members and investigators attending church services. The Whitegrass Branch, for example, has up to 300 attending church services on Sundays. On the other hand, full-time missionaries report that some branches have fewer than 50 active members. Generally speaking, the Church experiences moderate to high levels of member activity in Vanuatu, with the lowest member activity rates occurring in Port Vila.

In 2013, the Church received permission for branch presidents to be marriage celebrants, permitting them to marry members and investigators. At the time mission leadership reported that dozens of young adults from around the country were preparing for full-time missionary service.

A map displaying the locations of all 61 inhabited islands in Vanuatu and the number of LDS congregations on each island can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Church in Vanuatu has experienced some of the most rapid growth experienced by the Church within the past decade. The number of branches on some islands such as Tanna increased from one to five and the Church organized its first branches on four additional islands during this period. Local church leaders and mission leadership have made efficient use of limited mission resources over the past two decades resulting in impressive rates of outreach expansion with comparatively few resources. Mission leaders have regularly opened member groups in lesser-reached areas and many of these groups have become branches within relatively short periods of time. Mission leaders have understood the necessity to form smaller congregations within closer proximity of member homes due to high travel costs and limited economic development and transportation infrastructure. Senior missionary couples have played an important role in training and mentoring local leadership. With possibly a few exceptions, all branches and member groups in Vanuatu appear led by a local member serving as branch president or group leader.

Several islands are well saturated with LDS outreach as evidenced by low population to LDS unit ratios. Establishing branches throughout each large island has been important for reducing travel times and extending more penetrating outreach to rural populations. The population for Ambae, for example, is only 10,400. All inhabitants reside in rural areas. The Church operates six branches on Ambae scattered throughout the island, indicating that there is one branch per 1,735 people. The average branch in Vanuatu services less than 10,000 people - a significant achievement considering wards and branches in all but a handful of urban areas in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa include at least 25,000 people within their boundaries. The Church in Vanuatu has become one of the largest religious groups on some islands. The tiny island of Mere Lava had a population of 647 in 2009^[4] and has not had missionaries assigned since 2004 yet in 2013 mission leaders reported that sacrament meeting attendance on one Sunday was 210.

Some recently opened islands to missionary work have experienced rapid growth. In 2011, the Church assigned full-time missionaries to Gaua for the first time. In early 2012, the Church organized its first branch on Gaua. By November 2012, there were 140 members and investigators attending church on Sundays when the weather was good. In late 2012 and in 2013, senior missionaries reported that the branch would baptize as many as 23 converts in a single weekend. These findings are particularly impressive considering the total population of the island was a mere 2,491 in 2009.^[5] In mid-2013, it was likely that church membership surpassed 200 on the island, indicating that as many as eight percent of the population had joined the Church within a period of just a couple years. In 2013, there were four full-time missionaries serving on Gaua as a second missionary companionship was added to help teach, baptize, and retain the increasing numbers of investigators and converts in the fledgling branch.

Mission leaders have quickly and effectively coordinated with local members and missionaries in constructing meetinghouses in remote areas where branches and member groups operate. Many branch meetinghouses are built from local materials. These simple, cost-effective, and culturally appropriate meetinghouses generally consist of a corrugated metal roof, benches, and no walls. The rapid construction of these meetinghouses has permitted dynamic national outreach expansion in many remote, rural areas and has contributed to accelerated membership and congregational growth experienced within the past decade.

The Church has made significant progress meeting humanitarian and development needs throughout Vanuatu. Humanitarian senior missionary couples have organized and carried out clean water projects in isolated areas that use large tanks to store rain water. Senior missionaries have helped distribute baby kits assembled by church members in Utah. Latter-day Saint youth and young adults have participated in visiting remote villages and notifying these communities of free measles and rubella vaccinations provided by the Church and the World Health Organization. The Church has also provided hundreds free wheelchairs that are specially equipped for dirt roads and mud.

The Church has translated a sizable number of materials into Bislama, including the entire Book of Mormon. Local membership is self-sufficient in staffing translation needs for the Church. General Conference addresses, for example, are translated from Port Vila.

Opportunities

The organization of the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission in 2012 permits greater opportunities for church growth due to increased allocation of mission resources to Vanuatu. Mission headquarters located in Port Vila may help branches on Efate island become a stake within the foreseeable future as there are a sufficient number of branches on the island to form a stake and greater opportunities to create larger, ward-sized congregations due to high population densities. The organization of the new mission will likely allow for larger numbers of missionaries to serve in the country, providing needed manpower to strengthen branches and to continue to expand outreach onto additional islands and lesser-reached areas of islands where LDS units operate. The establishment of the mission also provides local church leaders with more frequent contact with mission leadership for training and mentoring.

Vanuatu presents abundant opportunities for national outreach expansion. The Church may organize district branches on islands where branches service large geographical areas within the boundaries of a district and where there are member groups established. District branches could help district leadership administer currently operating member groups, organize additional member groups where there are sufficient numbers of members and investigators, and help advance member groups into branches. There are also highly favorable conditions to expand missionary activity onto islands without an LDS presence. There are 11 islands or small island groups with 1,000 or more inhabitants that do not appear to have any branches or member groups organized, including Pentecost (16,843), Ambrym (7,275), Epi (5,207), Malo (4,273), Maewo (3,569), Vanua Lava (2,597), Tongoa (2,300), Erromango (1,950), Paama (1,627), Mota Lava (1,451), and Maskelynes (1,022). Some individuals from these islands have contacted mission leadership and requested visits from missionaries to learn about the Church. High receptivity and rapid growth following the establishment of congregations and assignment of missionaries on islands where there is a current LDS presence suggest that similar conditions would likely occur on the most populous unreached islands once outreach is extended. The use of nontraditional outreach expansion efforts such as appointing some young, full-time missionaries as traveling missionaries to visit these islands, assess conditions, teach interested individuals, and report these findings to district and mission leaders can help make frugal use of limited mission resources. The involvement of local church leaders and ordinary members in these outreach expansion efforts has the highest probability to accelerate growth, foster self-sufficiency, and preserve the Church in Vanuatu's legacy of efficient use of the comparatively small amounts of mission resources to accomplish significant growth achievements within short periods of time. Establishing a more standardized meetinghouse construction program in Vanuatu similar to previous programs implemented in Samoa and Tonga in the mid-twentieth century has potential to accelerate growth and establish a pervasive LDS presence in Vanuatu. However, such a program may not be necessary if local members and full-time missionaries can speedily construct additional meetinghouses with little to no outside assistance.

The Vanuatu Port Vila Mission does not have a mission branch organized. Some areas of Vanuatu do not pertain to a branch such as several northern islands the Torres Islands and several of the Banks Islands. Several ordinary branches include multiple islands or island groups within their boundaries. These branches appear unable to make any significant strides extending missionary efforts and organizing member groups on additional islands within their jurisdiction due to limited resources and few leadership personnel available. The organization of a mission branch may help keep better track of any known members who reside on islands without an organized branch and prepare for the creation of member groups and branches as mission leaders visit these locations and assess conditions for establishing an official church presence.

There are abundant opportunities for the Church to meet educational needs. Senior missionaries have observed that many schools are unable to accommodate all the children that live in an area resulting in many children who receive little to no formal education. Long distance from children's homes to schools requires parents to pay for transportation - an expense that is prohibitive for all but a small handful of families. The quality of education is also poor in many areas due to under qualified teachers and a lack of teaching supplies.

The large number of youth in the country provide opportunities for the Church to increase the size of its native full-time missionary force within the coming decade. Involvement from mission, district, and branch leadership in preparing youth and young adults to serve missions can have significant influence on long-term trends in missionary service for the Church in Vanuatu, bolster self-sufficiency, and minimize reliance on foreign missionary manpower to augment the size of the missionary force.

Challenges

Vanuatu's small population spread over 61 different islands creates many challenges for church administration. Low population densities require larger numbers of outreach centers to service small populations. Three-quarters of the national population resides in rural areas. Although high receptivity and rural populations have helped spur church planting and greater outreach expansion compared to countries with larger and more urbanized populations, these conditions exact greater resources from mission and district leaders to properly administer large numbers of sparsely populated villages. With no LDS stakes yet established on Vanuatu, there is a significant administrative burden on mission leadership to fulfill responsibilities pertaining to meeting the ecclesiastical needs of members, training district leadership, and supervising full-time missionaries and outreach expansion efforts.

The large geographic size of the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission poses a major challenge for mission leaders to effectively administer members living on more than a dozen different islands in three different countries. Senior missionaries have reported that some interested individuals in Vanuatu, including village chiefs, have contacted church leaders requesting for the establishment of the Church in their areas such as on Pentecost - an island completely unreached by LDS missionary efforts. Missionaries have taught some of these individuals when they travel to a location with a church presence but mission leadership has avoided the opening of additional islands to missionary work due to limited missionary manpower, difficulties maintaining proper administration of the Church in areas with a current LDS presence, and recent efforts to strengthen branches to help some member districts qualify to become stakes, most notably the Port Vila Vanuatu District.

Vanuatu culture and society requires village chiefs to approve any activities that occur within their jurisdiction. In order for the Church to enter new areas, approval from village chiefs must be obtained to teach investigators and organize an official church presence. Although the Church has not appeared to face any major challenges obtaining permission from village chiefs to enter additional locations, there is the possibility that church leaders and missionaries may be denied access to some islands and villages.

Many branches have very few active priesthood holders and are mostly comprised of women and children. Senior missionaries have reported that some branches have difficulties properly meeting their own administrative needs. These conditions, combined with the vast majority of members joining the Church within the past decade, have likely prevented the organization of districts on additional islands where there are a sufficient number of branches to be formed into a district such as on Ambae and Tanna.

Cost of living is extremely high in Vanuatu due to few natural resources, a comparatively small population, low levels of economic development and modernization, and the isolated location of the islands. High costs can be prohibitive for assigning greater numbers of foreign missionaries. Access to medical care is limited on many islands.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Oceania has experienced its most rapid membership and congregational growth in Vanuatu within the past decade. The Church has reported strong growth in a couple additional countries in Melanesia between 2001 and 2012. In Papua New Guinea, the number of members doubled from 10,656 to 21,265 and the number of wards and branches increased from 32 to 77. In the Solomon Islands, membership increased from 186 to 509 and the number of branches increased from one to four. In mid-2013, Vanuatu was the country with the seventh most members without a stake. However, Latter-day Saints comprise a significantly smaller percentage of the population in Vanuatu compared to other countries in Oceania such as Tonga, Samoa, and Kiribati.

Other missionary-focused groups report a presence in Vanuatu that is either larger and more pervasive than the LDS Church or smaller and more limited than the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 46% of the national population.^[6] The Seventh Day Adventist Church numbers among the largest religious groups in Vanuatu. In 2012, Adventists reported 82 churches, 130 companies (small congregations), and 18,618 members.^[7] The 2009 census reported that 12% of the population identified as Adventist;^[8] a higher percentage than reported by the Seventh Day Adventist Church of 7.1%. This finding suggests that Adventists experience high activity rates and have large numbers of un-baptized adherents who are not official Adventists. Jehovah's Witnesses report a very limited presence as only five congregations operate on three islands (Efate [3], Ambae [1], and Espiritu Santo [1]).^[9] The Church of the Nazarene reports 12 churches.^[10]

Limitations

The Church does not maintain a directory of member groups that operate in Vanuatu, any other country, or the world as a whole. It is unclear how many member groups function in the country. The Church does not publish statistics on member activity and convert retention rates. There are no official statements or reports from mission or area leaders regarding policies that govern outreach expansion in Vanuatu. The number of members on each island is not released to the public. There are no official statistics on the number of missionaries that serve in Vanuatu or the number of Ni-Vanuatu members serving full-time missions.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Vanuatu to maintain recent rapid growth trends appears highly favorable due to strong receptivity, willingness by successive mission leaders to open additional member groups and branches, and moderate to high member activity and convert retention rates in most branches. However, the establishment of member groups and branches on additional islands will likely depend on improved self-sufficiency of local leadership and the advancement of districts into stakes. Additional member districts will likely be organized on Ambae and Tanna within the near future as each of these islands have enough branches to form a district, branch leadership on these islands have experienced greater progress in meeting their administrative needs, and distance from district headquarters located on other islands creating challenges for church administration. Lesser-reached and unreached communities on the major islands with a current LDS presence such as Efate, Espiritu Santo, Malekula, and Tanna appear the most likely locations where LDS outreach expansion will occur within the foreseeable future. Due to the large geographic size of the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission and abundant opportunities to expand missionary work in all three countries, the Church may divide the mission to create a separate mission based in New Caledonia or the Solomon Islands. The Church may organize a mission branch or district branches to help service vast, rural areas where there are small numbers of members but little to no developed local leadership infrastructure.

[1] " 2009 National Census of Population and Housing: Summary Release", Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009.

[2] "Vanuatu," Operation World, retrieved 6 September 2013. <http://www.operationworld.org/vanu>

[3] " 2009 National Census of Population and Housing: Summary Release", Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009.

[4] " 2009 National Census of Population and Housing: Summary Release", Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009.

[5] " 2009 National Census of Population and Housing: Summary Release", Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009.

[6] "Vanuatu," Operation World, retrieved 6 September 2013. <http://www.operationworld.org/vanu>

[7] "Vanuatu Mission (2001-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 6 September 2013.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2200423

[8] " 2009 National Census of Population and Housing: Summary Release", Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009.

[9] "Congregation Meeting Search," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 4 September 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrtZGT

[10] "Nazarene Church Data Search," [nazarene.org](http://app.nazarene.org), retrieved 6 September 2013.
<http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=NH&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=>