



Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Progress Achieving Real LDS Growth in the Philippines

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Posted: April 28th, 2014

Overview

One of the greatest bastions for the LDS Church in Asia, the Philippines has a substantial LDS presence that compares in size to the Church in Mexico, Brazil, and Chile. At year-end 2013, the Philippines ranked as the country with the most districts (83), fourth most members (675,000+), fourth most missions (21), fourth most congregations (1,148), and fifth most stakes (88). The Philippines comprises its own church area and has its own medium-sized missionary training center in Manila. Notwithstanding this progress, the Church in the Philippines has experienced serious challenges with pervasive member activity and convert retention issues. These problems have been evidenced by over a hundred congregation consolidations, the closure of nearly a dozen stakes, and incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates for several decades. Although the Church in the Philippines continues to experience modest convert retention and low member activity rates, noticeable progress has occurred in ameliorating convert attrition and member inactivity worries through goals and interventions advocated by area leaders and mission presidents.

This case study reviews LDS growth trends since the early 2000s and the implementation of reactivation and improved missionary and church growth approaches during the early 2010s. Recent church growth and missionary successes are examined and opportunities and challenges for future growth are explored. LDS growth trends in other countries with over half a million members on church records are reviewed and the size and growth trends of other prominent proselytizing groups are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

Area Refocus on Real Growth

In early 2012, the Philippines Area presidency emphasized the importance of reactivation efforts due to widespread low member activity rates. At the time the area presidency disclosed that sacrament meeting attendance accounted for less than one-fifth of total church membership for the country. Some missionary reports indicated that there were no more than 150,000 total active members in the Philippines, suggesting a nationwide member activity rate of 23%. The area presidency immediately encouraged mission presidents and full-time missionaries to concentrate on reactivating less-active and inactive members. One of the greatest changes directed full-time missionaries to visit and teach less-active and inactive members if full-time missionaries had a two-hour block of time or longer with no teaching appointments with investigators. Prior to this time, missionaries typically utilized unscheduled time for street proselytism and door-to-door finding.

The implementation of this area focus immediately yielded several significant church growth developments. The number of temple recommend holders increased from 30,519 to 32,722 between year-end 2011 and year-end 2012; a 7.2% annual increase. During this period, the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders increased from 22,173 to 24,158 (a 9.0% increase) whereas sacrament meeting attendance increased from 115,652 to 121,446 (a 5.0% increase). During the first three quarters of 2013, the Church reported that the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders increased by nearly 1,000, the number of endowed adults with a current temple recommend increased by 2,000, the number of couples sealed in the temple increased by nearly 1,200, and the number of male Filipino missionaries serving increased by over 400. By year-end 2013, the Church reported that sacrament meeting attendance for the Philippines reached 125,506 and that the number of Filipino

members serving full-time missions reached 2,425. The area presidency also reported that the number of young single adults (YSAs) attending church meetings increased by more than 2,600 between year-end 2010 and year-end 2013. In early 2014, the area presidency reported that full-time missionaries throughout the Philippines spend half of their time finding and teaching investigators and the other half of their time strengthening less-active members and on reactivation. The area presidency noted no significant change in the annual number of converts baptized in the Philippines since 2010 as this statistic ranged from a low of 11,941 in 2012 to a high of 16,296 in 2011, and totaled 14,831 in 2013. The number of full-time missionaries assigned to the Philippines also substantially increased during the early 2010s. The area presidency reported that the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the Philippines increased from 2,600 in early 2013 to 4,300 in early 2014.^[1] Senior missionary couples in some missions reported that many branches and districts experienced significant increases in sacrament meeting attendance during the early 2010s, such as in the Philippines Cebu Mission.

Congregational Growth Trends

Although the Church in the Philippines reported steady, impressive increases in the number of congregations during the last quarter of the twentieth century, this growth came to a dramatic downturn in the early 2000s. The number of official congregations declined from a high of 1,234 (525 wards, 709 branches) in 2002 to 1,075 in 2006 (469 wards, 606 branches); a 12.9% decrease within a four-year period. Membership growth continued to steadily increase from 517,374 to 572,619 during this same period; a 10.7% increase. Positive congregational growth has occurred every year since 2007 and the net annual increase in the number of congregations ranged between four and eight during the late 2000s. The number of congregations increased by five in 2010 and 18 in 2011. In 2009, there were 1,095 congregations (495 wards, 600 branches).

The Church has continued to organize larger numbers of congregations since the beginning of 2012 compared to the period from year-end 2002 to year-end 2009. In 2012, the number of congregations increased by 16 whereas in 2013 the number of congregations increased by 14. During the first four months of 2014, the number of congregations increased by 15. In 2013, there were 1,148 congregations (556 wards, 592 branches). The Church organized approximately 51 new wards and branches between year-end 2010 and early 2014. Of these congregations, 29 were organized on Luzon (Dau Branch, Imus 2nd Ward, San Gabriel Ward, Cabuyao 2nd Ward, Mabini Branch, Santiago 3rd Ward, Pasig 4th Ward, Vintar Branch, Bonifacio 6th Ward, Agoon 3rd Branch, Lipa 2nd Ward, Magapit Branch, Pasay 4th Ward, Pasay 4th Ward, Bonifacio 7th Ward, Imus 3rd Ward, Taugtog Branch, San Juan Branch, Lubao 2nd Branch, Gosi Branch, Indang Branch, Daang Hari Ward, Labrador Branch, Kapitolyo Ward, Taguig 2nd Ward, Mandaluyong 4th Ward, Baliwag 2nd Branch, Tigaon 2nd Ward, and Springville Ward), seven were organized on Cebu (Lawa-an Ward, Marigondon Ward, Liloan 3rd Ward, Canduman Ward, Busay Ward, Lapu-Lapu 3rd Ward, and Busay 2nd Branch), six were organized in Mindanao (Matina 2nd Ward, Canitoan Branch, San Pablo Branch, General Santos 5th Ward, Ipil Branch, and Toril 2nd Ward), two were organized on Negros (Murcia Branch and Dumaguete 3rd Branch), two were organized on Guimaras (Buenavista Branch and Nueva Valencia Branch), two were organized in Samar (Oras Branch and Gandara Branch), one was organized on Biliran (Balaquid Branch), one was organized in Mindoro (Sablayan Branch), and one was organized in the Palawan Island area (Coron Branch). Only two congregations were discontinued between year-end 2010 and year-end 2013, namely the Tinajeros Branch in the Caloocan Philippines Stake in 2011 and the Dap-Dap Branch in the Borongan Philippines District in 2013.

At least 18 new groups began functioning in the early 2010s. Seven of these groups operated on Luzon (Baao, Cumon, Quezon, Pataquid, Nabua, Ala-Uli, and Ragay), seven operated on Guimaras or Panay (Ajuy, Comian, Sibunag, Miag-ao, Belison, Ibajay, and Pilar), one operated on Leyte (Inopacan), one operated on Mindanao (Barobo), one operated on Negros (Cabagtasán), and one operated on Palawan (Taytay).

The organization of new stakes has also substantiated recent reports of increased sacrament meeting attendance and other real growth indicators nationwide. The Church in the Philippines reached a high of 81 stakes in 2002 but the number of stakes declined by 76 by 2005 due to several stakes returning to district status. Extremely slow stake growth occurred during the remainder of the 2000s as the number of stakes increased from 76 in 2005 to 80 in 2010. In the 2010s, accelerated stake growth occurred as the number of stakes increased from 80 at year-end 2010 to 88 at year-end 2013. During this three-year period, the Church organized five new stakes from stake divisions (Makati East - 2011, Tuguegarao South - 2011, Santiago North - 2011, Bacoor - 2012, and Cebu Consolacion - 2013), whereas the Church organized three new stakes from districts maturing into stakes (Carigara - 2012, San Jose Del Monte - 2013, and San Gabriel - 2013).

A map displaying the location, name, and year of creation for recently organized wards, branches, and groups can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Church has experienced rapid growth according to several robust real growth indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and the number of temple recommend holders. The annual growth rates for all three of these indicators ranged between five and ten percent for 2012; substantially higher than membership and congregational growth rates for this year of 2.1% and 1.4%, respectively. These findings indicate that growth rates achieved for sacrament meeting attendance, the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and the number of temple recommend holders required many less-active and inactive members returning to church activity as increases in these statistics surpassed the total number of new converts and children of record added during this one-year period.

Emphasis on full-time missionaries regularly and consistently participating in reactivation efforts within their assigned units has

appeared to play an important role in making headway in the organization of new congregations and making progress towards commensurate membership and congregational growth. These reactivation efforts have appeared to encourage local church leaders to take greater accountability for members within their jurisdictions. The organization of new wards and stakes in many locations has likely only been possible due to substantial increases in the number of active members and the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders.

Many recently organized wards and branches have been created in the Manila and Cebu City metropolitan areas - the two most populous metropolitan areas in the Philippines. Rapid congregational growth has occurred in certain areas of these two metropolitan areas, suggesting improved reactivation efforts and successes in baptizing and retaining larger numbers of new converts. As these two metropolitan areas house the only two operating temples on the Philippines, steady real growth in these locations will be vital towards the long-term stability of the Church in meeting its own administrative and ecclesiastical needs.

Mission, stake, and district leadership have readily opened member groups to improve the accessibility of the Church to membership and target populations, and to lay the groundwork for the organization of additional branches. Many member groups have qualified to become independent branches within the past couple years due to renewed emphasis on reactivation. This approach to church growth often yields more rapid and more impressive returns in augmenting the number of active members and establishing resilient, self-sufficient congregations.

Opportunities

The organization of additional branches and member groups has enormous potential to accelerate growth and revitalize reactivation efforts among less-active and inactive members, and missionary efforts among the general population. Virtually all major cities and many suburban and rural communities have suitable locations for establishing member groups or branches in order to improve the accessibility of the Church and spur growth. These church planting efforts have the highest potential for success if newly organized congregations assemble within the community targeted, focus is placed on developing self-sufficient local church leadership through the assistance of stake, mission, and district leadership and full-time missionaries, and if the planning and execution of church planting efforts is headed by local Filipino church leaders.

The Church has translated its recently launched Hastening the Work of Salvation website into Tagalog and Cebuano, providing widespread use and application of the website throughout the Philippines. The website aims to inspire all members of the Church whether ordinary member, full-time missionary, local church leader, stake church leader, mission president, or area seventy to fulfill their responsibilities in missionary work and reactivating less-active and inactive members. Use of the website has good potential for members and local church leaders to formulate their own plans for creating an original and effective missionary strategy for their area that is founded in the scriptures and supported by international LDS leadership.

Challenges

Membership growth rates continue to outpace congregational growth rates despite focus on reactivation efforts. Inconsistent standards for prebaptismal preparation and leadership development problems appear at the root of many of these issues as many new converts do not become active for the long-term and consequently little growth in the number of active members occurs. Increased emphasis on full-time missionaries participating in reactivation efforts has appeared to correlate with fewer numbers of convert baptisms within the past couple years. A lack of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders presents a major barrier to greater self-sufficiency in congregations and the advancement of many districts into stakes. Greater member-missionary participation, adequate pre-baptismal preparation standards consistently implemented, and improved local leadership self-sufficiency will be required to make greater progress in achieving commensurate membership and congregational growth indicative of real growth within the Church.

Figures on the three measurements of member activity provided by recently returned full-time missionaries indicate severe inactivity problems in the Philippines. In 2012, sacrament meeting attendance accounted for only 18% of nominal church membership, implying that upwards of 75% of membership may not attend church at all. The number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders accounts for only 3.6% of total church membership whereas the number of temple recommend holders accounts for only 4.8% of total church membership. Missionaries identify that long-term convert retention problems constitutes one of the primary reasons for low member activity rates in the Philippines as most converts have historically not been retained for longer than one year after baptism. Rushed prebaptismal preparation inspired by reaching arbitrary baptismal goals, inconsistent standards for convert baptism between successive mission presidents, limited involvement from local church leaders and ordinary members in missionary efforts, distance to the nearest meetinghouse, corruption in society, and cultural conditions that place little emphasis on regular church attendance appear responsible for poor member activity rates in the Philippines. Reactivation efforts targeting those with little to no past meaningful church activity will likely yield few results due to the failure of these individuals to ever develop a personal testimony of the truthfulness of the Church and the importance of following LDS teachings. Many congregations have hundreds of inactive members on their rolls and reactivation and convert retention needs that overwhelm available leadership manpower, resulting in reliance on full-time missionaries to accomplish these tasks.

The Church in the Philippines has historically experienced challenges maintaining focus on reactivation and acceptable convert retention rates, resulting in mixed results in reclaiming lost members over the long term and achieving real growth. Past mission presidents have reported periods lasting several months to a few years during which higher convert retention rates and greater

church growth is achieved but that successive mission presidents at times hamper or contradict previous methods and approaches. Time will tell whether challenges in maintaining consistency in baptismal standards and reactivation efforts will be successfully addressed by area leadership.

Comparative Growth

The Church outside of the United States has reported little to no progress achieving real growth in other countries with over half a million members on church records between year-end 2009 and year-end 2012. The Church in the Philippines has experienced the greatest progress in achieving real growth as evidenced by a smaller discrepancy between membership and congregational growth rates. The Church in the Philippines was the only country during this period where congregational growth rates were more than half the rate of membership growth rates. Church membership in the Philippines increased by over 43,000 from 631,885 to 675,166 (a 6.8% increase) yet the number of congregations increased by 39; a 3.6% increase. In Mexico, church membership increased by over 120,000 from 1.198 million to 1.318 million (a 10% increase) yet the number of congregations declined by 22 from 2,007 to 1985 (a 1.1% decrease). In Brazil, church membership increased by 107,300 from 1.103 million to 1.210 million (a 9.7% increase) yet the number of congregations increased by only 56 (a 3.0% increase). In Chile, church membership increased by nearly 15,800 from 561,920 to 577,716 (a 2.8% increase) yet the number of congregations increased by eight (a 1.3% increase). In Peru, church membership increased by nearly 47,000 from 480,816 to 527,759 (a 9.8% increase) yet the number of congregations increased by only 20 (a 2.6% increase).

Other missionary-focused Christian groups have reported steady increases in the number of active members and congregations within the past decade. Evangelicals have a widespread presence and experience steady growth. Jehovah's Witnesses experience steady membership and congregational growth and maintain a presence in virtually all cities and large towns. In 2013, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 189,100 active members, 3,156 churches, and over 8,000 baptisms.^[2] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a pervasive presence in the Philippines and has achieved rapid growth in the number of active members and congregations within the past decade. In 2000, Adventists reported 3,829 churches, 1,878 companies, 54,634 baptisms, and 854,547 members whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 4,546 churches, 2,121 companies, 70,909 baptisms, and 828,169 members.^[3] Adventists have appeared to struggle with the long-term retention of converts as evidenced by the 2012 membership figure falling short of the 2000 membership figure. This finding is due to Adventists periodically removing inactive members from their rolls. The Church of the Nazarene reports a presence in most major populated places. In 2012, Nazarenes reported 23,230 full members, 3,002 conversions, 1,310 baptisms, 2,410 associate members, an average weekly worship of 14,873, and 348 congregations (300 organized churches, 48 churches not yet organized).^[4]

Limitations

The Church does not regularly publish official figures on various measurements of member activity such as the number of temple recommend holders, the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and sacrament meeting attendance. Data on these indicators in this case study were obtained from returned missionaries and the area presidency. No metadata was available regarding temple recommend holder, sacrament meeting attendance, and the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders for these figures. The qualifications for determining an active Melchizedek Priesthood holder were unknown. Data on the number, name, and location for branches that became wards were not analyzed in this case study. The Church does not publish the number, name, creation date, and location of member groups. It is unclear how the growth in the number of member groups functioning in the Philippines has changed with recent focus on reactivation efforts. No data regarding congregational and membership growth trends for evangelical groups in the Philippines were available during the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

The outlook for continued progress in achieving real LDS growth in the Philippines appears favorable due to substantial increases in various member activity indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders, increasing numbers of new stakes organized within the past couple years compared to the previous decade, and the steady opening of semi-official (groups) and official (wards and branches) congregations. It is unclear whether recent progress will be sustained for the long term as the Church in the Philippines has historically had short-lived church growth successes due to inconsistent convert baptismal standards, widespread implementation of quick-baptism tactics that incur low convert retention rates, and cultural and societal conditions that hamper member activity and church participation such as transportation challenges and lackadaisical attitudes regarding weekly church attendance and active church participation. Implementation of scriptural mandate for missionary work and the guidelines and principles encouraged by the Church's recently launched website *Hastening the Work of Salvation* has potential to improve member-missionary activity and local leadership accountability for the finding and retention of new converts, and the reactivation of less-active and inactive members. The organization of additional member groups and branches headed by the efforts of mission, stake, and district leadership has excellent potential to jumpstart church growth in many lesser-reached areas.

[1] "Area Presidency Message," Liahona, February 2014. p. N2.
<http://lds.org.ph/bc/content/Philippines/Dateline%20Philippines/2014/Dateline%20February%202014%20English.pdf>

[2] "2013 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[3] "Southern Asia-Pacific Division (1997-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 25 February 2014.
http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=D_SSD

[4] "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%2F>