

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Expansion of LDS Mission Outreach in the Brazil Manaus Mission

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Posted: July 23rd, 2013

Overview

During 2012 and 2013, unprecedented outreach expansion began in the Amazon Basin of Brazil within the Brazil Manaus Mission. In early 2013, the Brazil Amazon Mission consisted of the Panerai Replica Watches Brazilian states of Acre, Amazonas, Rondonia, and Roraima and served a population over 6.2 million.[1] Missionaries serving in the mission have reported that the first convert baptisms and plans for assigning full-time missionaries and organizing groups have been underway in five previously unreached cities including Sena Madureira in Acre State; Coari, Humaitá, and Urucurituba in Amazonas State; and Rorainópolis in Roriama State. Missionaries report plans to open additional locations to missionary work within the near future.

This case study reviews the history of mission outreach expansion within the current boundaries of the Brazil Manaus Mission. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for expanding missionary work into additional locations within the mission are analyzed and discussed. A comparative growth section compares recent outreach expansion efforts within the Brazil Manaus Mission to other missions in Brazil. The growth and size of other proselytizing Christian groups in the region is described and compared to the LDS Church. Limitations to data and findings in this case study are discussed. Lastly, a future prospects section predicts the outlook for the growth of the Church in the Brazil Manaus Mission.

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LDS Background

In 1967, the Church established a presence in Manaus but did not organize its first branch until 1978.[2] The Church appeared to organized its first official congregations in Vilhena in 1984, Porto Velho in 1988, Rio Branco in 1988, Ji-Paraná in 1989, Boa Vista in 1991, Itacoatiara in 1991, Manacapuru in 1991, Ariquemes in 1994, Cruziero do Sul in 1994, Tefe in 1994, Parintins in 1995, Senador Guiomard in 1995, and Maues in 1996. The Church organized its first stake in Manaus in 1988, Rio Branco in 1995, and Porto Velho in 1996. Districts have been organized in Itacoatiara (1994) and Boa Vista (1995). The Church organized the Brazil Manaus Mission in 1990.

In early 2013, the Brazil Manaus Mission appointed two sets of assistants to the mission president and assigned these two companionships to orchestrate the opening of previously unreached cities to proselytism and prepare for the establishment of member groups. By May 2013, five additional cities began to receive LDS outreach including Coari, Humaitá, Rorainópolis, Sena Madureira, and Urucurituba. At the time full-time missionaries reported that the mission was in the process of organizing member groups in each of these cities and assigning permanent full-time missionary companionships. All of these locations have had many new converts baptized within recent months and sacrament meeting services held either weekly, biweekly, or monthly. The opening of each of these five cities marks important milestones for the mission. Sena Madureira is the third most populous city in Acre State and the fourth city to have an LDS presence. Coari was previously the most populous unreached city in Amazonas State with approximately 50,000 inhabitants. With 30,000 inhabitants, Humaitá was the second most populous city in Amazonas State without an official LDS presence. Rorainópolis is the first location outside the state capital of Boa Vista to have an LDS presence established. In May 2013, full-time missionaries serving in Rondonia State reported efforts to organize member groups in various cities surrounding Ji-Parana.

In mid-2013, there were 48 wards and branches in Manaus, eight wards in Rio Branco, six wards and branches in Porto Velho, five branches in Boa Vista, four branches in Itacoatiara, three branches in Cruziero do Sul, two wards in Manacapuru, two branches in

Vilhena, one branch each in Ariquemes, Ji-Paraná, Maues, Parintins, and Tefe and member groups operating on an official or semi-official basis in Candeias do Jamari, Coari, Humaitá, Rorainópolis, Sena Madureira, and Urucurituba. Mission branches in southern Rondonia State were transferred back to the Brazil Cuiaba Mission sometime in 2013. A map displaying cities in the region and status of LDS outreach can be found here.

In 2010, the census reported 8,539 self-identified members in Amazonas, 815 self-identified members in Rondonia, 815 self-identified members in Acre, and 676 self-identified members in Roraima.[3]

Successes

In 2012 and 2013, the Brazil Manaus Mission began its most aggressive outreach expansion efforts since its organization in 1990 as demonstrated by the simultaneous opening of five cities. Mission leaders have utilized effective and original ideas in how to open these cities to missionary activity such as assigning assistants to the mission president to orchestrate the establishment of the Church in these cities. This approach has been successful notwithstanding the immense geographic size of the mission and transportation challenges as these missionaries act as traveling missionaries who spend several days at a time in one city before traveling to another. Ordinary full-time missionary companionships have also traveled to lesser-reached and unreached cities with plans to open additional member groups in these locations such as in Rondonia State. The intermittent contact of mission leaders and new converts and prospective local church leaders offers good prospects for instilling self-sufficiency in local leadership once member groups and branches become formally organized and fully operational. Limited but consistent contact between full-time missionaries and mission leadership with burgeoning groups and small branches of newly baptized members has been shown in many other areas of the world to enhance a sense of responsibility in local members in meeting their own proselytism and church leadership needs. However, success in meeting local leadership and missionary needs strongly depends on newly baptized members developing a personal testimony of the Church and committing to consistently live LDS teachings.

The Church has achieved rapid growth in Manaus over the past two decades. Between 2001 and 2013, the number of wards and branches in Manaus increased from 35 to 48 and the number of stakes increased from five to nine. Rapid growth and the isolated location of Manaus merited the decision to construct a temple in Manaus which was dedicated in 2012. The size of the Church in Manaus and the central location of Manaus within the Amazon Basin provides an excellent headquarters from which to base outreach expansion operations throughout the region.

Opportunities

Populations throughout the Amazon Basin have exhibited high receptivity to LDS outreach for decades. Recently opened cities and currently unreached cities have dozens, if not hundreds, of interested individuals who are willing to meet with missionaries, attend church, and accept baptismal commitments. Virtually all cities with at least 15,000 inhabitants present favorable conditions for the assignment of proselytizing missionaries due to widespread good receptivity to the Church throughout the Amazon Basin. Use of effective missionary and church growth approaches in this favorable environment can maximize growth potential such as planting multiple member groups in the most populous unreached cities and conducting regular investigative visits to unreached cities to locate isolated members, find and teach investigators, and assess conditions for organizing an official church presence and assigning full-time missionaries. There appear good opportunities for organizing additional member groups and branches in virtually all cities with a current LDS presence.

There are additional opportunities for utilizing the concept of traveling missionaries in the Brazil Manaus Mission. One missionary companionship in each major city could be assigned to multiple nearby cities and towns that currently have no formal church unit operating. These missionaries can traverse large geographical areas and pinpoint locations where receptivity is particularly good, where isolated members currently reside, and where sizable numbers of members and investigators merit the organization of a member group if one is not established. The mission has already directed some missionary companionships to work in this capacity in Rondonia state where there is the largest concentration of unreached cities within relatively close proximity to cities with a current LDS unit. Additional locations could benefit from this approach such as towns surrounding Manaus between Manacapuru and Itacoatiara, towns surrounding the Boa Vista area, and cities and towns in Acre State.

Challenges

Quick-baptism tactics continue to be widely implemented throughout the Brazil Manaus Mission resulting in poor convert retention and low member activity rates. Many converts baptized in recently opened cities have had extremely limited prebaptismal preparation. There have been some full-time missionary reports indicating that some individuals have been taught for the first time by missionaires, interviewed for baptism, and baptized all on the same day. Rushed prebaptismal preparation has had a strong correlation with low member activity and convert retention rates and raises doctrinal concerns of whether baptismal candidates meet scriptural guidelines for baptism. Most converts are baptized within a short period of time from receiving missionary lessons or attending church for the first time. Many of these converts fail to develop habitual church attendance and make a sufficient change in personal lifestyle and habits that conflict with LDS teachings, resulting in relapse and poor integration into their respective congregations.

The immense size of the Brazil Manaus Mission and the large number of stakes and districts within its boundaries pose a major challenge for a single mission presidency to effectively administer. Geographically one of the largest missions in Latin America, the Brazil Manaus Mission has vast areas totally unreached by the Church and also one of the most receptive populations to LDS

outreach. These conditions create a major administrative burden on mission leaders to simultaneously conduct missionary activity in established church centers while opening additional cities and towns to proselytism. The creation of a second mission in the region could significantly reduce this burden on leadership and improve greater convert retention accountability.

The Church in the Amazon Basin of Brazil falls short of achieving self-sufficiency in staffing its own missionary needs. The Brazil Manaus Mission has experienced challenges receiving a sufficient number of full-time missionaries to properly staff the mission. The mission remains highly reliant on non-Brazilian missionaries to staff its ranks due to the Church in Brazil remaining unable to meet its own missionary needs. Recent difficulties for foreign missionaries, particularly those from North America, to receive missionary visas has created significant logistical challenges and has likely delayed the opening of additional locations to missionary work within the past five years. The Church remains highly dependent on full-time missionaries to open additional cities to missionary work with little to no involvement from local church leaders in nearby cities. Increased emphasis on seminary and institute attendance before baptism for youth and young adults, more standardized and consistent baptismal standards requiring converts to prepare over a period of a couple months rather than a couple weeks to get baptized, and greater focus on the basic doctrines and teachings of the Church in missionary teaching and mission plan formulation will be necessary steps to augment the number of Brazilians who serve full-time missions and improve member activity and convert retention rates nationwide.

Some cultural and societal conditions present difficulties for the Church to achieve acceptably high convert retention and member activity rates. Brazilian culture has influenced lackadaisical attitudes prevalent among most the population toward weekly church attendance, active participation in church leadership and administration, and total conversion to the Church. These cultural conditions further support the need for longer prebaptismal preparation to ensure that prospective converts join the Church to stay active rather than to appease full-time missionaries pressuring baptism with little sincere, consistent desire to remain active for the long run. A revitalization of member-missionary programs has good potential to address cultural and societal conditions that hamper member activity and convert retention through local members fellowshipping and modeling to investigators how to live LDS teachings.

LDS outreach among Amerindian peoples in the Brazilian Amazon has not occurred and the outlook for outreach in the foreseeable future is poor. The Church has yet to establish a presence in all sizable cities in the region let alone among Amerindian peoples who primarily populate remote, isolated areas far from any established church center. These peoples reside in indigenous reserves, many of which are partially restricted or fully restricted to Christian missionary activity.[4]

Comparative Growth

Within the past decade, the Church in Brazil has not opened as many previously unreached cities to missionaries within such a short period of time as in the Brazil Manaus Mission. The opening of multiple, previously unreached cities to missionaries within a matter of a year or two has appeared to occur only in northeastern Brazil in the Brazil Joao Pessoa Mission. Within the past decade, the Church in Brazil has neither engaged in formal proselytism efforts nor established official congregations in over 400 cities populated by 20,000 or more people.

Other proselytizing Christian groups maintain a more widespread presence in the four Brazilian states covered by the Brazil Manaus Mission than the LDS Church. With the exception of the LDS Church, all sizable proselytizing Christian groups report a presence in virtually every city and major town throughout the region. Protestants comprise the second largest religious group in all four states in the interior Amazon Basin. According to the 2010 census, the percentage of Protestants in the population by state was 34% in Rondonia, 33% in Acre, 31% in Amazonas, and 30% in Roraima.[5] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a pervasive presence in the interior Amazon Basin and in 2012 reported 125,913 members, 742 churches, and hundreds of companies within the states of Acre, Amazonas, Rondonia, and Roraima.[6] Adventists generally baptize over 18,000 new converts a year in these four states[7] - nearly twice the number of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints in this geographical area. The 2010 census reported 155,313 Adventists in Acre, Amazonas, Rondonia, and Roraima (94,953 Adventists in Amazonas, 39,971 Adventists in Rondonia, 11,889 Adventists in Roraima, and 8,500 Adventists in Acre);[8] 14 times the number of Latter-day Saints reported on the census in these four states. Jehovah's Witnesses report 27 congregations in Acre, 132 congregations in Amazonas, 38 congregations in Rondonia, and 11 congregations in Roraima.[9] The 2010 census reported 33,157 Witnesses in these four states (3,521 in Acre, 20,592 in Amazonas, 6,546 in Rondonia, and 2,498 in Roraima); three times the number of Latter-day Saints reported on the census in these four states. Adventists and Witnesses have had a longer presence in the Brazilian Amazon and have engaged in more aggressive and consistent outreach expansion efforts compared to Latter-day Saints. These denominations utilize local and regional missionary resources to head these efforts whereas the LDS Church continues to rely on international missionary resources to fully staff its missionary personnel.

Limitations

Data on the total number and location of member groups in the Brazil Manaus Mission is unknown as the Church does not publish the location of member groups on its official meetinghouse locator website. Information on the location of member groups was obtained from missionary reports. The Church does not publish data on the number of members within administrative divisions in Brazil or in individual cities. Consequently the number of nominal members is unavailable for states covered by the Brazil Manaus Mission. Data on member activity and convert retention rates for the Brazil Manaus Mission is scant but return missionaries report that convert retention and member activity rates have been consistently low. No local leader or member reports were available during the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

The outlook for maintaining an LDS presence in recently opened cities and the opening of additional locations to missionary work appears favorable for the foreseeable future due to major increases in the international full-time missionary force, successes opening additional cities to missionary work in 2012 and 2013, and heightened awareness and concern for reaching cities and towns that have received no Latter-day Saint gospel witness. Once member groups are formally established and achieve minimally sufficient local leadership to staff a branch presidency, independent branches may be organized in Candeias do Jamari, Coari, Humaitá, Rorainópolis, Sena Madureira, and Urucurituba. However, rushed prebaptismal preparation has potential to create inactivity problems in newly opened cities and siphon mission resources into reactivation efforts. Currently unreached cities that may receive missionary visits and have full-time missionaries assigned within the near or medium terms include Benjamin Constant, Cacoal, Carauari, Guajará-Mirim, Jaru, Lábrea, Manicoré, Ouro Preto do Oeste, Pimenta Bueno, Rolim de Moura, and Tabatinga. Some recent missionary reports indicate that the Brazil Manaus may divide in the near future to create a separate mission based in Port Velho. The organization of a second mission in the interior Amazon Basin has excellent potential to maintain additional outreach expansion throughout the region and improve convert retention accountability due to increased mission resource allocation.

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