



Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Rapid LDS Growth in Western Province, Papua New Guinea

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Overview

Geographically the largest province in Papua New Guinea, Western Province is located in western Papua New Guinea and borders the Indonesian province of Papua. According to the 2000 census, Western Province supports a population of approximately 150,000 and ranks as the fifth least populated among the country's 19 administrative divisions. The province is divided into three administrative districts: The North Fly, Middle Fly, and South Fly Districts which are each inhabited by approximately 50,000. Most reside in small villages of only a few hundred individuals. Approximately 45 indigenous languages are spoken in Western Province which pertain to the Eastern Trans-Fly, South-Central Papuan, and Trans-New Guinea language families.^[1] English and Hiri Motu are commonly spoken second languages. Tribalism and Christianity are the dominant influences on society.

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LDS Background

Located on the small island of Daru, the Daru Branch became the first LDS congregation organized in Western Province in mid-1991. The first full-time missionaries were also assigned when the branch began operating.^[2] Additional branches were organized in the 1990s on Daru and by 1999 the Daru Papua New Guinea District was organized. A second district based in Isumo was organized in 2002 which consisted of the Isumo, Sogere, and Suki Branches. At the time the district in Daru had four branches. The Isumo Papua New Guinea District was consolidated with the Daru Papua New Guinea District in 2008.

In 2010, the Sogere Branch became its own district and eight new branches were organized within the boundaries of the district between late 2010 and early 2011, including the Bimaramio, Bina, Bunigi, Kamusi, Miruwo, Oropai, Sisiami, and Torobina Branches. A fifth branch was organized on Daru in early 2011, the Tawoti Branch. In mid-2011, the Suki Branch became its own district and four new branches were organized in the Suki area, the Eniawa, Kiru, Pukaduka, and Sapuka Branches. In mid-2011, the first stake in Western Province and the second stake in Papua New Guinea was formed in Daru with six wards (Daru 1st, Daru 2nd, Isumo, Oti Creek, Tawo'o, and Tawoti). The number of independent LDS congregations in Western Province increased from one in 1991 to seven in 2002 and 20 in 2011.

A devastating cholera outbreak struck Daru and Sogere in late 2010 resulting in the deaths of 76 local Latter-day Saints. Several LDS international church leadership personnel were in the region organizing the Sogere Papua New Guinea District and expedited requests for aid. The LDS Church quickly responded to the epidemic, sending 25 tons of rice, fish, flour, soap, and cooking oil, providing 2,500 water filter bottles, and organizing and funding a special envoy of doctors to treat cholera victims which saved hundreds of lives of severely dehydrated individuals.^[3]

In mid-2011, there was one LDS congregation per approximately 7,700 inhabitants. LDS membership in the Sogere Papua New Guinea District increased from approximately 1,000 in late 2010 to 1,600 in May 2011. Full-time missionaries were assigned for a three-week period in May 2011 prior to holding a district conference to teach and baptize investigators referred by local members, resulting in the baptism of over 180 converts.

Successes

No other rural location in the world over the past few decades has experienced as prolific congregational growth in the LDS

Church as Western Province in so short a period of time. In mid-2011, all recently organized branches were led by local members with only a couple exceptions in the Suki area. The successive organization of a dozen branches in a six month period appears only possible by the previous organization of as many dependent branches or groups as it is nearly impossible for the church to establish as many congregations so quickly without any sort of preexisting church organizational infrastructure. Rapid congregational growth has occurred notwithstanding moderate levels of receptivity in recent years among other Christian groups in the region and very low literacy rates. Many areas are remote and difficult for LDS mission leaders to access but this obstacle has not appeared to have affected recent church growth rates. Remote location appears to have delayed outreach expansion in the past and continues to present difficulties at present considering most of the population resides far from an LDS meetinghouse. The organization of the Daru Papua New Guinea Stake is a significant achievement that indicates self-sufficiency and strong local priesthood leadership as five of the six wards are based Daru Island which is inhabited by less than 15,000 people.

Opportunities

Strong receptivity and mission outreach expansion primarily headed by local members and leaders provide excellent opportunities for continued growth due to little reliance on limited, distant mission leadership and missionary manpower. Remote location and small populations present favorable conditions for establishing additional branches and groups throughout the region. Rapid membership growth in 2011 provides for the organization of additional congregations in the near future if new converts are retained and receive adequate leadership training to lead additional groups and branches. If the recent trend of congregational growth continues, most of the population in the Middle Fly and South Fly Districts may reside within five kilometers of an LDS meetinghouse within the next five years. Most ethnic groups in the region appear to have never received LDS outreach and it is unclear how receptive these groups may be to the LDS Church. Several of the most prominent villages and small towns have no LDS congregations, such as the district capital Balimo in the Middle Fly District, notwithstanding relatively close proximity to villages with branches. LDS meetinghouse construction has accommodated local needs and materials as many congregations appear to meet outdoors or in large huts or tent-like structures built by local members.

LDS congregations operate only in areas populated by speakers of Trans-New Guinean languages. Considering significant progress and very favorable response to the LDS Church and its teachings by speakers of Trans-New Guinean languages, establishing mission outreach centers into additional areas populated by speakers of other language families may further accelerate growth and outreach expansion. Areas which may provide the greatest opportunities to capitalize on receptivity and accessibility include the Fly River delta and villages between Sogere and Suki along the Fly River. Initiating LDS outreach to speakers of Eastern Trans-Fly and South Central Papuan languages appears most favorable in coastal areas of the mainland near Daru. One of the primary cities and a center for interethnic contact, Daru offers significant opportunities for a provincial LDS outreach center to facilitate reaching individuals from regions of Western Province currently unreached by the LDS Church. The establishment of LDS outreach centers in villages in the Daru, Sogere, and Suki areas permits outreach expansion with local member missionaries among receptive populations in the South and Middle Fly Districts. Notwithstanding societal fragmentation caused by extreme ethnic diversity, the LDS Church possesses significant opportunities to capitalize on missionary activity in Western Province as it is one of the politically most stable areas of Papua New Guinea.

The spread of Christianity in the region over the past century and the success of many Christian groups in supplanting traditional religious practices and rituals with common Christian practices has likely improved receptivity to the LDS Church as virtually the entire population possesses a Christian religious background. Religious beliefs and practices held by most the population appear to have improved the effectiveness of utilizing LDS proselytism approaches and materials among local populations as these approaches were developed primarily to use among Christian populations. Today Christianity is strongly rooted in many indigenous ethnic groups. Loyalty to traditional Christian denominations appears modest and has likely not reduced LDS growth trends.

Challenges

Very low literacy rates, poor living standards and access to health care, the perpetuation of the current pace of LDS congregational growth, and the facilitation of newly organized districts to become stakes appear the greatest challenges for LDS Church growth in Western Province. Remote location and adverse travel conditions reduces visits from mission leadership who travel approximately seven hours by dingy from Daru to Sogere on open ocean. The isolated North Fly District is among the most remote locations in Papua New Guinea and remains entirely unreached by the LDS Church notwithstanding its district capital Kiunga ranking as the sixteenth most populous city in the country and eight most populous city without an LDS congregation. As a result of low living standards and isolation from mission headquarters no full-time missionaries are permanently assigned on the mainland. Baptisms often occur in rivers nearby villages with LDS congregations. Crocodiles pose a danger and have necessitated special protocol for baptisms which require men armed with spears to establish a defensive parameter around a shallow area of river near the riverbank. No LDS audio or printed materials are available in languages indigenous to Western Province. The development of local language materials among traditional Christian groups combined with the modest devotion of locals to their traditional Christian denominations may make some recent Latter-day Saint converts vulnerable to counter-proselytism efforts by traditional Christian denominations to reclaim "lost" members.

Low living standards and poor access to health care present safety and health challenges for members and full-time missionaries. HIV/AIDs has spread rapidly in Papua New Guinea due to cultural taboo discussing sexual relations, especially in rural areas.^[4] Malaria is a serious concern due to the tropical climate and abundant wetlands.^[5] Pollution and river water contamination from mining operations in the North Fly District pose additional health concerns. Violent crime targeting non-Papuan in many areas has prevented the assignment of North American young missionaries from nationwide.

Language Issues

Provided with the number of native speakers, languages which appear to be primary spoken by LDS membership in Western Province include Southern Kiwai (9,700) in the Daru area, Suki (3,510) in the Suki area, and Bamu (6,310) in the Sogere area. Some members may also speak Gogodala (22,000) in the Sogere area and Mubami (1,730) in the Kamusi area. LDS congregations provide excellent outreach to Bamu- and Suki-speakers as most speakers of these languages reside within close proximity to LDS congregations in Sogere and Suki. Estimated literacy rates are very low in Western Province. Literacy rates among languages spoken in areas with LDS congregations range from 5-25%. Many indigenous language have extremely few written resources and most only have portions of the Bible translated. There are no LDS materials available in languages native to the region. Translating basic church materials into local languages is unfeasible at present as most languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers, only a small minority of the population is literate, and very few members appear capable of translating church materials into local languages. Below is a language map of Western Province. Areas where LDS congregations operate are circled in red.

Comparative Growth

Recent progress in organizing additional LDS congregations in Western Province is comparable to growth experienced by the Church in Polynesia during the twentieth century. Since 2010 LDS Church growth in Western Province has occurred more rapidly than in any other area of Oceania over the past 30 years.

Other outreach-focused Christians report slow growth in Western Province. The number of Seventh Day Adventist congregations has remained unchanged for over a decade notwithstanding slow membership growth. There were approximately 11,500 Adventists in Western and Gulf Provinces (excluding the Kiunga area) in 2010.^{[6][7]} Today Witnesses and Latter-day Saints have approximately the same number of congregations operating nationwide. Jehovah's Witnesses first established a presence in Papua New Guinea in the 1950s and experienced a rapid expansion of outreach in the late 1950s and early 1960s but do not appear to have experienced significant growth in Western Province. Like Latter-day Saints, Witnesses expand outreach often through members relocating to unreached areas and sharing their beliefs with their local communities.

Prospects

The outlook for future LDS Church growth in Western Province is excellent as the number of LDS congregations has proliferated, a stake in Daru and districts in Sogere and Suki were recently organized, rapid membership growth accompanied by high convert retention has occurred at least over the short term, and vast unreached areas of Western Province appear to offer highly favorable opportunities for future growth. Depending on local needs and leadership development, additional districts may be organized from operating districts in Sogere and Suki such as on the Bamu River delta. Efforts may be focused on facilitating districts in Sogere and Suki to become stakes as the Sogere Papua New Guinea District nearly met the minimal number of members for a stake to be organized in mid-2011. Remote location, low literacy rates, extreme linguistic diversity, tribalism, and health concerns present challenges for future growth. Due to high receptivity, remote location, and a sizable LDS population and presence in some areas, a future LDS mission headquartered on Daru may be warranted to take advantage of unique opportunities for rapid church growth.

^[1] "Papua New Guinea, Map 14," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 6 July 2011.
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_map.asp?name=PG&seq=160

^[2] Wakeley, Alan. "Members make historic trip to temple," LDS Church News, 21 December 1991.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21669/Members-make-historic-trip-to-temple.html>

^[3] Cooper, Christopher. "Cholera epidemic in Papua New Guinea," LDS Church News, 3 January 2011.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21669/Members-make-historic-trip-to-temple.html>

^[4] "Background Note: Papua New Guinea," Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 10 August 2011.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2797.htm>

^[5] "Middle Fly District," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 29 September 2011.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Fly_District,_Western_Province

^[6] "South West Papua Mission (1977-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 6 July 2011.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10455

[7] "2011 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," download.jw.org/files/media_books/yb11_E.pdf, retrieved 29 September 2011.
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