

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Church Growth and Missionary Developments in Laos

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Overview

Inhabited by 6.8 million, Laos has a diverse population that is Lao (55%), Khmou (11%), Hmong (8%), and other ethnicities (26%). Two-thirds of the population is Buddhist, whereas approximately one-third of the population follows other religions. Laos has been a communist state since 1975, although in recent years the country has relaxed some of its socialist economic policies. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Laos for over a decade and has experienced several significant church growth developments within recent years.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Laos. Recent church growth and missionary successes are identified , and opportunities and challenges for future growth are explored. Recent LDS developments in other Southeast Asian countries are reviewed, and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Laos are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

Although the Church had thousands of Laotians join the Church in the United States during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, no Latter-day Saints appeared to live in Laos until the early 2000s. In 1982, the Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Lao.[1] The first senior couple humanitarian missionaries arrived in 1995 and later provided administrative and ecclesiastical support to local members. The first native members in Laos joined the Church outside the country and later returned back to Laos. In June 2003, the Church organized the Vientiane Branch. In February 2006, LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Laos for missionary work. At the time, the first two members from Laos received their mission calls to serve in the Thailand Bangkok Mission. All three members of the branch presidency in 2006 were native members.[2]

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Several notable church growth and missionary developments have occurred in the 2010s. In 2010, church membership in Laos reached 200, with more than 100 attending church meetings in the Vientiane Branch.[3] In 2012, the Church published a translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Lao. At the time the Church reported that there were over 4,500 members who spoke Lao in Laos, Thailand, the United States, and Canada.[4] In February 2013, the Church assigned the first young full-time missionaries to serve in Laos on humanitarian assignment. Young full-time missionaries have since been permitted to provide member support, teaching, and baptismal preparation in the branch meetinghouse on Sundays. Local members and investigators are solely responsible to find and invite people to attend church. Consequently, the Vientiane Branch has experienced excellent member-missionary participation with good results.

As of year-end 2013, there were likely between 230 and 250 total members on church records in Laos.

In June 2014, there were five local members serving full-time missions from the Vientiane Branch, with two additional members awaiting their mission calls. Two young elder missionary companionships were assigned to the branch. At the time, missionaries reported that between 30 and 39 converts had joined the Church within the past year and that 80-89% of converts remain active one year after baptism. Approximately two-thirds of known Latter-day Saints in the country appeared to be active according to estimates by full-time missionaries. At the time, Lao and Hmong ethnicities comprised the majority, with small numbers of foreigners comprising the remainder of church membership.

Most members in Laos currently live outside of Vientiane. Many travel long distances to reach the meetinghouse. The current branch president and many members reside in one village located an hour away from Vientiane. The members drive together in vans or buses to attend church.

In mid-2014, the Church operated three Laotian-speaking congregations in the United States located in Richmond, California; Stockton, California; and Murray, Utah. At the time, additional Laotian-specific outreach also appeared to occur elsewhere in the United States. Some Laotian-specific outreach has also occurred along the Thai-Laotian border in Nong Khai, Thailand.

Successes

The diligence and self-sufficiency of local members to fill branch leadership positions, find and invite friends and family to attend church, and participate in the conversion process for investigators and new converts constitutes the crowning achievement of the Church in Laos within the past decade. Rarely has the Church had a full branch presidency comprised of native members in a country with as recent of an LDS establishment. Native members comprised the entire branch presidency beginning in as early as 2006; just three years after the organization of the Vientiane Branch. The Church has experienced steady growth despite proselytism restrictions due to member-missionary participation. Many members have developed solutions to attend church despite long distances to the meetinghouse, such as carpooling and using buses or vans. Increases in the number of local members serving full-time missions further attests to the growing strength of Laotian membership.

The Church has assigned senior missionary couples and young full-time missionaries despite government restrictions on religious freedom. The Thailand Bangkok Mission has been proactive in capitalizing on any opportunities to establish the Church and proselyte within the confides of the law. Although the religious activities of these missionaries are severely restricted to humanitarian and development work aside from teaching and preparing investigators for baptisms within the Vientiane Branch meetinghouse on Sundays, the assignment of full-time missionaries has provided needed teaching assistance to Laotian members as they find investigators and participate in the conversion and fellowshipping processes.

Due to missionary efforts among Laotians outside of their homeland, the Church has translated many gospel study materials into Laotian including Preach My Gospel, booklets to accompany the missionary lessons, missionary tracts and pamphlets, teaching manuals, scripture study resources, official church proclamations, and the entire Book of Mormon. Many of these materials are available for free by download on the Church's website lds.org.[5] Laotian translations of these materials provide valuable study aids for personal testimony building, leadership development, and member-missionary activity.

The Church has extended consistent Laotian-specific outreach in several locations outside of Laos, most notably in California and Nong Khai, Thailand. Missionary efforts in these locations have yielded good results and have contributed to the growth of the Church in Laos as members visit Vientiane, share the gospel with family and friends, or relocate back to Laos after living abroad.

Opportunities

Members continuing to serve full-time missions and returning back to the Vientiane Branch present excellent opportunities for long-term growth. Returned missionaries provide valuable experience and generally exhibit strong devotion to the Church. Consequently, many return missionaries quickly serve in local leadership positions where they apply their skills and faith to building up their home congregations. Steady increases in the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders will allow the Church to organize a second branch in Vientiane one day and perhaps additional congregations within the greater Vientiane area.

With many members traveling long distances to reach the current Vientiane meetinghouse, there are good opportunities for the Church to organize additional congregations that assemble closer to members' homes. It is unclear whether the Church has not organized additional congregations due to problems with obtaining the needed government permission to do so, or whether the Church has avoided the organization of additional congregations due to limited local leadership. Although traveling long distances to the current meetinghouse has likely contributed to the baptism of more stalwart, devoted converts willing to exercise their faith to the point of regularly attending church despite this inconvenience, the Church maintains only a minimal presence in the country with only one congregation. As Vientiane appears to have greater religious freedom than many other areas of Laos and also boasts the largest urban population in the country, the Church may be able to capitalize on these conditions and organize member groups that assemble in rented spaces or in member homes.

There appear good opportunities for the Church to utilize the handful of Laotian members serving full-time missions to conduct missionary work within Laos. Although the government strictly prohibits proselytism conducted by foreign missionaries, there do not appear to be any restrictions on native Laotians engaging in missionary. Many areas of Laos have sufficient religious freedom to permit passive proselytism practices. The coordination of Laotian full-time missionaries and the Vientiane Branch presidency to visit members residing in other cities has good potential to administer to these isolated individuals and families, and organize member groups that assemble in members' homes if permitted by local government authorities and approved by the Thailand Bangkok Mission and Asia Area Presidency. Although Church avoids the assignment of full-time missionaries to their home congregation due to challenges with missionaries and members maintaining appropriate boundaries and awkward situations that may arise, the assignment of Laotian missionaries to proselytism areas in Thailand near the Laotian border may

be most appropriate to mobilize Laotian missionaries for potential national outreach expansion efforts that consist of regularly visiting other cities with Vientiane Branch presidency members.

Continued coordination between Laotian-speaking congregations in the United States, the Nong Khai Branch in Thailand, Laotian-speaking members in other areas of the world, the Vientiane Branch, and the Thailand Bangkok Mission will be crucial to keep track of Laotian members, achieve national outreach expansion in Laos, and foster a sense of LDS community. The opening of additional member groups and branches in Thai cities along the Thai-Laotian border presents good opportunities for reaching Laotians with few government restrictions on religious freedom. Locations in Thailand that may be favorable for opening to missionary work with the goal of reaching Laotian people include Mukdahan and Nakhon Phanom as both of these cities have at least 30,000 inhabitants and are located on the Laotian border across from major cities in Laos, namely Savannakhet and Thakhèk.

Challenges

Restrictions on religious freedom constitute one of the greatest challenges for the expansion of LDS missionary activity in Laos. Foreigners are strictly forbidden to proselyte. Government officials on a variety of administrative levels have exhibited suspicion of non-Buddhist and non-animist religious groups, and interpret the constitution to restrict or prohibit Christian groups from proselytism, worship, and upholding their beliefs. Christians experience the greatest harassment and restrictions on religious freedom among religious minority groups. Although the central government has generally been consistent in regards to defining the scope of religious practice and even permitting Christian proselytizing by Lao citizens, some provincial and district governments have significantly limited religious freedom for Christians. Local government officials and police in some locations have threatened to arrest Protestants unless they renounce their faith such as in Savannakhet Province. Local government officials have prohibited Christians from constructing meetinghouses and assembling to worship in some locations, such as Luang Namtha Province.[6] Although the LDS Church has often experienced greater devotion from converts and higher member activity and convert retention rates in countries with significant restrictions on religious freedom, the current sociopolitical situation in Laos poses serious challenges for the Church to open additional cities to missionary activity. Consequently the Church in Laos has its presence restricted to only a single branch that operates in Vientiane.

The Church has yet to translate all LDS scriptures into Laotian as no translations are available for the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. The translation of these scriptures will be essential to promote greater gospel scholarship and testimony development among Laotian-speaking members. The lack of translations of these scriptures is a concern considering the Church has maintained a presence among Laotians for several decades but has thus far not produced Laotian translations of these scriptures.

There are no LDS teaching approaches or resources that are specially developed for those with a Buddhist or animist background. Traditional teaching strategies and missionary lessons have been developed for those with a Christian background or a basic understanding of Judeo-Christian principles. There is a great need for the development of materials that explain LDS teachings and doctrines to the understanding of those with little to no understanding of the need for a savior, the concept of sin, and the relationship between God and mankind.

Nearly all of the 86 ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to Laos[7] have never received an LDS gospel witness and most appear to have never had a single individual join the Church in Laos or abroad. The vast majority of these peoples reside in rural mountainous areas near the border with Vietnam, China, and Burma. Access to these peoples will be very difficult even if the Church establishes a widespread presence in Laos in major cities. As no LDS missionary activity has occurred among these peoples, it is unclear how these ethnolinguistic groups will respond to the gospel message.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced several significant church growth and missionary successes in other Southeast Asian nations within the past three or four years. In Thailand, the Church organized a second stake in Bangkok in 2014 after many years of preparation. Substantial gains in the number of members attending church occurred during the early 2010s and the number of converts baptized toppled 1,000 within the first six months of 2014 largely due to improved member-missionary participation. The number of missionaries assigned to Thailand also increased to the highest levels in several decades in 2014 due to increasing numbers of members serving full-time missions worldwide, larger numbers of Thai members serving full-time missions, and the Thai government providing larger numbers of foreign missionary visas to the Church. In Burma, the Church assigned its first young full-time missionaries in February 2014 to provide member support and teach investigators referred by members. In Vietnam, the Church began assigning proselytizing missionaries with Vietnamese ancestry to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City sometime in the 2000s. Recent church growth and missionary developments have included the organization of a member district sometime in the early 2010s, increases in the numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the country within the past couple years, the creation of a second branch in Ho Chi Minh City in 2013, and the government approving the Church's application for official recognition in May 2014. In Cambodia, the Church established two additional districts in Battambang (2010) and Phnom Penh East (2012), and organized its first two stakes on the same day in May 2014.

Some missionary-focused Christian groups report a more widespread presence in Laos than the LDS Church, whereas others appear to have a presence similar in size to the LDS Church if any presence exists at all. Government restrictions on religious freedom appear to limit congregational growth for all groups. Evangelicals and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church are the

largest nontraditional Christian groups. Evangelicals claim 2.6% of the population and have reported steady growth in recent years.[8] Adventists have experienced rapid membership growth within the past decade. In 2002, Adventists reported 594 members, two churches, and 23 companies in Laos, whereas in 2013 Adventists reported 2,115 members and four churches (large congregations).[9] Adventists reported 11 companies (small congregations) in 2012. The number of Adventist baptisms has widely varied year to year, with nearly 700 in 2007 and less than 50 in 2004 and 2011.[10] Jehovah's Witnesses do not report any statistical data on membership and congregations in Laos, but appear to maintain a minimal presence in a couple major cities along the Thai border. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence in Laos.

Limitations

Although several high-quality reports have been gathered from senior missionary couples who have served in Laos over the years, no direct reports from local Laotian members or young full-time missionaries who have served in Laos since their arrival in February 2013 were available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish annual membership figures for Laos, creating challenges to assess how membership growth has changed over time. The Church does not report annual country-by-country statistics for Laos or any other country pertaining to the number of full-time missionaries assigned, the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of converts baptized, and various activity measurements such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of temple recommend holders, and the percentage of converts who remain active one year after baptism. Several nontraditional, missionary-focused Christian groups do not report statistical data for Laos due to government restrictions on religious freedom and limited or no government recognition.

Future Prospects

The outlook for LDS growth in Laos appears favorable for the foreseeable future due to increasing numbers of convert baptisms, good member activity and convert retention rates, members serving full-time missions in larger numbers, and the strength and self-sufficiency of Laotian church leadership. A second branch may be organized in Vientiane once the number of active members becomes too large to be effectively administered by one branch. Depending on government approval and the number of priesthood leaders available, the Church may organize several member groups or small branches that assemble in locations closer to members' homes. Full-time missionaries serving in the Thailand Bangkok Mission express optimism that larger numbers of missionaries will be able to serve in Laos, and that there will be fewer restrictions on proselytism efforts within the near future. However, little progress will likely occur unless the Church is able to establish a presence in additional cities and more thoroughly saturate the Vientiane area with LDS outreach centers.

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