

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent National Outreach Expansion in Brazil

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Overview

The fifth most populous country in the world, Brazil has a homogenously Portuguese-speaking population of nearly 203 million people. Nearly 85% of the national population resides in urban areas. According to 2010 census data, there were 1,043 cities in Brazil with 20,000 or more inhabitants. As of late 2014, the LDS Church reported a congregation (ward, branch, or member group) in 582 of these cities (55.8%) as well as scores of additional cities with smaller populations. Approximately two-thirds of the Brazilian population resides in a city or town with an LDS congregation. In 2013 and 2014, the Church made significant strides in expanding LDS outreach into additional cities where it previously reported no presence. During this two-year period, the Church organized official branches in 25 cities and towns where the Church previously reported no ward or branch, and established member groups in 38 cities and towns where no known LDS presence previously operated. This significant expansion in LDS national outreach culminated in the opening of at least 63 cities and towns, with the vast majority of these urban areas supporting populations of 20,000 or greater. To contrast, during the period from 2006 to 2012 the Church appeared to open wards, branches, and member groups in less than 50 cities and towns where no LDS presence previously operated. Some of this acceleration in growth has been attributed to national outreach expansion vision advocated by the Brazil Area Presidency. In late 2014, local members indicated that the Brazil Area Presidency made a goal to open 146 previously unreached cities with 50,000 or more inhabitants to missionary work by the end of 2015.

This case study identifies cities and towns where the Church in Brazil organized its first official ward, branch, or member group during the two-year period encompassing the years 2013 and 2014. Factors that have influenced accelerated national outreach expansion are identified. Opportunities and challenges for the Church to perpetuate recent outreach expansion trends are explored. Trends in LDS national outreach expansion in other Latin American countries are reviewed. The size, growth, and national outreach capabilities of other missionary-focused Christian groups are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

Cities Where the Church Organized its First Ward or Branch (2013-2014)

Within the past two years, the Church in Brazil organized its first ward or branch in the following 25 cities: Altamira (2014), Caldas Novas (2013), Canaã dos Carajás (2014), Candeias do Jamari (2013), Caxias (2013), Coari (2013), Esperança (2014), Francisco Beltrão (2013), Iranduba (2014), Irecê (2013), Itapipoca (2013), Jaguaruna (2014), Jardim Canadá (2013), Jutaí (2014), Muriaé (2014), Paracuru (2014), Paragominas (2014), Parauapebas (2013), Pecem (2014), Nova Petrópolis (2014), Pirapora (2014), Primavera do Leste (2014), Santo Antônio da Patrulha (2014), Sena Madureira (2014), and Tobias Barreto (2014). The North Region (Amazon Basin) boasted the largest number of cities where the Church established its first ward or branch during 2013 and 2014 (nine cities). The Church reported the organization of its first official congregations in previously unreached cities within the remaining four Brazilian regions including the Northeast Region (seven cities), the South Region (four cities), the Southeast Region (three cities), and the West Central Region (two cities).

Cities Where the Church Organized its Member Group (2013-2014)

Within the past two years, the Church in Brazil organized its first member groups in the following 25 cities: Alta Floresta (2014), Araguari (2014), Bacabal (2014), Balsas (2014), Barra do Piraí (2014), Belém (2013), Bombinhas (2014), Buerarema (2013), Cabeceiras (2013), Cacoal (2014), Campo Verde (2014), Caninde (2014), Catalão (2014), Codó (2014), Fátima do Sul (2014), Gaspar (2014), Humaitá (2013), Iguatu (2014), Laranjal do Jari (2013), Laranjal Paulista (2013), Laranjeiras (2013), Pimenta

Bueno (2014), Mucuri (2013), Presidente Epitácio (2014), Quixadá (2014), Rolim de Moura (2014), Rorainópolis (2013), Salinópolis (2014), Santa Vitoria (2014), São Bernardo (2014), São Gotardo (2014), São Francisco do Conde (2014), Senador Canedo (2014), Teotônio Vilela (2014), Trindade (2014), Una (2013), Urucurituba (2013), and Viadutos (2013). The Northeast Region boasted the largest number of cities where the Church established member groups in previously unreached cities during 2013 and 2014 (14 cities). The Church reported the organization of its first official congregations in previously unreached cities within the remaining four Brazilian regions including the North Region (eight cities), the South Region (six cities), the West Central Region (six cities), and the Southeast Region (three cities).

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A map displaying the location of recently opened cities to missionary work where official congregations or member groups have been established can be found here.

Factors that Have Influenced Accelerated National Outreach Expansion

The surge in the worldwide number of members serving full-time missions has coincided with accelerated national outreach expansion in Brazil. Larger numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Brazil warranted the creation of seven new missions in 2013. This proliferation of new missions has not only provided the needed manpower to open additional cities to missionary activity but has supplied the needed resources and mission leadership to orchestrate this expansion. Mission leaders have consequently taken greater interest and maintained more consistent vision in opening unreached cities to missionary activity through the use of surplus mission resources and personnel.

The Church in Brazil has many members who reside in cities and towns without an LDS congregation. Over the past couple decades, perhaps as many as tens of thousands of members have moved to these locations. Many, if not most, of these members lose contact with the Church due to no nearby LDS presence. The Church in Brazil reported 1.25 million members at year-end 2013, indicating a high probability that most cities with 20,000 or more inhabitants have small numbers of members. The large number of members residing in unreached cities has played a significant role the identification of cities to open for proselytism and the establishment of member groups. Many more active members have requested stake, district, mission, or area leadership to have an LDS congregation established within their city. Locations with an existent membership base provide missionaries with resources and manpower to train and mentor future church leaders, albeit many of these members possess limited experience in church activity, testimony development, and church service.

Brazil has historically had an enormous number of small- and medium-sized cities without LDS congregations. The number of unreached cities has totally overwhelmed the available missionary manpower and resources for most of the Church's history in Brazil. President James E. Faust noted in 1998 that there were 140 cities with over 50,000 inhabitants and 400 cities with over 40,000 inhabitants without LDS missionaries.[1] Today there are 461 cities with at least 20,000 inhabitants and no known LDS congregation or missionaries assigned. To put this statistic into perspective, the Church in most Latin American countries currently reports a presence in all but a handful of cities with 20,000 or more inhabitants. Brazil's massive population combined with comparatively few LDS missionaries assigned and the small percentage of nominal LDS membership in the population have limited national outreach capabilities. Currently there is a major opportunity for the Church to make significant headway in reaching millions more Brazilians through utilizing surplus missionary manpower to open cities to missionary work and establish congregations in these locations.

Successes

The Church has opened at least 63 cities to missionary activity within a period of two years; a significant number of cities for the Church to establish a congregation in within so short a period of time. Although it is difficult to assess what percentage increase in national outreach expansion occurred during this two-year period, the Church may have established a presence in 10% more cities than prior to this surge in national outreach expansion. This stands as a significant accomplishment as the Church in Brazil and other Latin American countries has made little progress within the past decade opening additional cities and towns to proselytism and establishing congregations in these locations.

The Brazil Area Presidency setting the goal to open over a hundred of the most populous unreached cities to missionary activity by the end of 2015 constitutes one of the most significant and meaningful developments for the Church in Latin America within recent memory. This initiative capitalizes on the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions and the significant need for the Church in Brazil to expand national outreach due to tens of millions remaining unreached by the Church.

Opportunities

Brazil has one of the largest full-time missionary forces in the world that is comparable in size to the LDS missionary force in Mexico and only behind the United States in numbers. Both the Church in Brazil and the Church in Mexico have 34 missions; the second largest number of missions for any country after the United States. The Church's missionary training center (MTC) in São Paulo is the second largest missionary facility outside the United States. Large numbers of Brazilian members serve missions within their home country and receive training at the MTC in São Paulo. Current mission infrastructure in Brazil provides many opportunities to continue the expansion of LDS outreach if these resources are tactfully and efficiently distributed among the 34 missions.

Receptivity remains moderate to high in most areas of Brazil notwithstanding increasing secularism and rapid growth among Protestant groups over the past several decades. Other missionary-minded Christian groups have converted many previously receptive individuals in areas without an LDS presence. Many of these denominations continue to report rapid growth in most areas without an LDS presence, suggesting that receptivity remains high and that the Church may experience accelerated membership and congregational growth on a nationwide scale if outreach is expanded into these locations. The increasing influence of secularism in Brazilian society has not appeared to severely reduce receptivity to LDS outreach to the point that massive national outreach expansion efforts would yield few convert baptisms and augmentation of local leadership manpower. Receptivity in even the most secular Brazilian states still remains higher than in most European nations. Consequently continued efforts by mission and area leaders to systematically open hundreds of additional cities and towns to missionary work appear likely to yield good results and the establishment of a permanent LDS presence in the vast majority of these locations.

With tens of millions of Brazilians populating unreached urban areas, the Church has significant opportunities to expand outreach with relatively few mission resources. The 461 cities in Brazil with 20,000 or more inhabitants without a ward, branch, or known member group present the greatest opportunities for national outreach expansion. The Church could feasibly open all of these cities to missionary work within the next decade if it systematically assigns a single missionary companionship to each location and organizes a member group. There remain thousands more cities that support populations ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 where no LDS congregations operate. Many of these locations also appear favorable for exploring church planting efforts, especially with assistance of local church leaders and full-time missionary companionships assigned to nearby cities.

The Church has yet to engage in church planting strategies within the most populous cities that have recently had an LDS presence established. Many of these cities appear favorable for missionaries to establish multiple member groups upon the initial arrival of full-time missionaries. This pattern has been widely implemented in West Africa and has yielded good results. Three or four branches operate in some West African cities where no LDS branch previously operated. The Church may experience similar results if multiple member groups are simultaneously established, such as in the recently opened cities of Caxias, Iguatu, Paragominas, Parauapebas, and Quixadá.

Online proselytism efforts have good potential to harness the opportunities for national outreach expansion in Brazil. Use of social media such as Facebook can target specific cities with missionary-relevant advertisements such as an offer for a copy of the Book of Mormon, online correspondence with a missionary, and information regarding special firesides and cottage meetings organized by mission leaders in these cities. Mission leaders can use internet technologies to raise awareness of the Church preparing to establish a presence in additional cities, and identify receptive individuals for missionaries to begin teaching and preparing for baptism.

Portuguese is widely spoken throughout Brazil and offers excellent opportunities for expanding missionary work into additional locations. The high degree of linguistic homogeneity requires few if any other language resources in most unreached cities. Translations of LDS scriptures and most church materials into Portuguese provide ample gospel study and proselytism resources to spur growth in virtually every area of the country.

Challenges

The Church in Brazil has experienced chronic challenges with obtaining foreign missionary visas and has historically relied on North American missionary manpower to sufficiently staff its Brazilian missions. A shortage of missionary manpower has constituted one of the primary barriers to the Church in experiencing more efficient and speedy national outreach expansion. Comparatively few Brazilian youth and young adults have served full-time missions due to inactivity problems, financial constraints, and a lack of mission preparation and vision from local church leaders in some areas of the country. Foreign missionary visa problems and comparatively few Brazilians serving full-time missions pose challenges for consistently increasing the size of the current missionary force.

Many areas of Brazil with the highest concentrations of unreached cities have inadequate mission infrastructure to orchestrate significant outreach expansion. Maranhão State, for example, has no LDS mission headquartered within the state despite supporting a population of nearly seven million. Other states experience similar problems with limited mission infrastructure. Pará State supports a population of eight million but has only one LDS mission, whereas Minas Gerais State supports a population of more than 20 million but has only two LDS missions, Rio de Janeiro State supports a population of over 16 million but has only one mission is headquartered in the state, and Pernambuco State supports a pupulation of over nine million and has only one mission. The creation of additional missions in these and other states appears warranted to provide the needed resources and administrative supervision to achieve more significant national outreach expansion.

Many, if not most, Brazilian missions continue to implement quick-baptism tactics. Full-time missionary reports from one Brazilian mission indicate that in extreme cases mission leaders have approved convert baptisms to occur on the same day that some individuals initially met with full-time missionaries. Rushed prebaptismal preparation is strongly correlated with low convert retention and member activity rates as most of these converts fail to develop personal habits of weekly church attendance and living in harmony with LDS teachings that conflict with Brazilian cultural norms such as casual sexual relations and regular use of coffee, tobacco, and alcohol. Consequently the Church in Brazil continues to experience low member activity and convert retention rates, thereby frustrating local leadership development efforts in recently reached cities. Greater care to ensure that investigators develop habitual church attendance prior to baptism and that these new members are prepared to become asserts rather than liabilities to fledgling congregations will be essential for the Church to achieve ongoing national outreach expansion, especially if the supply of full-time missionaries becomes disrupted and if receptivity to LDS outreach declines.

The Church in Brazil made little progress expanding outreach during the 2000s. Some Brazilian states did not have a single city open for missionary work and have a congregation organized during this decade. The Church appeared to make little progress augmenting the size of the full-time missionary force during this period due to stagnant growth in the worldwide number of members serving full-time missions. The lack of national outreach expansion during this period also indicates the reliance of the Church in Brazil on full-time missionaries to open additional cities to missionary work and open new congregations as opposed to local church leaders orchestrating these outreach expansion efforts. As a result of the lack of national outreach expansion during the 2000s, the Church missed opportunities in some areas of the country to reach populations when they were more receptive to LDS outreach than at present. Other missionary-focused groups with a more widespread presence and significantly greater resources in Brazil such as the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses have shepherded many individuals who may have previously been receptive to LDS outreach.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Brazil has experienced significantly more rapid national outreach expansion during the 2010s than in other Latin American countries. Only the Church in Peru has opened a noticeable number of cities to missionary work within recent years. Approximately two dozen Peruvian cities and towns have appeared to have branches and member groups established. However, the pace of national outreach expansion in Peru falls vastly short of the Church in Brazil during this period. The Church in Mexico has appeared to open only a handful of previously unreached cities to missionary work notwithstanding the opening of eight new missions in 2013. Only a handful of cities and towns have had congregations organized and missionaries assigned for the first time in other Latin American countries within the past two years, including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a substantially more widespread presence in Brazil than the LDS Church. These denominations have maintained a presence in Brazil for approximately the same duration as the LDS Church, but have implemented outreach expansion strategies more efficiently and consistently than Latter-day Saints. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reports nearly 5,400 congregations in Brazil. The Adventist Directory indicates that Adventists have established congregations in virtually every location where the LDS church has established congregations. Most of these locations have many more Adventist congregations than LDS congregations, and Adventists report a presence in significantly more locations than the LDS Church. As of late 2014, Adventists in Maranhão State reported 164 congregations that assemble in 59 cities and towns,[2] whereas the LDS Church reported 21 congregations in nine cities and towns. Adventists maintain a more pervasive presence even in Brazilian states where the LDS Church has its most widespread presence. In Rio Grande do Sul State, Adventists reported 324 congregations[3] whereas the LDS Church reported only 192. Jehovah's Witnesses also report a significantly more widespread national presence in Brazil. In 2013, Witnesses reported 11,340 congregations in Brazil;[4] more than five times the number of LDS congregations in Brazil at the time.

Limitations

The organization of new branches in cities where no ward or branch operated prior to 2012 was assessed through the Church's official websites. Many of these cities had member groups established prior to the creation of an official branch. Consequently the organization of new branches in these cities during 2013 and 2014 may not reflect national outreach expansion efforts during these two years but efforts that began prior to this time. The Church does not publish information on the number and location of member groups and other semi-official congregations. Local member and full-time missionary reports provided data on all member groups reported and analyzed in this case study. Some of the member groups reported in this case study may no longer operate.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to experience ongoing national outreach expansion in Brazil appears favorable within the foreseeable future. Area and mission leaders in many areas of the country have consistently advocated for assigning missionaries and opening new congregations in previously unreached cities and towns. The goal to open 146 of the most populous unreached cities to missionary work and establish congregations in these cities predicts that there will be considerable progress in expanding national outreach within the near future. The Church has recently organized many new missions and the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Brazil has also appeared to substantially increase. However, relatively few Brazilian serving full-time missions and frustrations obtaining sufficient numbers of foreign missionary visas may pose challenges to staff needed manpower to orchestrate national outreach expansion. The Church may organize additional missions if there is sufficient missionary manpower to do so. Poor convert retention rates and low member activity rates remain ongoing frustrations and barriers to the Church achieving greater growth and self-sufficiency in national outreach expansion. Failure to instill adequate prebaptismal preparation and develop self-sufficient congregations in recently opened cities may result in a dramatic halt to national outreach expansion if recently organized congregations require excessive supervision and support from mission leadership.

[1] "Brazilians honor President Faust as 'one of their own'," LDS Church News, 9 May 1998. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/31720/Brazilians-honor-President-Faust-as-one-of-their-own.html

[2] "Browse MA, Brazil," www.adventistdirectory.org, retrieved 18 October 2014. http://www.adventistdirectory.org/BrowseStateProv.aspx?CtryCode=BR&StateProv=MA

[3] "Browse Brazil," www.adventistdirectory.org, retrieved 18 October 2014. http://www.adventistdirectory.org/BrowseCountry.aspx?&CtryCode=BR

[4] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/