

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Church Growth and Missionary Successes in Hong Kong

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Overview

Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China and supports a population of 7.1 million. Cantonese-speaking Chinese comprise nearly nine-tenths of the population. Other Chinese peoples and foreigners comprise the remainder of the population. Followers of Chinese religions constitute 90% of the populations whereas Christians comprise the remaining 10% of the population. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Hong Kong since the 1950s. The Church experienced slow but steady growth during the twentieth century. A significant decline in the number of congregations occurred in the 2000s. Church growth challenges have historically consisted of severe inactivity problems, few convert baptisms, and the population exhibiting low receptivity to LDS outreach. Significant progress has occurred for the Church within the past few years resulting in a reversal of negative growth trends. Progress has been attested by consistent net increases in the number of congregations and improvements in augmenting the number of active members.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Hong Kong. Recent church growth and missionary successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are predicted. The growth of the Church in other industrialized East Asian nations is reviewed. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in Hong Kong are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

The Church in Hong Kong established a permanent presence in the early 1950s. The Southern Far East Mission was organized in 1955 and was headquartered in Hong Kong. The Church organized its first member district in 1965. The Chinese translation of the Book of Mormon was first printed in 1965. Remaining LDS scriptures were printed in 1974. In 1969, the mission was named the Hong Kong-Taiwan Mission and two years later the mission divided, resulting in the Hong Kong Mission administering Hong Kong and Macau.

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Membership reached 1,300 in 1959 and 3,000 in 1964. In 1987, there were 14,000 members. Membership increased to 18,000 in 1993, 20,702 in 2000, 22,263 in 2005, 24,425 in 2010, and 24,528 in 2013. Annual membership growth rates have generally ranged from 1-2% since 2000.

In the early 1990s, returned missionaries reported that most wards had between 70 and 90 active members. At the time members serving full-time missions from Hong Kong constituted one-third of the full-time missionary force. The China Hong Kong Mission baptized between 100 and 200 converts during most years in the early 1990s.

The number of congregations increased from 24 in 1987 to 32 in 1993, 39 in 2000, and 41 in 2001. In 2001, the Church reached an all-time high for the number of congregations as 41 congregations operated (28 wards, 13 branches). The number of congregations declined to 39 in 2002, 37 in 2003, 36 in 2005, 33 in 2006, and 32 in 2008. Congregations discontinued during this seven-year period included the Fanling, Hung Shui Kiu, Kowloon City, Kwai Chung 2nd, Ngau Tau Kok (YSA), Pokfulam, and Tuen Mun 2nd Wards, and the Shau Kei Wan Branch. The Church reached a low of 32 congregations (23 wards, 9 branches) during the four-year period spanning 2008 to 2011. Inactivity problems were primarily responsible for the number of congregations declining by over 20% between 2001 and 2008. Significant congregational decline culminated in the

discontinuation of the Hong Kong Kowloon East Stake in 2006. Declines in the number of congregations and continued steady increases in membership resulted in incommensurate membership and congregational growth from 2002 to 2011. Consequently, the average number of members per congregation skyrocketed from 514 to 726. In 2010, the average number of members per ward or branch reached an all-time high of 763 members - the second highest members-to-units ratio in the world. In 2011, 12-16% of church membership in Hong Kong appeared to attend church on a regular basis.

The Church reversed its trend of stagnant or declining congregational growth in the early 2010s. The Church organized five new wards during the three-year period from year-end 2011 to year-end 2014 including the Hung Shui Kiu (2012), Ngau Tau Kok (2013), Pokfulam (2014), Castle Peak Bay (2014), and Kowloon City (2014) Wards. In late 2014, there were 37 congregations (28 wards, 9 branches). A map displaying current and previous LDS units in Hong Kong can be found here.

In late 2014, full-time missionaries reported that the China Hong Kong Mission and the Asia Area had a shared focus to organize additional congregations and reestablish a fifth stake in Hong Kong. Reactivation efforts have comprised the primary objective in reversing stagnant growth trends that persisted during the 2000s. Church leaders also appeared motivated to improve the accessibility of congregations to the population by organizing additional wards. Missionaries report that some wards, including recently organized ones, had few active members. In mid-2014, missionaries reported that one newly organized ward had approximately 50 active members. Missionaries reported plans to organize an additional Mandarin Chinese-speaking branch in the Tolo Harbour area within the near future.

The Church in Hong Kong has also recently experienced success in augmenting the number of convert baptisms. In July 2014, the China Hong Kong Mission baptized 48 converts - a significantly larger number than the number of baptisms the mission has historically baptized within a single month. Missionaries have reported instances of entire families joining the Church at the same time. In December, missionaries reported that stake leaders had organized special firesides for recent converts to share their conversion stories and fellowship one another.

In 2013, one in 296 was nominally LDS in Hong Kong.

Successes

Annual net increases in the number of congregations constitute the Church in Hong Kong's crowning church growth achievement within recent memory. Increasing numbers of congregations strongly correlates with increasing numbers of active members. The Church cannot organize additional wards unless there is sufficient leadership manpower and active membership available to staff the administrative needs of additional congregations. The Church has historically organized new wards when current wards are unable to meet the ecclesiastical needs of its membership or if geographical distance poses challenges for a single unit to properly function. The steady and accelerating trend of congregational growth in Hong Kong implicates substantial growth in the number of active members as geographical distances do not pose significant challenges for church administration. The Church in Hong Kong's progress in reversing congregational growth trends deserves the praise and the attention of church leaders worldwide. Rarely has the Church reversed trends of declining or stagnant congregational growth within industrialized countries where Western secularism exhibits a strong influence on society. Analysis of the principles utilized and vision adopted by the China Hong Kong Mission and the four Hong Kong stakes may reveal approaches that can be implemented in other industrialized and secularized countries in order to accelerate “real growth.”

The Church has exhibited good collaboration between the China Hong Kong Mission, the Asia Area Presidency, and local church leaders such as stake presidencies, bishoprics, and branch presidencies. Consistent vision and shared focus to reactive less-active members and augment the number of convert baptisms has yielded surprisingly good results in terms of active membership increases necessitating the organization of additional church units. Success achieved by the Church in Hong Kong has potential to be sustained into the coming years if mission, area, stake, and ward/branch leaders remain united and dedicated to more effective reactivation efforts and member-missionary participation.

Full-time missionaries serving in Hong Kong within the last couple years report diligent efforts by local church members and the China Hong Kong Mission to reactive less-active members. Missionaries reported that the mission tracked the number of reactivated less-active or inactive members along with other traditional statistics recorded on a weekly basis such as the number of lessons taught to investigators and the number of investigators with a baptismal date. Emphasis on reactivation has appeared to equal or exceed the emphasis on baptizing new converts. This statistical focus has helped full-time missionaries and local members collaborate and channel resources into more productive activities that have a better likelihood of generating a long-term pay off for the Church in terms of resuscitating chronic inactivity problems. Local members have also appeared more involved in the conversion process. Many new converts have been referred by less-active members returning to activity. Church leaders have also organized special firesides for new members to help curb convert attrition problems, which may have improved convert retention rates compared to previous years. Elder Chi Hong (Sam) Wong gave his October 2014 General Conference address in Cantonese - the first General Conference talk ever to be given in a language other than English. The subject of his talk centered on the importance of unity in missionary work with local church members and full-time missionaries collaborating on reactivation efforts.[1]

The China Hong Kong Mission has taken proactive measures to extend more widespread outreach among ethnolinguistic minorities. The mission made diligent efforts to establish a second Mandarin-speaking branch. Full-time missionaries noted in mid-2014 that there were eight full-time missionaries (two young elder companionships and two sister companionships)

designated for outreach among Mandarin speakers within the Tolo Harbour area. Missionaries serving in the Taipo Ward reported that Mandarin speakers wore headsets to receive translation of the Cantonese-speaking sacrament meeting services. Missionaries indicated that the ward also held a Mandarin-speaking Sunday School class separate from Cantonese speakers. Mission, stake, and ward leaders have collaborated in these efforts as evidenced by the mission assigning multiple missionary companionships to concentrate resources on the establishment of a second Mandarin-speaking branch in Hong Kong and local church leaders providing support and encouragement in the process.

Opportunities

Recent successes in the organization of new wards suggest that there are good opportunities for continued growth. The average ward or branch in Hong Kong continues to administer an overwhelmingly large number of inactive members. In late 2014, the average ward or branch appeared to have at least 675 members within its geographical boundaries and only 100 or fewer active members. The establishment of branches in some locations may be more effective than the creation of new wards as branches require fewer active members. Locations that appear favorable for the organization of new congregations include Kau Liu Ha, Kwan Tei, Sai Kung, Shek Yam, Stanley, and Yau Tam Mei Tsuen.

The Church has good opportunities to organize additional language-specific congregations for foreigners who reside in Hong Kong. Foreigners have exhibited good receptivity to LDS outreach, particularly Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese. The assignment of Mandarin-speaking full-time missionaries to each stake may be effective in laying the groundwork for the organization of additional Mandarin-speaking branches in a similar fashion to current efforts in the Tolo Harbour area. The establishment of language-specific congregations for speakers of Tagalog, Indonesian, and Hong Kong Sign Language may be effective in establishing a stronger LDS community among these people groups. Full-time missionaries have reported that there are a sizable number of deaf members and investigators in some congregations. Local church leadership has indicated there is a need for specialized outreach among the deaf community in Hong Kong Sign Language. Mission leaders designating one or two missionary companionships for proselytism efforts in Hong Kong Sign Language may be effective in capitalizing on opportunities for growth. The establishment of a member group or branch to service deaf members may also be effective to promote a sense of LDS community and provide specialized outreach among this subset of the Chinese population.

Returned missionaries report that some cultural characteristics have enhanced LDS missionary efforts. One returned missionary noted that proxy temple work is easily accepted by many in Hong Kong due to similar practices in traditional Chinese religions. The cosmopolitan atmosphere in Hong Kong has also appeared more inviting and accommodating to religious minorities compared to other locations in East Asia.

Challenges

It is unclear whether reactivation successes among less-active and inactive members during the early 2010s will be sustained in the long-term. Many wards have hundreds of less-active or inactive members. Missionaries serving in the Kwai Chung area reported that in late 2014 there were at least 400 inactive members who resided within the ward boundaries. The number of congregations continues to remain less than the number of congregations 12 years earlier notwithstanding the organization of several new wards within the past three years and steady increases in the number of members on church records. The Church in Hong Kong has experienced one of the lowest member activity rates in the international church. Western secularism and traditional Chinese religion have likely reduced participation in organized religion among Christian groups and have influenced activity trends among LDS membership. Rushed prebaptismal preparation to reach arbitrary baptismal goals has also contributed to inactivity problems. These problems have been manifest by the net decline in the number of congregations from 2001 to 2008, stagnant congregational growth from 2008 through 2011, and one of the highest members-to-units ratios for the Church. These statistics suggest problems with the retention of new converts, an insufficient number of active members to organize additional congregations, and shortages in local leadership manpower.

The influence of Western secularism on society and adherence to traditional Chinese religions poses challenges for LDS missionary activity. Most the Chinese population in Hong Kong identifies as nonreligious. Secularism has promoted many values that stand in opposition to LDS teachings such as casual sexual relations. Many investigators and less-active members have challenges abstaining from substances prohibited by the Word of Wisdom. The intergenerational nature of traditional Chinese religions often discourages adults from full conversion and participation in the Church due of the concerns of parents. Some rituals in traditional Chinese religions may oppose LDS teachings. Some members and investigators struggle with differentiating between customs and practices that can be retained after conversion or reactivation in the Church and those that cannot.

Church growth efforts among ethnic minority groups face many challenges due to the transient nature of many of these peoples. Missionaries have reported problems with local leadership development among Mandarin speakers. Many Mandarin speakers temporarily reside in Hong Kong for educational purposes but do not provide a long-term resources in the establishment of a permanent, self-sufficient LDS presence.

Counterproselytism efforts from other missionary-focused Christian groups have posed challenges for growth. Some religious groups have discouraged others from investigating the Church and portray the Church in a negative light. This has resulted in many receiving a tainted first impression of the Church.

Comparative Growth

The Church in East Asia has experienced very slow or stagnant growth in most industrialized nations since 2000. The Church in Hong Kong stands as the only location within the past decade where the Church has experienced a major decline in the number of congregations followed by a major increase in the number of congregations. Other countries have typically experienced a major net decline in the number of congregations, no noticeable net change in the number of congregations, or a slight net increase in the number of congregations. In Japan, the Church has experienced a significant decline in the number of congregations within the twenty-first century. The Church reached an all-time high for the number of congregations in 2000 when 317 units (175 wards, 142 branches) operated. Steady decline in the number of congregations has occurred since this time. In late 2014, the Church in Japan reported 267 congregations (158 wards, 109 branches) - a net decline of 50 congregations (16% decrease) within a 14-year period. In South Korea, the Church has reported one of the most significant declines in the number of congregations for the worldwide church. The Church in South Korea reached a high of 175 congregations (105 wards, 70 branches) in 1999. In late 2014, the Church in South Korea reported 126 congregations (82 wards, 44 branches) - a net decline of 49 congregations (28% decrease). In Taiwan, the Church has experienced a dramatic slowdown in membership and congregational growth rates within the past 15 years. The number of congregations increased from 76 (36 wards, 40 branches) in 2000 to 104 (83 wards, 21 branches) in 2014. The number of members increased from approximately 30,000 to nearly 57,000 during this period. However, annual membership growth rates decreased from over 10% in the early 2000s to less than three percent since 2011. Congregational growth has been essentially stagnant since 2008 when there were 101 congregations (79 wards, 22 branches). In mainland China, the Church experienced prolific membership and congregational growth from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s. This growth was attributed to mainland Chinese who joined the Church abroad that remained converted and dedicated to living LDS teachings upon their return to China. These converts have shared the gospel with family members within the confides of the law resulting in the baptism of additional converts. The Church regularly organized new member groups and branches to administer these members. In Singapore, the Church has experienced slow congregational growth but has never appeared to have discontinued a ward or branch within the past two decades. The number of congregations increased from eight in 2000 (six wards, two branches) to 11 in 2014 (10 wards, one branch).

The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups have significantly varied by denomination. Evangelicals comprise half the Christian population in Hong Kong and number approximately 430,000. Evangelicals indicate that the influence of traditional Chinese religion and secularism on society pose challenges for growth.[2] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in Hong Kong. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 5,435 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 68 congregations, and 238 baptisms.[3] In late 2014, Witnesses operated congregations in the following languages: Cantonese Chinese (37), English (20), Mandarin Chinese (7), Indonesian (2), Tagalog (1 congregation, 3 groups), Hong Kong Sign Language (1), Thai (1), and Nepali (1 group). The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has reported stagnant congregational growth and slow membership growth within the past decade. In 2003, Adventists reported 4,148 members, 18 churches (large or well-established congregations), and six companies (small or recently-established congregations) whereas in 2013 Adventists reported 5,058 members, 19 churches, and two companies. Adventists have baptized approximately 100 new converts a year since 2003.[4] The Church of the Nazarene operates a minimal presence in Hong Kong. In 2013, Nazarenes reported less than 300 members, an average weekly worship of 159 people, and two congregations.[5]

Limitations

Although many high-quality reports from current missionaries were available during the writing of this case study, no reports from local church leaders were available. The Church does not publish data pertaining to the number of active members, sacrament meeting attendance, or the number of members who hold temple recommends. Changes in official LDS statistics that track reactivations or the number of active members were unavailable to study. The Church does not release country-by-country information to the public regarding the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the number of convert baptisms.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Hong Kong to perpetuate recent church growth and missionary successes appears mixed. Progress has been unprecedented in reactivation efforts and augmenting the number of convert baptisms. Additionally, some statistics suggest noteworthy improvements in real growth such as the organization of several new wards despite a major contraction in LDS outreach within Hong Kong during the 2000s. However, the Church in Hong Kong has historically struggled with one of the lowest member activity rates in the world. The influence of secularism and Chinese religion on society has posed significant cultural challenge for full-time missionaries to overcome in teaching investigators and reactivating less-active members. Past experience has shown that similar successes in other countries are often short-lived due to changes in leadership, the minimum standards for prebaptismal preparation, receptivity to LDS proselytism, and the availability of missionary resources.

[1] Wong, Chi Hong. "Rescue in Unity," General Conference, October 2014. https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/10/rescue-in-unity

[2] "China, Hong Kong," Operation World, retrieved 18 December 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/chnh

[3] "2013 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[4] "Hong Kong-Macao Conference (1999-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 18 December 2014. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2529589

[5] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," nazarene.org, retrieved 18 October 2014. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDwQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnazarene.org%2Ff