

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Church Growth and Missionary Successes in Taiwan

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Overview

Inhabited by 23.3 million people, Taiwan is an island nation in East Asia that is 98% Chinese (84% Taiwanese, 14% mainland Chinese) and 2% indigenous. The LDS Church established an initial presence in the late 1950s and experienced moderate growth during the latter half of the twentieth century. The Church achieved nearly commensurate membership and congregational growth rates between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s, but experienced a substantial slowdown in all church growth indicators from the mid-2000s until the early 2010s. Decelerating LDS growth reversed in the mid-2010s as evidenced by the organization of several new congregations (wards and branches) and the creation of new stakes.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Taiwan and discusses past church growth successes. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are discussed. LDS growth trends in other East Asian countries are compared to the Church in Taiwan. The size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Growth History

The Church organized the first branch, assigned the first missionaries, and dedicated Taiwan for missionary work in the late 1950s. In 1958, there were 200 members. Membership increased to 8,390 in 1975, 10,016 in 1983, 21,000 in 1993, 33,506 in 2001, 51,090 in 2009, and 57,889 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates widely fluctuated during the 1970s and 1980s from as low as -2.7% in 1977 to as high as 10.7% in 1989, but generally ranged from 2-8%. Annual membership growth rates usually ranged from 4-6% during the 1990s and 2000s with the exception of the three-year period from 1999 to 2002 when annual membership growth rates ranged from 9-12%. Annual membership growth rates declined in the early 2010s to 2.7% in 2011, 2.3% in 2012, and 1.8% in 2013. The Church reported an annual membership growth rate of 1.9% in 2014.

There were 30 branches in 1975. The total number of congregations reached 47 in 1987 (19 wards, 28 branches), 57 in 1995 (22 wards, 35 branches), 76 in 2000 (36 wards, 40 branches), 92 in 2005 (69 wards, 23 branches), and 102 in 2009 (80 wards, 22 branches). The total number of congregations declined in the early 2010s to 100 in 2012 (79 wards, 21 branches). Congregational growth trends rebounded in the mid-2010s to 105 in 2014 (84 wards, 31 branches) and 113 in late 2015 (96 wards, 17 branches)

There were three districts in 1975. The Church organized its first stake in 1976. The number of stakes reached two in 1981, three in 1982, five in 1997, seven in 2001, nine in 2004, 11 in 2010, and 14 in late 2015 whereas the number of districts totaled two in 1987, three in 1991, four in 1993, five in 1999, four in 2001, three in 2003, two in 2004, one in 2010, two in 2011, and one in late 2015.

In 1971, the Church organized its first mission in Taiwan in Taipei. In 1976, a second mission was organized in Kaohsiung. The mission was later relocated to Taichung in 1983. In 1998, the Church organized a third mission based in Kaohsiung, but discontinued the mission in 2009.

The number of active members per congregation has appeared to remain consistent over the past decade. In the early 2000s,

missionaries reported that most congregations had between 60 and 130 active members whereas in the early 2010s, most congregations appeared to have between 60 and 150 active members. In 2013, one ward in the Kaohsiung area had 140 attending sacrament meeting and one branch in the Chia Yi Taiwan District had over 90 attending church. Approximately 20% of members nationwide appear to be active. Data from returned missionaries over the past two decades indicates that approximately 30-40% of converts remain active one year after baptism.

Recent Church Growth Developments

Several church growth developments that began in 2013 suggest measureable progress in reversing decelerating growth trends that persisted from the mid-2000s until the early 2010s. Increases in the number of active members have occurred in remaining member districts and mission presidents have focused on helping these districts become stakes in the near future. A mission president reported that a nationwide priesthood conference was held in October 2013 with the Asia Area Presidency, all four Taiwanese area seventies, both Taiwanese mission presidents, and all stake and district presidencies in the country. The content of the conference focused on helping the Church increase the number of stakes from 11 to 20 within the foreseeable future although details on how this ambitious goal would be accomplished were not disclosed. The Church has organized four new stakes and one new district since 2010. New stakes organized have included Kaohsiung East (2010), Taipei South (2014), Taichung South (2015), and Hualien (2015) whereas the new district organized was located in Chia Yi (2011). The Church organized 14 new wards or branches between early 2012 and October 2015 including the Luchou Branch (2012), Tungying Ward (2013), Taitung 3rd Branch (2014), Tanfeng Ward (2014), Sanhsia Ward (2014), Tali Ward (2014), Tsuihua Ward (2015), Wuchuan 3rd Ward (2015), Chingshui Branch (2015), Tungfeng Branch (2015), Minhsiung Branch (2015), Kuishan Ward (2015), Taoyuan 4th Ward (2015), Chungho 2nd Ward (2015), Hualien 3rd Ward (2015) Most of these new units were organized in the Taipei/Taoyuan (6) and the Taichung (5) metropolitan areas. Taiwan Taichung Mission also organized the Church's first member group on Jinmen (Kinmen) Island in July 2013.

Missionaries serving in Taiwan during 2015 reported efforts to organize several additional stakes in Taiwan within the foreseeable future. Missionaries reported that the following stakes may divide to create new stakes in the near future: the Kaohsiung Taiwan East (8 wards, 1 branch), Kaohsiung Taiwan West (8 wards), Taipei Taiwan East (7 wards), and Tao Yuan Taiwan (9 wards). The Chia Yi Taiwan District also appeared close to meeting the minimum criteria to operate as a stake in late 2015.

Successes

Within the past couple years, the Church in Taiwan has successfully reversed stagnant congregational growth trends in several locations. Focus from area, mission, and stake leaders to organize additional stakes and achieve “real growth” has appeared responsible for this development. The percentage increase in the number of congregations during the first nine months of 2015 has been the highest experienced by the Church in Taiwan since 2003. The reactivation of less-active or inactive members and the improvement of convert retention has appeared primarily responsible for these improvements as accelerating congregational growth rates have occurred notwithstanding no change in membership growth rates per 2014 membership data.

The Church in Taiwan has steadily organized new stakes since the mid-1990s despite periods of slow or stagnant growth. The number of stakes has more than tripled within the past 20 years suggesting increases in the number of active members and Melchizedek Priesthood holders. Several districts have matured into stakes during this period, indicating improved self-sufficiency in local church leadership in areas with a more limited LDS presence. Renewed vision to accelerate growth for the entire country has potential to sustain real, long-lasting results if these plans are consistently followed, member-missionary participation improves, and sufficiently strict convert baptismal standards are maintained.

The Church in Taiwan is the only industrialized East Asian nation that has not experienced periods of widespread congregation consolidations. There have appeared to be only a handful of wards or branches ever closed in Taiwan and only two congregations have been discontinued since 2011: the Shih Pai Ward in 2012 and the Taichung YSA Branch in 2015. The Church in most industrialized countries in the region has experienced periods of widespread ward and branch consolidations such as in Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea during the 2000s. This finding suggests that the Church in Taiwan has achieved greater self-sufficiency in local leadership and higher member activity and convert retention rates compared to other industrialized countries in the region. The Taiwanese population has also appeared more receptive to the LDS gospel message within the past 15 years in comparison to other industrialized East Asian nations.

The Church has recently organized new congregations in cities where no previous LDS units operated. The establishment of the first member group on Jinmen in the early 2010s constitutes a major church growth and missionary success for the Church in Taiwan as this development occurred almost entirely through member-missionary efforts. Mission leadership facilitated the organization of the Jinmen Group initially without the assistance of full-time missionaries. Additional cities where the first LDS congregations have been organized include Minxiong (Minhsiung) and Guishan (Kuishan).

The Church in Taiwan has achieved some of the greatest penetration of LDS outreach among countries in Asia. The Church currently maintains an average of one LDS mission per 11.7 million people in Taiwan – a smaller target population than the average mission in South Korea (one mission per 12.3 million), Japan (one mission per 18.1 million), Thailand (one mission per 68.0 million), Indonesia (one mission per 256 million), or India (one mission per 626 million). The population of several administrative counties in Taiwan has some of the highest percentages of nominal Latter-day Saints in East Asia. According to

data from the early 2010s, estimated LDS membership accounts for at least 0.30% (one member per 330 or fewer people) in eight counties such as Hsinchu (0.42%), Nantou (0.31%), and Taichung Shih (0.30%). A combination of the population exhibiting moderate receptivity to the Church and the Church mobilizing greater mission resources to Taiwan than many other countries in the region appears responsible for this progress.

The Church in Taiwan has played a significant role in the establishment of the Church in mainland China. Missionaries have reported small numbers of mainland Chinese joining the Church in Taiwan and later returning to mainland China. Similarities in culture, language, history, and religion have provided unique proselytism opportunities for the Church in reaching mainland Chinese who are currently unreached within their home country by traditional LDS missionary paradigms.

The Church remains relatively strong among youth and young adults as evidenced by good attendance at special youth or YSA conferences and good levels of seminary and institute participation. During the 2011-2012 school year, seminary and institute enrollment accounted for 4.3% of nominal church membership for year-end 2011; a higher percentage than most industrialized countries around the world. Taiwanese Latter-day Saints constitute a sizable percentage of the full-time missionary force in Taiwan.

Opportunities

Scores of medium-sized and small cities without LDS congregations present excellent opportunities for growth. Many of these cities are located west of Taipei and west of Taichung. Stake and district leaders visiting members and investigators who reside in these locations and exploring options for organizing family home evening (FHE) groups, member groups, or branches that assemble in these cities may improve convert retention and member activity rates by reducing travel times to meetinghouses, fostering a sense of LDS community in these cities, and extending purposeful outreach that specifically targets these cities. Cities with over 50,000 inhabitants appear most favorable for the establishment of congregations and the assignment of full-time missionaries such as Caotun, Daxi, Erlin, Hemei, Lugang, Yangmei, Yilan (separate from Luodong), and Zhushan. A map displaying large and medium-sized cities in Taiwan and the status of LDS outreach can be found here.

Missionaries over the years have indicated that active members are often willing and excited to help missionaries with teaching investigators and new converts. Organizing congregation-by-congregation ward and branch mission plans to incorporate local members into the finding, teaching, baptizing, and retention processes presents a methodical approach to capitalizing on member enthusiasm for missionary work. The use of member-missionary programs and approaches that are increasingly implemented in North America such as members creating mormon.org profiles, using of social media in missionary efforts, and teaching investigators in members' homes has good potential to accelerate growth and take advantage of moderate to good receptivity exhibited by the population. Greater focus on ordinary members fulfilling their home and visiting teaching responsibilities may improve member involvement in reactivation and retention efforts. Missionaries are well recognized by many Taiwanese and the Church has frequently conducted nationwide services projects that have given many a positive or neutral opinion about the Church and its purpose. Inclusion of local members in service projects and finding activities has potential to capitalize on the Church's visibility in society.

The Church has yet to organize English-speaking congregations in all major cities in Taiwan and to organize congregations that specifically service other ethnolinguistic minority groups such as Tagalog speakers or speakers of indigenous Taiwanese languages such as Amis. Appointing several missionary companionships to target ethnolinguistic minority groups has potential to accelerate LDS growth as many of these peoples appear to exhibit higher receptivity to Christian proselytism groups than the Taiwanese or mainland Chinese.

Challenges

Historically mediocre rates of member activity and convert retention constitute the primary challenge for LDS growth in Taiwan. In the early 2000s, returned missionaries reported that some missions baptized hundreds of new converts within a period of several years yet mission-wide sacrament meeting attendance remained unchanged. This finding is consistent with other countries that have traditionally experienced very poor convert retention rates. Missionaries serving in the early 2010s reported that nearly all congregations have hundreds of inactive members. One missionary serving in a ward in Taichung reported that his ward had over 800 members within its boundaries. Another missionary serving in a branch in the Hua Lien Taiwan District reported that only 50 of the 200 members on branch records regularly attended church. One ward in the Kaohsiung area had only about 60 attending church on an average Sunday. Some branches have extremely few active members. A branch in one stake in the Taiwan Taichung Mission had only 13 members in attendance on most Sundays. Few active members in comparison to the number of members on church records overwhelms local church leadership with home and visiting teaching, reactivation efforts through ward or branch missionaries, and general church leadership for a congregation.

Returned missionaries over the past several decades indicate that inadequate prebaptismal preparation, cultural conditions, and a weak testimony in the Church were common reasons for members no longer attending church. Missionaries indicate that a lack of member involvement in member-missionary work, rushed baptismal preparation to achieve numerical goals, and the large number of youth converts who were often transient and inconsistent in church attendance were significant challenges. Family objections for some individuals who joined the Church resulted in these new converts becoming inactive. Cultural traditions discourage conversion from traditional Chinese religions such as Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism notwithstanding most followers of these religions in Taiwan exhibiting low levels of personal religiosity. Returned missionaries

indicate that many Taiwanese struggle to see the need for organized religion and going to a church that expects as much out of its members as the LDS Church (e.g. holding a calling, weekly church attendance, daily scripture study and personal prayer). East Asian religions emphasize more philosophical and abstract religious concepts to achieve balance and harmony in the universe. Consequently the Western religious concepts of sin, the need for a savior and saving ordinances, and repentance are foreign and misunderstood. Returned missionaries observe that some local church leaders go inactive once released from their calling due, in part, to feeling like they "lost face" and attributing their release to falling short of meeting leadership expectations.

The Church has experienced slower growth in some of the most populous cities and counties in Taiwan in comparison to other less populated areas. Some of the most populated cities and counties in Taiwan also appear to have some of the lowest percentages of Latter-day Saints. Estimated membership as of 2013 accounted for less than 0.20% (one LDS per 530 or more inhabitants) for seven counties where an official LDS congregation operates including New Taipei City (population: 3.94 million), Taoyuan (population: 2.03 million), and Yunlin (population: 0.71 million).

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 other location within the past decade where the Church has experienced a major decline in the number of congregations followed by a significant increase in the number of congregations. The number of congregations in Hong Kong totaled 24 in 1987, 32 in 1993, 41 in 2000, 37 in 2003, 32 in 2008, 34 in 2013, and 40 in late 2015. 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 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 confines 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 had 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).

Other missionary-focused Christian groups have reported membership and congregational growth rates that are either comparable to the LDS Church or that are more rapid. Evangelicals claim 2.8% of the national population and account for approximately half of Christians in the country.[1] In 2014, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 9,256 active members, 128 congregations, and 455 convert baptisms in Taiwan.[2] Provided with the number of language-specific congregations in parentheses as of late 2013, Witnesses held worship services in six languages including Mandarin Chinese (117), English (7), Taiwanese Sign Language (2 congregations, 5 groups), Indonesian (3 groups), Vietnamese (2 groups), and Tagalog (1 group).[3] Witnesses achieved steady growth in the number of congregations and active members from 2007 until 2012 as the number of congregations increased by 38% and the number of active members increased by 28%. In addition to traditional and simplified Chinese, Witnesses translate proselytism materials into one indigenous Taiwanese language (Amis).[4] In 2012, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church reported 6,224 members, 55 churches, and 30 companies. Adventists have experienced slow congregational growth and steady membership growth within the past decade as the combined number of churches and companies increased from 77 to 85 and the number of members increased by 45%.[5] The Church of the Nazarene currently reports 43 churches in Taiwan[6] and in 2014 reported 3,013 full members and an average weekly worship of 2,580.[7]

Limitations

Estimated LDS membership was ascertained by multiplying the number of congregations in each administrative county by the average number of members per congregation in Taiwan for 2012 (545). One study assessing the accuracy of estimated membership figures ascertained through this method found that estimated membership figures usually fall within 20% of the actual membership total.[8] The Church does not publish official member activity and convert retention rates. No official membership statistics are released for Taiwan on an administrative county or city level. The Church does not publish the annual number of convert baptisms per country or mission or a breakdown in the membership increase attributed to children of record, member reinstatements, or convert baptisms. Although abundant returned missionary reports were available, few local member and church leader reports were available during the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to sustain progress accelerating real growth appears positive. Missionaries report that many wards will likely divide in the near future to create additional congregations. Some stakes appear likely to divide in the near future once additional wards and organized such as the Taoyuan Taiwan Stake. The Chia Yi Taiwan District also appears likely to become a stake in the near future. However, the Church in Taiwan has yet to make greater progress in overcoming decades of persistent

member inactivity and convert attrition problems. Steady increases in the number of new congregations at a rate equal to or greater than membership growth rates in the coming decade will be a robust indicator of real growth. Increasing numbers of Taiwanese Latter-day Saints serving full-time missions will be crucial towards increasing the number of members qualified to fill leadership positions and improving the self-sufficiency of the Church in Taiwan.

[1] "Republic of China, Taiwan," Operation World, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/country/chnt/owtext.html

[2] "2014 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[3] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[4] "Publications," jw.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=ami

[5] "Taiwan Conference (2012-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2246813

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 26 October 2015. http://nazarene.org/find-a-church

[7] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2004-2014," nazarene.org, retrieved 16 November 2013.

[8] Martinich, Matt. "Estimated LDS Membership by Administrative Division through the Members-to-Units Ratio," cumorah.com, 24 June 2013. http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_other_articles&story_id=578&cat_id=30