

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

>

Reversing Stagnant LDS Growth in Samoa

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: December 19th, 2015

Overview

Samoa is located in Polynesia and supports a population of nearly 200,000. The LDS Church numbers among the largest religious groups in the nation. Church-reported membership constitutes 38% of the national population – the second highest percentage of Latter-Day Saints among sovereign countries of the world. The Church reported essentially stagnant growth between 1999 and 2011. Although church membership increased from 58,477 to 72,320, the number of congregations slowly increased from 130 to 134. Within recent years, the Church in Samoa has reversed stagnant growth trends as evidenced by the creation of new congregations and new stakes.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Samoa. Recent successes reversing stagnant growth trends are discussed. Opportunities and challenges for sustaining real growth for the Church in Samoa are analyzed. LDS growth trends in neighboring Polynesian nations are compared to the Church in Samoa. A summary of growth trends among other Christian denominations is provided. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

//

LDS Background

The Church established the Samoa Mission in June 1888. Slow to moderate membership and congregational growth occurred during the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. The Church organized its first stake in Samoa in 1962.

Annual membership growth rates have generally ranged between 1-3% since the early 1990s. Steady congregational growth occurred between 1987 and 1999 as the number of congregations increased from 92 (67 wards, 25 branches) to 113 (86 wards, 27 branches) in 1995 and 130 (108 wards, 22 branches) in 1999. Significant stake growth also occurred in the 1990s as the number of stakes increased from nine in 1991 to 16 in 1997.

The Church reported essentially stagnant growth between 1999 and 2011. Although church membership increased from 58,477 to 72,320 (24%), the number of congregations slowly increased from 130 to 134 (3%). The number of stakes remained unchanged at 16 between 1997 and 2011.

The creation of new stakes and congregations during the 2010s signaled a reversal to stagnant LDS growth trends that persisted during the previous decade. Four new stakes were been organized in the early and mid-2010s, including the Savaii Pu'apu'a (2012), Upolu Malie (2012), Apia Central (2013), and Upolo Tafuaupolu (2014) Stakes. The number of congregations increased to 135 (119 wards, 16 branches) in 2012, 137 in 2013, 140 in 2014, and 145 (129 wards, 16 branches) in late 2015. The Church has organized 11 new congregations since 2012, including the Fasitootai Ward (2012), Alamagoto Ward (2013), Mulifanua 2nd Ward (2013), Siuniu Branch (2014), Motootua 2nd Ward (2014), Vaoala Ward (2014), Saleapaga Ward (2015), Tanumalala Branch (2015), Siumu-Uta Branch (2015), Letogo 2nd Ward (2015), and the Tiavea 2nd Branch (2015).

The average ward or branch in Samoa included 1,364 people within its geographical boundaries as of 2015. To contrast, the average ward or branch included 1,346 people within its geographical boundaries in 1999.

Successes

The Church in Samoa stands as a salient example that small nations with tiny populations can yield impressive growth if LDS mission resources are appropriately allocated. Despite fewer than 200,000 inhabitants, the Church claims 75,971 members and operates 145 congregations and 20 stakes. Only 19 other nations in the world operate more stakes than Samoa despite Samoa ranking as the 185th most populous nation according to CIA World Factbook population estimates in 2015.[1] The Church has consistently operated a mission in Samoa with proselytizing missionaries since 1888 and has achieved mostly slow, albeit steady, growth within the past 127 years. The Church in Samoa also produces more missionaries than the number of missionaries assigned to the country, providing the regional and worldwide church with surplus missionary manpower to allocate elsewhere.

The reversal of essentially stagnant growth trends in the early 2010s that previously persisted between 1999 and 2011 constitutes a major success for the Church. Progress has appeared to primarily center on reactivation efforts and improving convert retention rates as annual membership growth rates have remained constant within the past 25 years. Stake, mission, and area leaders have appeared to focus on organizing new congregations and stakes to revitalize reactivation efforts and spur greater growth. Thus far, these efforts have appeared successful as evidenced by no ward or branch closures within recent memory and church membership meeting the qualifications to organize new congregations and stakes.

Opportunities

Apia presents some of the greatest opportunities for the establishment of additional wards and branches due to its large urban population. There are nearly 90,000 people who reside in Tuamasaga District, most of whom reside in Apia and surrounding settlements. However, there are only five stakes headquartered within the greater Apia metropolitan area. Creative community events such as musical firesides, special projects, and faith-promoting talks may be effective for local members to invite less-active members and the non-LDS population to these events. Effective home and visiting teaching programs also have good potential for local members and church leaders to reactive less-active or inactive members.

There are 36 villages in Samoa that do not have a ward or branch that assembles within them. 14 of these villages are located on Savaii, whereas 12 of these villages are located on the southern coast of Upolu. Essentially all of these villages present good opportunities for the organization of branches. Most of these three dozen villages fall within the boundaries of wards and likely have dozens of active, less-active, or inactive Latter-day Saints. The organization of branches in these villages can help provide a sense of LDS community and reduce travel times to the nearest meetinghouse as many walk on foot to attend meetings. The establishment of member groups prior to the creation of branches may also be effective to provide more immediate outreach and prepare village membership for the responsibilities of an official ward or branch prior to stake leaders sending a request to area and international church leadership for approval.

The Church does not operate an official ward or branch on the island of Manono where there are approximately 1,000 inhabitants in four villages. The organization of a member group or branch may be effective in establishing a permanent presence on Manono and providing outreach to the island's inhabitants.

Challenges

Convert attrition and member inactivity remain significant problems for the Church in Samoa. Local members in some congregations have reported that only one-third of converts remained active one year after baptism. The average ward or branch had 543 members on its rolls in 2014, whereas most wards and branches appeared to have between 50 and 150 active members. As a result, most congregations have hundreds of less-active or inactive members within their geographical boundaries. The government reported in 2006 that self-identified Latter-day Saints comprised 13.2% of the population[2] whereas church-reported membership constituted 36% of the national population at the time. Many less-active or inactive members attend other denominations or self-affiliate with other churches despite the retention of their names on LDS membership records. Consequently, the Church experiences significant challenges to reactive these members due to their active participation in other churches such as Congregational Christians, Roman Catholicism, and Methodists.

Problems with member inactivity and convert attrition have been further compounded by poor member participation. Local members report that there are comparatively few active members in some wards and branches who are willing to accept callings to serve in their congregation. This has resulted in problems with some congregations properly functioning and a minority of active members constituting the majority of those who participate. The Apia Samoa Temple appears moderately utilized by members in Samoa and American Samoa as evidenced by six endowment sessions scheduled Tuesdays through Fridays and five sessions scheduled on Saturdays as of 2016.[3] To contrast, the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple scheduled 12 endowment sessions Tuesdays through Fridays and six endowment sessions on Saturdays.[4]

Comparative Growth

The Church in some Polynesian nations have recently experienced successes similar to the Church in Samoa in regards to reversing stagnant or slow growth. The Church in French Polynesia has reported steadily accelerating annual membership growth rates within the past five years. Congregational growth rates have also accelerated. The number of congregations increased by only four between 2001 and 2011, whereas the number of congregations increased by eight between 2011 and

2015. Two new stakes were also organized in the early 2010s – the first new stakes to be created in French Polynesia since the late 1990s. The Church in New Zealand experienced a net increase of 15 congregations between year-end 2012 and year-end 2015, whereas there was a net increase of only seven congregations between year-end 2002 and year-end 2012. The number of stakes in New Zealand also increased by four between 2012 and 2015, whereas no new stakes were organized between 1998 and 2011. The Church in American Samoa reported the highest annual membership growth rate in over 23 years (5.7%) in 2014. Congregational growth has also slightly accelerated. The number of congregations increased by only one between 1997 and 2006, whereas the number of congregations increased by six between 2007 and 2014. However, the Church in other Polynesian nations has reported essentially stagnant growth with no improvements as measured by congregational, membership, or stake and district growth. The Church in Tonga reported a net increase of only one congregation between 2008 and 2014 yet church-reported membership increased by over 8,000 during this period.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has reported moderate membership growth and slow congregational growth in the Samoan Islands within the past decade. Adventists reported 10,899 members, 41 churches, and 33 companies in 2014.[5] Jehovah's Witnesses operate a minimal presence in Samoa and have experienced slow growth. Witnesses reported an average of 522 active publishers (members), 12 congregations, and 46 baptisms.[6] The Church of the Nazarene reports a small presence and essentially stagnant growth. Nazarenes reported 1,353 full members, 81 fellowship members, 15 organized churches, and six churches not yet organized.[7]

Limitations

The Church does not publish information on various measurements of member activity such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of temple recommend holders, and number of full-tithe payers. The Church does not publish an annual, country-by-country breakdown of the number of converts baptized, the number of members reactivated, the number of missionaries assigned, or the number of members serving full-time missions. No membership data is available by administrative district in Samoa.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Samoa to perpetuate the recent reversal of stagnant LDS growth appears positive. Congregational growth rates have accelerated in recent years and the organization of new stakes has appeared to provide stake leaders greater focus on reactivation efforts. The Church appears likely to organize branches or wards in villages where no wards or branches currently assemble. Additional stakes may be organized in Apia and southeastern Upolu within the foreseeable future. Long-term success in sustaining commensurate membership and congregational growth will center on engaging active members in fulfilling their callings, stake and area leaders organizing additional congregations in lesser-reached villages, and maintaining reasonably high standards for prebaptismal preparation.

[1] "Country Comparison: Population," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 28 November 2015. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2119rank.html#bm

[2] "Samoa," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148892.htm

[3] "Apia Samoa," lds.org, retrieved 28 November 2015. https://www.lds.org/church/temples/apia-samoa?lang=eng

[4] "Nuku'alofa Tonga," lds.org, retrieved 28 November 2015. https://www.lds.org/church/temples/nukualofa-tonga?lang=eng

[5] "Samoas-Tokelau Mission (2005-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 28 November 2015. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2780297

[6] "2014 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2015-yearbook/

[7] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2004-2014," Nazarene.org, retrieved 28 November 2015. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjvm_a4k7TJAhUBayYKHW