



Comparative Growth Case Studies

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Comparing the Growth of the LDS Church and the Community of Christ (RLDS) in French Polynesia

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Overview

Located in Oceania, French Polynesia is an overseas collectivity of France with approximately 277,000 inhabitants.^[1] Provided with the 2012 population, French Polynesia consists of the five island groups including the Austral Islands (6,820), the Marquesas Islands (9,261), the Society Islands (235,295), and the Gambier Islands and the Tuamotu Archipelago (16,831).

During the 1840s, the LDS Church began its first foreign language and foreign culture proselytism efforts in French Polynesia and experienced significant success although government restrictions resulted in the removal of missionaries and no contact with French Polynesian members for several decades. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS) established a presence in the 1870s and 1880s and converted many previously LDS members and leaders. In the 1890s, the LDS Church returned to the islands and found that many members remained faithful. Today both the LDS and RLDS (renamed Community of Christ in 2001) number among the largest religious groups in French Polynesia.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church and the Community of Christ in French Polynesia. National outreach and congregational growth trends are compared between the two denominations. Factors that have influenced differing growth trends between the two denominations are discussed. The growth of the LDS Church and the Community of Christ in the Oceania region is compared and the growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups is summarized. Prospects for the future growth of the LDS Church and the Community of Christ are predicted. Data on the distribution and name of Community of Christ congregations were retrieved from the mission centers webpage on the Community of Christ's official website^[2] whereas data on the name and location of LDS congregations were retrieved from the Church's online meetinghouse locator.^[3] 2012 island population figures were retrieved from the Institut de la statistique de la Polynésie française official website.^[4]

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LDS Background

In 1843, the Church announced the assignment of foreign missionaries to present-day French Polynesia marking the first time missionaries were called to a foreign language and foreign culture mission.^[5] In 1844, the Church organized the Society Islands Mission to service present-day French Polynesia. At the time the Society Islands Mission was the third LDS mission to be ever created after the British (1837) and Eastern States (1839) Missions. That same year the first LDS missionaries arrived in French Polynesia and began proselytism on Tubuai. Both nonnative and native converts joined the Church within the first few months of proselytism. In mid-1844, the Church organized its first branch in Tubuai. Eventually half of the island's 200 inhabitants joined the Church. Around the same time missionaries baptized the first converts on Tahiti. In late 1844, missionaries began proselytism in the Tuamotu Archipelago and by 1848 hundreds of converts had joined the Church in this island group. Membership in French Polynesia reached 866 in late 1846.^[6] By the late 1840s, there were over 1,000 Latter-day Saints in French Polynesia^[7] accounting for approximately two percent of worldwide church membership.

Misunderstandings with the French Protectorate government regarding the financial support of foreign missionaries arose in the late 1840s and were resolved in 1851 with the Church agreeing that missionaries had to be self-supporting and pay for items received from local members. In 1852, the Church closed the Society Islands Mission due to changing government policies and was not able to reopen the mission until 1892. Despite the proselytism efforts of Catholic and RLDS missionaries, several LDS congregations continued to operate independently and isolated from international church leadership in the Tuamotu Archipelago,^[8] such as on Takaroa.^[9] However many Latter-day Saints joined the RLDS Church between 1885 and 1892. There were 425 self-identified Tahitian Latter-day Saints in early 1893 after four decades of no official church presence.^[10]

Extremely slow membership growth occurred between the mid-nineteenth century and 1975 as membership increased from 1,750 to 4,509. In 1972, the Church organized its first stake in French Polynesia.

The Church experienced a significant acceleration of growth during the last 25 years of the twentieth century as evidenced by membership increasing from 4,509 to 16,616, the number of congregations increasing from 43 in 1987 to 75 in 2000, the dedication of the a temple in 1983, and the number of stakes increasing from one to six. The Church reported good member activity rates on many islands. In 1994, 60% of church membership in the two Takaroa branches were active.^[11] In the 2000s, the Church reported that several islands had high percentages of Latter-day Saints. In 2005, approximately 13% of the inhabitants on Tubuai and Rurutu were LDS whereas approximately 38% of the inhabitants of Takaroa were LDS.^[12]

Within the past decade, the Church has continued to experience real growth and has reported several indicators suggest increasing numbers of active members. Between the 2004-2005 and 2011-2012 school years, seminary enrollment increased from 740 to 995 and institute enrollment increased from 524^[13] to 888.^[14]

At year-end 2012, there were 22,659 members and 83 congregations. Approximately 8.2% of the population was nominally LDS. In late 2013, there were 85 congregations (56 wards and 29 branches). In December 2013, missionaries serving in the Tahiti Papeete Mission reported that missionaries baptized approximately 800 converts during the previous 11 months.

The Church has experienced challenges with maintaining growth in some areas of French Polynesia such as the Tuamotu Archipelago. Latter-day Saints relocating away from smaller islands for education and employment purposes constitutes one of the greatest challenges for growth on most islands in French Polynesia.^[15] The percentage of Latter-day Saints has declined on some islands. In Takaroa, Latter-day Saints at one time in the first half of the twentieth century accounted for 90% of the island population but by the early twentieth century this percentage had dropped to 38%.^[16]

Community of Christ (RLDS) Background

In 1873, the first RLDS missionaries unintentionally arrived in Tahiti as these missionaries were en route to Australia and had to disembark because of a leak on their ship. In 1879, the first permanent RLDS missionaries arrived in French Polynesia and zealously traveled from island to island baptizing converts and organizing congregations. In the 1880s, RLDS missionary activity especially focused on the Tuamotu Archipelago. In 1895, LDS reports indicated that the RLDS Church was the dominant religion on nine islands, the LDS Church was the dominant religion on eight islands, and Roman Catholics were the dominant religion on seven islands.^[17] No data is available regarding the number of RLDS members and congregations in French Polynesia during the late eighteenth century or during the nineteenth century. However, slow membership and congregational growth has appeared to occur during most of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In 2006, the Community of Christ reported 6,882 members in French Polynesia.^[18] In early 2013, the Community of Christ called Tahiti native Mareva M. Arnaud Tchong as an apostle marking the first time an individual of Polynesian ancestry was called to serve in this capacity.^[19] In late 2013, the Community of Christ listed 57 congregations in French Polynesia on its mission center webpage.^[20]

A map displaying the status of LDS and Community of Christ outreach by island can be found [here](#).

National Outreach and Factors Influencing Differing Growth Trends

In late 2013, the LDS Church reported 85 congregations in French Polynesia. The LDS Church has a presence on all island groups except the Gambier Islands. A member group may function in the Gambier Islands as the Tahiti Papeete Mission Branch administers the islands and the mission branch does not include any other islands within the boundaries of the mission. Provided with the names of islands with an LDS presence and their respective populations in parentheses and the number of LDS congregations in brackets, there are two islands in the Austral Islands with an LDS presence (Tubuai [4 branches] - 2,170, Rurutu - 2,322), there are seven islands in the Society Islands with an LDS presence (Tahiti [44 wards] - 183,480, Raiatea [4 wards, 2 branches] - 12,237, Moorea [2 wards, 1 branch] - 16,899, Bora Bora [2 wards] - 9,596, Huahine [2 wards] - 6,303, Tahaa [1 ward, 2 branches] - 5,220, and Maupiti [1 ward] - 1,194), there are two islands in the Marquesas Islands with an LDS presence (Hiva Oa [1 branch] - 1,021 and Nuku Hiva [1 branch] - 1,396), and there are 13 islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago with an LDS presence (Rangiroa [2 branches] - 2,567, Takaroa [2 branches] - 882, Ahe - [1 branch] - 552, Apataki [1 branch] - 680, Arutua [1 branch] - 680, Fakarava [1 branch] - 824, Hao [1 branch] - 1,066, Hikueru [1 branch] - 150, Makemo [1 branch] - 832, Manihi [1 branch] - 685, Raroia [1 branch] - 349, Taenga [1 branch] - 124, and Takapoto [1 branch] - 380). Between late 2001 and late 2013, the LDS Church had not appeared to discontinue any branches in the Tuamotu Archipelago.

In late 2013, the Community of Christ reported 57 congregations. The Community of Christ has a presence on three of the five island groups (Austral Islands, Society Islands, and the Tuamotu Archipelago). Provided with the names of islands with a Community of Christ presence and their respective populations in parentheses and the number of congregations in brackets, there are two islands in the Austral Islands with a Community of Christ presence (Tubuai [3] - 2,170 and Raivavae [1] - 940), there are six islands in the Society Islands with a Community of Christ presence (Tahiti [15+] - 183,480, Raiatea [3] - 12,237, Moorea [2] - 16,899, Bora Bora [1] - 9,596, Huahine [3] - 6,303, and Tahaa [1] - 5,220), and there are 17 islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago with a Community of Christ presence (Rangiroa [4] - 2,567, Hao [3] - 1,066, Tikehau [2] - 529, Ahe [1] - 552, Amanu

[1] - 195, Apataki [1] - 680, Arutua [1] - 680, Fakarava [1] - 824, Hereheretue [1] - 56, Kaukura [1] - 475, Makatea [1] - 68, Manihi [1] - 685, Mataiva [1] - 280, Niau [1] - 226, Raraka [1] - 110, Takapoto [1] - 380, and Takaroa [1] - 882.

The LDS Church and the Community of Christ report a concurrent presence on 16 islands (nine in the Tuamotu Archipelago, six in the Society Islands, and one in the Austral Islands) whereas the LDS Church reports an exclusive presence on seven islands (four in the Tuamotu Archipelago, two in the Marquesas Islands, one in the Society Islands) and the Community of Christ reports an exclusive presence on nine islands (eight in the Tuamotu Archipelago and one in the Austral Islands).

The Community of Christ has experienced greater growth than the LDS Church in Tuamotu Archipelago. Aggressive RLDS missionary efforts in the Tuamotu Archipelago during the late nineteenth century appear primarily responsible for a larger and more widespread Community of Christ presence in this island group compared to the LDS Church. The Community of Christ operates congregations on two islands in this archipelago where there are less than 100 inhabitants (Hereheretue and Makatea) whereas the LDS Church reports no presence on any islands with fewer than 100 inhabitants. The Community of Christ also reports more congregations on a single island or atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago than the LDS Church. Rangiroa (4 congregations) and Hao (3 congregations) Atolls have the most Community of Christ congregations among atolls in the Tuamotu Archipelago whereas Rangiroa (two branches) and Takaroa (two branches) Atolls have the most LDS congregations in the Tuamotu Archipelago. There are eight islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago with an exclusive Community of Christ presence whereas there are only four islands in the archipelago with an exclusive LDS presence. Notwithstanding the Community of Christ maintaining congregations in four more islands in Tuamotu Archipelago than the LDS Church, the LDS Church has experienced steady congregational growth over the past century. Of the 15 branches currently functioning in Tuamotu Archipelago, four were organized prior to 1900, one was organized between 1901 and 1950, four were organized between 1951 and 1990, four were organized between 1991 and 2000, and two were organized between 2001 and 2010.

The LDS Church operates a significantly more widespread and larger presence on Tahiti than the Community of Christ. In late 2013, there were 44 wards on Tahiti whereas there appeared to be approximately 15 Community of Christ congregations. The significantly larger LDS presence on Tahiti compared to the Community of Christ appears rooted in the LDS church consistently maintaining proselytism and outreach expansion vision within the past half century whereas these efforts by the Community of Christ have appeared to be less consistent and equipped with fewer resources.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church reports a pervasive presence in most countries in Oceania. Nominal LDS membership accounts for over five percent of the population in seven additional countries and territories including Tonga, Samoa, American Samoa, Niue, the Cook Islands, Kiribati, and Marshall Islands. The LDS Church reports a presence in all sovereign nations in Oceania whereas the Community of Christ maintains an extremely limited presence in the region with reported congregations in only four countries and territories (Australia, Fiji, New Caledonia, and New Zealand). French Polynesia stands as one of the few major international centers of strength for the Community of Christ.

The LDS Church is the largest nontraditional, missionary-focused Christian denomination in French Polynesia. The LDS Church claims more than twice as many members and operates dozens more congregations than most other outreach-oriented faiths. Evangelicals claim 7.2% of the population, or approximately 19,700 members. Evangelicals identify the growth and prominence of the LDS Church and the Community of Christ as a significant challenge for achieving progress in evangelism.^[21] Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced rapid congregational growth and steady membership growth within the past decade. At year-end 2012, there were nearly 2,800 active members and 35 congregations.^[22] In late 2013, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 42 congregations in French Polynesia. Provided with the number of congregations per island group, Witnesses maintain a presence on all island groups including the Society Islands (27), the Tuamotu Archipelago and the Gambier Islands (9), the Austral Islands (4), and the Marquesas Islands (2). Witnesses also operate two groups for French Sign Language and one group for English speakers.^[23] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence in French Polynesia. In 2012, Adventists reported 4,713 members, 38 churches (large congregations), and 17 companies (small congregations). Adventists have experienced accelerating membership growth as the annual number of converts baptized has increased from 100 to over 300 within the past decade.^[24] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in French Polynesia.

Limitations

The Community of Christ does not publish annual membership or congregation figures. Consequently it is unclear how growth trends have behaved for this denomination over time. The locations for five Community of Christ congregations listed on the official mission centers website (Cdapp-Communaute Des Artisans, Héliaman, Marama Api, Te Rama Ora-Mamao, and Titi'aifaro) were unknown at the writing of this case study. Data on RLDS and Community of Christ missionary efforts during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were extremely limited.

Future Prospects

Recent growth trends suggest that the LDS Church will continue to experience slow national outreach expansion in French Polynesia and perpetuate steady membership and congregational growth for many years to come. The LDS Church may organize branches on additional islands and in lesser-reached or unreached villages on the most populous islands such as

Tahiti. The Community of Christ will likely experience stagnant or declining growth due to worldwide challenges the denomination experiences in retaining its members and gaining new converts and no indications that noticeable growth developments have occurred during the past decade other than a Tahitian native beginning to serve as an apostle. Some Community of Christ members may join the LDS Church due to shared historical legacy, many theological similarities, and the active, widespread LDS missionary program in the islands.

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[4] http://www.ispf.pf/Libraries/RP2012/Tableaux_standards_RP2012_Population_PDF.sflb.ashx

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