



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Cuba

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Overview

Cuba is one of the most populous countries in the Caribbean, supporting a population of over 11 million. Roman Catholics comprise a strong majority although many do not actively follow their faith. In early 2014, Cuba was the only country or dependency in the Americas with over half a million people without a formal LDS missionary presence.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Cuba. Past successes for area and mission leaders in establishing the Church in Cuba are identified and opportunities and challenges for beginning formal proselytism efforts and achieving growth are discussed. The status of the Church in other countries and dependencies in the Americas where no formal LDS proselytism occurs is reviewed and the growth of the Church in nearby Caribbean nations is summarized. The size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Cuba is analyzed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

Thousands of Cuban immigrants have joined the Church in the United States over the past several decades. Missionaries have baptized most of these converts in South Florida where a large Cuban immigrant community resides. The Church in Cuba appeared to organize its first branch for local members sometime in the early to mid 2000s in Havana. Estimated membership totaled 15 in 2007,^[1] 30 in 2008,^[2] and 50 in 2012.^[3] The Church has periodically operated a member group or branch for American military personnel in the United States-administered Guantanamo Bay within the past two decades. In early 2011, the first member to serve a full-time mission from the Havana Branch began his mission.

In the late 2000s, leadership in the Caribbean Area began assess the prospects for assigning full-time missionaries to Cuba and obtaining official government recognition. Initial efforts focused on utilizing Latin American full-time missionaries to begin proselytism efforts in Cuba but as of early 2014 no full-time missionaries had been assigned. Sometime in the early 2010s, the administration of Cuba transferred from the Mexico Area to the Caribbean Area. The Jamaica Kingston Mission has semi-officially administered Cuba and the Havana Branch since Cuba was reassigned to the Caribbean Area. Area leaders have since reported limited progress in establishing a missionary presence. In 2012, the Church continued to wait for the government to make a decision on its pending application for official recognition.^[4]

Successes

The establishment of an LDS presence in Havana notwithstanding no full-time missionaries assigned and no official government recognition constitutes the greatest success achieved by the Church in Cuba. The Havana Branch has appeared to function with little outside assistance and local members and church leaders have experienced some success in finding, teaching, and baptizing new converts and assimilating converts who joined the Church abroad as evidenced by increasing numbers of members. LDS membership as reported by the U.S. Department of State has increased within the past six or seven years notwithstanding no formal missionary activity occurring in the country although membership appears less than 100 at present.

The Church publishes the location of its sole meetinghouse in the country for the Havana Branch on its online meetinghouse locator site^[5] notwithstanding no official government recognition or full-time missionaries assigned. This information can assist

members and investigators in contacting local church leadership, locating the chapel, and participating in church services. In late 2010, the Havana Branch met in a rented space leased by another church.^[6] It is unclear whether the Church continues to assemble in the same location. The current branch meetinghouse displayed on the Church's meetinghouse locator is situated in west-central Havana, providing good accessibility to many who reside in the city.

The first member to serve a mission from the Havana Branch in 2011 constitutes a major success for the Church in strengthening local membership and improving prospects for establishing a missionary presence in Cuba one day. Additional members serving full-time missions and returning and remaining in their home country will be essential towards leadership development and accelerating church growth.

Opportunities

Considerable religious freedom exists in Cuba although the government does enforce some restrictions. These conditions permit member-missionary activity, the baptism of new converts, and publicly holding worship services. The Cuban government has permitted foreign church leaders to visit the branch to provide administrative and ecclesiastical support. Local members may also serve full-time missions in other countries without government interference. Local members and church leaders can make significant headway in sharing the gospel with others, strengthening the Havana Branch, and preparing for the organization of additional congregations if this action is approved by government officials. Holding family home evening groups and cottage meetings in members' homes can provide member-missionary opportunities to invite friends, family members, and associates to discuss gospel topics and socialize with fellow members and investigators. These church planting approaches are effective in establishing a sense of LDS community that can lay the groundwork for organizing a member group or branch. Recent reports indicate that the government has regularly approved the use of homes for worship or religious purposes as long as religious groups sought government approval.^[7]

Cuban Latter-day Saints who joined the Church abroad present good opportunities for initiating missionary work and establishing an LDS presence in additional cities. The Church has a large ethnic Cuban population within its membership in the United States. Improvements in intergovernmental relations between the United States and Cuba has potential to serve as a catalyst for greater growth should personal correspondence more freely occur between Cubans residing abroad and Cubans who reside within Cuba.

The Church currently has a sufficiently large number of Latin American missionaries to staff full-time missionary efforts in Cuba once the government and international church leaders approve the assignment of foreign full-time missionaries to Cuba. The Church maintains a large Spanish-speaking full-time missionary force in the Dominican Republic where hundreds of local Dominican members serve full-time missions. It is likely that this Dominican missionary force will be utilized for initial proselytism efforts.

Challenges

The Church has never assigned full-time missionaries to Cuba within modern times. This lack of outreach has occurred for several reasons such as the Church's fledgling presence in Latin America during the mid-twentieth century when greater religious freedom existed, the Church's virtually nonexistent presence in the Caribbean until the 1970s, and the Church missing the opportunity to establish a presence in Cuba prior to the communist takeover. The current number of Cuban members remains insufficient to even staff a minimal LDS missionary presence in Cuba at present. The Church may not assign foreign full-time missionaries to Cuba until it obtains official government recognition and church leaders can determine that missionaries could properly carry out their proselytism activities without government interference.

Cuba remains minimally reached by the Church as only one branch functions in the entire country and no formal missionary efforts have occurred. Inhabited by 2.2 million people, the Havana metropolitan area is the least reached city in the Americas as only one branch services the entire city. In 2010, there were 11 cities with 100,000 or more inhabitants without a known LDS presence and there were approximately 110 cities with over 10,000 inhabitants. Even if missionary work progresses as fast as in the Dominican Republic, which saw some of the most rapid national outreach and membership growth seen in the past 30 years, it would take over three decades to establish congregations in most of these cities.^[8]

The Church may experience low convert retention and member activity following the introduction of foreign full-time missionaries. The influence of communism on society and limited religious freedom has fostered casual societal attitudes regarding active religious participation. Regional culture and past experience in other countries with similar demographic characteristics suggests that inactivity and convert attrition may be challenges as the Church currently experiences low to mediocre member activity and convert retention rates throughout Latin America and Spanish-speaking areas of the Caribbean. Maintaining consistently high baptismal standards that emphasize habitual church attendance, testimony development, and local member and leader involvement prior to baptism will be essential towards mitigating these cultural and societal factors and avoiding quick-baptism tactics which have been implemented in other nations.

As of early 2014, no mission officially administered Cuba. The lack of a formal assignment of Cuba to a mission may delay more earnest efforts by mission leaders to visit local members and more consistently petition government officials for assigning foreign full-time missionaries.

Comparative Growth

The Church has a permanent missionary presence in all countries and dependences with over 100,000 inhabitants in the Americas with the exception of Cuba. In early 2014, eight dependencies appeared to have no permanent LDS missionary presence (Anguilla, Greenland, Montserrat, Saba, Saint Martin, Saint Barthélemy, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and Sint Eustatius) but only three of these dependencies had more than 10,000 inhabitants (Anguilla, Greenland, and Saint Martin).

LDS growth trends have significantly varied by country within the Caribbean. In the Dominican Republic, the Church has grown from 100 members and one branch in 1978 to 124,435 members, 202 wards and branches, 19 stakes, nine districts, three missions, one temple, and one missionary training center in 2012. The Church in the Dominican Republic has experienced some of the most rapid growth in the world within the past 35 years. Currently approximately 1.2% of the Dominican population is LDS. In Haiti, the Church has grown from less than 100 members and one branch in 1980 to 18,165 members, 42 wards and branches, four stakes, three districts, and one mission. The Church in Haiti reports one of the most limited presences the Americas among countries with one million or more inhabitants as approximately 0.18% of the population was LDS in 2012. In Jamaica, the Church has grown from less than 100 members and one branch in 1980 to 5,580 members, 19 branches, two districts, and one mission in 2012. The Church in Jamaica has experienced slow growth within the past two decades and maintains a limited presence in the country as only 0.20% of the population was LDS in 2012. In Puerto Rico, the Church has grown from 832 members and four branches in 1975 to 21,174 members, 41 wards and branches, and one mission in 2012. The Church in Puerto Rico has experienced no net increase in membership or congregations since the late 1990s.

Virtually all missionary-focused Christian groups with a worldwide presence report a widespread or pervasive presence in Cuba that totally overshadows the current size of the LDS Church in the country. Evangelicals claim 8.8% of the national population and report rapid growth among youth and young adults.^[9] Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced rapid growth over the past several decades and have a pervasive presence in Cuba. In 2012, Witnesses reported 95,441 active members, 1,403 congregations, 3,470 convert baptisms, and a memorial attendance of over 225,000.^[10] There are nearly four times as many Witness congregations in Cuba than in the entire Caribbean Area of the LDS Church. Approximately one percent of the national population is an active Jehovah's Witness. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence in Cuba and has experienced steady growth. Adventist membership increased from 17,838 in 1997 to 32,994 in 2012; an 85% increase within 15 years. Adventists have also reported strong congregational growth trends during this period as the number of churches (large congregations) increased from 145 to 302 and the number of companies (small congregations) slightly declined from 154 to 144. Adventists generally baptize between 1,500 and 3,000 new members in Cuba a year.^[11] In 2012, the Church of the Nazarene reported 6,421 full members, 679 baptisms, an average weekly worship attendance of 3,598, and 80 congregations (72 organized churches, 8 churches not yet organized).^[12]

Limitations

The Church has not published official membership statistics for Cuba. Reports from local members who reside in Cuba were unavailable during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish information regarding member activity rates, the number of convert baptisms by country, and efforts to open additional countries to missionary activity. No accurate data was available regarding the number of Latter-day Saints who have been born in Cuba or who are of Cuban ancestry. The Church does not publish data on the operation of member groups. It is unclear whether any member groups operate within the country in additional cities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for establishing a formal LDS missionary presence in Cuba appears favorable within the foreseeable future due to recent efforts by area leaders to obtain government recognition and assign foreign full-time missionaries, improving religious freedom conditions in Cuba, sizable numbers of Spanish-speaking missionaries in the Caribbean Area, and some minor church growth and missionary successes achieved by local members. Rapid growth, significant national outreach expansion, and the instilling of self-sufficiency in local leadership will likely require the assignment of sizable numbers of foreign full-time missionaries, excellent coordination between local member and missionaries in missionary efforts, and premeditated, tactful planning by mission and area leaders to regularly open additional cities to proselytism. The Church may formally assign Cuba to a mission in the Caribbean within the near future. Improving religious freedom conditions suggest that government officials may grant official recognition to the Church in the coming years.

[1] "Cuba," International Religious Freedom Report 2007, retrieved 23 June 2010.
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[2] "Cuba," International Religious Freedom Report 2008, retrieved 23 June 2010.
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108521.htm>

[3] "Cuba," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 January 2014.
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[4] "Cuba," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 January 2014.
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[5] Ids.org/maps, retrieved 10 January 2014.

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[9] "Cuba," Operation World, retrieved 10 January 2014. <http://www.operationworld.org/country/cuba/owtext.html>

[10] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[11] "Cuban Union Conference (1984-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 10 January 2014.
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