

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS growth in Burma (Myanmar)

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Inhabited by 55.2 million people and located in Southeast Asia, Burma is the 25th most populous country in the world. The population is predominantly Bamar (68%). Sizable ethnic minority groups include the Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%), and Mon (2%). Buddhists account for 89% of the population whereas Christians and Muslims each account for 4% of the population according to most estimates. The LDS Church has assigned senior missionary couples on humanitarian assignment since 1998 and has maintained an official branch in Yangon since 2003. Several significant church growth developments have recently taken place in regards to LDS outreach in Burma and Burmese-specific outreach in other nations such the organization of a Karen-speaking branch in Salt Lake City, Utah for Burmese refugees in 2009 and the assignment of the first young elders to serve in Yangon in February 2014.

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

NOTE: Burma is used instead of Myanmar in this case study. Both names are interchangeable. The government has encouraged the use of Myanmar instead of Burma since 1989 but the international community and many other governments continue to refer to the country as Burma.

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LDS Background

The Church appeared to baptize the first Burmese converts during the late 1970s and early 1980s in Thailand. Since the 1990s, small numbers of Burmese have joined the Church in several Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. Some of these converts have returned to Burma and have played an important role in establishing an LDS presence in Yangon. Senior missionaries began serving in Yangon, Burma in 1998 and have primarily provided humanitarian and development work; although in recent years leadership training and member support have been additional responsibilities. The first official branch began operating in 2003. A local member has appeared to serve as the branch president for most of the time since the branch's creation.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church began to experience accelerated growth among Burmese living abroad. Much of this growth occurred within the United States where hundreds of Burmese began readily joining the Church in several states. This influx occurred primarily due to increasing numbers of Burmese refugees entering the country. In 2009, the Church organized its first Karen-speaking branch in the Church in Salt Lake City, Utah due to rapid growth among Burmese refugees. A case study examining LDS outreach among Karen refugees in the United States can be found here.

Progress also occurred for the Church in Burma during the early 2010s. In early 2014, three Burmese members from the Yangon Branch were serving full-time missions in Australia (2) and Utah (1). In February 2014, the Church assigned its first young male missionaries to Yangon, Burma to help strengthen the Yangon Branch, and teach and baptize investigators referred by local members. Missionaries at the time also reported that the Church had begun translating the Book of Mormon into Burmese.

Successes

Recent successes in assigning the first young elder missionaries to Yangon and sending multiple local members on full-time missions appears rooted in the support provided by successive senior missionary couples. The Church has consistently assigned senior missionary couples to Yangon within the past 15 years notwithstanding little growth and religious freedom restrictions. Although senior missionaries have primarily focused on humanitarian and development work since their arrival, many of these couples have provided invaluable leadership support and mentoring to the fledgling Yangon Branch. Senior missionaries have also appeared to play an important role in preparing youth and young adults for full-time missionary service.

The Church has translated a small body of basic proselytism and gospel study materials into Burmese. The Church publishes Burmese translations of the monthly First Presidency message, the 13 Articles of Faith, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, and audio files for select General Conference addresses on its official website.[1] Additional Burmese language materials are available for order on the Church's online store such as investigator study booklets that accompany the missionary lessons and the book Gospel Fundamentals.[2]

Opportunities

The return of civilian rule to the Burmese government in 2011 and increasing integration of Burma into the international community within the past five years presents more favorable conditions for church growth and missionary activity. These conditions appear largely responsible for the 2014 decision made by mission leaders to assign the first young missionaries to Yangon and present additional opportunities to channel greater resources into the country.

Yangon presents excellent opportunities for LDS growth due to its large population, greater political stability compared to other areas of the country, good accessibility from mission headquarters in Bangkok, and tiny LDS presence. With 5.15 million inhabitants[3] and 33 townships, Yangon remains minimally reached by the sole LDS meetinghouse that currently operates in Mayangone Township; a community in north-central Yangon. The recent assignment of young elder missionaries to Yangon provides additional resources and manpower to initiate church-planting approaches. Holding family home evening (FHE) groups and cottage meetings in townships where there are clusters of members and investigators has excellent potential to lay the foundation for organizing member groups that assemble in these locations. Current restrictions on religious freedom appear unlikely to interfere with young elders and senior missionary couples working alongside branch leadership in identifying suitable locations to initiate church planting approaches and organizing and conducting these meetings. Townships that appear favorable for church planting efforts due to distance from the current branch meetinghouse and large target populations include Bahan, Hlaingtharya, Kyauktada, North Dagon, North Okkalapa, Shwepyithar, Thaketa, and Thingangyun. Returned missionaries provide valuable leadership experience and will likely play an important role in making future church planting efforts successful. Conducting church services and group meetings in Burmese appears adequate for reaching both Bamars and major ethnolinguistic minority groups as missionaries have thus far reported few problems with Karen members communicating and worshiping in Burmese.

Past reports by senior missionary couples indicate that there are small numbers of Burmese members who reside outside of Yangon. A handful of members reside in Mandalay although LDS worship services do not appear to be held on a consistent basis. Mandalay presents the greatest opportunity for establishing an official LDS presence outside of Yangon as it is the only other metropolitan area in Burma with over one million inhabitants and is the only known location where multiple Latter-day Saints have been reported to reside. Naypyidaw may also present feasible opportunities for an LDS establishment within the next decade due to its status as the third most populous city in the country and the administrative capital of Burma.

Challenges

Limited religious freedom continues to exist in Burma notwithstanding improvements in the government becoming more open with other countries. The government exhibits a strong preference to Theravada Buddhism despite not officially endorsing a state religion. Religious groups may operate in the country without registering with the government although government permission is required to engage in charitable work and religious education. The government discourages Christian groups from proselytizing but has recently permitted some foreign Christian groups to operate and obtain visas.[4] These conditions prohibit open proselytism by LDS missionaries and require missionary activity to occur on a member or investigator-referral basis. Local members may also experience some restrictions in their efforts to share the gospel with others due to the government's attitude regarding Christian proselytism. Consequently full-time missionaries may experience challenges finding investigators to teach and engaging in productive activities if local members do not supply a steady number of teaching referrals.

The Church in Burma heavily relies on senior missionary couples and the Thailand Bangkok Mission to properly function. The Church has been largely unable to meet its own leadership and missionary needs in Burma due to the small number of local members in the country and the limited leadership experience of many of these members. Many Burmese who join the Church abroad and return to Burma have often experienced limited meaningful church attendance and testimony development due to language barriers with the missionaries, church leaders, and members in the country where they joined the Church, full-time missionaries rushing pre-baptismal preparation in order to reach arbitrary goals, and the lack of a Burmese LDS community in most nations where these converts join the Church.

The Church does not publish information regarding its operations in Burma due to restrictions on religious freedom and the

Church's sensitive presence in the country. Consequently many Burmese converts baptized abroad cannot find the Church in their home country due to no contact information provided online. The lack of information publicly available regarding the Church in Burma leads many to believe that there is no LDS presence in the country. Consequently there may be scores or even hundreds of unaccounted Burmese members who currently reside in the country. Creating a Burmese website similar to the Church's Mormons and China website to provide essential leadership contact information for members and investigators in Burma may be an appropriate solution to meet this need.

The Church has few translations of materials into Burmese and other languages spoken in Burma. The Book of Mormon has yet to be translated into Burmese. No other indigenous languages in Burma have translations of LDS materials, including Karen. No teaching approaches or resources have been developed for proselytizing those with a Buddhist background. Utilizing traditional LDS teaching and proselytism approaches with Buddhists has limited applicability as these approaches have been developed for those with a Christian background or a basic knowledge of Christianity.

Comparative Growth

The arrival of young elder missionaries to Yangon and greater numbers of local Burmese natives serving full-time missions complements the recent pattern of accelerated outreach expansion and growth in Southeast Asian countries where the Church has limited recognition and religious freedom restrictions exist. In Laos, the Church assigned its first young elder missionaries to Vientiane in 2013 to assist with humanitarian projects, teach investigators within the meetinghouse, and strengthen members in the branch. In Vietnam, the Church began assigning proselytizing missionaries with Vietnamese ancestry to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City sometime in the 2000s. Recent church growth and missionary developments have included the organization of a member district sometime in the early 2010s, the creation of a second branch in Ho Chi Minh City in 2013, and increases in the numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the country within the past couple years.

Virtually all other missionary-focused Christian groups with a worldwide presence report a significantly larger presence in Burma than the LDS Church. Most denominations experience steady growth and maintain congregations in many areas of the country. Evangelical groups estimate that Christians account for approximately nine percent of the national population and that the national population is five percent evangelical.[5] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence in Burma and has experienced steady growth within the past 15 years. Adventists appear to have a presence in all seven regions and in all seven states. In 1997, Adventists reported 19,785 members, 1,637 baptisms, 171 churches, and 111 companies whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 31,786 members, 223 churches, and 105 companies.[6] Adventists publish materials into 12 indigenous languages including Burmese, Chin (Falam), Chin (Haka: Zotung), Chin (Matu), Chin (Ngawn), Chin (Tedim), Chin (Thado), Jingpho (Kachin), Karen (Pwo), Karen (S'gaw), Lushai (Mizo), and Rakhine.[7] Jehovah's Witnesses have maintained a presence in Burma for a century and have experienced slow growth during most of this time. Witnesses reported less than 100 active members in 1949; 35 years after establishing an initial presence in 1914. Appreciable growth began in the late 1960s as the number of active members increased from approximately 300 in 1967 to nearly 1,600 by 1988. Expansion into previously unreached areas of the country corresponded with this accelerated growth such as the opening of Chin State to proselytism. In 2013, Witnesses reported 3,857 peak publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 119 baptisms, and 70 congregations.[8] Witnesses publish proselytism materials into at least five indigenous languages including Burmese, Chin (Haka), Jingpho (Kachin), Karen (S'gaw), and Mizo. The Church of the Nazarene maintains a limited presence. In 2012, Nazarenes reported 2,734 full members, 50 associate members, an average of 1,374 attending weekly worship services, and 24 congregations (23 organized churches, one church not yet organized).[9]

Limitations

Reports from local members who reside within Burma were unavailable during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish membership and congregational data for Burma. It is unclear how many members on church records reside in the country. There are no reliable estimates regarding the number of Burmese Latter-day Saints worldwide as the Church does not report a breakdown of membership by ethnicity or country of origin. Information on the number of Burmese-speaking Latter-day Saints is unavailable as the Church only publishes the number of members who speak the 10 most commonly spoken languages by church membership. No data was available regarding member activity and convert retention rates for the Church in Burma.

Future Prospects

The outlook for accelerating LDS growth in Burma appears favorable within the foreseeable future due to greater numbers of Burmese serving full-time missions, the recent assignment of young elder full-time missionaries to Yangon, the greater integration of Burma into the international community, and the return of a civilian government within the past five years. Although church planting tactics have good potential to augment the number of active members and increase the number of convert baptisms in Yangon, prospects for mission leaders to engage in these strategies appear unfavorable due to the Church's emphasis on the centers of strength model to guide church growth and missionary activity. Additional branches and member groups will likely only be organized once the number of active members and priesthood leaders necessitates it. The establishment of member groups and branches that meet in other cities will likely hinge on devout church members and active priesthood holders relocating to these locations and petitioning mission leaders to organize congregations. The translation of the Book of Mormon into Burmese appears to have just recently begun and may take another five years until completion. Prospects for translating basic missionary and gospel study materials into additional languages appears good for Karen (S'gaw), but highly unlikely for other major languages due to few converts who have joined the Church that speak these languages.

[1] "Burmese," lds.org, retrieved 8 March 2014. https://www.lds.org/languages/mya

[2] store.lds.org, retrieved 8 March 2014

[3] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 7 March 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[4] "Burma," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 7 March 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208218

[5] "Myanmar," Operation World, retrieved 8 March 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/myan

[6] "Myanmar Union Mission (1997-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 7 March 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2332173

[7] "2013 Annual Statistical Report," adventistarchives.org, retrieved 7 March 2014. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCcQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fw

[8] "2013 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[9] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2002-2012," nazarene.org, retrieved 19 November 2013. 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