

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS Outreach Expansion in the Solomon Islands

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Overview

Ranking as the fifth most populous country in Oceania, the Solomon Islands are located in the Melanesia sub-region and support a population of nearly 600,000. The islands possess considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity as there are over 300 inhabited islands and approximately 70 ethnolinguistic groups.[1] Pijin, or also known as Solomons Pidgin, is a widely spoken Creole language for interethnic communication.[2] The LDS Church established an initial presence in 1995 but experienced virtually stagnant growth until the early 2010s. The Church in the Solomon Islands has excellent opportunities to expand its outreach and accelerate growth due to the population exhibiting good receptivity, local leadership steadily growing in its quality and numbers, mission presidents demonstrating greater interest and accountability for missionary work in the islands in recent years, and the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in the Solomon Islands. Church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church in other Melanesian countries is compared to LDS growth trends in the Solomon Islands and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in the country are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1987, Elder James E. Faust dedicated the Solomon Islands for missionary work eight years before any formal missionary worked began. In 1992, the Solomon Islands were assigned to the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission.[3] In February 1995, the mission assigned the first missionary couple to the country and held the first sacrament meeting in Honiara.[4] Young elder missionaries were introduced in the late 1990s and were evacuated in 2000 due to violence and political instability.[5] Missionaries returned sometime in the mid to late 2000s. Only one branch functioned in the entire country between 1997 and 2009. In 2010, the Church organized two new branches in the Honiara area (Burns Creek and White River) and established its first official branch on the island of Malaita in the village of Fauabu. In 2011, the four branches became part of the newly organized Honiara Solomon Islands District.

In June 2012, senior missionaries met with isolated members and investigators in Gizo where they held a meeting with 40 in attendance. Senior missionaries reported that at the time there were approximately 15 members and 30 investigators on the island. In July 2012, the Solomon Islands were transferred to the newly organized Vanuatu Port Vila Mission. In September 2012, the new mission president determined that the Church would need to strengthen its leadership on Honiara before missionaries would be assigned to Gizo and the organization of a formal church unit occur. In late 2012, approximately 180 members in Honiara watched one of the General Conference sessions. The prime minister of the Solomon Islands spoke at the district conference later that year.

In early 2013, 100 youth and young adults in the Honiara Solomon Islands District participated in a service project to clean and beautify a local school. Later that year, mission leadership observed that increasing numbers of full-time missionaries serving in the Solomon Islands resulted in the mission nearly meeting the minimum criteria for a separate missionary zone in the Solomon Islands to be established. In late 2013, mission leaders organized a member group in the town of Auki on Malaita.

In 1999, there were 148 members in the entire country. Membership increased to 191 in 2005, 343 in 2010, and 564 in 2013. In

2013, approximately one in 995 was LDS, or 0.10%. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by city, town, and village can be found here.

Successes

Within the past few years, the Church in the Solomon Islands has achieved significant progress reversing stagnant growth trends that persisted during the 1990s and 2000s. It took 10 years for the Church to double its membership from 148 in 1999 to 299 in 2009 and only one branch operated in the entire country during this period. Within the three-year period from year-end 2009 to year-end 2012, membership increased from 299 to 509, the number of branches to increased from one to four, and a sufficient numbers of branches combined with developing local leadership manpower permitted the organization of a district for the first time.

The Church has recently explored some opportunities for outreach expansion and growth notwithstanding the relatively small size of the Church on the islands, remote location from mission headquarters, and most of the population residing in small towns and rural communities. Populations in most locations have exhibited good receptivity to LDS outreach, resulting in growth occurring in virtually every location where missionary efforts are consistently implemented. The organization of the Fauabu Malaita Branch in 2010 marked a significant milestone for the Church establishing its first branch off of Guadalcanal Island. Investigatory visits to Gizo yielded good results in terms of interested investigators, isolated members, and several convert baptisms. Efforts to open a member group in Auki, Malaita produced good results as a group began formally functioning in November 2013.

Opportunities

Experience in other Melanesian nations with similar population characteristics as the Solomon Islands has demonstrated that some of the greatest opportunities for growth exist in rural areas instead of major population centers. Currently villages on the island of Malaita present the greatest opportunities for LDS growth. Malaita Island has been the only island aside from Guadalcanal where the Church has successfully established branches and member groups, and is also the island with the second largest population after Guadalcanal. Receptivity in Fauabu and Auki has been good resulting in increasing church attendance. Other nontraditional missionary-focused groups report some of their greatest followings in the Solomon Islands on Malaita, implying that the LDS Church may also experience similar growth trends if additional missionary resources are allocated, and if appropriate church planting vision is extended and maintained. Locations on Malaita within close proximity to Auki and Fauabu appear most favorable for church planting efforts such as the villages of Aimela, Buma, Dala, Farafara, Fiu, Fote, Kunura, Kura, Letei, Sita, and Tako. There also appear good opportunities for the Church to expand outreach into rural communities on Guadalcanal, especially in coastal areas east of Honiara.

Cottage meetings and family home evening (FHE) groups present excellent outreach expansion strategies in locations where populations display good receptivity to LDS outreach but distance to the nearest meetinghouse and limited amounts of mission resources restrict outreach. Cottage meetings are a thrifty approach to assessing receptivity in additional locations, preparing the groundwork for the establishment of a sense of LDS community, and instilling local self-sufficiency in the Church. Meetings may occur in a home or makeshift shelter and consist of a full-time missionary, local church leader, or ordinary member presenting a basic gospel lesson and providing the opportunity for members, missionaries, and investigators to socialize before and after the lesson. A combination of social integration, testimony development, and regular attendance at these more casual meetings sets returning members and investigators up for success in becoming lifelong, contributing members within their communities. Good attendance and locals expressing interest in attending future cottage meetings can merit the regular establishment of meetings in a FHE format. Consistent interest and attendance by members and investigators often warrants mission leaders to establish a member group that holds a simplified worship service and Sunday School class once there is at least one active priesthood holder to conduct worship services and bless and pass the sacrament to the congregation. The formation of a member group is an essential precursor to the eventual establishment of an official LDS congregation once certain activity and leadership standards are met, which generally consist of five or six active priesthood holders and a small group of active members sufficiently large to staff essential leadership and auxiliary positions. Success in utilizing cottage meetings to accelerate outreach expansion efforts require mission leaders to frequently visit previously unreached villages and villages where good receptivity has occurred and to minimize the number of visits to locations where populations exhibit little interest and follow-through in invitations previously extended.

The establishment of an official member group in Gizo will be an essential step toward making any progress establishing the Church in the western half of the country where no official LDS presence currently operates. The appointment of a senior missionary couple stationed in Honiara with the task of providing leadership, administrative, and ecclesiastical support to the isolated group of members and investigators in Gizo has the greatest potential for long-term success in the permanent establishment of a congregation that can one day become self-sufficient in meeting its own operational needs. Recent experience with senior missionaries and mission leaders visiting Gizo has illustrated that prospective missionary outreach has excellent potential for growth if mission leadership can effectively delegate the needed resources, time, and energy to make this happen.

Although the Church has not translated any materials into Pijin as of early 2014, there are good opportunities to utilize LDS materials and language resources available in Tok Pisin and Bislama. These two Melanesian Creole languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, respectively. Pijin is historically related to both of these languages and exhibits high intelligibility with Bislama, suggesting that the assignment of Ni-Vanuatu full-time missionaries may present good opportunities

for growth due to linguistic similarities between Pijin and Bislama. The current assignment of the Solomon Islands to the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission improves the feasibility of allocating Bislama-speaking missionaries to the Solomon Islands in order to more effectively proselyte and teach to the understanding of target populations. The widespread usage of Pijin as a lingua franca in the Solomon Islands provides opportunities for opening additional areas to missionary activity without the requirement of missionaries and church leaders fluently speaking indigenous languages spoken by native populations.

The opening of a separate mission headquartered in the Solomon Islands has enormous potential to capitalize on excellent conditions for growth and channel surplus numbers of members serving full-time missions into the country. The population of the Solomon Islands surpasses the combined population of New Caledonia and Vanuatu and the population serviced by several individual missions based in Oceania such as the Marshall Islands Majuro, Micronesia Guam, Samoa Apia, and Tonga Nuku'alofa Missions. The relatively large population of the Solomon Islands suggests that the establishment of a separate mission would allocate greater resources into the islands and improve the likelihood that additional islands and villages would open to missionary activity. The Church in Oceania has also achieved greater self-sufficiency in meeting its own missionary needs, suggesting that there are good opportunities to capitalize on regional missionary manpower to staff a new mission headquartered in Honiara one day.

Challenges

Several poignant challenges for more effective missionary work and accelerating church growth persist such as limited mission resources available in the Solomon Islands, the inability of local church leadership and members in instigating national outreach expansion without the assistance of mission leaders and full-time missionaries, and hesitation from mission leaders to establish member groups on additional islands due to distance and fledgling district and branch leadership on Honiara and Malaita. The Church has experienced rapid growth in Vanuatu within the past decade as evidenced by the number of congregations rapidly increasing from 13 to 31, membership more than doubling from 2,469 to 6,103, and recent growth necessitating the organization of a separate mission headquartered in Vanuatu in 2012. The majority of mission resources have been assigned to Vanuatu due to favorable growth conditions, closer proximity to mission headquarters in Port Vila, more developed local church leadership, and focus on the creation additional districts and stakes. The mission also must staff missionary needs in New Caledonia where one recently created stake operates. These mission-wide needs have consequently limited the number of missionaries available for assignment in the Solomon Islands.

Local members and church leaders in the Solomon Islands have historically exhibited an inability to head outreach expansion efforts and missionary work within their jurisdictions. Virtually no progress occurred in growing the Church during years when no full-time missionaries were assigned. To contrast, the Church in many other countries with a fledgling church presence has had local leadership at the forefront of missionary work and outreach expansion. The Church achieved considerable growth in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea as a result of local leaders and members heading missionary efforts and later appealing to mission leadership for assistance in the establishment of the Church in additional locations. Little improvement in outreach expansion capabilities will occur in the Solomon Islands until local church leaders become more consistent and engaged in missionary efforts among their own people.

The Church has experienced modest member activity and convert retention rates in Honiara within the past two decades although activity rates have appeared to improve during the early 2010s. It took 15 years from the arrival of the first full-time missionaries until more than one branch began operating in the city notwithstanding the population generally exhibiting good receptivity and the high population density of this largest urban area in the Solomon Islands. Convert retention and member activity problems may continue to persist in Honiara, thereby prompting mission leadership to direct full-time missionaries to strengthen members and reactive less-active and inactive members. These conditions have potential to delay efforts to open additional areas to missionary activity.

There have been some reports of other Christian groups persecuting Latter-day Saints. One report indicated that the dominant religious group in one area prohibited Latter-day Saint converts from using a well in the community. Another report indicated that local religious leaders originally opposed the establishment of an LDS congregation on Malaita. Some community and religious leaders expressing disapproval of LDS missionary activity may create barriers for future outreach expansion efforts.

The Church has not translated any basic gospel study or missionary materials into Pijin or indigenous languages spoken in the Solomon Islands. Pijin Translations of basic proselytism and gospel study materials and the Book of Mormon will likely be necessary to encourage gospel comprehension and testimony development due to some challenges utilizing Bislama translations among Pijin speakers.

Comparative Growth

The Church in the Solomon Islands has the most limited presence in Oceania among countries and dependencies with at least 20,000 inhabitants as only 0.10% of the population is nominally LDS. To contrast, the Church in Papua New Guinea has the second most limited presence in Oceania yet nominal membership constitutes 0.30%; three times the percentage of the Church in the Solomon Islands. Within the past decade, the Church has experienced rapid national outreach expansion and membership and congregational growth in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu and slow to moderate growth in Fiji and New Caledonia. All countries and dependencies in Melanesia have experienced more rapid national outreach expansion than the Solomon Islands with the exception of New Caledonia. Currently the Solomon Islands are the most populous country in Oceania

without an LDS mission headquartered within the country.

Virtually all missionary-focused Christian groups report a presence in the Solomon Islands that is substantially larger than the LDS Church. Most of these groups currently report slow to moderate growth. Evangelicals claim one-third of the national population and have reported several waves of rapid growth followed by periods of stagnation within the past half century.[6] The Seventh Day Adventist Church numbers among the largest denominations of the islands and currently comprises approximately 10% of the national population. Adventists continue to experience steady growth. In 2007, Adventists reported 184 churches, 238 companies, and 36,654 members whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 186 churches, 250 companies, and 45,046 members. The annual number of Adventist baptisms ranged from as low as 622 to as high as 2,598 during this six-year period.[7] Adventists translate materials into 16 indigenous languages including Babatana: Avaso, Bilua, Bughotu, Kwara'ae, Langalanga (Wala), Lengo, Marovo, Mono: Alu (Alo), Pijin, Rennel (Bellona), Roviana, Sa'a: Ulawa (South Malaita), Santa Cruz (Natügu), To'abaita, Ughele, and Vangunu: Bareke. Some of these languages have less than 2,000 speakers. Jehovah's Witnesses report a widespread presence and steady growth. In 2013, Witnesses reported 1,856 active members, 79 baptisms, and 50 congregations. Provided with the number of Witness congregations and groups per province in parentheses as of early 2014, Witnesses maintain a presence on Malaita (36), Guadalcanal/Capital Territory (6), Western (6), Central (2), Temotu (2), Choiseul (1), Isabel (1), and Makira (1).[8] Witnesses translate materials into at least four indigenous languages including Solomon Islands Pidgin, Kwara'ae, Roviana, and To'abaita.[9] The Church of the Nazarene reports a limited presence. In 2012, Nazarenes reported 428 full members, 70 associate members, 132 new Nazarenes, an average weekly worship attendance of 393, and 17 congregations (10 organized churches, 7 churches not yet organized).[10]

Limitations

Reports regarding member activity and the operation of member groups were obtained from returned missionaries, senior missionary couples, and mission presidents. However, no reports from local members and church leaders were available. The Church does not publish the name, number, and location of member groups on its online meetinghouse locator. It is unclear whether the Church operates additional member groups not identified within this case study. The Church does not publish statistics regarding the number of convert baptisms per country, the number of missionaries assigned to each country, the number of members serving missions from each country, and various statistics pertaining to member activity and convert retention rates. It is unclear how many members reside on islands and villages without an LDS presence.

Future Prospects

The outlook for expanding LDS missionary work into additional locations and establishing larger numbers of congregations appears favorable within the foreseeable future due to the reassignment of the Solomon Islands to the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission in 2012, small but increasing numbers of full-time missionaries serving in the islands, and efforts by mission leadership to open additional member groups and branches within the past few years. Utilizing outreach expansion approaches that concentrate on rural communities within reasonably close proximity to current locations with LDS congregations presents the greatest opportunities for growth within the foreseeable future, such as on Malaita Island. Church planting tactics such as holding cottage meetings and organizing FHE groups have enormous potential for growth, especially if local church leadership takes the initiative to conduct these activities. The establishment of a separate mission headquartered in Honiara will be an important milestone in more effectively proselytizing the Solomon Islands, but this milestone appears many years away from realization.

[1] "Solomon Islands," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 March 2014

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[2] "Pijin," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 March 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/pis

[3] "7 new missions created; total now 275," LDS Church News, 29 February 1992.
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[4] "From around the world," LDS Church News, 15 April 1995.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/25990/From-around-the-world.html

[5] "Missionaries evacuated from Solomon Islands," LDS Church News, 17 June 2000.
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[6] "Solomon Islands," Operation World, retrieved 1 March 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/solo

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[8] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 1 March 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[9] "Publications," jw.org, retrieved 1 March 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter

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