

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach Expansion in Sumatra, Indonesia

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Overview

Inhabited by approximately 50 million people,[1] Sumatra is the second most populous island in Indonesia after Java and accounts for over one-fifth of the population of Indonesia. Sumatra is geographically the sixth largest island in the world and the largest island that is totally within the sovereignty of Indonesia. Austronesian peoples have populated Sumatra for millennia and originally followed indigenous beliefs. Several ancient kingdoms ruled Sumatra during the first millennia. In the twelfth century, Arab and Indian traders introduced Islam to Sumatra and by the sixteenth century Islam became the dominant religion on the island. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Dutch explored and traded in the region and ultimately ruled Sumatra and other nearby islands under its Dutch East Indies colony. Christian missionaries arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulting in most of the Batak people converting to Christianity.[2] Today all other indigenous peoples are predominantly Muslim. The Netherlands ruled Sumatra until the independence of Indonesia in the mid-twentieth century. Located in North Sumatra Province, Medan is currently the most populous city on Sumatra with 2.1 million inhabitants.[3]

This case study briefly reviews the history of the Church in Sumatra and its current status as of 2013. Recommendations for expanding outreach and spurring church growth are provided. Challenges for missionary activity are identified and discussed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in Sumatra to other areas of Indonesia and contrasts LDS growth in Sumatra to other nontraditional, missionary-focused Christian groups. Limitations to these findings and the outlook for future LDS growth are discussed.

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LDS Background

In 1995, the Church organized its first and only branch on Sumatra in Medan. Full-time missionaries appeared to begin serving in the branch sometime in the late 1990s. In the mid-2000s, the Church participated in many humanitarian and development projects on Sumatra following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that devastated vast areas along the western coast. In 2008, the Indonesia Jakarta Mission assigned a second missionary companionship to the Medan Branch.

In 2012, the first sister missionaries were assigned to the Medan Branch bringing the total number of missionary companionships in the branch to three. In late 2012, approximately 30 attended a fireside led by senior missionaries on family history and temple work. In mid-2013, missionaries reported there were approximately 30 active members in the branch out of 170 on the records and that church attendance would sometimes reach as high as 50 with generally only a few investigators in attendance. Missionaries reported that they were permitted to openly proselyte in the Medan area using methods such as street contacting. The Medan Branch currently meets in a rented building. As of mid-2013, no other locations on Sumatra have ever appeared to receive LDS outreach. The Medan Branch includes the entire island of Sumatra within its geographical boundaries. Only a handful of Sumatra natives have served full-time missions and most of these members have appeared to relocate to Jakarta before or after serving missions. Returned missionaries report that in recent years the Indonesia Jakarta Mission has taken increased interest in revamping LDS outreach in Medan, including providing training in Jakarta to the branch president for a three-day period in 2012 on how to better administer and lead the Church in his area.

A map displaying the location of ethnolinguistic groups native to Sumatra and the status of LDS outreach can be found here.

Recommendations

Opportunities for expanding LDS outreach on Sumatra appear most likely to experience success in areas where there are sizable numbers of Christians due to greater theological similarities between Latter-day Saints and mainstream Christian denominations than between Latter-day Saints and Muslims or Buddhists, Christians exhibiting often greater tolerance of proselytism compared to Muslims, and LDS teaching and missionary approaches developed and designed for application among those with a Christian background or basic understanding of Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices. There are millions of Christians who live in North Sumatra Province who have never received a Latter-day Saint gospel witness but appear receptive to receive missionary outreach. Many of these Christians pertain to Batak peoples who traditionally reside in areas south of Medan surrounding Lake Toba. Batak peoples provide excellent opportunities for prospective LDS outreach expansion as most are Christian, other nontraditional proselytizing denominations have experienced steady church growth among most Batak peoples, and the relatively close proximity of the Batak homeland to Medan. Provided with estimated population figures in parentheses, there are five Batak ethnolinguistic groups who are predominantly Christian including the Batak Angkola (750,000),[4] Batak Diari (1,200,000),[5] Batak Karo (600,000),[6] Batak Simalungun (1,200,000),[7] and Batak Toba (2,000,000).[8] These Batak subgroups altogether total over 5.75 million.

No senior missionary couple has ever appeared to be assigned to Medan and given the specific task of engaging in missionary activity and member support within Medan, surveying potential outreach expansion in cities elsewhere on Sumatra, and contacting isolated members and investigators and coordinating their efforts with mission leadership. The assignment of a senior missionary couple to Medan who is given the task to conduct exploratory visits into the Batak homeland presents promising opportunities for locating isolated members and investigators. Senior missionaries can locate multiple interested individuals and periodically hold cottage meetings in areas where these individual reside. Regular visits can occur to cities, towns, and villages where receptivity is highest and where investigators are preparing for baptism. Once prospective members demonstrate consistent interest and progress towards meeting minimal prebaptismal qualifications, senior missionaries can baptize these members and organize member groups in order for sacrament meeting services to occur and to prepare for local leadership development. Young missionaries serving in Medan can accompany senior missionaries during their visits to locations where groups of members or investigators reside and facilitate the growth and development of the Church in these areas. Branches may be established once there are multiple active male members who are ordained to the priesthood that can meet the administrative demands of a branch presidency and other leadership positions. The Church has translated all LDS scriptures into Indonesian, providing materials for proselytism and testimony development. However, the translation of basic proselytism materials into the most commonly spoken Batak languages may be appropriate due to its widespread usage in the Lake Toba area.

There is an urgent need to address low member activity rates in the Medan Branch as soon as possible in order to improve the efficiency of how the branch functions and in order to improve member-missionary participation. Senior missionaries frequently offer greater expertise and skill than their younger counterparts in reactivation and convert retention efforts, which could provide more immediate and longer lasting results in ameliorating chronic member activity and convert retention problems in the isolated branch. Organizing a second member group that assembles in an area of Medan closer to some members in the branch could improve outreach and help establish a more permanent and larger LDS presence in the city. Holding weekly family home evening (FHE) groups and other branch activities also has potential to help fellowship less-active members and improve member activity rates.

There are opportunities to establish the Church in additional cities on Sumatra outside of North Sumatra Province. The most populous unreached cities such as Palembang (1.32 million), Bandar Lampung (0.79 million), Pekanbaru (0.70 million), Padang (0.69 million), and Jambi (0.41 million) each offer good opportunities for growth due to large populations concentrated in small geographical areas. Accessibility to these cities is good and it is likely that there are at least a few isolated members and investigators in several of these cities at present. Mission leaders conducting exploratory visits to these cities and assessing which appear most favorable for assigning full-time missionaries can be an effective method for establishing an initial LDS presence in additional locations.

Mission and area leaders may find success reversing stagnant outreach expansion in Sumatra by requesting some Indonesian families from Java to relocate to unreached cities in an effort to establish a permanent LDS presence in additional locations. This tactic has not been utilized by mission and area leaders around the world for many years due to concern over active families becoming inactive if they relocate to cities where there is no previous church presence. Difficulty assimilating into a new city, finding employment, distance from friends and family, and safety concerns are potential problems that have dissuaded church leaders from implementing this tactic in Indonesia. There are few approaches that offer as much potential for church growth and permanent outreach expansion as active Latter-day Saint families moving to locations without a preexisting church presence due to member-missionary opportunities for family members to find and teach new friends and acquaintances. This approach must be carefully evaluated by church leaders, specifically in the process of selecting "planter families" who are requested to move to a new city in order to ensure that these families would be appropriate for this assignment. The Church has experienced some of its greatest growth through member families moving to previously unreached locations, starting small congregations, and reaching out to the local population. Coordination from mission leaders to purposefully and tactfully select particular families and locations could yield good results in an era of stagnant outreach expansion for the Church in Indonesia.

Challenges

The Medan Branch has experienced stagnant growth and the number of active members remains small notwithstanding the branch functioning for nearly two decades and the mission assigning three missionary companionships to the branch since 2012. There has been little indication that stagnant growth has been reversed with the addition of two more missionary companionships over the past five years. The Church in Medan exhibits a lower member activity rate than most other cities in Indonesia as less than 25% of members on the rolls appear to attend church on a regular basis. Convert retention problems

appear the root cause of low member activity rates as the vast majority of members on church records appear to have been baptized in Medan. Possible reasons for poor convert retention and slow nominal membership growth include a disconnect between full-time missionaries and local members and leaders in finding, teaching, and fellowshipping new converts and low levels of member-missionary activity in the branch. Extremely limited numbers of members who are qualified to serve in leadership positions also severely limits the strength and quality of local missionary activity.

There are few resources available for coordinating outreach expansion efforts on Sumatra. The expansion of LDS outreach will require prudent use of limited mission resources in the Indonesia Jakarta Mission incurred by restricted numbers of foreign missionary visas and the tiny size of the Church in Indonesia of less than 7,000 members compared to the massive population of a quarter of a billion people. The surge in the number of members serving missions in the early 2010s will have little to no effect on augmenting the number of missionaries serving in the Indonesia Jakarta Mission unless the number of native Indonesians serving full-time missions noticeably increases and the Church commensurately increases the missionary complement for the mission accordingly.

The influence of Islam on Indonesian society as a whole and on most areas of Sumatra poses a significant barrier for traditional LDS missionary and church planting tactics. Some ethnolinguistic group such as the Acehnese are staunchly Muslim with extremely few individuals who have converted to Christianity. Conditions for missionary activity among some of these traditionally Muslim peoples may require missionary activity to only occur on a teaching referral basis and possible restrictions on teaching Muslims altogether.

There are additional societal and cultural conditions among the Batak that pose challenges for missionary activity. Low standards of living and poverty limit the ability for the Church to achieve local self-sufficiency in meeting economic needs required for financing meetinghouse construction and maintenance. Full-time missionaries report that some cultural characteristics among Christians have reduced receptivity to the Church such as many believing that there is no one true church and that all churches are inherently good, thereby creating a major obstacle for some to accept the LDS teaching that the LDS Church is the only true and living church on the earth.

No LDS materials have been translated into languages indigenous to Sumatra. A lack of basic proselytism materials may pose a barrier among some monolingual individuals who do not speak standard Indonesian. However, Indonesian is widely taught and used for interethnic communication, making many Indonesian translations of LDS materials useful for initial outreach expansion efforts.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced no progress expanding outreach on other major islands in Indonesia. All but three LDS branches operate on Java and no new congregations have been organized on Java for many years with the exception of a couple member groups. The Church has operated only one branch on Sulawesi (Manado) for nearly three decades. In Papua, the Church briefly operated a small branch in the mid-2000s but closed the branch due to active members relocating elsewhere. The Church recently organized its first branch on Bali but has not appeared to extend any overt missionary activity on the island. A member group has also recently begun meeting in Batam but no formal missionary activity has occurred in this location.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report a significantly larger and more widespread presence on Sumatra compared to the LDS Church. These denominations have all appeared to establish a foothold among the Christian Batak peoples in the area around Lake Toba. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports nearly 30,000 members, 341 churches, and nearly 200 companies on Sumatra.[9] Adventists translate basic publications into at least eight indigenous languages to Sumatra including Batak Angkola, Batak Dairi, Batak Karo, Batak Simalungun, Batak Toba, Komering, Minangkabau, and Nias.[10] Provided with the number of congregations in parentheses, Jehovah's Witnesses report congregations in the following provinces in Sumatra: North Sumatra (52), Lampung (3), Bangka Belitung (1), and Riau (1). Witnesses report 20 congregations in Medan alone.[11] Witnesses appear to translate proselytism materials into only one indigenous language: Nias.

Limitations

Only a few full-time missionary reports were available from current or returned missionaries who have served in the Medan Branch. Neither local member nor local branch leadership reports were available from the Medan Branch. Data on the number and activity status of isolated members living in Sumatra outside of Medan is unavailable and there are no reliable estimates. There were no reports available providing the ethnic composition of LDS membership for the Medan Branch and it is unclear what ethnicities are represented among baptized members.

Future Prospects

The outlook for expanding LDS missionary activity on Sumatra appears mixed as there has been no progress opening previously unreached locations to missionary activity since the mid-1990s but mission leadership has taken greater interest in assigning additional missionary companionships and jumpstarting church growth within recent years. However, these efforts to increase the number of missionary companionships assigned to the Medan Branch has thus far been unsuccessful in increasing

church meeting attendance. The assignment of a senior missionary couple appears a likely development within the foreseeable future and has high potential for strengthening the Medan Branch and evaluating prospects for opening additional locations to missionary activity. Prospects for accelerated church growth will ultimately depend on local members and leaders taking the initiative to share the gospel with others and magnify their church callings and responsibilities.

[1] "Indonesia: Urban City Population," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/Indonesia-MU.html

[2] "Batak - Religion and Expressive Culture," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 6 July 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/East-Southeast-Asia/Batak-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html

[3] "Indonesia: Urban City Population," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/Indonesia-MU.html

[4] "Batak Angkola," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/akb

[5] "Batak Dairi," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/btd

[6] "Batak Karo," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/btx

[7] "Batak Simalungun," www.joshuaproject.net, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/languages.php?rol3=bts

[8] "Batak Toba," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/bbc

[9] "West Indonesia Union Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=WIUM

[10] "Statistical Report for 2010 - Languages and Dialects in which Seventh-day Adventist Publications are now in Print", p. 81. sda.org.

[11] "Congregation Meeting Search," www.jw.org, retrieved 4 July 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT