



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Papua Province, Indonesia

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Overview

Formerly called Irian Jaya, Papua Province is the most eastward province in Indonesia and comprises the western half of New Guinea with the exception of the Bird's Head Peninsula. Western New Guinea remained under the administration of the Netherlands following the independence of Indonesia in 1949 but jurisdiction for the region was transferred to Indonesia in 1963. In 2010, there were approximately 2.84 million inhabitants^[1] and nearly 200 indigenous languages spoken in Papua Province. ^[2] Anthropologists have been fascinated by the extreme ethnolinguistic diversity in Papua Province. Like neighboring Papua New Guinea, Papua Province exhibits some of the most extreme linguistic and cultural diversity in the world notwithstanding a population of less than three million.

Proselytizing Christian faiths have made significant headway within the past century conducting missionary activity among Papuan peoples. Prior to Christianization efforts, Papuan peoples adhered to traditional beliefs. Today, 83% of the population is Christian and overwhelmingly Protestant. Notable religious minorities include Muslims (15.89%), Hindus (0.09%), and Buddhists (0.05%). ^[3] Many continue to practice or infuse traditional religious beliefs with government-recognized religions. ^[4] In the 2000s, the LDS Church briefly operated a branch for nonnative members temporarily living in the small copper-producing town of Tembagapura but closed the branch once membership moved elsewhere.

The LDS Church currently reports no official presence in Papua notwithstanding its predominantly Christian population, high receptivity to outreach-focused faiths, and the Church's recent successes expanding outreach in Papua New Guinea. This case study explores the opportunities, challenges, and future prospects of establishing an LDS presence in Papua Province and highlights the achievements of other Christian groups in the province.

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Opportunities

The predominance of Christianity provides more favorable opportunities for church planting and formal proselytism than most locations in Indonesia. Unlike most provinces in Indonesia, Muslims comprise a minority in Papua. Due to the prominence of Christians in local government positions and ongoing violence between the Christian Papuan rebels and Muslim government troops, Muslims in Papua experience some restrictions on religious freedom such as the refusal of some local government leaders to provide permits to construct new mosques. ^[5] It is unclear how Papuan Indonesians will respond to prospective LDS outreach but it is likely that the Church will experience greater ease and freedom engaging in proselytism activities compared to Muslim-majority areas.

The Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission services the entire country of Papua New Guinea and provides opportunities for the Church to begin proselytism in Papua Province due to its close proximity, predominantly native full-time missionary force, and open border crossing at Wutung that the public can access. Cultural similarities between the indigenous peoples of the two countries may also warrant the reassignment of Papua Province to the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission from the Indonesia Jakarta Mission once church leaders approve formal proselytism and official missionary activity in the region. At present only Papuan and Indonesian missionaries appear likely to serve in Papua Province due to restricted foreigner access to the region and safety concerns. Papuan missionaries also appear most likely among foreign missionaries to obtain visas from Indonesian officials due to Indonesian and Papuan citizens travelling between the two countries with relatively few encumbrances. Located on the northern coast nearby the Indonesian border crossing at Wutung, Vanimo currently has no LDS presence but could become an important city from which to base mission operations bound for Papua Province as an

Indonesian consulate operates in the city. Tourists and visitors note that the Wutung border crossing is one of the safest places in Papua New Guinea and the border has remained open despite political instability and restricted travel for foreigners in Papua Province.^[6] The Wutung border crossing is within close proximity to Jayapura, the most populous city in Papua Province and an important economic center. Papuan missionaries may experience challenges serving in Jayapura as Indonesian is used as a trade language for interethnic communication whereas Tok Pisin is an official language and the most commonly spoken language in Papua New Guinea. If the Church is unable to obtain visas for Papuan missionaries to serve in Indonesia, the Church could assign native Indonesian missionaries from the Indonesia Jakarta Mission to Jayapura as they do not appear to have any restrictions relocating to Papua Province from other areas of the country.

The establishment of LDS congregations in Jayapura will be critical towards establishing a long-term presence that can one day become self-sufficient in its administrative and leadership needs. An LDS presence in Jayapura can also serve as a headquarters to base outreach expansion efforts into other areas of the province due to its large population, administrative status as provincial capital, and ethnic composition. In 2010, there were approximately 234,000 inhabitants in Jayapura;^[7] more than any other city in Papua and Papua Barat Provinces. Other important target cities include Merauke (86,782), Timika (106,529), Biak, and Wamena (Dani).

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and a wide body of materials and church literature into Indonesian. Widespread use of the Indonesian language among many Papuan peoples can facilitate church growth, improve gospel understanding in a second language, and unite different ethnicities into the same congregations. Missionaries can utilize Indonesian materials in initial proselytism efforts and over time learn indigenous languages to facilitate gospel comprehension.

Challenges

Political instability lasting for half a century constitutes the greatest barrier to establishing an LDS presence in Papua. Skirmishes between security force operations under the Indonesian military and Free Papua Movement separatist guerillas (OPM) has resulted in chronic violence and instability for decades. Military personnel have been tried and prosecuted for torture and unlawful killings but sentencing is far below the severity of the crime.^[8] In 2012, there were reports of Indonesian troops killing civilians in Wamena after bombings in the area.^[9] Foreign individuals are generally not permitted to visit Papua and West Papua Provinces due to security and safety concerns. Government officials forbid Papuans from flying the Morning Star flag in Papua despite the Papua Special Autonomy Law permitting Papuans to fly this flag in symbolism of their cultural identity. Large demonstrations frequently occur and at times have been dispersed by local police despite most demonstrations occurring peacefully.^[10] Other United States-based Christian groups such as Baptists and Adventists operate in Papua notwithstanding these challenges. Some Baptist groups have managed to place nonnative families in remote villages to supervise proselytism. Local Christian pastors and ministers often occupy local government positions and may thwart efforts by LDS missionaries to proselyte if they label the Church as heretical.

There are no known Latter-day Saints living in Papua Province. The Church has an extremely limited presence in Indonesia that is constrained to a handful of cities on Java and one city each on Bali, Sulawesi, and Sumatra. Distance from mission headquarters, difficulties securing visas for foreign missionaries, mission resource allocation centered on Java to facilitate districts become stakes, caution expanding missionary activity in a predominantly Muslim country, and no change in the number of Indonesian members serving missions over the past 20 years has resulted in extremely limited progress expanding outreach into unreached areas. The introduction of the Church into new areas has depended on active members relocating to other areas and petitioning mission leaders to organize a congregation. A handful of inactive members who have lost contact with the Church may reside in Jayapura. The establishment of a group and holding cottage meetings may help efforts to find any isolated members and interested individuals from which to build a new congregation.

Most of the population of Papua Province resides in sparsely populated, remote areas that are difficult to access. Rugged terrain and dense tropical forest have isolated Papuan peoples for centuries, resulting in extreme ethnolinguistic diversity. Some peoples were not formally contacted by outsiders until the twentieth century such as the Dani.^[11] Anthropologists estimate as many as 40 peoples remain uncontacted by outsiders.^[12] Some tribes such as the Asmat have practice headhunting and cannibalism although these traditions have declined in recent years.^[13]

The Church translates no materials or scriptures into indigenous languages in Papua Province. There are 17 languages or language groups spoken by 10,000 or more speakers including Ambai (10,100), Asmat languages (19,000), Awyu languages (31,010), Biak (30,000), Damal (14,000), Dani languages (270,000), Ekari (100,000), Kayagar (10,000), Ketengban (10,000), Moni (20,000), Muyu languages (12,000), Nalca (11,100), Nduga (10,000), Ngalum (10,000), Sentani (30,000), Yali languages (30,500), and Yaqay (10,000).^[14] Translations of basic proselytism materials into indigenous languages with the most speakers will be important for maximizing the success of future proselytism efforts.

Comparative Growth

Most nontraditional Christian groups that engage in missionary activity established a presence in Papua Province in the mid-twentieth century including Seventh Day Adventists and Baptists. Seventh Day Adventists report 20,501 members, 102 churches,^[15] and approximately 100 companies in Papua and West Papua Provinces. Adventists generally baptize between 500 and 1,500 converts a year in the two provinces.^[16] Witnesses appear to have a presence in Papua but do not publish the location of individual congregations in Indonesia on their meetinghouse locator website.^[17]

Future Prospects

Prospects for the LDS Church establishing a presence in Papua Province appear dim due to ongoing political instability in Papua Province, distance from mission headquarters in Indonesia, and no known Latter-day Saints in the area. Opportunities for growth appear good despite these challenges as native populations exhibit high receptivity to other Christian faiths, recent successes of the LDS Church expanding outreach among Papuan peoples in rural areas of Papua New Guinea, access to Papua Province from Papua New Guinea through the Wutung border crossing, and the availability of LDS materials and scriptures in Indonesian. The reassignment of Papua and Papua West Provinces to the Papua New Guinea Mission may be warranted to commence formal proselytism activity. At present the establishment of the Church in Papua Province appears most likely to occur through the relocation of Latter-day Saint Indonesian families to Jayapura. However, political instability in the region and few Indonesian Latter-day Saints nationwide may deter any members from moving to Jayapura for employment purposes for many years to come.

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