



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Timor-Leste (East Timor)

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Overview

Timor-Leste, or East Timor, is a small island nation of 1.2 million people located on the eastern half of the island of Timor. Timor-Leste also includes the small enclave of Oecussi on the western side of Timor and the islands of Pulau Atauro and Pulau Jaco. Malayo-Polynesian peoples comprise the majority the population. Most speak Tetun (a Malayo-Polynesian language) or Tetun Dili (a Creole language that borrows from Portuguese and indigenous languages spoken in Timor-Leste). There are sizable numbers of Papuan ethnolinguistic groups and a small Chinese minority. The population is 99.1% Christian. Roman Catholics constitute 96.9% of the population whereas other Christian denominations comprise 2.2% of the population. The LDS Church has no known presence in Timor-Leste notwithstanding a homogeneous Christian population, no government restrictions on religious freedom, and the operation of several nontraditional, missionary-focused denominations within the country for many years.

This case study reviews the history of the Church administering Timor-Leste. Opportunities for establishing an official LDS presence and achieving growth are explored. Recommendations for how to most effectively establish an initial LDS presence are provided. Challenges for establishing a church presence and achieving growth are discussed. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Timor-Leste is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment are predicted.

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LDS Background

Timor-Leste has been assigned to the Indonesia Jakarta Mission since the independence of Timor-Leste from Indonesia in 2002. The Church has never appeared to operate congregations or send missionaries or mission leadership to Timor-Leste. In 2013, the Church reported no members in Timor-Leste.

Latter-day Saints in Southeast Asia report that small numbers of Timorese have joined the Church in Malaysia.

Opportunities

The Timorese government and constitution protect religious freedom. There do not appear to be any major societal abuses of religious freedom for religious minority groups within the capital city of Dili. There is no state religion notwithstanding the population being homogeneously Roman Catholic. Religious groups may register with the secretary of state for security but there are no developed registration procedures. There do not appear to be any penalties or restrictions for unregistered religious to operate in the country.^[1]

The Church has the unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of additional countries to missionary work such as Timor-Leste. The number of members serving full-time missions worldwide increased by the tens of thousands within 2013 and 2014. Portuguese is one of the official languages in Timor-Leste and is spoken by many in Dili, thereby simplifying initial missionary efforts. The Church has significant Portuguese-speaking missionary manpower in the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Portugal. The allotment of even two or three Portuguese-speaking missionary companionships to the Dili area would make virtually no noticeable impact on taking away resources from other areas of the world and could generate a long-term pay off for the Church in terms of establishing a permanent LDS presence through finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining native converts. Delays in the Church obtaining government registration and

assigning foreign missionaries may result in the Church missing the window of opportunity to enter Timor-Leste at a time when the government and society generally respect religious freedom and permit Christian groups to openly proselyte and assemble. Past experience has illustrated that these conditions do not always remain constant or continue to improve. This may result in the Church missing the time-sensitive window of opportunity to establish an official presence when government policies and societal attitudes are more tolerant of foreign-based, outreach-oriented Christian groups.

Dili is inhabited by approximately 200,000 people and presents the greatest opportunities for missionary activity in Timor-Leste due to its sizable population, societal tolerance for religious minorities, and the operation of the only international airport in the country. The Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport has regular international flights to Darwin, Australia; Denpasar, Indonesia; and Singapore, providing mission and area leaders opportunities to visit Timor-Leste and assess conditions for opening the country to missionary activity. The operation of the international airport is also essential to assign any foreign full-time missionaries in order for missionaries to correspond and travel to mission headquarters and permit mission leadership to visit and supervise missionary activity. There have also been government efforts to improve national infrastructure within the past few years such as electrical utilities and roads.

Traditional LDS teaching approaches and missionary lessons have been developed for those with a Christian background. These approaches and teaching resources can likely be effectively implemented among the Timorese population.

Recommendations

The establishment of the Church in Timor-Leste will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members and investigators who reside in Dili. Isolated members and investigators petitioning church leaders to hold church services and to assign missionaries will be key for mission and area leaders to determine the need and urgency of registering the Church with the government and assigning missionaries. Mission and area leaders may also begin investigatory efforts on their own without appeals from members or investigators due to the good opportunities for missionary work and church growth. The Church may reassign Timor-Leste to the Oceania Area and to one of the Australian missions once international church leaders decide to open the country to missionary work. This is due to greater missionary resources available in the Oceania Area and regular international flights between Timor-Leste and Australia.

The assignment of one or two senior missionary couples to Dili to prepare the groundwork for the arrival of full-time, proselytizing young missionaries appears the most practical course of action to establish an official LDS presence in Timor-Leste. This has been the pattern for the Church to establish a presence in countless other nations and has generally yielded good results. Senior missionaries can begin meeting with members and investigators in the Dili area, facilitate efforts to register the Church with the government, and organize a member group. Senior missionaries can also search for missionary housing, investigate opportunities for humanitarian and development projects, and baptize the first converts.

Full-time missionaries may be assigned to Dili once government registration is obtained and when this action is approved by area and international church leadership. The greatest successes in baptizing large numbers of converts and achieving high convert retention will require full-time missionaries regularly opening additional member groups throughout the Dili metropolitan area. The establishment of multiple small branches or member groups reduces travel times to the nearest LDS meetinghouse, provides greater saturation of LDS missionary outreach, and generally accelerates "real growth" as measured by increases in active membership, priesthood manpower, and the maturity and strength of local members. Involvement from local members in missionary efforts will be vital towards instilling self-sufficiency in the Church in Timor-Leste and achieving good convert retention and member activity rates.

Prospects for opening additional areas of the country to missionary work will become more likely once church units in Dili develop greater self sufficiency and experience regular increases in the number of members and investigators attending church services. Locations that appear most likely to have an LDS presence established include Baucau and towns on the outskirts of Dili.

Challenges

Timor-Leste is isolated from the nearest LDS mission. The Indonesia Jakarta Mission headquarters are over 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) away from Dili. No other mission in Asia or Oceania is located closer than 1,000 miles from Timor-Leste. The Church has an extremely limited missionary presence in Indonesia. Distance to mission headquarters in Jakarta poses serious administrative strains and challenges for the mission president and senior missionaries to supervise missionaries.

There are no known Latter-day Saints who currently reside in Timor-Leste. The lack of a membership base upon which missionaries can build poses challenges for establishing an indigenous LDS community that becomes self-sufficient. Consequently full-time missionaries will be responsible for initial fellowshipping and leadership responsibilities until new converts can assume these responsibilities. Few Timorese have joined the Church abroad and only a handful, if any, appear to regularly visit or return to Timor-Leste.

Distance to the nearest mission headquarters, no known Latter-day Saints in Timor-Leste, economic and political stability challenges, and a crippled national infrastructure may dissuade mission and area leaders from considering the assignment of

missionaries to Timor-Leste. The Church has generally avoided opening countries to missionary activity if no members are known to live in the country, the country is distant from the nearest mission, there are low standards of living, or there are restrictions on religious freedom. Conditions in Timor-Leste meet all of these conditions with the exception of religious freedom restrictions. Timor-Leste has yet to make a significant recovery from the war and political conflict that destroyed the country's infrastructure during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Although the country has amassed wealth from exploiting offshore oil reserves, there has been little improvement in standards of living and economic opportunities for most Timorese. There have been problems with political stability as evidenced by civil unrest that occurred in 2006. Past experience suggests that no progress will occur establishing an LDS presence in Timor-Leste until there are a sizable number of active members who relocate to the country and request an official LDS establishment. No Portuguese-speaking missionaries serve in Southeast Asia or Oceania, which may discourage area leaders from exploring missionary opportunities in Timor-Leste.

The Church may experience challenges in establishing a presence outside the capital and obtaining foreign missionary visas. Religious minority groups have experienced harassment, violence, and discrimination outside of Dili. Some denominations reported long delays in obtaining or renewing visas for foreign missionaries.^[2]

Most Timorese possess strong ethnoreligious ties to the Catholic Church. The population is 96.8% Catholic according to the 2010 census.^[3] Other missionary-focused groups experience modest receptivity due to the strong influence of Catholicism on society. Consequently the LDS Church may experience slow growth in Timor-Leste due to most the population exhibiting little interest in nontraditional Christian groups.

The Church has not translated any proselytism or gospel study materials into Tetun or Tetun Dili. Although the use of Portuguese materials may be appropriate during initial proselytism, most do not speak Portuguese fluently. A lack of LDS materials translated into Tetun or Tetun Dili may correspond to reduced receptivity and the perception that the Church is not compatible with Timorese culture. Effective missionary efforts outside of Dili will require the translation of LDS materials into additional indigenous languages - all of which presently have no LDS materials available.

Comparative Growth

Several missionary-focused Christian groups operate in Timor-Leste, although these groups have experienced limited growth. Evangelicals are the largest outreach-oriented Christian group and claim 2.3% of the national population. Evangelicals report that poverty, illiteracy, and poor infrastructure pose challenges for achieving greater church growth.^[4] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has maintained a minimal presence in Timor-Leste since as early as 1986. In 2013, Adventists reported 514 members, one church (large or well-established congregation), and no companies (small or recently organized congregations). Adventists have operated as many as 11 companies within the past five years but these church planting efforts have appeared unsuccessful. Adventists have experienced slow growth over the past five years as generally between 20 and 50 baptisms have occurred annually.^[5] Jehovah's Witnesses experience very slow growth and maintain a minimal presence. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 207 publishers (active members who engage in regular proselytism), three congregations, and 13 baptisms.^[6] In mid-2014, the Jehovah's Witnesses online meeting locator reported congregations in Dili (3) and Baucau (1). At the time all worship services were held in Tetun.^[7] Witnesses translate proselytism materials into many indigenous languages including Tetun, Bunak, Fataluku, Kemak, Makasae, Makasae (Ossu), and three dialects of Mambae.^[8] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence in Timor-Leste.

Limitations

The Church has historically not published membership figures for Timor-Leste on a yearly basis. It is unclear how membership growth trends have fluctuated within the past couple decades. Membership data for 2013 may not be accurate if there are isolated members who joined the Church elsewhere and whose current whereabouts are unknown, or if membership data is subsumed under Indonesia. There are no official membership statistics on country of origin or language usage for languages not within the 10 most commonly spoken languages in the Church. There are no reliable estimates on the number of Timorese Latter-day Saints worldwide. There are no details available on whether mission or area leaders have petitioned or planned to open Timor-Leste to missionary work. The Church does not publish information on its plans to open additional countries to missionary work until these plans are finalized and carried out.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the establishment of an official LDS presence in Timor-Leste is poor for the foreseeable future due to the country's isolation from the nearest LDS mission, its relatively small population in comparison to surrounding nations, a lack of known members in the country, poorly developed national infrastructure, and low living standards. Consequently it appears unlikely that the Church will make any proactive efforts to open Timor-Leste to missionary activity and establish an official presence within the foreseeable future. However, Timor-Leste nonetheless presents good opportunities for commencing LDS missionary activity due to no restrictions on religious freedom and a predominantly Christian population. Timorese joining the Church abroad and requesting the establishment of the Church in their homeland appears the most likely method that the Church will begin to seriously consider opening Timor-Leste to missionary work. Timor-Leste may be reassigned to the Oceania Area and one of the Australian missions due to the lack of resources available and the immense geographical size of the Asia Area and the Indonesia Jakarta Mission.

- [1] "Timor-Leste," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 7 November 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222173>
- [2] "Timor-Leste," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 7 November 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222173>
- [3] "Timor-Leste," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 7 November 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222173>
- [4] "Timor Leste," Operation World, retrieved 3 November 2014. <http://www.operationworld.org/timo>
- [5] "Timor-Leste Mission (2011-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 3 November 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2497252
- [6] "2014 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 12 April 2014. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/>
- [7] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 3 November 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_YBBXHC
- [8] "Featured Items," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 3 November 2014. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/>