

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Chinese in the United Kingdom

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Overview

The United Kingdom possesses a large Chinese speaking community and is likewise a favorable destination for Chinese speaking international students. As of 2012, there were 78,715 speaking Chinese students studying within the United Kingdom, [1] in addition to over 478,000 permanent residents within the country who identify themselves as “British Chinese” be it in heritage or ethnicity alike.[2] The United Kingdom possesses a large number of “Community Chinatowns” located in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sheffield, and Aberdeen.

This case study concentrates on recent LDS missionary efforts reaching Chinese populations within the England Leeds Mission. Church growth successes are examined and opportunities and challenges for future growth are explored. LDS growth among Chinese populations in other European countries is compared to recent growth developments in the United Kingdom. The size and growth trends experienced by missionary-focused Christian groups that target the Chinese in the United Kingdom are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The England Leeds Mission includes the North East and Yorkshire regions of England, consisting of the major cities Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle, Sunderland, Kingston Upon Hull, Bradford, and York. The mission numbers among the highest baptizing within the United Kingdom, averaging around 360 baptisms per year. Beginning in 2011, the church began to assign Mandarin speaking missionaries to the mission, resulting in more successful conversion and retention of the Chinese-speaking population. Church leaders have also organized several member groups within major community centers. The Church has since expanded its Chinese missionary program to additional English missions. In 2012, missionaries in the England Manchester Mission reported that 10 new Chinese-speaking missionaries arrived over a period of six months.

Local members observe that Chinese students have always represented a highly receptive group to LDS missionaries as Chinese baptisms are not a new nor a traditionally uncommon notion within England. However, cultural, social, and linguistic barriers between Chinese, missionaries, and English church members have acted as impermeable barriers towards their retention. Historically, the retention of Chinese converts has been incredibly poor dominantly based upon these factors, in addition to many Chinese students also returning home to China following completion of their studies.

The introduction of Mandarin speaking missionaries into the England Leeds Mission saw a turning point where the seeds of success began to be sown. The rate of receptivity towards Mandarin missionaries was greatly increased, resulting in some Mandarin speaking elders assigned to a single area for long periods of their missions in order to strengthen, retain, and seek out new converts, whilst wards cooperated by ordering Mandarin speaking resources, such as hymnbooks and likewise headphone systems to allow the translation of sacrament talks through the missionary. Chinese retention grew significantly as a result of concentrated mission outreach. Eventually Chinese speaking groups with stabilized native Chinese leadership were established within Newcastle Upon Tyne and Leeds. These areas held significant advantage above others as they did not just possess a large Chinese student population, but also a permanent population of Chinese migrants.

Additional expansion of Chinese-specific outreach has occurred within the past year. In September 2013, the Church opened a Chinese-speaking proselytism area in Liverpool. That same month the England London South Mission reported that there were nine missionaries designated as Mandarin Chinese-speaking and that some wards held special social activities for Chinese

members and investigators such as in Portsmouth. One of these activities attracted nearly 20 Chinese investigators in Liverpool that month. In December 2013, missionaries in Scotland reported plans to have four Mandarin Chinese-speaking proselytism areas (Aberdeen, Dundee/St. Andrews, Edinburgh, and Glasgow) once additional Chinese-speaking missionaries arrived to the mission in early 2014. In early 2014, sister missionaries reopened Mandarin Chinese outreach in the Manchester YSA Ward. Currently, missionaries report that there are a dozen or more recent Chinese converts in several cities.

Successes

The assignment of Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionaries to multiple missions in the United Kingdom has significantly improved convert accountability for Chinese members. Missionaries have worked well with local ward leadership and ordinary members to identify needs and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Chinese-specific proselytism. Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionaries have also appeared to improve gospel comprehension and the tailoring of teaching to the religious understanding of Chinese due to the extension of specialized outreach.

The Church has organized member groups as precursors to the establishment of branches; a significantly more effective approach as opposed to a church-splitting approach that requires a sufficient number of active members in a ward or branch to divide it into smaller congregations. The groups in Leeds and Newcastle Upon Tyne are now experiencing considerable and stable growth with baptisms occurring regularly. The establishment of a stable Chinese leadership has reduced the burden of finding and fellowshipping new converts previously incurred by full-time missionaries, thus making retention a significantly easier task. Missionaries report that because of the growth of the Newcastle Group, it is close to becoming a branch, likewise with the Leeds group. The groups have created a sociological footing for Chinese converts who would normally become estranged and uncomfortable due to the barriers with the wider English membership.

Chinese activities have attracted sizable numbers of investigators and members and constitute a major success for the Church to provide a sense of LDS community and fellowship among this ethnolinguistic minority group. The Church has regularly held these activities and these activities provide a less formal opportunity for members, missionaries, and investigators to invite others. The Church has appeared to utilize this approach as a means of assessing receptivity in some locations prior to concentrating greater amounts of mission resources.

The conversion of Chinese students and those from mainland China temporarily residing in the United Kingdom has further strengthened the Church in mainland China where there are proselytism restrictions. In 2013, the Church launched its Mormons and China website to provide greater worldwide accountability for the thousands of Chinese converts baptized abroad who later return back to mainland China. A case study reviewing the website and examining opportunities and challenges for future growth can be found here.

Opportunities

The recent establishment of Chinese member groups presents significant opportunities for proselytizing the wider Chinese population within the United Kingdom and providing the Church in mainland China with stronger and more active members. As there are many cities that do not yet have Chinese speaking groups, opportunities in the long term for greater outreach may exist, as Newcastle and Leeds do not represent the sole focus of Mandarin assignments, others may emerge the future. Likewise, these groups could eventually establish Mandarin missionaries in the long term should their growth and stability continue. Cities with some of the highest concentrations of Chinese that appear most favorable for maintaining or introducing specialized outreach among Chinese include the greater London area, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool, Coventry, Bristol, and Nottingham.

The Church has not appeared to introduce Cantonese-speaking missionaries to the United Kingdom. The designation of a couple missionary companionships as Cantonese-speaking may help improve missionary efforts among this subset of the British Chinese population.

Challenges

Despite these initial successes, several challenges still exist for Chinese growth within other cities. Namely, the lack of permanent Chinese communities in some areas makes the retention and securing of student converts difficult. In addition, the sociological entrenchment, lack of commitment and clique culture of some congregations have prevented Chinese programs getting off the ground in some areas.

At the same time, the social influence of Chinese groups have also acted to sway Chinese converts from attending their proper assigned wards, preventing others from developing. An example of this is Sunderland. A Chinese program was initiated in Sunderland in 2012. A Mandarin speaking missionary assigned and the missionary was able to make a number of converts. However, Sunderland's lack of a permanent Chinese community, combined with the operation of a Chinese group within the neighboring city of Newcastle contributed to significant setbacks resulting in a brief termination of the Sunderland Chinese missionary program in mid-2013. Local members reported that many Chinese converts living within the city deemed "less active" were in actuality actively attending the member group in Newcastle.

The integration of the active Chinese members into the wider church community remains a significant challenge. Chinese student members are rarely involved in YSA activities and institute, and have struggled to create strong friendships outside of their member circles, which although have secured their participation within the church, it indicates that the social barriers between them and the English membership have not disappeared but have manifest themselves in other ways. Some converts lack English skills, while as a whole the English membership have little to no knowledge of Mandarin Chinese.

Comparative growth

The Church has appeared to assign Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionaries to only a few European countries as of 2014 notwithstanding many Chinese residing throughout Europe. In France, the Church has designated several missionary companionships as Mandarin Chinese-speaking in both the France Paris and France Lyon Missions for several years. In the Netherlands, the mission president reported that there was at least one Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionary assigned to the mission in early 2014.

Some missionary-focused Christian groups report a significantly more widespread presence among British Chinese and Chinese students temporarily residing in the United Kingdom than the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim five percent of the Mandarin-speaking Chinese population in the United Kingdom, suggesting that 80% or more of Mandarin-speaking Chinese Christians in the country are evangelicals.[3] Evangelicals report similar statistics for estimated membership among other Chinese groups such as speakers of Cantonese or Hakka. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence among British Chinese and operate congregations that provide worship services in both Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese. In early 2014, Witnesses reported 49 Mandarin-speaking congregations and groups and six Cantonese-speaking congregations and groups within Great Britain. Nearly 50 cities receive Chinese-specific Witness outreach including Aberdeen, Bath, Belfast, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, Bury, Cambridge, Cardiff, Coventry, Dundee, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow (2), Gloucester, Guildford, Hastings, Hatfield, Hull, Ipswich, Leeds, Leigh-on-Sea, Lincoln, Liverpool (2), London (5), Loughborough, Luton, Manchester (2), Middlesbrough, Milton Keynes, Motherwell, Newcastle Under Lyme, Nottingham, Oxford, Penicuik, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Preston, Reading, Sheffield, Southampton, St Andrews, St Austell, Stirling, Sunderland, Swansea, and York.[4] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports no Chinese-specific congregations in the United Kingdom[5] but likely has small numbers of Chinese in various congregations. The Church of the Nazarene reports no Chinese-specific congregations in the United Kingdom.[6]

Limitations

The Church does not publish data on the number of members by country of origin for the United Kingdom of the Church as a whole, although senior missionaries serving in Hong Kong in 2014 indicated that there are possibly as many as 100,000 Chinese Latter-day Saints worldwide. It is unclear how many Chinese members are on church records for the United Kingdom. The Church does not publish the number, name, and location of its member groups in the United Kingdom or for the Church as a whole. Consequently, it is unclear how many Chinese groups currently function in the United Kingdom. Although several high-quality reports from local British members and full-time missionaries were available during the writing of this case study, no reports from British Chinese members were available.

Future Prospects

The outlook for continued growth in the number of active Chinese members and the continued strengthening of the LDS Chinese community in the United Kingdom appears positive. The fact that no groups in the mission existed in 2011 and several operate throughout the country today is a testimony that progress has been made. Many of these groups regularly baptize new members and have had good convert retention. The growth and expansion of Mandarin Chinese leadership will prove a pivotal feature in these member groups evolving into branches and eventually wards. However, growth may be limited to only a handful of cities rather than occurring throughout the country. The availability of Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionaries within British missions, and the involvement and interest of local church leaders in Chinese-specific outreach within their jurisdictions, will be critical towards ensuring continued expansion and long-term success in reaching Chinese populations in the United Kingdom.

[1] "International student statistics: UK higher education," www.ukcisa.org.uk, 7 March 2014. http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges--schools/Policy-research--statistics/Research--statistics/International-students

[2] "FOI Request: Mid-2010 Population Estimates by Ethnic Group," www.ons.gov.uk, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/business-transparency/freedom-of-information/what-can-i-request/previous-foi-requests/peopl

[3] "Han Chinese, Mandarin," Joshua Project, retrieved 20 January 2014. http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=12051&rog3=UK

[4] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 20 January 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[5] "Directory," www.adventistdirectory,org, retrieved 20 January 2014. http://www.adventistdirectory.org/BrowseCountry.aspx?&CtryCode=GB

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 20 January 2014. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=UK&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=