



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among Laotians in the United States

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Overview

The United States has one of the largest Laotian populations in the world. Currently the estimated number of Laotian Americans residing in the United States is approximately 230,000. In the mid-2000s, there were approximately 148,000 Lao speakers in the United States.^[1] The most recent census data notes that Lao speakers are primarily concentrated in California (35,153), Texas (11,851), Minnesota (9,687), Washington (8,518), and Tennessee (6,507).^[2] Laotians traditionally adhere to Buddhism (60%) and traditional religious practices (33%). A small minority adheres to Christianity (4%) or is nonreligious (3%).^[3] The LDS Church has extended Laotian-specific outreach since the 1970s when sizable numbers of Laotian refugees were resettled in the United States. Today Laotians number among the best-reached Southeast Asian peoples by the LDS Church within the United States.

This case study reviews the history of Laotian resettlement patterns in the United States. The history of the Church among Laotians in the United States is summarized. Church growth successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are examined. The size and growth trends of the Church among other Southeast Asian peoples are reviewed. Efforts by other missionary-focused Christian groups to proselyte Laotian Americans are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Laotian History

The Lao people, or commonly called Laotians in the United States, traditionally reside within the present-day boundaries of Laos. The Lao share many cultural and linguistic similarities with other major ethnolinguistic groups within the region, most notably the Thai people. The Laotian language utilizes its own writing script derived from Brahmic abugida scripts native to India and shares many similarities with Thai languages.

The Lan Xang kingdom was established in the fourteenth century in present-day Laos. Lan Xang ruled the area for three centuries and influenced the Southeast Asia region. The kingdom divided into three states and eventually assimilated into Thailand later. Laos became part of French Indochina in the late 1800s. France regained control of Laos following a brief hiatus in World War II. Independence occurred in 1949, but France continued to exert influence on the region for the following decade. Laos played an integral part of the Vietnam War due to civil war between the communist Pathet Lao rebels and the Royal Laotian government. The United States heavily bombed Laos to fight the North Vietnamese assistance of the Pathet Lao. Communists took control in 1975 and continued strict socialist policy until 1988.

The United States admitted tens of thousands of Laotian refugees during the late 1970s and early 1980s due to hundreds of thousands of Laotians displaced in Thailand as a result of the communist takeover. Approximately 100,000 Laotians entered the United States during the three-year period from year-end 1978 to year-end 1981. The vast majority of Laos-born Lao people in the United States entered the country during this period.^[4]

LDS History and Background

The Church began missionary efforts among the Lao people in the late 1970s when tens of thousands of Lao refugees arrived to the United States. Recently returned missionaries from the Thailand Bangkok Mission were utilized in initial proselytism efforts in locations where there were sizable numbers of Lao refugees.^[5]

The Church appeared to organize the first Lao-speaking Sunday School classes, member groups, and branches during the 1980s. The Church extended Laotian-specific outreach in several American cities in California, Tennessee, and Utah by the late 1980s. The Church has historically maintained Lao-speaking mission programs in several American missions including the California Oakland/San Francisco Mission, the California Fresno Mission, the California San Diego Mission (since the early 2010s), the Massachusetts Boston Mission (four Lao-speaking missionaries in 1991),^[6] and the Pennsylvania Philadelphia Mission.

The Church operated three Lao-speaking units in the United States as of mid-2015 – two in California (Richmond and Stockton) and one in Utah (Salt Lake City). The most recently organized Laotian-speaking branch in the United States is the Stockton 7th Branch (Laotian) that was organized in 1989. The Church in the United States reported sizable numbers of Laotian members in at least 15 additional congregations as of mid-2015 in the following cities: Danville, Arkansas; Fresno, California; Porterville, California; San Diego, California; Fort Dodge, Iowa; St Cloud, Minnesota; Dallas, Texas; Garland, Texas; Orem, Utah; West Valley City, Utah; Franklin, Virginia; Herndon, Virginia; Reston, Virginia; and Everett, Washington.

The Church has previously operated Lao-speaking Sunday School classes, member groups, or branches in several cities where no Lao-speaking Sunday Schools or units appear to currently operate. Some of these locations include Eureka, California in 1995;^[7] Denver, Colorado in 1997;^[8] Providence, Rhode Island in 1993;^[9] Nashville, Tennessee in 1981;^[10] and Dallas, Texas in 2000.^[11] The most recently discontinued Laotian-speaking branch in the United States was the Mayfair Branch (Laotian) in Fresno, California. The branch closed in 2012.

The Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Lao in 1982.^[12] The entire Book of Mormon was translated into Lao in 2012.^[13] Translations of General Conference addresses in Lao have been available since as early as 1988.^[14]

The Church has generally reported few active Lao members in most locations where there are sizable concentrations of Laotian Latter-day Saints. The South Philadelphia Branch had approximately 250 less-active or inactive members as of 2000.^[15] The congregation continued to operate as a branch as of mid-2015. One returned missionary reported that the Richmond Ward (Laotian) had approximately 70-80 active members during the early 2010s.

The Church reported approximately 4,500 Lao-speaking members worldwide as of 2012. The vast majority of Laotian Latter-day Saints resided in the United States, Canada, Laos, and Thailand at the time.^[16]

A map displaying the location of Lao-speaking LDS congregations and cities with sizable numbers of Lao-speaking members can be found [here](#).

Successes

The LDS Church is one of the largest Christian denominations among Laotians in the United States. There are at least 18 LDS congregations in the United States that either hold worship services in Lao or have sizable numbers of Laotian Latter-day Saints. Rarely has the Church in the United States made such impressive inroads among a traditionally non-Christian, immigrant ethnolinguistic group with less than a quarter of a million people scattered throughout the country. The Church has aggressively proselytized Laotians in many states where there are sizable Laotian populations such as California, Pennsylvania, and Utah. Laotian-speaking full-time missionaries have regularly served in several cities in California. Multiple missions maintain active Lao proselytism programs. The Lao language has been consistently taught in the Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) to missionaries destined to serve Lao-speaking missions. Decades of missionary outreach has yielded some lasting results as evidenced by three Lao-speaking congregations in the United States in operation as of mid-2015. The Church has achieved good self-sufficiency in a few of its Lao-speaking congregations that have been organized within the past three decades. The Church has maintained the operation of three Lao-speaking congregations for nearly three decades. Two of these units have a sufficient number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders to operate as wards.

The Church has continued to expand Lao-specific mission outreach within the United States. The Church started a Lao mission language program in the California San Diego Mission during the early 2010s. Mission and stake leaders throughout the United States have appeared to quickly mobilize resources to extend specialized outreach among Laotians in many locations.

LDS outreach among Laotians in the United States has facilitated the establishment of the Church in Laos during the past decade. One of the first members to reside in Laos joined the Church in the United States in 1991 while visiting family in Minnesota. The member returned to Laos in 2002.^[17] The translation of select passages of the Book of Mormon and gospel study and missionary materials into Lao preceded the formal establishment of a branch and the assignment of full-time missionaries to Vientiane, Laos. The availability of these materials in Lao has appeared a significant catalyst to the growth of the Church in Laos since the organization of the Vientiane Branch in 2003 and the success of missionary work in the city within the past decade.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities for the Church to expand Laotian-specific outreach into additional cities where there are sizable

Laotian communities. The Church has a well-developed body of Lao proselytism materials and has maintained Lao language proselytism programs for decades in some areas. Thus, the Church has the resources and materials needed to continue to expand Lao outreach into additional locations where little or no previous outreach has been extended. Cities where no Lao-speaking congregation operates but where there are a sizable number of Laotian Latter-day Saints in English-speaking wards or branches present good opportunities to hold Lao-speaking Sunday School classes and organize member groups, if church leaders have not done so already. Many of these cities are located in California, Virginia, and Texas. Additional states with Laotian communities may also present good results if Lao-speaking missionaries are assigned such as Minnesota and Washington. Social media proselytism efforts may be effective in reaching Laotian populations in locations where no Lao-speaking missionaries serve and where there are few, if any, Laotian Latter-day Saints.

The positive relationship between many Laotian Americans and the United States government appears to have improved receptivity to the LDS Church in locations where Lao-speaking congregations operate. LDS teachings which encourage members to support their governments and be involved in civic matters may have attracted some Laotians to investigate and join the Church. Additionally, the connection between the LDS Church and American society and culture may have also improved receptivity to missionary work.

The size of LDS Church in many Laotian American communities presents unique opportunities for the Church to utilize Laotian Latter-day Saints in missionary efforts in Laos. Many Laotian Americans retain a vivid memory of their traditions and customs and offer good opportunities for the LDS Church to make greater inroads in Laos if legal obstacles that diminish religious freedom are overcome. Laotian American Latter-day Saints have frequently served full-time missions and provide invaluable resources as translators with English-speaking leadership, cultural experts on traditional beliefs and practices, and language guides to teaching the Lao language. The Church benefits from developed Laotian leadership in many locations with Lao-speaking congregations. Some members with leadership experience can be assigned to Laos to work with Laotian communities within the confines of the law.

Challenges

Traditional ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism and traditional religious beliefs constitute one of the greatest challenges for LDS missionary work among Laotians in the United States. The Church has not developed teaching strategies tailored to the religious background of Buddhists. Thus, missionaries have reported challenges with explaining basic LDS teachings and doctrines to the understanding of Buddhists. Laotians and other Southeast Asian peoples such as Cambodians have exhibited modest receptivity to the LDS Church and other missionary-focused Christian groups notwithstanding many of these populations living in the United States for three decades or longer. These conditions will require cultural sensitivity and skill by stake and mission leaders to appropriately adapt proselytism and missionary teaching approaches to the needs of Laotian Americans.

The Church has experienced convert retention and member activity problems in most locations where there are sizable concentrations of Laotian members. The Church has baptized thousands of Laotians in the United States since the late 1970s yet there remain only three Lao-speaking congregations nationwide. The Church has closed several branches that previously administered to Laotians and/or other Southeast Asian peoples. One Lao-speaking branch in the Denver metropolitan area had essentially all of its members become inactive. The closure of branches appears indicative of inadequate numbers of active priesthood holders to operate segregated congregations for Lao and English speakers. The Church has not translated its Hastening the Work of Salvation website or broadcast into Lao. The Church has yet to translate Mormon.org into Lao to assist online missionary efforts. However, there are many Lao translations of LDS materials available through lds.org that can be utilized for online member-missionary work.

The Church does not publish information on which wards or branches in the United States hold Sunday School classes or operate member groups to meet the needs of a specific ethnolinguistic minority group. The lack of information on Lao-speaking Sunday School classes online may discourage some interested Laotian members or investigators from seriously considering attending church. Publishing information on Lao-speaking member groups and Sunday School classes on the Church's online meetinghouse locator appears an effective method to present this information to interested individuals and assist in missionary efforts.

Many Laotians have become assimilated into mainstream American society within recent years. This has created challenges with determining whether Lao-specific missionary work or congregations should operate in some locations as many have become proficient in English. These conditions pose challenges for extending specialized outreach among Laotians due to individual differences in Lao proficiency, English proficiency, and assimilation into mainstream American society.

The operation of Lao-speaking congregations in some locations has been challenging due to the movement of Laotian populations. Some Laotian communities have moved to different cities within the past several decades. Thus, few Laotians have remained in some locations where larger Laotian communities previously existed.

The Church has yet to translate all LDS scriptures into Lao. It is unclear why the Church has not completed translations of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price into Lao as the Church has maintained a sizable presence among Laotians in the United States since the late 1980s. The translation of these LDS scriptures into Lao will be important for promoting testimony development and gospel scholarship among Lao-speaking members who exhibit limited proficiency in English.

Comparative Growth

The Church in the United States initiated outreach among most Southeast Asian peoples during the 1970s and 1980s. Most outreach began in Utah and California among recently immigrated individuals and families who fled their home nations as refugees. LDS outreach has primarily been extended to Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodians. Hmong-specific outreach began in the late 1970s. Many Hmong-speaking wards and branches have operated within the past three decades. Today there are 10 Hmong-speaking wards or branches that operate in California (9) and Minnesota (1). Vietnamese-specific outreach began in the late 1970s.^[18] Many Vietnamese branches have operated over the past three decades although multiple branches have closed during this period such as in Utah and Nebraska. Currently the Church operates four Vietnamese-speaking branches in California (2), Georgia (1), and Texas (1). Cambodian-specific outreach also began in the 1970s/early 1980s in several states. Some Cambodian-speaking branches have closed over the years in locations such as in California. Currently Cambodian-speaking wards or branches operate in California (2) and Utah (1).

Several missionary-focused Christian groups have established Lao-speaking congregations in the United States. Latter-day Saints are one of the largest Christian denominations among Laotians. Evangelicals claim 0.5% of Laotians in the United States.^[19] Jehovah's Witnesses report seven congregations that extend outreach in Lao. However, only one of these congregations, located in Columbus, Ohio, exclusively holds worship services in Lao. The other six congregations only hold some meetings in this language.^[20] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the United States reports only one small Lao-speaking congregation in San Diego, California.^[21] The Church of the Nazarene maintains one Lao-speaking congregation in Burlington, North Carolina.^[22]

Limitations

The Church does not regularly publish the worldwide number of Laotian Latter-day Saints. Member activity and convert retention rates among Laotians are difficult to assess as the Church does not publish these statistics. There were no efforts to estimate these statistics in this case study due to a lack of data. Although many reports from returned missionaries were available during the writing of this case study, no reports from Laotian Americans were utilized.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among Laotians in the United States appears mixed. The recent expansion of Lao-specific outreach to additional missions is encouraging and may indicate continued efforts to expand Lao-speaking mission programs. Additional Lao-speaking branches, member groups, or Sunday Schools may be organized in additional cities in California, Virginia, and Texas. However, the creation of new Lao-speaking units will likely strongly depend on the availability of priesthood leadership, interest from mission and stake leadership to organize Lao-speaking units, and the receptivity of local Laotian communities to LDS missionary efforts. The need for specialized Lao outreach may decline in the coming years due to the integration of many Laotians into mainstream American society and increasing English proficiency.

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