People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among Vietnamese in the United States

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Overview

Vietnamese rank as the fifth largest ethnolinguistic minority group in the United States. There were approximately 1.2 million Vietnamese speakers in the United States as of 2008.[1] The states with the largest Vietnamese populations as of 2010 included California (581,946), Texas (210,913), Washington (66,575), Florida (58,470), Virginia (53,529), Georgia (45,263), Massachusetts (42,915), Pennsylvania (39,008), New York (28,764), and Louisiana (28,352).[2] Linguistic data obtained in 2011 from the US Census Bureau indicates that Vietnamese speakers exhibit the lowest level of English competency among the 10 most commonly spoken minority languages in the United States.[3]

Most Vietnamese Americans arrived to the United States in two waves of refugees. The first occurred in the mid-1970s in connection with the fall of Saigon, whereas the second occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of war in Indochina. These two immigration waves culminated in the number of Vietnamese skyrocketing from 245,025 in 1980 to 614,545 in 1990.[4] Approximately half of Vietnamese in the United States are Buddhist (53%) whereas 23% are nonreligious, 9% are Christian, 9% follow ethnic religions, and 6% follow other religions. Over three-quarters of Vietnamese Christians are Roman Catholic.[5]

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church among the Vietnamese people in the United States. Church growth and missionary successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church among other Southeast Asian peoples in the United States is reviewed. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups among Vietnamese Americans are examined. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS History

The Church began missionary efforts among the Vietnamese people in South Vietnam during the 1960s. American military personnel stationed in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War were instrumental in the initial proselytization of the Vietnamese people. The translation of Church materials into Vietnamese began in the late 1960s. There were approximately 300 Vietnamese members by 1975. Full-time missionaries assigned to serve in South Vietnam were withdrawn in 1975 and almost 100 Vietnamese Latter-day Saints left the country. The last official LDS worship services in Saigon were held on April 27th, 1975.[6] Between 150 and 200 members remained in South Vietnam following the end of the war.

The Church initiated Vietnamese-specific outreach in the United States during the 1970s. However, more coordinated, widespread missionary activity did not commence until the mid to late 1980s. Some locations where the Church concentrated initial Vietnamese-specific missionary activity included the Los Angeles metropolitan area, California; San Jose, California; and Salt Lake City, Utah. The Church has maintained Vietnamese mission language programs in several locations within the past several decades. For example, there were six Vietnamese-speaking missionaries in the Georgia Atlanta Mission during the early 1990s that primary worked in the Brookhaven 2nd Branch (Vietnamese).[7]

The Church operated four Vietnamese-speaking branches in the United States as of mid-2015. These branches included the Bayshore Branch in San Jose, California (organized in 1992); the Braeburn 2nd Branch in the Houston metropolitan area, Texas (organized in 1987); the Brookhaven Branch in Atlanta, Georgia (organized in 1991); and the Garden Grove 12th Branch in Garden Grove, California (organized in 1992). Additional locations where no Vietnamese-speaking branch operated but where

there were sizable numbers of Vietnamese-speaking members include Theodore, Alabama; San Diego, California; Worthington, Minnesota; Lexington, Nebraska; Lincoln, Nebraska; Mount Airy, North Carolina; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Garland, Texas; Salt Lake City, Utah; and the Seattle/Tacoma metropolitan area, Washington.

There are some locations where the Church has previously extended Vietnamese-specific outreach but where the Church no longer appears to maintain specialized branches, member groups, or Sunday School classes to service Vietnamese speakers. The Church previously assigned Vietnamese-speaking missionaries to Washington D.C. during the early 1990s when a Vietnamese unit once operated in the area.[8] Some locations previously had Vietnamese-speaking missionaries assigned, but no longer appear to have formal Vietnamese proselytism programs such as in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the early 1990s.

The Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Vietnamese in 1980. The Book of Mormon was translated in its entirety in 1982.[9] The Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price were translated in 2003.[10] Translations of General Conference addresses into Vietnamese have been available since as early as 1988.[11]

A map displaying the locations of Vietnamese-speaking LDS congregations and locations with sizable numbers of Vietnamese American Latter-day Saints can be found here.

Successes

The Church has proselytized Vietnamese communities in some states with sizable Vietnamese populations such as major cities in California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Houston, Texas. Vietnamese-speaking full-time missionaries have regularly served in several cities for multiple decades and several missions maintain active Vietnamese proselytism programs. The Vietnamese language has been consistently taught in the Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) to missionaries destined to serve Vietnamese-speaking missions. Four Vietnamese-speaking branches operate in the United States to exclusively administer Vietnamese speakers.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and a sizable number of gospel study and missionary materials into Vietnamese. The ample number of gospel study resources appears to sufficiently meet missionary and testimony development needs. The Church has had many of these materials translated for several decades to assist in missionary efforts among Vietnamese worldwide.

Opportunities

The Church has extended minimal Vietnamese-specific outreach in the United States within the past several decades despite a nationwide population of over one million. This underserviced subset of the American population presents good opportunities for specialized outreach due to a large target population, Vietnamese exhibiting moderate levels of receptivity to LDS outreach in locations where specialized missionary outreach has been extended, and abundant church resources in the United States than can be channeled into missionary work among ethnolinguistic minority groups. The well-developed body of Vietnamese proselytism materials permits efficient and effective use of scriptures and gospel study and missionary materials in proselytism and church growth initiatives.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area presents some of the greatest opportunities for LDS growth among the Vietnamese people in the United States. All three counties in the United States with the largest Vietnamese populations are located within the Los Angeles metropolitan area.[12] However, only one Vietnamese-speaking branch located in Garden Grove services the entire area. The establishment of Vietnamese-speaking Sunday School classes, member groups, and branches in additional stakes and missions within the area presents good opportunities for reaching the largest concentration of Vietnamese people within the United States.

There are good opportunities for the Church to expand Vietnamese-specific outreach into additional cities. The Church has maintained Vietnamese-language proselytism programs for decades in select areas and has taught Vietnamese in the Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) to missionaries destined to serve Vietnamese-speaking missions. Thus, the Church has the resources needed to expand Vietnamese outreach into additional locations where little or no previous outreach has been extended. Cities where no Vietnamese congregation operates but where there are a sizable number of Vietnamese Latter-day Saints in English-speaking wards or branches present good opportunities to hold Vietnamese-speaking Sunday School classes and organize member groups, if church leaders have not done so already. Locations with small numbers of Vietnamese Latter-day Saints that appear most favorable for the establishment of member groups or branches include San Diego, California; Lincoln, Nebraska; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Dallas, Texas; Seattle, Washington; and Tacoma, Washington. Metropolitan areas with sizable Vietnamese communities that appear favorable for future LDS outreach where there appear to be few Vietnamese Latter-day Saints include Washington DC and Boston, Massachusetts. Social media proselytism efforts may be effective in reaching Vietnamese populations in locations where no Vietnamese-speaking missionaries serve and where there are few, if any, Vietnamese Latter-day Saints.

The establishment of an LDS presence among some Vietnamese communities in the United States presents unique opportunities for the Church to expand its missionary activity in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese Latter-day Saints who reside in the

United States are fluent in the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese American Latter-day Saints regularly serve full-time missions and provide invaluable resources, especially in Vietnam where the Church is only permitted to assign full-time missionaries of Vietnamese ancestry. Increases in the number of Vietnamese Americans joining the Church and serving missions could therefore result in a significant expansion of LDS missionary activity within Vietnam.

Challenges

Few Vietnamese have converted to Christianity. Most Vietnamese are Buddhist or nonreligious. 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. Vietnamese 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 Vietnamese Americans.

The Church has experienced convert retention and member activity problems in most locations where there are sizable concentrations of Vietnamese members. The Church has baptized thousands of Vietnamese in the United States since the late 1970s yet there remain only four Vietnamese-speaking congregations nationwide. No Vietnamese-speaking branches have met the minimum criteria to operate as wards due to a lack of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders and inactivity problems among general membership. The Church has not translated its Hastening the Work of Salvation website or broadcast into Vietnamese. The Church has yet to translate Mormon.org into Vietnamese to assist online missionary efforts. However, there are many Vietnamese 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 Vietnamese-speaking Sunday School classes online may discourage some interested Vietnamese members or investigators from seriously considering church attendance. Publishing information of Vietnamese-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 Vietnamese have become assimilated into mainstream American society within recent years. This has created challenges with determining whether Vietnamese-specific missionary work or congregations should operate as many have become proficient in English. These conditions pose challenges for extending specialized outreach among Vietnamese due to individual differences in Vietnamese proficiency, English proficiency, and assimilation into mainstream American society.

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 Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong communities. Laotian-specific outreach began in the late 1970s.[13] Many Laotian branches have operated over the past three decades although multiple branches have closed during this period such as in California and Colorado. Currently the Church operates three Lao-speaking units in California (2) and Utah (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). 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).

Several missionary-focused Christian groups have established Vietnamese-speaking congregations in the United States. However, most of these denominations have established a more widespread presence among Vietnamese Americans compared to the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 1.8% of Vietnamese in the United States.[14] Jehovah's Witnesses report 55 congregations that extend outreach in the Vietnamese language. However, only 15 of these congregations exclusively hold worship services in Vietnamese as the other 40 congregations only hold some meetings in this language.[15] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reports 11 Vietnamese-speaking congregations – seven of which are churches (large or well-established congregations).[16] The Church of the Nazarene operates at least four Vietnamese-speaking congregations in the United States.[17]

Limitations

The Church does not publish the worldwide number of Vietnamese Latter-day Saints. The number of Vietnamese who have joined the Church in the United States is unknown. Member activity and convert retention rates among Vietnamese 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 Vietnamese American Latter-day Saints were utilized.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among Vietnamese in the United States appears mixed. Some branches may advance into wards within the coming years once there are a sufficient number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders to meet the minimum criteria for a ward to operate. Vietnamese-speaking member groups or branches may be organized in additional cities in California, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington. However, the creation of new Vietnamese-speaking units will likely strongly depend on the availability of priesthood leadership, interest from mission and stake leadership to organize Vietnamese units, and the receptivity of Vietnamese populations to LDS outreach. The need for specialized Vietnamese outreach may decline in the coming years due to the integration of many Vietnamese into mainstream American society and increasing English proficiency.

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