



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

>

LDS Outreach among the Cambodians in the United States

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: August 31st, 2015

Overview

Cambodians in the United States numbered approximately 232,000 according to 2010 census data.^[1] Metropolitan areas in the United States with at least 10,000 Cambodian Americans as of 2010 included Los Angeles, California (44,522); Boston, Massachusetts (24,528); Seattle, Washington (19,240); Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (13,000); and Stockton, California (12,557).^[2] There were approximately 182,000 Cambodian (Khmer) speakers nationwide as of 2008.^[3] Most Cambodian Americans arrived to the United States as refugees in the 1980s.^[4] Cambodian Americans are predominantly Buddhist (86%) whereas smaller numbers follow ethnic religions (8%), Christianity (3%), or no religion (3%). Most Cambodian Christians in the United States adhere to non-Catholic denominations.^[5] The LDS Church has maintained Cambodian-specific outreach in the United States for approximately three decades and has established a Cambodian LDS community in several locations nationwide.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church among Cambodian 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 Cambodian Americans are examined. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.[swiss replica watches](#)

//

LDS History

The Church initiated Cambodian-specific outreach during the 1980s when many Cambodians were resettled in the United States as refugees. Small numbers of Cambodians likely joined the Church as early as the 1970s. Some locations where the Church concentrated initial Cambodian-specific missionary activity included the Los Angeles metropolitan area, California; the Oakland metropolitan area, California; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Boston, Massachusetts. The Church noted small numbers of Cambodian members in the Los Angeles area during the late 1980s.^[6] There were eight Khmer-speaking full-time missionaries assigned to the Massachusetts Boston Mission in 1991.^[7]

The Church operated three Khmer-speaking congregations in the United States as of mid-2015. These congregations included the Long Beach Park Ward in Long Beach, California (organized in 1985); the Jordan River Branch in Salt Lake City, Utah (organized in 1980); and the Oakland 10th Branch in Oakland, California (organized in 1987). Additional locations where no Khmer-speaking branches operate but where there are sizable numbers of Cambodian members include Orange, California; Stockton, California; Boston, Massachusetts; Lowell, Massachusetts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Spanish Fork, Utah; Thatcher-Penrose, Utah; and Everett, Washington. The Minnesota Minneapolis Mission began an official Khmer-speaking language program in 2015. The Church has achieved rapid growth in Cambodia within the past two decades since the introduction of full-time missionaries. Today there are nearly 12,900 members, 2 stakes, 5 districts, 10 wards, 20 branches, and 1 mission in Cambodia.

There are some locations in the United States where the Church has previously extended Cambodian-specific outreach but where the Church no longer appears to maintain specialized branches, member groups, or Sunday School classes to service Cambodian speakers. Some locations previously had a Khmer-speaking branch such as Fresno, California where the Khmer-speaking branch closed in 2012. No Khmer-speaking congregation operates in the Boston metropolitan area despite hundreds of inactive Cambodian members in the city.

The Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Khmer in 1982. The Book of Mormon was translated in its

entirety in 2000.^[8] The Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price were translated in 2007.^[9] Translations of General Conference addresses into Khmer have been available since as early as 1988.^[10]

A map displaying the locations of Khmer-speaking LDS congregations and locations with sizable numbers of Cambodian American Latter-day Saints can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Church has proselytized Cambodian communities in several states with sizable Cambodian populations such as major cities in California; Boston, Massachusetts; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Khmer-speaking full-time missionaries have regularly served in several cities for multiple decades and several missions maintain active Khmer proselytism programs. The introduction of Khmer-speaking missionaries to the Minnesota Minneapolis Mission in 2015 signaled a major advancement in expanding Cambodian outreach in the United States to previously unreached areas. The Khmer language has been consistently taught in the Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) to missionaries destined to serve Khmer-speaking missions in the United States and Cambodia. Three Khmer-speaking congregations operate in the United States to exclusively administer Khmer speakers.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and a sizable number of gospel study and missionary materials into Khmer. 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 Cambodians worldwide.

Opportunities

The growth of the Church in Cambodia during the past two decades presents unique opportunities for the Church to utilize some Cambodian members who live in their homelands to proselyte Cambodian Americans. The size of the Church in Cambodia vastly overshadows the size of the Church among Cambodian Americans at present. The assignment of Cambodian natives to serve Khmer-speaking missions in the United States can assist in providing needed manpower that is familiar with the Khmer language and culture.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area presents some of the greatest opportunities for LDS growth among Cambodians in the United States. Only one Khmer-speaking ward located in Long Beach services the entire area where over 40,000 Cambodians reside. The establishment of Khmer-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 Cambodian people within the United States.

There are good opportunities for the Church to revitalize Cambodian-specific outreach in Boston, Massachusetts and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Church has the resources needed to rekindle and expand Khmer-speaking outreach into these locations where efforts to establish self-sufficient congregations to exclusively service Cambodian members have thus far been unsuccessful. The establishment of member groups or branches in these locations appears feasible. The organization of these units appears likely to jumpstart progress without siphoning excessive resources from stakes or missions.

Cities where no Khmer congregations operate but where there are sizable numbers of Cambodian Latter-day Saints or investigators in English-speaking wards or branches present good opportunities to hold Khmer-speaking Sunday School classes and organize member groups, if church leaders have not done so already. Locations with small numbers of Cambodian Latter-day Saints that appear most favorable for the establishment of Sunday School classes or member groups include Fresno, California; Stockton, California; the Minneapolis metropolitan area, Minnesota; and Everett, Washington. Social media proselytism efforts may be effective in reaching Cambodian populations in locations where no Khmer-speaking missionaries serve and where there are few, if any, Cambodian Latter-day Saints.

Challenges

Few Cambodian Americans have converted to Christianity. Most Cambodians are Buddhist. 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. Cambodians and other Southeast Asian peoples such as Vietnamese have exhibited modest receptivity to the LDS Church in the United States and other missionary-focused Christian groups notwithstanding many individuals from these people groups 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 Cambodian Americans.

The Church has experienced convert retention and member activity problems in most locations where there are sizable concentrations of Cambodian members. The Church has baptized thousands of Cambodians in the United States since the late 1970s yet there remain only three Khmer-speaking congregations nationwide. The Church has not translated its Hastening the Work of Salvation website or broadcast into Khmer. The Church has yet to translate Mormon.org into Khmer to assist online

missionary efforts. However, there are many Khmer 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 Khmer-speaking Sunday School classes online may prevent some interested Cambodian members or investigators from seriously considering church attendance. Publishing information on Khmer-speaking member groups and Sunday School classes through the Church's online meetinghouse locator appears an effective method to present this information to interested individuals and assist in missionary efforts.

Many Cambodian Americans have become assimilated into mainstream American society within recent years. This has created challenges with determining whether Khmer-specific missionary work or congregations should operate as many have become proficient in English. These conditions pose challenges for extending specialized outreach among Cambodians due to individual differences in Khmer 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, Vietnamese, and Hmong communities. Laotian-specific outreach began in the late 1970s.^[11] 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). Vietnamese-specific outreach began in the late 1970s.^[12] 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). 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 Khmer-speaking congregations in the United States. Most of these denominations maintain a presence among Cambodians comparable in size and national outreach to the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 1.6% of Cambodians in the United States and note a minimal presence.^[13] Jehovah's Witnesses report 14 congregations that extend outreach in the Khmer language. However, only four of these congregations exclusively hold worship services in Khmer as the other 10 congregations only hold some meetings in this language.^[14] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reports three Khmer-speaking groups – all of which operate in North Carolina.^[15] The Church of the Nazarene operates at least five Khmer-speaking congregations in the United States.^[16]

Limitations

The Church does not publish the worldwide number of Cambodian Latter-day Saints. The number of Cambodians who have joined the Church in the United States is unknown. Member activity and convert retention rates among Cambodians 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 some reports from returned missionaries were available during the writing of this case study, no reports from Cambodian American Latter-day Saints were utilized.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among Cambodians 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. Khmer-speaking member groups or branches may be organized in additional cities in California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Washington. However, the creation of new Khmer-speaking units will likely strongly depend on the availability of priesthood leadership, interest from mission and stake leadership to organize Khmer units, and the receptivity of Cambodian populations to LDS outreach. The need for specialized Cambodian outreach may decline in the coming years due to the integration of many into mainstream American society and increasing English proficiency among Cambodian Americans.

- [1] "The Asian Population: 2010," 2010 Census Briefs, March 2012. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>
- [2] "Cambodian American Populations by Metro Area 2010 Census," hmongstudies.org, retrieved 7 July 2015. <http://hmongstudies.org/CambodianAmericanPopulationsbyMetroArea.pdf>
- [3] "New Census Bureau Report Analyzes Nation's Linguistic Diversity," U.S. Census Bureau, 27 April 2010. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb10-cn58.html
- [4] "Cambodian Americans," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 7 July 2015. <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Bu-Dr/Cambodian-Americans.html>
- [5] "Khmer, Cambodian in United States," Joshua Project, retrieved 7 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12662/US
- [6] Hart, John L. "Los Angeles: Hispanics, other minorities strengthen inner-city wards," LDS Church News, 17 June 1989. <http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/18725/Los-Angeles--Hispanics-other-minorities-strengthen-inner-city-wards.html>
- [7] "Boston: Gospel rolls forward in one of nation's oldest cities," LDS Church News, 28 September 1991. <http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/20681/Boston-Gospel-rolls-forward-in-one-of-nations-oldest-cities.html>
- [8] "Book of Mormon Editions," Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, p. 635.
- [9] Triple Combination in Cambodian – accessed 15 July 2015. https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/cambodian/pdf/language-materials/34404_khm.pdf?lang=khm
- [10] "Report of the 158th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Ensign, November 1988. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1988/11/report-of-the-158th-semiannual-general-conference-of-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-s>
- [11] Gardner, Marvin K. "News of the Church," Ensign, May 1979. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/05/news-of-the-church>
- [12] Britsch, R. Lanier; Holloman, Richard C. "The Church's Years in Vietnam," Ensign, August 1980. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/08/the-churchs-years-in-vietnam?lang=eng&query=vietnamese>
- [13] "Khmer, Cambodian in United States," Joshua Project, retrieved 15 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12662/US
- [14] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 4 June 2015. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FsPnZGTZNCF
- [15] "Adventist Directory," Adventistdirectory.org, retrieved 30 May 2015. <http://adventistdirectory.org/default.aspx?page=SearchResults&Search=vietnamese&submit=>
- [16] "Nazarene Church Data Search," Nazarene.org, retrieved 30 June 2015. <http://nazarene.org/find-a-church>