

Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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Strategies for LDS Outreach in Rural Areas

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Overview

In the late 2000s, the percentage of the world's population residing in urban areas exceeded the percentage of the world population residing in rural areas for the first time in human history.[1] Although the LDS Church has taken careful efforts to establish its presence in many medium and large cities throughout the world, rural areas remain severely under-reached in all but a handful of countries. This case study examines the degree of LDS outreach that occurs in rural areas and provides strategies can help extend effective missionary outreach and spur church growth in rural locations. Opportunities and challenges for growth are examined followed by a comparative growth section that contrasts LDS outreach in rural areas to the rural outreach efforts of nontraditional missionary-focused faiths. Limitations to these findings are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

World Urbanization and Rural Population Statistics

According to the most recent estimates published in the CIA World Factbook, 50.5% of the combined population of the 10 most populous countries in the world reside in rural areas, or about 2.09 billion of 4.14 billion people. The rural population exceeds 100 million in five of these countries (India [839 million], China [667 million], Indonesia [124 million], Pakistan [123 million], and Bangladesh [117 million]) and the rural population is greater than the urban population in four of these countries (Bangladesh - 71.6%, India - 68.7%, Pakistan - 63.8%, and Nigeria - 50.4%). Of the 227 countries and territories listed in the CIA World Factbook that have data reported on urbanization, 86 (37.9%) have rural populations that exceed urban populations. Among countries with at least one million inhabitants, the 10 countries that report the highest percentage of the population living in rural areas include Burundi (89.1%), Papua New Guinea (87.0%), Trinidad and Tobago (86.0%), Sri Lanka (84.9%), Uganda (84.4%), Malawi (84.3%), Nepal (83.0%), Ethiopia (83.0%), Niger (82.2%), and South Sudan (82.0%). Among countries and territories with at least one million inhabitants, there are at least 11 countries and territories with rural populations comprising less than 10% of the population including Hong Kong (0%), Singapore (0%), Puerto Rico (1%), Qatar (1.2%), Kuwait (1.7%), Belgium (3.0%), Venezuela (7.0%), Argentina (8.0%), Uruguay (8.0%), Israel (8.1%), and Japan (8.4%).[2]

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LDS Background

The Church more regularly engaged in missionary activity and establishing congregations in rural communities during the nineteenth century than during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The first missionaries generally traveled to both large cities and small villages in search of converts and organized branches in either location once there was a sizable following of members and investigators. Many small villages and less populated areas were ripe fields for early missionaries, including in Western Europe. In the United Kingdom, the first missionaries taught and baptized converts and established branches in many rural communities such as in Herefordshire.[3] In Iceland, missionary activity in the nineteenth century occurred on the sparsely settled Westmann Islands where 410 Icelanders joined the Church and emigrated to the United States to build up the Church in the Intermountain West.[4] The population of the islands has remained very small and has never appeared to exceed 5,000.[5] In Switzerland, most of the early converts in the mid-nineteenth century came from rural areas of the Alpen Highlands. In Austria, the Church organized its first branch in the country in Haag am Hausruck;[6] a rural community that currently has only a couple thousand inhabitants. In the twentieth century, rural outreach declined as populations urbanized throughout the world, resulting in the closure of small branches in towns and villages in areas of North America and Western Europe as members relocated to larger cities for employment and educational opportunities.

By the end of the twentieth century, the overt proselytism of previously unreached rural communities had become almost

entirely absent from worldwide missionary efforts as resources were channeled into the largest population centers around the world due to greater accessibility and more populous target populations than rural locations. This resulted in the development of the "centers of strength" model for guiding mission resource allocation. Only the Church in Oceania has maintained and expanded its operations in rural locations over the long term due to a lack of urbanization, strong receptivity to the Church among most ethnic groups, and most countries supporting tiny populations. There have been some isolated instances of the Church conducting missionary activity and organizing congregations in rural areas in a few locations in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In Latin America, these efforts have almost exclusively occurred among Amerindian peoples. The Church in southeastern Nigeria has achieved some of its greatest growth in rural communities as many reside in small towns and villages, the general population has exhibited strong receptivity to the Church, and there has been good member-missionary participation. These rural areas have also have high population densities and predominantly Christian populations.

Recommendations

Conducting LDS missionary activity in rural areas presents many unique opportunities and challenges for church growth. Member-missionary programs present good opportunities for church growth as they require few resources and involve local members and leaders. The Church has experienced rapid growth and impeccable convert retention and member activity rates in some rural communities with strong member involvement in missionary work such as in the rural highland areas of Madagascar. Rural areas tend to be more religious than urban ones which can enhance receptivity to LDS outreach but can also deter individuals from seriously studying about the Church due to strong familial and community ties to particular denominations or religious groups.

Low population densities spread over geographically large areas pose significant challenges for traditional missionary approaches due to a smaller target population that is more difficult to access compared to urban areas. The assignment of full-time missionary companionships to rural areas is generally an unfeasible and impractical task due to isolation from mission leaders and other missionaries, transportation challenges, difficulty finding adequate housing, often few or no active members residing in rural communities, and the awkwardness of implementing traditional finding techniques of street contacting and door-to-door proselytism to locations with low population densities.

Local church leaders heading missionary and outreach expansion efforts within their geographic jurisdictions provide some of the most promising solutions for achieving effective missionary programs in rural areas. Local leaders generally possess greater familiarity and knowledge with locations nearby their home villages and towns compared to mission leaders based in a major city distant from the target location. The Church in Oceania has relied on local members and leaders to initiate and maintain mission outreach in rural areas where there has been significant success. In Papua New Guinea, the Church has established member districts with thousands of members within a matter of a couple years largely from the efforts of local members and leaders taking the initiative to prepare individuals for baptism and activity in the Church.

Traveling full-time missionaries offer dynamic and practical solutions to mitigate the problem of assigning limited numbers of full-time missionaries to locations with small populations and low population densities. This method has been utilized in a few missions such as the Brazil Manaus Mission where the immense geographic size of the mission, limited numbers of full-time missionaries, and concerns on permanently assigning full-time missionaries to remote cities and towns where is a member group or no LDS presence has in the past prevented the establishment of an official missionary presence in many locations. When coordinated with local and mission leaders to find isolated members and investigators, this method can yield good results, increase the overall productivity of a mission, and extend outreach to unreached rural communities.

The use of nontraditional church units that can adapt to the unique needs of rural areas is key to successfully extending outreach in rural communities. These church units supervise church activity in large geographical areas and are flexible to changing needs of church membership. Mission and area branches are official congregations that each consist of multiple member groups and isolated members spread over large geographical areas. These congregations have functioned for many years in the Church and currently number over a hundred worldwide. Mission and area branches service geographical areas usually significantly larger than a stake or district and can administer members and member groups in rural areas through the mission hierarchical structure. The organization of member groups in rural locations provides church services in rural communities where there are few members and no realistic prospects for the establishment of a branch within the near term. Official church branches can be established in rural communities as mission leaders establish member groups and these groups reach the minimum qualifications to become an official branch through increasing church attendance and maturing local leadership self-sufficiency. There are also opportunities to organize nontraditional church units on a district level to service rural locations within the boundaries of a member district. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, district branches began functioning in over 20 different member districts to administer member groups and isolated members residing in rural areas within the boundaries of the district. If permitted by international and area leaders, mission and district leaders can organize member groups that hold church services on some Sundays within a rural community and on other Sundays assemble with other nearby member groups to hold a branch sacrament meeting service in order to provide greater socialization and leadership training opportunities.

Technology offers many solutions for extending outreach and holding church services in rural communities. The use of social media in online proselytism efforts can reach rural populations without missionaries or members traveling to isolated communities. Church websites provide information on the Church and its teachings to anyone with an internet connection living in a country where there is no government censorship of online religious material. Church leaders have reported success meeting administrative needs for members spread over large geographical areas through the use of virtual branches. These branches have operated in a few locations worldwide and permit members who live in locations where there are an insufficient

number of members to organize a branch to assemble in member groups or worship in the privacy of their homes and connect with other members dispersed within a specific geographical area. This approach has been utilized among foreign members residing in mainland China where there are hundreds of active and less-active members spread over dozens of cities and towns where there may be only one individual or a handful of members in each location. Virtual branches rely on audio-conferencing technology in order for members to participate by telephone and require participants to have an active, reliable telephone line or cellular phone to dial in. Locations where there is an active male member who is at least a priest in the Aaron Priesthood may be authorized to hold sacrament meeting services. This method can be successful in many rural locations except where lower levels of economic development and poorer living standards do not permit the use of teleconferencing technology.

Challenges

The Church has not appeared to establish any formal protocol for expanding missionary activity into rural areas. Consequently many local, mission, and area leaders vary significantly from one another on how they approach the teaching and baptism of converts in rural communities and the establishment of member groups and branches. Economic development, poverty, modernization, societal and cultural norms, and ethnolinguistic diversity all play a role in ascertaining the feasibility in extending rural outreach, the receptivity of local populations, and the success of missionary programs. Although local conditions can vary significantly from country to country and administrative division to administrative division, there is a need for more standardized protocol directing church leaders how to proceed with investigatory missionary efforts in rural communities and how to establish a church presence and engage in formal proselytism. A lack of direction on this issue from church leadership can result in missed opportunities for growth.

Returned missionaries, local church leaders, mission and area presidents, and ordinary members from around the world report that area, mission, and local church leaders have often discouraged outreach expansion into rural areas due to difficulties properly administrating the Church in these locations from long distances. In Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, the Church has some of the most promising prospects for achieving growth in rural communities but is only equipped in Oceania to make significant inroads at present. Many rural areas are considered off-limits in Sub-Saharan Africa notwithstanding some communities boasting scores or even hundreds of self-affiliated, unbaptized "members" waiting for years or even decades for mission and area leaders to approve the official organization of the Church in their area. Many concerns from area and mission leaders for delaying the organization of church units in rural communities are valid as church leaders must assess the intention for why these groups desire church membership, whether these groups properly understand church teachings, and whether conversion occurs on an individual level rather than a collective level. Mission resources in many Sub-Saharan African nations are so limited that all but a couple major cities continue to remain unreached, resulting in regional church leaders prioritizing the opening of additional locations to missionary work based on the size of target populations and accessibility from mission headquarters. There is a danger in delaying the establishment of the Church for too long of a period in these circumstances as individuals who would have once been stalwart church leaders and have built up the Church in their communities can be shepherded into other Christian denominations or lose interest after becoming frustrated with a lack of response.

Many rural areas exhibit high levels of ethnolinguistic diversity, presenting challenges for church leaders to accommodate differing cultural and linguistic needs. In Papua New Guinea, there are 6.43 million people and over 800 individual indigenous languages spoken[7] yet only 13% of the population resides in urban locations. These conditions require sensitivity to diversity issues and at times the written translation of church materials in local languages if warranted by reasonably high literacy rates.

Many rural areas in developed countries experience population decline and aging populations. In the United States, rural flight has resulted in declining populations in many Midwestern and Great Plains states. Rural populations frequently relocate to urban areas in search of more stable and higher-paying employment, higher quality and more abundant educational opportunities, and better living conditions. The Church faces the challenge of maintaining a church presence in many rural communities as individuals and families join the Church and later move elsewhere only to have no other members move in to replace move-outs. This requires a heightened need for active missionary programs to bring in more converts to replace members who relocate elsewhere due to the slim chance that new members will relocate in sizable numbers to the given location. Aging populations in rural areas can result in members passing away with no younger members to replace them and creates challenges for assimilating youth converts into older units with few youth to provide fellowship and social support.

Several unreached countries have predominantly rural populations. A lack of urbanization may delay the establishment of the Church in some of these nations and poses major obstacles for the Church to effectively proselyte the majority of the population especially if church leaders avoid proselytism in rural areas. Located in Central Asia and boasting a population of 7.9 million, Tajikistan has no LDS presence and approximately three-quarters of the population resides in rural areas. Nearly four-fifths of the population of the African country of Chad (population: 11.2 million) reside in rural areas. Approximately three-quarters of the 1.17 million people in the Southeast Asian nation of Timor-Leste (East Timor) reside in rural communities. Over 82% of Niger's 16.9 million people reside in rural areas. Prospective missionary activity in these nations will require specific interventions for rural outreach if the Church is to try to reach even half of the national population.

Comparative Growth

Virtually all other missionary-focused Christian groups have engaged in outreach in rural areas. However, the extent of outreach in rural areas generally correlates with the size of a particular denomination in a country. In Rwanda, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reports one of the largest number of members of any country in the world where there were approximately 544,000 Adventists in 2012[8] yet Rwanda has one of the highest percentages of people who live in rural areas among

countries worldwide (80.9%). In Mexico, Jehovah's Witnesses have a widespread presence in rural areas that includes specialized language congregations providing worship services in approximately 70 Amerindian languages.[9] Both Adventists and Witnesses maintain a rural presence in most countries where these denominations have an official presence but the ratio of congregations meeting in rural versus urban areas is rarely proportional to the percentage of the population residing in rural versus urban areas. On the other hand, the LDS Church generally lacks any presence whatsoever in rural communities in most countries in which it has an official church presence.

Limitations

The CIA World Factbook indicates that the criteria for determining which populations reside in urban areas differs by how each country defines urban population. Consequently populations considered to be urban in some countries may be considered to be rural in other countries due to differing criteria. Many cultural, economic, and societal conditions influence the degree to which LDS outreach centers in rural areas can adequately reach surrounding rural populations such as the quality of roads and infrastructure, the physical geography and climate, the cost and availability of transportation, and local attitudes regarding travel and movement. Consequently some urban or rural congregations in the LDS church can extend more penetrating outreach into surrounding areas than others. There are no reliable or official estimates or membership figures for rural versus urban areas in the LDS Church on neither a global nor a country-by-country level.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to experience noticeable gains in expanding missionary activity and organizing additional congregations in rural areas appears bleak for the foreseeable future due to resistance from local and regional church leaders organize congregations in rural locations and many aspects of traditional LDS proselytism and missionary approaches being incompatible in a rural setting. The most promising prospects for expanding outreach in rural locations will likely be in countries where rapid active membership growth occurs and where there is a widespread LDS presence such as in Oceania, some locations in Latin America, and in a few areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. Greater focus from international and local church leaders on developing and implementing effective rural outreach tactics will be required for the Church to make greater headway in extending outreach to the billions of people who reside in rural communities that remain minimally or totally unreached by current LDS missionary efforts.

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[2] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/

[3] Evans, Richard L. "History of the Church in Great Britain," Ensign, September 1971. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/09/history-of-the-church-in-great-britain

[4] "A monument at 'Mormon Pond'," LDS Church News, 15 July 2000. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38132/A-monument-at-Mormon-Pond.html

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