LDS Growth Case Studies

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Discontinued Stakes Worldwide

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Overview

The creation of new stakes is a robust indicator of real membership growth in the LDS Church as minimal standards for the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, the number of congregations within a given area, and a certain percentage of full-tithe paying members are requirements for stakes to operate. When a stake no longer meets the criteria to function as a stake, a stake may be discontinued and consolidated with neighboring stakes or become one or more member districts. The location, timing, and antecedent conditions for when a stake is discontinued provides valuable information regarding the self-sufficiency of the church, convert retention and member activity rates, area policies regarding church growth and outreach expansion, and anticipated church growth trends in the affected area. Since 1990, 122 stakes have been discontinued in the LDS Church worldwide. Dozens of stakes were discontinued between 1830 and 1990, but most of these stakes were closed as part of stake realignments to create new stakes or due to administrative challenges caused by long distances between congregations. This essay identifies reasons for the Church discontinuing stakes, the ramification of stakes closing on local LDS populations, methods to avoid future stake closures, and an outlook for future trends in discontinuing stakes.

Background

100 of the 122 discontinued stakes between 1990 and 2011 operated in North or South America (82%). Provided with the number of stakes discontinued, countries which had stakes discontinued since 1990 include Chile (43), the United States (35), the Philippines (10), Brazil (6), Japan (6), Peru (5), Colombia (3), Ecuador (2), Germany (2), Guatemala (2), Mexico (2), Australia (1), Bolivia (1), the Dominican Republic (1), Hong Kong (1), Liberia (1), and Nigeria (1). Stakes which operated for the most years that were closed between 1990 and present include the Ogden Utah Mount Ogden (82 years), Salt Lake Park (68 years), Glendale California (58 years), Walnut California (49 years), and Barstow California (49 years) Stakes. Six stakes operated for three or fewer years which were closed after 1990 and include the Esmeraldas Ecuador San Rafael, Iquitos Peru Mi Peru, Iquitos Peru Sachachorro, Kidapawan Philippines, Ozamiz Philippines, and Kyoto Japan South Stakes. On average, stakes discontinued between 1990 and 2011 operated for 15 years. The median number of years discontinued stakes operated was nine whereas the mode number of years a discontinued stake operate was five. Chile is the country which has had the highest percentage of its stakes discontinued over the past 20 years (37%) whereas Mexico has had the lowest (0.9%). Years between 1990 and 2011 which had the most stakes discontinued where 2002 (26), 2003 (19), 2001 (10), and 2011 (10) whereas no stakes were discontinued in 1990 and 1997 and only one stake was discontinued in 1994, 1995, and 2010. The average year between 1990 and 2011 had five or six stakes discontinued. The average stake discontinued between 1990 and 2011 was organized in the late 1980s and discontinued in 2002.

Reasons for Discontinuing Stakes

Declining numbers of active members due to members moving out of the geographic boundaries of a stake is the primary reason for stakes closing in the United States. Nearly all discontinued stakes in the United States operated in California and Utah in urbanized locations where real estate prices have increased, the socioeconomic status of the area has generally declined, and many Latter-day Saint families relocate to newly constructed suburban communities often in different cities or states. Many of these former stakes had small geographic boundaries and five or six congregations for most the time they operated, making them prone to closure if large numbers of members left the area, few members moved into the stake, and small numbers of converts joined the Church. Many of the converts baptized in these locations are not retained or like their seasoned-member counterparts relocate to other locations which offer more affordable housing and living standards and exhibit community culture perceived as more compatible with traditional LDS lifestyles. Member activity rates also appear lower in locations where stakes were discontinued compared to other locations. This finding may be due to the differing lifestyle of

less-active and inactive members compared to active members which do not prompt relocation to suburban communities that are perceived as culturally LDS. Overtime this results in an increasing percentage of members who are not active as more active members than less-active or inactive members move outside a given stake. Stake closures generally occur after several wards are consolidated or just prior to the realignment and closure of wards and branches in areas with declining active membership.

Low member activity and poor convert retention rates are the primary reasons for the Church discontinuing stakes outside the United States. Oftentimes many of these stakes were organized during the years of the most rapid membership growth experienced by the Church in Latin American countries and the Philippines and also during the years when convert retention rates were the lowest. Most discontinued stakes in Chile were originally created between 1993 and 1998, during a time period when the Church created stakes and congregations with small numbers of active members in an effort to assign administrative responsibilities to greater numbers of new members to help curtail convert attrition. Few active members in wards and stakes nationwide prompted the consolidation of 43 stakes between 2000 and 2005 to create congregations with larger numbers of active members and reorganize stakes so that they met the minimal criteria for a stake to operate. However in the process of realigning wards and branches, returned missionaries report that many active members fell into inactivity as they were required to travel greater distances and socially integrate into new congregations.

Often in conjunction with low member activity rates, distance from other church centers and adverse political conditions have initiated stake closures internationally. Stakes discontinued on Mindanao Island, Philippines such as Ozamiz and Kidapawan appear partially due to political instability and distance from other nearby stakes and mission headquarters. The lone Monrovia Liberia Stake operated far from any other LDS Church centers and was adversely affected by the emigration of active members to Ghana and other countries due to civil war in the early 2000s. The stake was eventually discontinued and divided into two districts due to these issues in addition to administrative challenges and mediocre member activity rates. In the late 1980s, several stakes were closed in rural areas of Uruguay primarily due to long distances between individual wards and branches and few congregations within these former stakes.

Natural disasters prompting member relocations have also contributed to stake closures. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991 damaged 80% of members' homes in the Olongapo Philippines Stake,[1] leading to relocations which likely contributed to the discontinuation of the stake in 1993. The Slidell Louisiana Stake was discontinued in 2007; two years after Hurricane Katrina left widespread damage in the area.

Missionaries serving in some Latin American nations and the Philippines have noted that leadership crises have influenced the decision by international church leaders to close stakes. Chronic issues with stake and ward leadership following church protocol regarding administration issues has been a challenge as some leaders were unaware or refused to follow church policy outlined in leadership handbooks. In some locations, local church leadership dealt inappropriately with members guilty of serious transgressions. The embezzlement of member donations by ward, branch, and stake leaders appeared to had rarely occurred in some areas where stakes once operated.

At times stakes are discontinued to create multiple districts in aspiration for each district to become a new stake. In the Dominican Republic, the first and only stake to be discontinued was the La Vega Dominican Republic Stake in 2009. The stake was divided into three districts based in Bonao, Cotuí, and La Vega. In the Philippines, several discontinued stakes were divided into two districts, such as the Camiling Philippines and the Burgos Philippines Stakes. As of 2011, no stakes appeared to had been organized from districts which were organized from a single previously discontinued stake as low member activity rates and leadership issues have been ongoing. Within the past two decades only a few discontinued stakes have been reinstated, such as the Chincha Peru Stake.

Negative Effects of Discontinuing a Stake

Missionaries and members report that the closure of a stake can significantly reduce member morale and weaken member testimonies as previously set goals in wards and branches are often unreached and have precipitated to the decision by church leadership to discontinue the stake. The decision to close a stake can be particularly hard on local church leaders who can feel like they failed in their ecclesiastical duties to build up and strengthen the Church in their areas. Stake consolidations often occur in tandem with congregation consolidations which often result in reduced member activity rates as members often travel greater distances to meetinghouses and must socially integrate into new wards and branches. Returning a stake to district status results in several stake privileges lost that were previously extended to members residing within the former stake as these priesthood responsibilities are placed on the mission president. Examples of such privileges include issuing temple recommends, ordinations to the office of high priest in the Melchizedek Priesthood, the lack of a patriarch, and greater mission president involvement in administrative issues. Some stakes which are downgraded to districts are unable to become stakes again despite several years of close supervision and support from mission leaders to address concerns and meet the requirements for a stake to again operate. However returning stakes to district status may be more beneficial than consolidating discontinued stakes with neighboring stakes as there is greater continuity in local leadership responsibility that does not rely on nearby stakes for support.

Methods to Avoid Discontinuing Stakes

The primary method to avoid the closure of stakes is to prevent the creation of stakes with few congregations that do not

satisfactory meet the standards for a stake to operate. In the early 2000s, the Church raised the standards needed for new stakes to be organized to reduce their likelihood of getting discontinued. Standards that appeared to be heightened included increasing the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders required for a stake to function, requiring greater numbers of congregations to pertain to new stakes, increasing the time required for a district to operate like a stake before a stake is officially organized, and reducing the geographical size stakes cover if possible. Heightened requirements were also placed on congregations to create units with more active members. In the United States, the Church appeared to increase the minimally required number of nominal members within a new stake's boundaries to a thousand higher than for stakes outside the United States during the early 2010s. The average number of wards per stake worldwide has increased over the past two decades from 6.72 in 1993 to 6.97 wards per stake in 2000 and to 7.16 wards per stake in 2010.

The Church appeared to increase the number of wards included in newly organized stakes in the United States from only five or six before the late 2000s to generally seven to nine thereafter. Increases in the number of wards included in newly organized stakes may increase the administrative burden on stake leaders but offers a buffer in the event that large numbers of active members relocate outside of the stake boundaries or become inactive. A change in the number of wards in newly organized stakes may also indicate an increased emphasis for the Church to create strong, resource-endowed stakes rather than generating a larger number stakes with fewer resources to achieve greater numerical growth.

Success in reducing the likelihood of a stake closing rests largely on consistent standards for wards and branches to be organized and continue operating. Reducing the standard for a ward or branch to be created by decreasing the number of active members or priesthood holders to be reached and then later increasing this standard and consolidating smaller units several years later offers no long-term sustainability and generally results in large numbers of active and semi-active members falling into inactivity as social relationships forged in church are disrupted and meeting locations and times are frequently altered.

Consistent member-missionary participation is crucial toward safeguarding against the likelihood for a stake closing. Local members should take responsibility for finding investigators, fellowshipping new converts, coordinating with church leaders for reactivation efforts, and faithfully fulfilling visiting teaching and home teaching responsibilities. Stakes with active missionary programs that heavily utilize local members often reduce the risks of member activity issues in regards to the closure of stakes.

Future Prospects

Prospects appear high for the consolidation of additional stakes in the United States, particularly in the largest cities of Utah, California, Idaho, and Arizona due to few convert baptisms in comparison to the number of Latter-day Saints in established stakes, the ongoing trend of active members relocating elsewhere, the influx of nonmembers within stakes with small populations and geographical boundaries, often lower member activity rates in urban stakes, and many stakes possessing the minimal number of wards to sustain the functioning of a stake. Heightened standards for stakes to operate in much of Latin America will likely decrease the number of stakes discontinued in Central and South America within the next decade as moderate convert baptismal rates often replace the number of active members moving outside of stakes which have few wards. At present, Brazil appears one of the most susceptible countries to increased numbers of stake closures within the next decade as many stakes operate with only five or six wards, especially in the Sao Paulo area.

[1] "Members in Guam aid volcano victims from the Philippines," LDS Church News, 20 July 1991. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21641/Members-in-Guam-aid-volcano-victims-from-the-Philippines.html