



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Unreached Islands in the Philippines

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Overview

The LDS Church reported nearly 650,000 members in approximately 1,100 congregations in the Philippines at the end of 2010. At present, the Church in the Philippines has the fourth most members and fourth most congregations of any country in the world. Notwithstanding a missionary presence established for half a century, scores of Philippine islands with sizable populations remain unreached by the LDS Church. This essay identifies the most populous islands in the Philippines without an LDS presence, suggests effective and efficient approaches for establishing a church presence in these locations, and examines opportunities and challenges for growth on unreached islands.

Most Populous Unreached Islands

In late 2011, there were at least 66 islands or small island groups with at least 1,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation; 15 of which had at least 50,000 inhabitants. The breakdown of unreached islands with at least 1,000 inhabitants by Philippine island group is as follows: Luzon (28), Sulu Archipelago (18), Visayas (16), and Mindanao (4). Christians appear to account for the majority in two-thirds of unreached islands in the Philippines. Provided with the number of inhabitants, islands with populations over 50,000 include Sulu (645,185), Basilan (496,503), Tawi-Tawi (158,429), Tablas (154,413), Bantayan (120,101), Dinagat (106,951), Siquijor (87,695), Siargao (77,720), Burias (76,266), Ticao (75,829), Siasi (63,518), Polillo (63,448), and Sibuyan (52,615). A Google Map displaying the 66 islands or small island groups with at least 1,000 inhabitants and no LDS congregation can be found [here](#).

Effective Approaches for Reaching Additional Islands

One of the greatest assets to LDS Church growth in the Philippines is its large nominal membership. Rapid membership growth and outreach expansion on the largest islands of the Philippines over the past 50 years offers considerable opportunities for establishing an official LDS presence on currently unreached islands. Many members and investigators have likely relocated to these islands over the years. Mission and area leaders are often unaware of the number, location, and activity status of most these members as most unreached islands with sizable populations do not appear to receive visits from church leaders or missionaries. Isolated members who have the resources to contact local and mission leaders appears the primary method that has initiated LDS outreach expansion in the Philippines over the past couple decades as mission leaders have rarely initiated missionary work in unreached areas.

Periodically visiting unreached islands, enumerating isolated members and ascertaining activity status, gauging receptivity, teaching investigators, and organizing congregations if local leadership is available offer the most effective outreach expansion approaches available to local, mission, and area leaders. Following the basic methodology for church planting such as obtaining education on the area of interest, performing a cost and benefit analysis to ascertain local needs and identify the most suitable locations to concentrate outreach, and holding cottage meetings may yield significant outreach expansion and growth results. To conserve limited full-time missionary manpower, mission leaders can appoint a pair of missionaries as traveling missionaries to routinely visit islands without an LDS presence to identify isolated member and investigator needs, distribute church literature, and meet with local government and community leaders. Humanitarian and development work such as employment training workshops, neonatal resuscitation clinics for medical professionals, clean water projects, and remodeling and modernizing projects for schools, hospitals, and community buildings provide valuable opportunities for finding investigators, meeting local needs, and increasing public awareness of the LDS Church in unreached locations.

One key aspect of effective outreach expansion is continuity between successive church leaders. It has been unfortunate that

the efforts of one mission president, branch president, or bishop can be undone by a church leader later on due to differing attitudes and priorities regarding full-time missionary involvement in outreach expansion, reactivation work, and administrative unit support. Prospects for church growth are often underdeveloped when mission presidents fail to relay information regarding plans and policies pertaining to outreach expansion and church growth to their successors. This often results in a slowdown or cessation in outreach expansion. The style and priority of mission presidents can vary considerably and either favor or inhibit expanding outreach onto unreached islands within their administrative jurisdiction. Area presidencies also heavily influence decisions to open additional islands to missionary work and may have prompted or discouraged mission leaders to open additional island to proselytism. Maintaining consistent policies regarding missionary involvement in administrative issues, following adequate prebaptismal standards, and planning to open additional islands to missionary activity will be crucial towards sustained church growth in the Philippines and increasing the percentage of the national population reached by LDS mission efforts.

Favorable Islands for Outreach

Unreached islands around southern Luzon, the Visayas, and Palawan appear the most suitable to initiate systematic outreach expansion. Political stability, sizable populations, the prominence of Christianity, and reasonably close proximity to islands with LDS congregations present favorable conditions for church planting. Notwithstanding no translations of church materials in languages native to many unreached islands in this region, LDS materials in Tagalog (Filipino) and Cebuano can be utilized as these languages are commonly spoken second languages.

In early 2011, the Church established its first presence on Coron Island. By the end of the year sacrament meeting attendance in the Coron Gorup reached 70. Missionaries indicate that strong receptivity, active member-missionary participation, and small numbers of devoted local church leaders have contributed to rapid growth in Coron. This recent example demonstrates the feasibility of expanding outreach onto unreached islands and the successes that can follow from assigning even a few full-time missionaries to these locations. Similar results may occur on additional islands in the Luzon and Visayas island groups such as Burias, Polillo, Tablas, and Ticao if outreach is extended.

Located north of Masbate Island, Burias and Ticao are assigned to the Philippines Naga Mission and are inhabited by 150,000 people. The population primarily speaks Masbatenyo. No LDS materials are translated into Masbatenyo, but outreach has occurred among Masbatenyo speakers on the island of Masbate where a district and several branches operate. Second language proficiency in mainstream Philippine languages such as Tagalog reduces the need for initial translations of church materials in Masbatenyo for proselytism on Burias and Ticao. Local members serving missions from Masbate may play an important role in opening Burias and Tico to missionary work due to commonalities in local language and culture.

Located off the east coast of Luzon Island near Manila, Polillo Island is assigned to the Philippines San Pablo Mission but has no LDS congregations. Tagalog is the only indigenous language spoken by the 63,000 inhabitants of the island. Close proximity to the Luzon mainland, shared language, and a sizable population deserve serious consideration by mission leaders for extending outreach to Pilillo.

With over 150,000 inhabitants, Tablas also pertains to the Philippines San Pablo Mission. Approximately half the population speaks Inonhan; other commonly spoken languages include Bantoanon and Romblonmanon. Although no LDS materials are translated into any of these languages, the Church can initially meet local language needs through utilizing materials in other Filipino languages such as Hiligaynon, Tagalog, and Cebuano as these languages are commonly spoken second languages. The nearest LDS congregations to Tablas within the Philippines San Pablo Mission are on Marinduque and Mindoro. Several stakes and districts operate within close proximity of Tablas in the Philippines Iloilo Mission on Panay Island. The large geographic size and administrative demands of the Philippines San Pablo Mission which services a large portion of southern Luzon island in addition to several additional islands in the Luzon Group may merit the decision by the First Presidency and area leaders to reassign Tablas Island to the Philippines Iloilo Mission if an official LDS presence is established.

Barriers to Outreach Expansion

Low member activity and poor convert retention rates, mediocre local leadership development, and overreliance on full-time missionaries to ameliorate these issues appears to have significantly delayed the expansion of LDS missionary activity to additional islands. LDS outreach expansion noticeably stopped in the early 2000s as missionary efforts were refocused on correcting these issues that often stemmed from inadequate prebaptismal preparation. A reemphasis on the "Centers of Strength" church policy may also have dissuaded the opening of additional islands to proselytism at the time. Over the past decade, mission leaders have concentrated their resources on strengthening congregations and in more recent years facilitating the organization of stakes from member districts throughout the Philippines with limited success. Meanwhile, only one additional island appears to have opened for missionary work within the past decade: Coron. Reduced rates of membership and congregational growth have resulted as the bulk of the Church's missionary force has been concentrated on revitalizing missionary efforts in hundreds of under-performing wards and branches instead of expanding outreach. As a result, many of the most populous islands unreached by the Church in the Philippines continue to receive no LDS outreach notwithstanding widespread religious freedom, receptive populations, and reasonably close geographical proximity to established mission outreach centers.

The Sulu Archipelago contains many of the most populous unreached islands and cities in the Philippines. However the strong

ethnolinguistic ties of the indigenous population to Islam and renewed political efforts from local separatist groups to increase autonomy render any LDS prospective proselytism impractical due to cultural restrictions and low receptivity. No translations of LDS materials in languages native to the Jolo Archipelago present additional challenges.

The LDS Church halted all outreach expansion in traditionally Muslim areas of southern Mindanao approximately 15 years ago. The Christian majority has ostracized the Muslim minority for decades. Traditionally Muslim areas in the southern Philippines are among the poorest nationwide. Christians relocating to the traditionally-Muslim areas of Mindanao over the past half century have sparked deeper resentment for Muslims who feel their religious and cultural identity is threatened. Some Muslims have rebelled against the government under the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in an effort to protect their Islamic culture and identity from Christian proselytism and resettlement. The national government created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2008 and a cease-fire was reached in July 2009 between the Philippine government and MILF.^[1]

Today a cordial relationship exists between Christian and Muslim religious communities in many areas of the southern Philippines as both groups aim to address low living standards and poverty. The sensitive nature of Christian proselytism in predominantly Muslim areas warrant caution and care from LDS leaders to respect local customs in order for an LDS community to be successfully established without upsetting the delicate balance of power between Christians and Muslims. Open proselytism would be inappropriate in these areas. Finding through member referral and passive missionary approaches such as humanitarian and development work appear the most appropriate alternatives for establishing an initial church presence in the Sulu Archipelago.

Comparative Growth

Other outreach-focused Christian groups report a presence on more islands in the Philippines than the LDS Church. The Seventh Day Adventist Church appears to have a presence in all but a handful of Philippine islands with at least 1,000 inhabitants. In 2010, Adventists reported approximately 6,200 members meeting in 60 congregations in Romblon Province where at the time there was not a single LDS congregation operating and no known Latter-day Saint presence. Jehovah's Witnesses report membership and congregations on Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan yet no LDS presence is established on any these islands. Both Adventists and Witnesses have steadily increased national outreach through opening additional islands to proselytism; often decades before the LDS Church. Stronger member-missionary programs, developed local leadership, higher baptismal standards, and enthusiasm to open additional islands to proselytism appear major factors which have led to the success of these denominations.

Conclusion

The recent success of expanding LDS outreach onto some lesser-reached and previously unreached islands such as Guimaras and Coron may persuade mission and area leaders to open or expand outreach onto additional islands. The maturation of districts into stakes appear a likely catalyst toward freeing up additional mission resources to allocate to currently unreached areas. A lack of vision among local church leaders will likely continue and require the utilization of full-time missionaries to head the opening of additional islands to proselytism instead of ward or branch missionaries and leaders. Notwithstanding political instability in the Sulu Archipelago, good opportunities exist to establish an initial LDS presence and conduct outreach expansion through passive missionary approaches and humanitarian and development work. Current opportunities may be time sensitive in the Sulu Archipelago; increasing autonomy in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao may restrict religious activities for Christians in the future and make the establishment of an LDS presence more difficult or impossible.

^[1] "Philippines," July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, 13 September 2011.
http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168372.htm