



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Rapid LDS Growth in Sarawak, East Malaysia

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Overview

During the past decade, the LDS Church has experienced some of its most rapid membership and congregational growth in East Asia in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Located on the island of Borneo (Kalimantan), Sarawak has experienced fewer restrictions on religious freedom than most Malaysian states as Christians constitute the largest religious group. Impressive LDS membership and congregational growth has not been limited to a single location in Sarawak but has been concentrated in the largest cities often among native peoples such as the Iban. The LDS Church has achieved steady growth in Sarawak by allocating mission resources to take advantage of high receptivity exhibited by the population to nontraditional Christian denominations.

This essay provides demographic and historical background, a synopsis of LDS history and growth, and identifies opportunities, challenges, and prospects for future growth in Sarawak.

Background

Sarawak is located slightly north of the equator and experiences tropical climate. Terrain consists of low mountains and hills covered by tropical rainforest and farmland. With 2.4 million inhabitants, Sarawak is one of two Malaysian states in East Malaysia and is divided into 33 administrative districts. Provided with the percentage of the population, the most populous districts include Kuching (24.9%), Miri (12.1%), Sibu (10%), and Bintulu (7.6%). Indigenous peoples appeared to populate Sarawak for millennia prior to the arrival of the first Europeans in the sixteenth century. The Sultanate of Brunei ruled Sarawak until 1842 when the Kingdom of Sarawak was established. Originally from England, the Brooke family supplied many of Sarawak's rulers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and began modernizing the economy. Ties with the United Kingdom were strengthened during this period resulting in Sarawak becoming a British Protectorate in 1888. In 1946, Sarawak was incorporated into the United Kingdom and was absorbed into Malaysia as its own state in 1963.^[1]

Sarawak exhibits a cosmopolitan feel in society and culture as no ethnic group constitutes a majority. The Iban are the largest ethnic group and comprise 29% of the population; additional prominent ethnicities include Chinese (24%), Malay (23%), Bidayuh (8%), Orang Ulu (6%), and Melanau (5%).^[2] Most of the population speaks Malay as a first or second language. Iban is the second most commonly spoken language with 658,000 speakers in Malaysia.^[3] Christians comprise 43% of the state population whereas Muslims account for 26% of the state population.^[4] Services drive the economy and Sarawak ranks fourth among Malaysian states in terms of gross state product.^[5] Housing varies significantly by location and ethnicity. Many of the Iban continue to reside in traditional housing structures called longhouses which are elongated to accommodate extended family.

LDS History

The Church appeared to establish its initial presence in Sarawak in the late 1990s. In September 2001, there were three LDS branches in Sarawak in Kuching, Miri, and Sibu. In 2008, there were eight branches in Bintulu (3), Kuching (3), Miri (1), and Sibu (1). By year-end 2011, there were 14 branches including five in Kuching, four in Bintulu, three in Sibu, two branches and a group in Miri, and one branch each in Sibu Jaya and Mukah. Two Chinese-speaking units were organized in the 2000s in Sibu (the Sibu 3rd Branch) and Miri (Chinese Group). Four districts operate in Sarawak and, provided with the year organized, are based in Kuching (2003), Miri (2008), Sibu (2009), and Bintulu (2011). At present, LDS congregations operate in areas where at least seven languages are traditionally spoken: Malay, Chinese languages Iban, Central Melanau (113,000), Bintulu (4,200), Naram (2,420), and Sibu Melanau (420).

In 2010, the Church organized its first branch in Sibu Jaya. That same year, the Sibu Malaysia District baptized approximately 260 convert baptisms. In early 2011, there were approximately 40 members in Mukah. In the late 2000s, missionaries serving in Sarawak reported prospects of opening Sri Aman and Mukah to missionary work but only Mukah had missionaries assigned by early 2012.

Church attendance numbers fluctuate by branch. In late 2011, the Sibu Jaya Branch had up to 110 attend sacrament meeting and several convert baptized on a weekly basis. In mid-2011, the Sibu 2nd Branch generally had between 100 and 120 attending sacrament meeting. Most other branches appear to have between 50 and 125 active members. In late 2011, the Church held a youth conference in Kuching. In the Sibu Malaysia District, approximately 80% of the youth who attended the conference came from the Sibu Jaya and Mukah Branches. In late 2011, all cities with branches functioning in Sarawak had a senior missionary couple assigned.

Opportunities

The potential growth opportunities for the LDS Church in Sarawak are excellent due to strong receptivity in the population to nontraditional Christian groups, the vision of mission and area leaders to allocate sufficient mission resources, and the expansion of outreach into previously unreached or lesser-reached areas. The opening of Sibu Jaya to missionary work demonstrates the willingness of mission leaders to expand outreach into previously unreached areas and the rapid which can follow. Strong membership growth and moderate convert retention rates in Sibu Jaya illustrate the high receptivity of unreached populations in Sarawak. In mid-2011, 40 of the approximately 70 new converts in attendance at a new member meeting in the Sibu Malaysia District Conference were from the Sibu Jaya Branch notwithstanding the branch representing only one of the five branches in the district at the time.

LDS congregations are established in all the major cities. Many of the most populous unreached cities and districts are reasonably close to established church centers in Bintulu, Kuching, Miri, and Sibu as these four cities are fairly evenly distributed throughout the geographic area of Sarawak and provide unique opportunities for outreach expansion. The Church can base future outreach expansion efforts from these locations to initiate missionary work in smaller, presently unreached cities such as Bau, Bintatang, Lawas, Limbang, Niah, Sarikei, Serian, and Sri Aman.

The high representation of senior missionary couples in Sarawak has presented unique opportunities for the Church to provide training and education to new converts. Few missions have as many senior missionary couples assigned to work within a specific area of a mission as the Singapore Mission assigns to Sarawak. Senior couples demonstrate more maturity in taking accountability for missionary work compared to their young counterparts as indicated by more consistent focus on finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts; leadership development and administrative training; skill and expertise in organizing creative and enriching activities that provide fellowshiping and ecclesiastical support; and their often strong involvement in humanitarian and development work. In 2011, senior missionaries reported that the Singapore Mission president requested that senior missionaries train branch councils every six months by reviewing church handbooks and administrative procedures. Senior missionaries regularly hold temple preparation classes in the Sibu Malaysia District. Other areas of focus have included humanitarian and development work, leadership development, and the coordination of Church Education System programs such as seminary and institute. Trainings appear to be routinely held for branch leadership throughout Sarawak.

The Church has provided outreach to many of the most populous non-Muslim ethnic groups. LDS congregations generally conduct their worship services in Malay but at times also conduct services in Chinese languages and Iban. In late 2011, full-time missionaries reported that missionaries designated as Chinese-speaking were assigned to Kuching, Miri, and Sibu. The Church has taken advantage of reaching the Chinese minority through assigning missionaries who speak Chinese and organizing language-specific units for Chinese members and investigators.

Challenges

Few qualified priesthood holders have created difficulties in local church administration. Senior missionary couples and young full-time missionaries provide the bulk of training and support for newly baptized converts that fill leadership roles. Many branches appear to depend too strongly on missionaries to function. Member activity and convert retention rates for youth appear to have declined within the past decade as large numbers of youth have been baptized but few adult members are available to provide fellowshiping and support. Senior missionaries often hold local leadership and administrative roles such as counselors or clerks in district presidencies. Depending on local needs, senior missionaries have also held branch callings such as gospel instructors. Senior missionaries have regularly conducted financial audits on individual branches. Some local members have refused to accept branch callings and threaten to go inactive unless these requests from branch leaders are retracted.

Only a handful of members in Sarawak have served full-time missions. In 2011, senior missionaries serving in the Sibu Malaysia District reported that during one part of the year there were no members serving missions from the entire district. The Church has entirely depended on foreign missionaries to staff proselytism areas. The high representation of North American missionaries has created challenges with local leadership and member-missionary efforts to become self-sufficient. Foreign missionaries exact large costs for transportation and travel due to visa regulations that mandate foreign missionaries to leave the country every 90 days to renew their visas. Frequent visa run trips to Singapore also disrupt the continuity of missionary

work in proselytism areas.

Not all members who attend sacrament meeting on a regular basis participate in all church meetings. Missionaries report that attendance in Sunday School, Relief Society, and priesthood is considerably lower than sacrament meeting attendance. In late 2011, the Sibu Jaya Branch often had only five members attend Relief Society yet there were 50 Relief Society members on the branch membership rolls.

Mission policies have often focused on meeting baptismal quotas and reinforcing these goals by presenting rewards to young missionaries for reaching them. For example, in late 2011 young missionaries reported that they were granted permission to visit remote tourist sites because they reached their baptismal goals as a zone. As a result of the emphasis on quick-baptism tactics and reaching arbitrary goals, many new converts are rushed into baptism and receive substandard post-baptismal teaching and support as missionaries neglect retention efforts and focus on finding, teaching, and baptizing additional converts. Local branch and district leadership undertake the responsibility for retaining the flood of new converts, but the limited maturity, strength, enthusiasm, and number of local priesthood leadership offers few resources and little consistency in meeting ecclesiastical and fellowshiping needs. As time passes and baptismal-quota-driven policies remain enacted, the Church may begin to become overburdened with lengthy lists of hundreds of inactive Latter-day Saints on the books of branch membership rolls. Many of these converts experienced no meaningful church attendance and activity due to the short duration between initially attending church and becoming inactive shortly after baptism. Many of these converts exhibit little to no recollection of LDS teachings and never had a testimony of the Church built upon personal scripture study, individual and family prayer, and weekly church attendance that lasted longer than a couple months. The task of reclaiming these "lost" members becomes nearly insurmountable as time passes due to their limited understanding of the Church and its teachings, at times bitter and hurt feelings of being neglected or offended, and reliance on full-time missionaries to provide the manpower for these reactivation efforts. Notwithstanding the seriousness of this issue, the Church has experienced noticeable, real growth in Sarawak. Sizable increases in the number of congregations from a mere three in 2001 to 14 today and the organization of three additional districts in the past decade indicate that some local leadership has been developed and that many converts have been retained and contribute to their respective congregations.

A lack of LDS materials translated into Malay, Iban, and other languages presents difficulties. Members have relied on Indonesian translations of LDS materials and scriptures due to no LDS scripture translations available in Malay and Iban. Some branches have distributed Indonesian translations of church materials but teach Sunday School and other classes from the limited number of materials translated into Malay. Few church materials in local languages have likely contributed to leadership development, convert retention, and testimony building challenges.

Some cultural practices interfere with the continuity of missionary work. The Hari Gawai holiday significantly disrupts missionary work every year, with church attendance numbers falling to as low as 10% of normal. Other holidays such as Chinese New Year and Western holidays like Christmas have also drastically decreased church attendance numbers. Investigators and new converts can lose contact with missionaries and fall out of developing habits of regular church attendance during these holidays. The drinking of alcohol at the funeral of a loved one is a common practice in the Iban tribe and may create some testimony building challenges for some Iban members and investigators.

Comparative Growth

In the past decade, no other Southeast Asian country has experienced as prolific congregational and membership growth as Malaysia in Sarawak. The LDS Church has not opened any additional cities to proselytism in the other East Malaysian state of Sabah and organized only one additional branch within the past decade. Membership and congregational growth trends in West Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia have been significantly slower than in Sarawak.

Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other missionary-minded Christians generally experience steady growth in Sarawak. Many of these groups appear to have more members than the LDS Church. In 2010, Adventists reported 20,092 members meeting in 98 congregations in Sarawak and Brunei^[6] - likely five times as many members and six times as many congregations as the LDS Church.

Future Prospects

Consistent congregational growth, the formation of three districts within the past five years, a receptive population to LDS teachings, and the steady expansion of missionary work into additional cities and towns among multiple ethnic groups suggests continued membership and congregational growth for the Church within the next decade. Reliance on foreign missionaries will likely remain one of the greatest barriers to greater growth. Consistent emphasis on programs to safeguard against convert attrition such as mandatory seminary or institute enrollment for investigators prior to baptism in areas where CES programs are available and stronger local member involvement in the conversion process may be key to reverse the ongoing trend of substandard convert retention rates. A sizable body of returned missionaries and greater numbers of local members serving missions may be requisite in order for stakes to be organized as at present the number of consistently active Melchizedek priesthood holders appears insufficient in all four districts. With five branches clustered in a single city, the Kuching Malaysia District appears most likely to become a stake within the next decade. The growth of the Church in Sarawak may encourage LDS area and mission leaders to begin missionary activity in neighboring Kalimantan, Indonesia due to similar cultural, religious, and socioeconomic conditions that have favored growth in East Malaysia.

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