



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Expanding LDS Outreach in Brazil

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Overview

The LDS Church has had a presence in Brazil since 1928 when the first missionaries were assigned to southern Brazil. Initial missionary efforts occurred among German-speaking immigrants. In 1935, the Church organized the Brazilian Mission with headquarters in Ipomeia, Santa Catarina. In the late 1930s, the Church created its first branches in major cities in northern Brazil such as Fortaleza. Today the Church has 27 missions, over one million nominal members, over 240 stakes, and approximately 2,000 wards and branches. Expanding missionary work into previously unreached locations has been essential toward the Church's growth over the past several decades.

In 1998, former Second Counselor in the First Presidency President James E. Faust noted that despite rapid growth and diligent efforts from mission and area leaders to introduce missionaries into additional cities over the past half century, there were 140 cities with over 50,000 people and 400 cities with over 40,000 people that were unreached by the Church.^[1] In the 2000s, the Church opened few additional cities to proselytism compared to the previous several decades which contributed to a slowdown in all indicators of growth, namely increases in membership and the number of congregations, stakes, districts, and temples. In 2009, there were over 400 cities that had 20,000 or more inhabitants without an LDS congregation. As of mid-2012, the Church had appeared to open less than 20 additional cities to missionary activity over the previous five years. Currently the Church has a presence in locations populated by approximately 65% of the Brazilian population. Of the 35% of Brazilians residing in locations without an LDS presence, 60% live in urban areas with no ward, branch, or group functioning.

This essay provides data on LDS outreach in Brazil by state, presents opportunities and challenges for opening unreached cities to proselytism, and suggests methods to accelerate outreach expansion. City population data were retrieved from www.citypopulation.de and are as of 2010.

Outreach by State

The LDS Church has had a presence in every administrative state of Brazil since 1988, ^[2] although such a presence is at times limited to only one city or a handful of the most populous cities. In mid-2012, there were six cities in Brazil with over 100,000 inhabitants without an LDS presence, four of which were in Rio de Janeiro State (São João de Meriti, Ipiiba, Mesquita, and Inhomirim). The other two cities were in Goiás (Trindade) and Minas Gerais (Araguari).

As of mid-2012, 14 of the 26 administrative states had ten or more cities with 20,000 inhabitants without a known LDS congregation operating. In 2009, the states with the most unreached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants included São Paulo (69 of 215), Minas Gerais (66 of 120), Bahia (34 of 71), Pará (32 of 43), Ceará (29 of 44), and Maranhão (26 of 30). The percentage of cities with an LDS presence provides insight into the breadth of outreach. The states with the lowest percentage of reached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants included Maranhão (13%), Pará (26%), Ceará (34%), Mato Grosso (38%), and Goiás (41%). The states with the highest percentage of reached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants included Rio Grande do Sul (89%), Santa Catarina (78%), Paraíba (77%), Espírito Santo (74%), Tocantins (71%), São Paulo (68%), and Rio Grande do Norte (67%).

Roraima is the only state that has an LDS presence in every city with over 20,000 inhabitants but this is because there is only one city with more than 20,000 inhabitants in the entire state (Boa Vista). In 2009, the states with the fewest unreached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants included Amapá (1 of 3), Tocantins (2 of 7), Paraíba (3 of 13), Amazonas (4 of 10), Rio Grande do Norte (4 of 12), Sergipe (4 of 9), Espírito Santo (5 of 19), Piauí (5 of 11), Rorônia (6 of 11), Mato Grosso do Sul (7 of 14), Alagoas (8 of 14), and Rio Grande do Sul (8 of 75).

Opportunities

With tens of millions of Brazilians populating unreached urban areas, the Church has significant opportunities to expand outreach with relatively few mission resources. In Para State, several medium-sized cities present excellent conditions for church planting due to sizable populations and good receptivity in the state as a whole. Cities which may present the greatest opportunities for a future LDS presence include Tucuruí, Altamira, Itaituba, Redenção, Tailândia, Breves, Jacundá, Cametá, Santa Isabel do Pará, Rondon do Pará, Salinópolis, Dom Eliseu, Conceição do Araguaia, Vigia, São Miguel do Guamá, Tomé-Açu, and Xinguara. Each of these 17 cities has at least 30,000 inhabitants and other similarly-sized cities opened to LDS proselytism have experienced good receptivity to missionaries and moderate to rapid growth. There are an additional 21 cities in Para with between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants without LDS congregations, many of which also pose good opportunities for church planting and outreach expansion.

Brazil has one of the largest full-time missionary forces in the world that is comparable in size to the LDS missionary force in Mexico and only behind the United States in numbers. The Church's missionary training center (MTC) in Sao Paulo is the largest missionary facility outside the United States. Large numbers of Brazilian members serve missions within their home country and receive training at the MTC in Sao Paulo. No other country has as many LDS missions as Brazil with the exception of the United States. The large amount of mission resources dedicated to Brazil offer many opportunities to expand outreach if such resources are appropriately distributed.

Portuguese is widely spoken throughout Brazil and offers excellent opportunities for expanding missionary work into additional locations. The high degree of linguistic homogeneity requires few if any other language resources in the 400 most populous unreached cities by the Church. Translations of LDS scriptures and most church materials into Portuguese provide ample gospel study and proselytism resources to spur growth in virtually every area of the country.

Receptivity remains moderate to high in most areas of Brazil notwithstanding increasing secularism and rapid growth among Protestant groups over the past several decades. Other missionary-minded Christian groups have converted many previously receptive individuals in areas without an LDS presence. Many of these proselytizing Protestant groups continue to report rapid growth in most areas without an LDS presence, suggesting that receptivity remains high for now and that the Church may experience accelerated membership and congregational growth if it acts before receptivity eventually declines. Rising secularism in Brazil does not render any prospective outreach expansion efforts moot in the least receptive locations such as in many of the southern states. Receptivity in the most secular Brazilian states still remains higher than in most European nations and deserves serious consideration by mission planners to open the hundreds of unreached cities in these locations to missionary activity.

The large number of Latter-day Saints nationwide has increased the chances that active members relocate to unreached cities. It is likely that perhaps as many as half of unreached cities with at least 20,000 inhabitants have at least several Latter-day Saints, although member activity rates in Brazil suggest that most of these isolated members are inactive. Nevertheless these isolated members offer valuable resources to starting an official church presence in unreached cities regardless of current activity status if they can be located. Members which continue to live by LDS teachings or have had experienced meaningful church attendance lasting for several years would provide the most valuable assistance to staffing potential leadership and sharing the gospel with others.

Challenges

Reliance on full-time missionaries to head proselytism efforts reduces the pace and scope of the Church's potential growth in Brazil. Brazil numbers among one of top countries for sending members on full-time missions but the Church remains reliant on non-Brazilian missionaries to fully staff its 27 missions. Visa issues have disrupted missionary efforts and shortages of missionaries in many missions likely deter outreach into additional cities. Missionaries serving in many areas of Brazil report that there is little member involvement in member-missionary activity. Low member activity rates, few missionary preparation resources, and inconsistent efforts by local church leaders to prepare youth for missionary service appear primarily responsible for the shortage of native Brazilian LDS missionaries.

The enormous number of unreached cities is intimidating for mission leaders to make any noticeable progress in opening them to proselytism. No other country in Central or South America has anywhere close to as many unreached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants as Brazil. The number of unreached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants in Brazil appears greater than all the unreached cities with this many or more inhabitants in all other Latin American countries combined. Some missions have scores of unreached large or medium-sized cities such as the Brazil Belo Horizonte Mission which includes most of Minas Gerais State. If the Brazil Belo Horizonte Mission were to open one of these cities every missionary transfer, which occur every six weeks, it would take over a decade for each of these cities to have an LDS presence as there are close to 100 unreached cities that have over 20,000 people in Minas Gerais.

Delays in the Church publicizing meetinghouse locations and times for newly established groups on its official meetinghouse locator website poses challenges for effectively expanding outreach into new locations. The Church only posts data on meetinghouse locations for wards and branches. Locations for groups and other types of dependent units are not accessible to the public and can only be acquired through phone contact to the mission office, personal contact with missionaries assigned to

the congregation, or by word of mouth. It is a common occurrence for less-active and active members to not attend church in cities with groups functioning because they are unaware of a church presence.

Some of the most populous unreached cities are geographically isolated and difficult to access, especially in northern and interior areas of Brazil. Assigning missionaries to these cities and opening branches would significantly increase the administrative burden on mission leaders as mission leaders bear the responsibility to service isolated members in these locations in addition to meeting the needs any full-time missionaries assigned. Inconvenience, travel expenses, and shortages of full-time missionaries often outweigh the potential positives of opening more remote medium and large cities to proselytism in the eyes of mission and area leadership.

The current distribution of full-time missionary manpower poses significant barriers to accomplishing headway in expanding outreach. The Church often assigns the largest numbers of missionaries to areas with the most established LDS presence, resulting in reduced resources in locations where many unreached cities exhibit excellent conditions for commencing missionary activity. A "Centers of Strength" paradigm has been widely instituted throughout Brazil, evidenced by the Church reporting scores of congregations in some states such as Ceara but these countries operate within only a handful of the largest cities. Many mission leaders demonstrate little or no desire to expand outreach within their jurisdictions as opportunities for missionary activity are not totally realized in locations that already have an LDS presence. Excuses for not capitalizing on receptive populations in unreached cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants are diverse and complex. Some feel that it is unwarranted as many areas already opened to proselytism struggle with member activity and leadership issues that are compensated by delegating full-time missionary resources. Others rationalize that long distances and few or no known Latter-day Saints in an unreached city legitimize no conscious effort to visit these locations and ascertain conditions. Many church leaders are unfamiliar with successful instances of church leaders in other areas of the world who have planted new congregations and steadily increased national outreach responsibly. Consequently, there is a lack of vision in many Brazilian missions on how to make progress expanding outreach.

Recommendations

Mission leader visits to unreached cities are greatly needed and are essential for expanding outreach. At present, information about the number and activity status of church membership in cities without an official church presence is often incomplete, inaccurate, or unknown. If mission presidency members are unable to visit these cities, assigning this task to a missionary companionship may be appropriate. In the Brazil Belem Mission, the mission president requested that missionaries visit two previously unreached cities that each had a small group of active members worshipping under the jurisdiction of the Brazil Belem Mission Branch. In early 2012, missionaries who visited these cities reported that they frequently encountered church members who were unaware of any LDS presence in these cities. A few one, two, or three day visits from full-time missionaries to these cities resulted in sacrament meeting attendance in the groups doubling in a matter of a few weeks as "lost" members and missionary contacts began attending church services. In mid-2012, prospects appeared good for each of these cities to have their first independent branches created in the near future; an achievement that perhaps would not be possible if missionaries were not permitted by the mission president to visit these cities and perform some missionary activity. This experience suggests that there are dozens of cities throughout Brazil where these results could be replicated.

Many Brazilian missions could benefit from a couple "traveling missionary" companionships that focus exclusively on visiting unreached cities. Tasks that could be assigned to traveling missionaries may include gathering and updating information on any isolated members in these locations, teaching any missionary referrals, assessing prospects for finding a meetinghouse location and permanently assigning full-time missionaries, gauging receptivity, and distributing church literature. Traveling missionaries would be an effective solution to maintaining focus on expanding outreach even if mission resources are limited or stretched. If a single missionary companionship cannot be allocated to this task, requesting missionary companionships in the cities closest to the target location to set aside a single day or two every couple weeks to visit the city can provide at least some vision and focus to expanding outreach.

Goal setting by the Brazil Area Presidency and each of the 27 mission presidencies in Brazil to open additional cities would help achieve greater momentum, consistency, and organization to accomplish any noticeable progress in the monumental task of establishing the Church in over 400 additional cities in Brazil. If this task were to be successfully completed by creating a least one ward or branch in each of these cities, the number of wards and branches in the Church in Brazil would increase by 25% from the number currently operating. It is quite possible that the number of additional cities that have large enough populations to support their own congregations total as many as 1,000 considering some areas of Brazil exhibit higher receptivity and several current outreach efforts have targeted many cities and towns with fewer than 20,000 people such as in the Brazil Joao Pessoa Mission, namely in Goianinha, Rio Grande do Norte; Itapororoca, Paraiba; and Rio Tinto, Paraiba. Many more populous unreached cities in northern and interior Brazil have over 50,000 inhabitants and more receptive populations than in other areas of the country. It is possible that the Church may have multiple congregations organized in these cities if mission leaders have the proper vision and foresight to establish groups and branches in neighborhoods throughout these larger cities simultaneously. If mission and area leaders act in coordination to open multiple congregations in some of the more populous unreached cities, it is possible that the Church could create an additional 1,200 to 1,500 more congregations than at present. This massive number of units would only include those in areas that currently do not have an LDS presence and where only 21% of the Brazilian population resides. Lesser-reached neighborhoods in reached cities where 65% of Brazilians live present additional good prospects for church growth if properly approached.

For additional direction and recommendations on LDS Church planting, refer to a previously completed case study on [how to open a city to missionary work](#).

Comparative Growth

Most missionary-minded Christian groups in Brazil have a presence in most if not all cities with 20,000 or more inhabitants. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 6,861 congregations nationwide whereas Jehovah's Witnesses reported 10,926 congregations. Adventists have a widespread presence in many of the least reached states of Brazil by the LDS Church. In 2011, the LDS Church had only 15 wards and branches in Maranhao State that operated in just three cities whereas Adventists had 572 congregations in Maranhao^[3] operating in scores of different cities and towns during the same period. Adventists have over 200 congregations in the southern portion of Para State^[4] alone whereas the LDS Church organized its first branch in the same geographic region in the early 2010s. As of mid-2012, the LDS Church operated only one branch and one group within the same geographic area as the Seventh Day Adventist Church operated more than 200 congregations. Adventists have also outpaced LDS growth in the more secular southern states of Brazil. In 2011, Adventists reported 201 congregations in Santa Catarina State^[5] whereas the LDS Church reported only 64 wards and branches that same year. With one of the most widespread LDS presences among Brazilian States, Rio Grande do Sul still had more Adventist congregations than Latter-day Saint wards and branches (268 versus 192). Ceara State has numbered among the few states that have had several new cities open to LDS missionary activity during the 2000s yet between 2000 and 2010 Adventists reported that the number of congregations in Ceara and Piaui States increased from 94 to 210^[6] whereas the number of LDS congregations increased from approximately 65 to approximately 120 in the same two states. Evangelicals and other Protestant groups report rapid growth and a widespread presence in virtually every region of Brazil in locations ranging from small towns to the most populous metropolitan areas.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the LDS Church expanding into additional cities in Brazil appears mediocre as the Church relies almost totally on full-time missionaries to accomplish this task. Continued difficulties for North American missionaries obtaining visas to serve in Brazil and no major increases in the number of Brazilian Latter-day Saints serving missions will make any efforts to open large numbers of unreached cities unfeasible unless mission resources are redistributed. The recent successes in the Brazil Belem Mission of full-time missionaries visiting unreached cities and performing limited proselytism appears an effective method that may be more broadly utilized in other missions in Brazil if widely publicized and promoted by the Brazil Area Presidency. However the most practical and effective method for opening the hundreds of unreached cities will require greater member-missionary involvement in church planting and excellent coordination of mission presidents with local church leaders to achieve any noticeably progress expanding outreach while the Brazilian population remains receptive to the Church.

^[1] "Brazilians honor President Faust as 'one of their own'," LDS Church News, 9 May 1998.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31720/Brazilians-honor-President-Faust-as-one-of-their-own.html>

^[2] "From around the world," LDS Church News, 17 September 1988.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/18323/From-around-the-World.html>

^[3] "North Brazil Union Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 14 May 2012.
<http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=NBUM>

^[4] "South Para Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 14 May 2012.
<http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=SPAM>

^[5] "Santa Catarina conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 14 May 2012.
<http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=SCTC>

^[6] "North Coast Conference," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 14 May 2012.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10287