LDS Growth Case Studies

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Analysis of LDS Growth in the City of Sao Paulo, Brazil

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Overview

Located in Sao Paulo State, the city of Sao Paulo is the most populous city in Brazil and the entire continent of South America with 11.3 million inhabitants as of 2010. Sao Paulo ranks as the ninth most populated agglomeration in the world as an additional ten million people inhabit neighboring cities within of the enormous metropolitan area but outside the Sao Paulo city boundaries. The city consists of 96 administrative districts which range in population from as few as 8,258 people (Marsilac) to as many as 360,787 people (Grajau). In 2000, the Human Development Index (HDI) for Sao Paulo was 0.841.[1] In 2010, the ethnic breakdown of the population was 60.64% white European, 30.51% mixed race, 6.54% African, 2.19% Asian, and 0.12% Amerindian.[2]

The LDS Church has a significant presence in the city of Sao Paulo as indicated by the operation of four missions, a temple, and largest missionary training center (MTC) outside the United States, and over two dozen stakes. Notwithstanding the size of this presence, dozens of Sao Paulo city districts have no LDS congregation operating or contain only one or two congregations to service over 100,000 people.

This essay analyzes LDS outreach in the city of Sao Paulo by examining congregational and city district population data and identifying challenges, opportunities, and future prospects for outreach expansion. A brief history of stake growth in Sao Paulo is provided followed by an analysis of outreach for each of the city's 96 districts. To determine if there is any correlation between wealth and extent of outreach, a correlation analysis was performed utilizing city district HDI figures and city district population to LDS congregation ratios. The comparative growth section compares outreach in Sao Paulo to select cities in Brazil and Latin America.

LDS congregational data and city district population data were utilized in this essay as no nominal LDS membership figures are available on a city or city district level and congregational data offer insights into active membership as certain numbers of active members must be present for a congregation to operate. LDS congregational data were retrieved from the Church's meetinghouse locator website, lds.org/maps. Population data utilized in these analyses originated from www.citypopulation.de. Human Development Index (HDI) figures were retrieved from http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Lista_dos_distritos_de_S%C3%A3o_

Stake Growth in Sao Paulo

The Church organized its first stake in Sao Paulo in 1966. Additional stakes organized within the Sao Paulo city limits include Penha (1968), West (1973), North (1977), Santo Amaro (1979), Ipiranga (1980), Perdizes (1980), Taboao (1983), Interlagos (1985), Sao Miguel Paulista (1991), Campo Limpo (1992), Itaquera (1992), Piratininga (1992), Vila Sabrina (1993), Raposo Tavares (1995), Jacana (1996), Grajau (1997), Guarapiranga (1997), Parque Bristol (1997), Pirituba (1997), Jardim da Saude (2007), Casa Grande (2008), Jaragua (2008), Alvarenga (2010), and Ferreira (2011). The Church has discontinued only one stake in Sao Paulo: The Sao Paulo Brazil Vila Sabrina Stake in 2001. In mid-2012, there are 25 stakes. A map of stakes in the Sao Paulo area can be found here.

Distribution of LDS Congregations in Sao Paulo

In 2011, there were 140 LDS congregations within the Sao Paulo city limits (137 wards, 3 branches) and the average congregation serviced 80,382 people. The Church has congregations headquartered in 71 of the 96 districts and the average district with a congregation has 136,698 inhabitants. Districts with the most congregations include Grajau (10), Vila Sonia and

Sacoma (6), and Cursino, Cidade Dutra, Jabaquara, and Jardim Sao Luis (5). Taking the ratio of the number of congregations to district population provides insight into the level of LDS outreach per district. Districts which appear most reached by the LDS Church include Vila Sonia (one ward per 18,100), Cursino (one ward per 21,800), Morumbi (one ward per 23,479), Butanta (one ward per 27,098), Raposo Tavares (one ward per 33,388), and Campo Grande (one ward per 33,571). All six of these most reached districts are located in the southwest along the peripheries of the city. Districts with the largest populations with only one LDS congregation include Sapopemba (284,524), Brasilandia (264,918), Cidade Tiradentes (211,501), Itaquera (204,871), and Vila Curuca (149,053). All five of these least-reached districts are located in the northern half of the city and four of these districts are located in the northeast. Districts with the smallest populations that have an LDS congregation included Socorro (37,783), Belem (45,057), and Morumbi (46,957). These three districts are not concentrated in a particular area of the city. Click here to view a map displaying all city districts by degree of LDS outreach.

Of the 25 districts with no LDS congregations, two have more than 100,000 inhabitants. The average population of districts without an LDS congregation is 61,917. Districts with the most inhabitants that have no LDS congregations include Lajeado (164,512), Cangaiba (136,623), Vila Formosa (94,799), Itaim Bibi (92,570), and Aricanduva (89,622). Most of the unreached districts are located in central Sao Paulo near the city center. Click here to view a map displaying all city districts and status of LDS outreach.

Human Development Index (HDI) and Degree of LDS Outreach

The Human Development Index (HDI) is an indicator that measures the well-being of human populations on a scale between zero and one. Factors included in the calculation of HDI have varied over time but at present consist of life expectancy, education, and distribution of wealth.[3] In general, countries with HDI scores over 0.800 have very high levels of human development whereas countries with HDI scores between 0.700 to 0.799 have high levels and 0.500 to 0.699 have medium levels. HDI scores below 0.499 indicate low levels of human development.

In 2011, the HDI of Brazil was estimated at 0.718. Based on statistics gathered in 2007, the average HDI for the 25 districts in Sao Paulo city without an LDS congregation was 0.881 whereas the average HDI for the 71 districts with at least one LDS congregation was 0.842.

To assess whether there is any relationship between wealth and distribution of LDS congregations in Sao Paulo, we conducted a regression analysis on district HDI values and the ratio of district population to LDS congregations operating within each district. Data included in the analysis consisted of the 71 Sao Paulo city districts with at least one LDS congregation.

The analysis yielded a Pearson's r of -0.32, indicating a moderate negative correlation between HDI values and the ratio of district population to LDS congregations. This finding suggests that the LDS Church has either more aggressively targeted city districts with lower living standards and economic development or that the Church has experienced greater receptivity in areas with lower HDI values, resulting in greater growth and more wards and branches operating in these locations than locations with higher HDI values. The strength of the correlation is moderately small, indicating that there is considerable variability between the extent of LDS outreach and economic development in the city's 71 districts with at least one LDS congregation operating.

Opportunities for Outreach Expansion

There are many opportunities for the LDS Church to expand outreach in lesser-reached and unreached districts in Sao Paulo. Unreached districts that rank within the bottom fifth by order of HDI and districts that have over 50,000 inhabitants and only one LDS congregation present some of the most favorable conditions for expanding outreach and planting additional congregations. The Church may experienced the greatest potential for growth in the unreached districts of Lajeado, Parque do Carmo, Cangaiba, and Aricanduva as each district exhibits similar HDI levels as the most reached city districts and all of these districts support populations over 50,000. Lesser-reached districts that have only one LDS congregation contain many communities and neighborhoods that may be receptive to future church planting efforts such as Sapopemba

The Church operates only three branches among its 140 units in the city of Sao Paulo, indicating a church leader emphasis on creating large congregations. The densely populated urban area requires fewer meetinghouses to adequately meet outreach potential and legitimizes the operation of wards with large numbers of members, but many communities have no LDS congregation and no meetinghouse conveniently close by. Establishing small congregations more accessible to the general population and church members that meet in rented spaces may accelerate growth. Depending on the number and activity status of Latter-day Saints in these city districts, church leaders can create groups or branches in these locations.

Sao Paulo ranks among the most self-sufficient cities in Brazil for the Church in terms of the size and strength of local leadership. No other city in Brazil has as many stakes as Sao Paulo and stakes require certain numbers of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders to function, indicating that there are large numbers of priesthood manpower available to concentrate on expanding outreach in the most favorable areas. Experienced church leaders are a valuable resource for establishing additional groups and small branches in lesser-reached and unreached districts.

Challenges for Expanding Outreach

The greatest barrier towards the Church expanding into many of Sao Paulo's 25 unreached city districts is lower receptivity in many of these locations. The wealthier upper-half of unreached districts poise a daunting task for the Church to expand outreach efforts. Wealthier populations tend to exhibit lower levels of religiosity and consequently display weaker receptivity to mission outreach than less wealthy areas. Secularism often prevails in these environments and impedes earnest missionary efforts. Higher cost of living and more expensive real estate deters the allocation of limited missionary resources and funds to rent spaces to hold church meetings or purchase property to build chapels.

Reliance on full-time missionaries to assist opening new congregations in lesser-reached communities challenges the Church's efficiency in expanding outreach in Sao Paulo. In recent years, the Church has experienced shortages in the number of missionaries in many of its 27 missions in Brazil due to visa complications for foreign missionaries. The inability for the Church in Brazil to become totally self-sufficient in meeting its missionary needs limits efforts by church leaders to start additional congregations in lesser-reached areas. The paradigm for LDS missionary work in many areas of the world follows a "centers of strength" approach which emphasizes the strengthening of established congregations prior to the introduction of missionary resources into unreached locations. With many missions in Brazil at times experiencing challenges assigning a single missionary companionship per ward or branch, the Church has consequently had little success in outreach expansion within the past decade. Outreach expansion campaigns primarily headed by local stake presidents and ward and branch leaders offer the most practical solution toward accelerating outreach expansion in Sao Paulo as this method is self-sustaining and exacts few mission resources.

Ethnic diversity in some lesser-reached and unreached districts pose a challenge for planting congregations. For example, the largest Japanese community outside of Japan is located in Liberdade District where there is no LDS congregation. Japanese-speaking resources would need to be allotted to the district for more effective outreach to occur. However, there appear to be few Japanese-speaking Brazilian Latter-day Saints to facilitate outreach in Liberdade. There are also sizable Lebanese, Arab, and Italian communities in Sao Paulo and many of these minority groups reside in central and northeastern areas of the city where most lesser-reached and unreached districts are located.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in Sao Paulo operates more stakes than any other metropolitan area in Brazil but the Church extends more penetrating outreach in many other major cities. In Fortaleza, the average congregation services a population of 30,600; less than half the population serviced by the average congregation in Sao Paulo. The average congregation in some other major cities like Rio de Janeiro services a significantly larger population than Sao Paulo. The degree of LDS outreach in Sao Paulo ranks in the middle among Brazil's most populous cities.

The LDS Church in major cities in other Latin American countries appears to have experienced greater growth in communities that experienced average or below average living conditions for the city. The U.S. Department of State noted in its 2006 report on religious freedom in Venezuela that young LDS missionaries often worked in poor neighborhoods with high crime rates in many Venezuelan cities.[4] The Church has appeared to experience similar growth trends in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Lima, Peru; and Mexico City, Mexico.

Future Prospects

The consist organization of new stakes and wards within the past two decades suggests that the Church may establish a ward or branch to service every district of Sao Paulo city that has an HDI less than the city average and a population of at least 50,000 by the year 2020. However, church policies and attitudes regarding church planting and expanding outreach in urban areas may delay greater realization of these opportunities for many years, resulting in the Church organized new wards and branches in only a handful of districts that currently do not have their own LDS congregation. Prospects appear most favorable for the organization of additional wards and branches in lesser reached city districts in the northeast as distances to church meetinghouses are longer than in other areas of the city, few LDS mission resources have been assigned to this area in the past, and populations demonstrate good levels of receptivity to outreach.

[1] "Sao Paulo (city)," pt.wikipedia.org, retrieved 12 June 2012. http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A3o_Paulo_%28cidade%29

[2] "Sao Paulo (city)," pt.wikipedia.org, retrieved 12 June 2012. http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A3o_Paulo_%28cidade%29

[3] "Human Development Index," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 4 June 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Development_Index

[4] "Venezuela," International Religious Freedom Report 2006, retrieved 4 June 2012. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71478.htm