

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Small Island Countries, Territories, and Dependencies without an LDS Presence: Strategies for Outreach

Author: Matt Martinich

Overview

The Church operates congregations in nearly 180 countries and territories worldwide that range in population from as many as 1.3 billion people in China to as few as 1,269 in Niue. Population size has somewhat correlated with the allotment of mission resources, although the Church has tended to concentrate resources in North America, South America, and the Pacific. Due to focus by international LDS leaders on reaching Pacific Islands and Western Europe, the Church has maintained a presence in many of world's least populous island nations and dependencies. Of the 38 island nations and dependencies with fewer than 100,000 but more than 1,000 inhabitants, 22 have an LDS presence (58%). This essay identifies small island nations, dependencies, and autonomous islands reached by the LDS Church that have populations less than 100,000 and islands unreached by the Church that have populations less than one million and greater than 1,000. Opportunities, challenges, methods of effective outreach, and prospects for future outreach and growth are provided.

Reached Small Island Nations and Dependencies

Provided with the most recent population estimates from the CIA World Factbook, the 22 island nations and dependencies with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants that have an LDS presence include Jersey (94,949), Antigua and Barbuda (89,018), Isle of Man (85,421), Dominica (73,126), Bermuda (69,080), Marshall Islands (68,480), American Samoa (68,061), Guernsey (65,345), Greenland (57,695), Cayman Islands (52,560), Saint Kitts and Nevis (50,726), Turks and Caicos Islands (46,335), Northern Mariana Islands (44,582), Sint Maarten (37,429), Palau (21,032), Bonaire (15,666), Cook Islands (10,777), Tuvalu (10,619), Nauru (9,378), British Indian Ocean Territory [Diego Garcia] (4,000), Falkland Islands (3,140), and Niue (1,269).

Unreached Small Island Nations and Dependencies

The 21 island nations, dependencies, or autonomous areas without an LDS presence that have populations between 1,000 and one million include Comoros (737,284), Equatorial Guinea (685,991), Maldives (394,451), Mayotte (194,000), Sao Tome and Principe (183,176), Seychelles (90,024), Faroe Islands (49,483), Saint Martin (30,959), Aland Islands (28,000), Wallis and Futuna (15,453), Anguilla (15,423), Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha (7,728), Saint Barthelemy (7,728), Saint Pierre and Miquelon (5,831), Montserrat (5,164), Sint Eustatius (3,543), Norfolk Island (2,182), Svalbard (1,970), Christmas Island (1,496), Saba (1,824), and Tokelau (1,368). 16 of these islands or island groups are dependencies politically tied to Australia (Christmas Island and Norfolk Island), Denmark (Faroe Islands), Finland (Aland Islands), France (Mayotte, Saint Barthelemy, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and Wallis and Futuna), the Netherlands (Saba and Sint Eustatius), New Zealand (Tokelau), Norway (Svalbard), and the United Kingdom (Anguilla, Montserrat, and Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha).

There are three island dependencies that once had an LDS branch but no longer appear to have an active church presence. These islands include Mayotte, Saint Martin, and Saba. The Church has operated a branch in Saint Martin periodically but close proximity to the larger branch on the Dutch half of the island (Sint Maarten) have prompted consolidations to boost the number of active members in the Philipsburg Branch. Saint Martin may more accurately be categorized as lesser-reached considering missionaries based in Sint Maarten continue to travel to Saint Martin where active members and investigators reside. It is unclear whether there remain any Latter-day Saints in Mayotte or Saba today.

A map of all currently unreached small island nations and dependencies can be found here.

Opportunities

Several unreached small island nations and territories experience high receptivity, no restrictions on religious freedom, and few language challenges. Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, and Seychelles present some of the most favorable church planting conditions due to the larger populations than most small unreached island nations, good levels of receptivity indicated by steady growth in other outreach-oriented faiths, and the availability of LDS materials in local languages or officially-designated national languages like Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Some of these countries have had several Latter-day Saint converts who joined the Church abroad. For example, there were 20 Seychellois Latter-day Saints worldwide in 1988.[1] Some locations that once had an active LDS presence continue to present opportunities for reestablishing a congregation but tiny populations dissuade a more proactive outreach approach from mission leaders who administer to other more populous nations that exhibit greater demand for resources.

Opportunities for growth are more limited in many of the other least populated island nations and territories currently unreached by the Church. However, many of these remaining locations could be reached with at least some short of outreach even if this may consist of a visit from a mission or area leader once a year. The Faroe Islands exhibit less favorable conditions for growth due to increasing secularism, strong ties to traditional Christian denominations, and no translations of LDS materials into Faroese. However, there are a few Faroese Latter-day Saints residing in the Faroe Islands, mission leaders occasionally visit the islands, and other nontraditional Christian faiths have experienced some limited success such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists.

Many of the smallest unreached island nations and territories experience high levels of religiosity and good receptivity to nontraditional Christian faiths. These locations include Anguilla, Saint Barthelemy, and Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha. Jehovah's Witnesses number among the most prominent religious groups in Saint Helena and Saint Barthelemy, claiming 114 active members and three congregations in Saint Helena where there are fewer than 5,000 inhabitants.

There are some opportunities for reaching the likely least receptive unreached island nations and dependencies such as Svalbard and Wallis and Futuna. Mission or area leaders visiting these locations on an annual basis and holding a cottage meeting may be the most practical method to assess conditions and extend at least some outreach if there are not enough Latter-day Saints to hold regular church services.

Challenges

Tiny populations, remote location, and limited mission resources have delayed outreach to many small island nations and territories unreached by the LDS Church today and constitute the greatest barriers to future outreach. Other missionary-focused Christian denominations have more aggressively targeted small island nations and dependencies through church planting and member-focused proselytism, specifically in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America. Oftentimes Christian groups will assign a pastor to relocate to a previously unreached island with the task to plant a church.

Many small islands experience high rates of emigration due to few employment opportunities, economic reasons, and social isolation. The population of Tokelau has experienced slight population decline over at least the past two decades due to many relocating to New Zealand. Other locations have transient populations that consist of individuals who temporarily relocate for employment purposes.

Higher levels of religiosity on many small islands has reduced religious freedom and receptivity to nontraditional faiths. In Comoros and the Maldives, Islam strongly influences the government and society resulting in bans on Christian proselytism. Both countries are homogenously Muslim; less than one percent of the population adheres to other religions. In Comoros, former Muslims who convert to Christianity can be legally prosecuted for apostasy although this is uncommon; generally non-Muslim Comorians worship in private to avoid persecution. Christian foreigners may openly worship.[2] In the Maldives, all non-Muslim religious activity occurs only in private as the government heavily emphasizes that Islam is inextricably connected to Maldivian culture.[3] In Wallis and Futuna, 99% of the population is Catholic. Religious freedom is legally protected, however conversion from Catholicism is rare and appears highly stigmatized. Villages in the islands are build around Catholic churches as the Church is the center of society.[4]

Methods for Outreach

Mission and area leader visits to unreached island nations and dependencies are essential toward any proactive church planting initiatives. These visits assess conditions for proselytism, aid in locating any isolated members, organize meetings to teach about the Church, raise awareness of the Church to local government and communities, and prepare for the assignment of a senior missionary couple if feasible.

Mission presidents from around the world have regularly reported success from simply visiting unreached areas within their jurisdiction. Just the mere physical presence of a mission or area church leader in these locations has made significant headway in expanding outreach. For example, mission leaders from the Democratic Republic of the Congo accomplished significant progress through a series of visits to Burundi in 2010. Visits provided careful evaluation of political and societal conditions for determining the feasibility of reestablishing the Church in Burundi as the previously established LDS presence in the 1990s had disappeared following civil war and ethnic violence. The determination to simply visit Burundi culminated in the

assignment of two senior couples and half a dozen young proselytizing missionaries in the fall of 2010 and the creation of two independent mission branches by mid-2011. A 2012 visit to the Central African Republic by the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission President yielded significant results including a meeting with the country's president that was reported by national news media and the mission president evaluating the prospects of assigning full-time missionaries.

Mission and area leader visits to unreached locations to meet with known isolated Latter-day Saints often results in finding previously unknown members on these islands. With perhaps only a few exceptions, nearly all small island nations and dependencies appear to have at least a few Latter-day Saints. Some locations appear to have as many as a couple dozen. No organized LDS presence prevents members who reside on these islands from enjoying full activity in the Church, but there are often at least one or two individuals who remain faithful to LDS teachings and desire to help establish the Church in their community.

Mission and area leader visits achieve greater impact on preparing for an official LDS establishment through planning and informing the public, local government, and community leaders that a visit will occur. In general mission and area leaders hold public meetings, firesides, and even sacrament meeting services when visiting locations without a formal church presence. These meetings generally spread by word of mouth from members in contact with church leaders but can take on more premeditated and sophisticated methods such as publishing an announcement in local newspapers, radio, and other media advertizing. Oftentimes mission and area leaders invite local community and government officials to LDS gatherings to build positive relationships, minimize suspicion, and provide accurate information.

The assignment of a senior missionary couple to an unreached island nation or dependency is among the most effective methods to expand outreach. In December 2008, the Jamaica Kingston Mission assigned missionaries for the first time to the Turks and Caicos Islands. A senior missionary couple arrived and began working with a small group of 17 Latter-day Saints; all of which were baptized elsewhere. The senior couple not only provided ecclesiastical and leadership support for the group but also engaged in open proselytism. The first convert baptisms occurred in March 2009. By June 2009, there were 70 attending church services and the first branch was organized in Providenciales.[5] Senior missionary couples provide invaluable expertise in church administration and leadership often crucial towards the development self-sufficient congregations that eventually can operate without assistance from missionaries. Similar success may occur in currently unreached island nations and territories, although limited numbers of senior couples serving missions challenge efforts to more methodically expand outreach.

Ordinary members play one of the most vital roles in expanding outreach to unreached island nations and dependencies. The Church is generally accommodating to permitting isolated members that relocate to a country or dependency without a previous church presence to hold worship services at home. However, members who actively invite others native to the location to church and perform missionary activity can create a need for the Church to consider a more permanent and coordinated mission outreach initiative. American expatriate Latter-day Saints were the catalyst to establishing an official LDS presence in dozens of countries over the past century in South America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Europe.

Future Prospects

The recent establishment of the Church in some previously unreached small island nations and dependencies such as the Turks and Caicos Islands and Dominica suggests that additional small island nations and dependencies appear likely to have an LDS presence established in the foreseeable future. Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, and the Faroe Islands are the island nations and dependencies that appear most likely to have an LDS presence established in the medium term. The establishment of a church presence in other unreached island nation and dependencies appears unlikely due to tiny populations, remote location, restrictions on religious freedom, and limited mission resources in an era of expanding outreach opportunities in more populous and more accessible locations.

[1] Williams, Sandra. "In His Own Language", Liahona, Aug. 1988, 25

[2] "Comoros," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009.
http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127225.htm

[3] "Maldives," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010.
http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148797.htm

[4] "Wallis and Futuna," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 26 June 2012.
http://www.everyculture.com/To-Z/Wallis-and-Futuna.html

[5] "Pressing forward on Caribbean Island," LDS Church News, 20 June 2009.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57490/Pressing-forward-on-Caribbean-Island.html