



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Methods for Expanding LDS Outreach in India

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Overview

Inhabited by 1.2 billion people, India is the world's second most populous country yet in 2011 the LDS Church reported only approximately 10,000 members and 36 branches operating in 15 cities and towns. Although the Church has achieved steady growth organizing additional branches in the most populous cities that have already had at least one branch, little progress has occurred within the past 15 years establishing branches in additional cities.

There is enormous potential for future LDS growth in India. The full-time missionary force numbers among the most self-sufficient in Asia, local members exhibit maturity and dedication in leadership often beyond their church experience, and receptivity to LDS outreach is moderate to strong in many locations resulting in steady membership and congregational growth. However with branches operating in only 15 locations, the Church has yet to harness even a portion of the potential growth India has to offer.

This case study presents a brief background on the expansion of the Church in India followed by successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth. Methods for expanding outreach into currently unreached locations are provided. A comparative growth section contrasts the growth of the LDS Church in India with the growth of other outreach-focused Christian faiths.

LDS Background

The first LDS missionaries arrived in the mid-nineteenth century but were unsuccessful in establishing a permanent church presence. The first permanent LDS presence began in the 1960s and 1970s. The Church organized its first mission - the India Bangalore Mission - in 1993. Bangalore, Coimbatore, Hyderabad, and New Delhi were the first cities to have a church presence. By 2001, the Church operated branches in eight additional cities including Chennai, Cochin, Erode, Goa, Karimnagar, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Rajahmundry. In 2007, the Church organized a second mission in New Delhi. By 2010, the Church no longer had a branch functioning in Cochin or Karimnagar but reported branches for the first time in five additional cities and towns: Chavadi, Kakinada, Kolar Gold Fields (KGF), Rajahmundry, and Semmedu. The estimated number of cities with at least one LDS branch was four in 1990, 12 in 2000, and 15 in 2010.

In mid-2012, the Church had branches operating in 15 cities and towns in India. Groups meeting under the auspices of the two mission branches appear to operate in several locations such as Pune. However, the Church does not publish group meeting locations and times on its online meetinghouse locator or the Church's India country website.

Successes

The Church organized branches in the majority of currently reached cities before there were 2,000 members nationwide. Mission leaders in the early 1990s demonstrated zeal and vision opening branches in additional cities notwithstanding very few full-time missionaries assigned to India, a weak LDS infrastructure nationwide, and a tiny church membership. Although there were comparatively few Latter-day Saints and a tiny nationwide presence, the Church established a branch in all six of the most populous cities by early 1994.

Increasing numbers of Indian member serving missions is a major accomplishment for the Church that has made it possible to

operate two missions and open additional proselytism areas within the largest cities. Difficulties obtaining visas for non-Indian missionaries reduces dependence on foreign members to staff the missionary force, raises self-sufficiency, and encourages church leaders to focus on preparing Indian youth to prepare for missionary service.

Opportunities

The potential for LDS growth in India is astounding and only fractionally realized. There are at least 467 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants in India.^[1] Not even 100 cities would be reached if the Church assigned one full-time missionary companionship per city based on the number of full-time missionaries currently assigned to India. Although the Church has not established congregations in locations inhabited by even 10% of the national population, opportunities appear excellent for growth in many areas. Virtually all proselytizing Christian faiths report rapid growth and high receptivity throughout the country. Latter-day Saints may replicate these same results.

There are favorable opportunities to increase the size of the native full-time missionary force. Many recent converts are youth and young adults. If these members serve missions, the Church can obtain greater manpower to implement toward outreach expansion in targeted unreached areas such as eastern India where Christians constitute the majority or a sizable minority in several states. The Church has often experienced some of the greatest success baptizing and retaining converts who previously identified as Christian. Eastern India offers excellent prospects for growth and outreach expansion if the Church establishes an initial presence and allocates resources to several locations simultaneously.

Reactive and Proactive Methods of Outreach: Maximizing Opportunities for Growth

Methods for expanding outreach fall into two categories: Those that are reactive and those that are proactive. Reactive methods dictate that church leaders and members respond to a need. These needs include organizing a group or branch following several member families relocating to an area without a unit close by, teaching an investigator who self-referred himself or herself to the missionaries, or visiting a less active member that expresses desire to return back into activity. Proactive methods require that church leaders and members create a need in the first place. Examples of proactive methods include mission leaders visiting locations without an LDS unit, holding cottage meetings, humanitarian and development work in unreached locations, organizing public events, participating in radio and television programs, and opening new groups in locations with few or no known Latter-day Saints nearby.

The Church has heavily relied on reactive methods for expanding outreach for decades. Reactive methods require less effort from the Church and its members as the task at hand is to simply respond or react to a need or request to establish an official church presence in another city rather than to create one. Reactive methods expand outreach only according to a series of unexpected events out of the control of leaders, missionaries, and members. Historically the Church has achieved little growth expanding outreach in areas where mission and area leaders have heavily implemented reactive approaches to outreach. At times returned missionaries have reported that mission and area leaders discourage opening new cities altogether under the premise of the "centers of strength" policy, namely that there is a greater need to build up the Church in locations with congregations until they become completely self-sufficient before exploring opportunities elsewhere. Unfortunately, this logic has had catastrophic results worldwide as many congregations never become adequately self-sufficient, large numbers of missionaries assigned to a single unit erodes the independence of membership and leadership to administer their own congregation, and populations in unreached areas generally become less receptive to missionary work as they remain untouched for years or even decades.

The Church in India has followed a reactive method to expand outreach over the past 15 years. For example, the opening of the KGF Branch in the mid-2000s was only possible because multiple Latter-day Saint families relocated to the city and long distance from Bangalore necessitated the organization of a separate unit. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church followed more proactive methods to expand outreach in a few locations but these efforts were constrained within a city that already had a branch operating. For example, mission leaders organized several groups in the New Delhi area and experienced noticeable success from these efforts as indicated by the number of branches in New Delhi multiplying from three to seven within only a few years. The Church has also followed a reactive method to translate materials into additional languages. This is manifest in the Church having already translated materials into the predominant language in nearly each location with an LDS congregation but supplying no translations in major languages spoken in areas without an LDS presence. For example, there are no LDS materials of any kind available in Gujarati (46 million native speakers) or Oriya (32 million native speakers) and there are no LDS congregations operating where these languages are traditionally spoken (Gujarat and Orissa, respectively).

Recommendations

The Church cannot lightly take the divine mandate by Christ to take the gospel to all the world. This is especially true in India where nearly one-fifth of the world's population resides. However, only five percent of the population resides in a city or village with an LDS congregation. Expanding outreach to additional cities will be crucial toward fulfilling the great mandate given by Christ to his apostles following his resurrection and repeated throughout Latter-day scripture to take the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

Proactive methods of outreach expansion will be required to make any noticeable headway in introducing the Church to

additional locations. Periodic visits from mission leaders to cities without an LDS ward or branch is a major step toward opening cities to proselytism. Mission leaders may firsthand assess living conditions, meet any isolated members, hold cottage meetings, search for a location to hold church services, and investigate the feasibility in assigning full-time missionaries. If permitted by local law and socially acceptable, mission leaders may distribute church literature and help generate greater interest and awareness in the Church and its teachings.

Much of the future growth of the LDS Church will hinge on church planting. There have been comparatively few instances of LDS Church planting worldwide and most of these instances have occurred in Africa. The Church generally only opens new groups or branches after members relocate to a location that has no unit. This reactive approach to outreach expansion yields mixed results and is often slow and disorganized.

A proactive approach to LDS Church planting in India could take on the form of assigning a couple strong Latter-day Saint families to relocate to a target city to plant a congregation. Other Christian denominations frequently engage in church planting through delegating this responsibility to ordinary members that move to a new city and given the task to start a new church. The LDS Church has inadvertently planted new groups and branches in many locations around the world through members moving for employment purposes. This process resembles many aspects of the colonization efforts of the LDS Church in North America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when church leaders established hundreds of "Mormon Colonies" as groups of several families were assigned to establish settlements in unpopulated areas. The primary purpose of these settlements was to geographically expand the Church's influence in the region, make land claims prior to other groups, and to make each settlement economically, commercially, and agriculturally self-sufficient. The opportunities for the Church in India are remarkably similar and parallel the same goals of early Latter-day Saint colonists. In India, major goals include increasing the percentage of the population that has opportunities to receive a gospel witness, baptize converts while many remain receptive and before receptive individuals are shepherded into other proselytizing faiths, and creating self-sufficient congregations that meet their own needs and provide resources to perpetuate outreach elsewhere.

With planning and a fervent desire, it is possible for the LDS Church to double the number of cities in India with an LDS presence by 2020. Listed in order of population size, the following 16 cities appear among the most favorable locations to target in the effort to expand national outreach: Jaipur, Kanpur, Lucknow, Ghaziabad, Kochi, Vijayawada, Madurai, Meerut, Tiruchirappalli, Mysore, Tiruppur, Salem, Warangal, Nellore, Puducherry, and Aizawl. These cities each present good opportunities for future LDS outreach should church leaders and members pursue outreach due to possessing at least three of the following four factors: Large city population, reasonably close proximity to cities with an LDS presence, sufficient religious freedom to permit the assignment of full-time missionaries, and sizable Christian populations. A map displaying these target cities and cities with current LDS congregations can be accessed [here](#).

Challenges

There has been no clear vision by church leaders to head outreach expansion efforts to additional cities for over 15 years as indicated by the Church opening its first branch in only a few cities during this period. The Church has spread to additional cities only if sizable numbers of Latter-day Saints are concentrated in a city or town. This has resulted in unpredictable outreach expansion and often lackluster efforts from mission leaders to organize branches in unreached locations with small numbers of isolated members. Steady membership and congregational growth has continued despite few strides made in opening additional locations to proselytism but only due to growth in cities that already have an LDS presence.

Anti-Christian sentiment and safety concerns for full-time missionaries have dissuaded the opening of additional cities to proselytism. During the 2000s, full-time missionaries did not wear nametags or openly proselyte in some cities due to safety concerns such as Hyderabad. Religious extremists have executed terrorist attacks and bombings in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Delhi, and Mumbai over the past decade. Political instability in some states presents security concerns. Five states (Gujarat, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh) have anti-conversion laws that urge Hindus not to convert to other religions and reinforce Hindu standards for the entire population. Christians experience the most persecution in Orissa and Karnataka. Enticing individuals to convert with the allurements of monetary gain or intimidation is illegal in India. Many Christian groups, including Latter-day Saints, have been accused by Hindu extremist groups of buying converts through offering financial services and benefits although the LDS Church has never taken part in this practice.

The large geographic size of India has intimidated mission and area leaders from targeting additional major cities. India is the seventh largest country and the Church operates branches in six of the 28 administrative states (Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal) and one of the seven union territories (Delhi). Some unreached states or union territories have no translations of LDS materials in the predominantly spoken indigenous language such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, and Tripura.

The Church operates far below its potential capabilities in cities with LDS congregations. Many cities are minimally reached. Since early 1994, the Church has operated branches in Kolkata and Mumbai yet has never assigned proselytizing missionaries to either location. Furthermore, there remains only one branch in each city notwithstanding Mumbai has 20.9 million inhabitants and Kolkata has 15.7 million inhabitants. There are more than one million people within the geographic boundaries of the average ward or branch in every city populated by over one million with exception of Vishakhapatnam.

Some cities experience member activity and convert retention challenges that consume mission resources to address these

issues. For example, missionaries report that the Church has experienced low member activity rates in Coimbatore and that this has limited the progress of the Church in the area.

Comparative Growth

Latter-day Saints appear the largest proselytizing international Christian faith that have the smallest presence in India. In 2001, the census reported that 2.3% of the Indian population identified as Christian.^[2] Most Christian denominations report hundreds of thousands or millions of adherents and a presence in most administrative divisions. There are over 2.5 million Baptists.^[3] The United States-based Seventh Day Adventist Church reports more members in India than in any other country in the world with over 1.5 million. In 2011, Adventists reported a presence in every state of India and most if not all seven union territories. Some states have over 100,000 Adventists like Tamil Nadu. Jehovah's Witnesses number among the smallest proselytizing faiths but nonetheless reported 37,095 active members assembling in 441 congregations in 2011.

Conclusion

Difficulties obtaining visas for foreign missionaries, poor treatment of Christians in many areas, few LDS mission resources, and large populations that include many receptive individuals require creative, consistent, and enthusiastic approaches to make greater progress expanding national outreach in India. Proactive efforts for national outreach expansion are greatly needed to harness the potential growth India has to offer the Church. Innovated methods are warranted to make the most of extremely few mission resources that maximize their potential. Periodic mission leader visits to unreached cities, holding cottage meetings, distributing literature when appropriate, and establishing positive relationships with local government and community leaders can help make the most of available resources. The founding of a small missionary training center (MTC) headquartered in India could help perpetuate growth and encourage self-sufficiency, but appears highly unlikely until a temple is built.

^[1] "INDIA: Major Agglomerations," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/India-Agglo.html), retrieved 19 July 2012.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/India-Agglo.html>

^[2] "India," July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, 13 September 2011.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168245.htm

^[3] "Statistics," Baptist World Alliance, retrieved 27 July 2012. <http://www.bwanet.org/about-us2/statistics>