



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Solutions to Sustainable LDS Outreach Expansion in the Lesser Antilles

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Overview

Located in the eastern Caribbean, the Lesser Antilles include 22 countries and dependencies on several dozen small islands that run in a chain between Puerto Rico and South America. In late 2012, the LDS Church reported a congregation operating in 16 countries and dependencies in the Lesser Antilles and in all dependencies inhabited by more than 40,000. In the 2000s, the Church expanded missionary activity and organized new congregations on most islands but by the late 2000s and early 2010s had retracted its presence in many locations.

Background information on past LDS outreach expansion and contraction in the Lesser Antilles is provided followed by specific successes and challenges to sustaining outreach expansion. Solutions to achieving sustainable outreach expansion tailored to the needs and conditions in the Lesser Antilles are identified and discussed.

LDS Background

In the 1980s, the Church established its first presence in most countries and dependencies in the Lesser Antilles. Provided with the year the first branch or first missionaries were assigned, the Church has established a presence in Trinidad and Tobago (1976-1977), Curacao (1978),^[1] the United States Virgin Islands (1978), and Barbados (1979), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (1980),^[2] Guadeloupe (1982, 1984),^[3] Saint Lucia (1983-1994, 2003),^[4] Antigua and Barbuda (1984), Martinique (1984),^[5] Saint Kitts and Nevis (1984),^[6] Sint Maarten (1984), Grenada (1985),^[7] Saint Martin (mid-1980s-1993, 2008-2011), Aruba (1986), Bonaire (1990), the British Virgin Islands (1999), Saba (mid-2000s-early 2010s), and Dominica (2006). At year-end 2011, Trinidad and Tobago was the only country or dependency of the Lesser Antilles with more than 1,000 members.

There are six dependencies that currently have no LDS congregations. There is no record of any LDS presence in Anguilla, Montserrat, Saint Barthelémy, and Sint Eustatius. Saba and Saint Martin are the only dependencies in the Lesser Antilles that once had an LDS presence but do not have a current church presence. These two dependencies receive little if any missionary outreach.

In the mid-2000s, the Church made significant strides expanding outreach by forming branches in previously unreached locations. Provided with the number of cities with a branch before and after outreach expansion occurred, countries and dependencies that had branches opened in previously unreached cities included Barbados (three to four in 2006), the British Virgin Islands (one to two in 2007), Dominica (zero to three in 2007), Guadeloupe (two to six from 2001 to 2008), Martinique (one to two in 2007), Saba (zero to one in the mid-2000s), Saint Kitts and Nevis (one to two in 2005), Saint Lucia (one to two in 2007), Saint Martin (zero to one in 2008), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (one to two in 2007), and Trinidad and Tobago (six to 11 from 2001 to 2008).

Over the past four years, the Church has experienced a contraction of outreach in the Lesser Antilles. Provided with the number of cities before and after retraction of outreach occurred, notable examples include Barbados (four to three in 2012), the

British Virgin Islands (two to one), Dominica (three to two in 2010), Guadeloupe (six to three from 2009 to 2011), Martinique (two to one in 2011), Saba (one to zero in the early 2010s), and Saint Kitts and Nevis (two to one). Within the past decade, the Church organized a second branch in several cities that already had an LDS branch but later consolidated these units. Congregation consolidations occurred in Oranjestad, Aruba; Willemstad, Curacao; Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe; and San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago.

Successes

Past LDS outreach expansion in the Lesser Antilles has occurred within short periods of time and has not been limited to only a few locations. In the 1980s, 10 of the 22 countries and dependencies had missionaries assigned for the first time and a branch organized notwithstanding the Church reporting a presence in only four countries and dependencies beforehand. A second wave of outreach expansion occurred in the mid to late 2000s that produced lasting results in a few countries, notably Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The Church experienced its greatest success maintaining a presence in newly opened cities in Trinidad and Tobago among countries in the Lesser Antilles. This success is evidenced by all cities that had branches established in the 2000s continuing to have wards or branches functioning as of late 2012, the number of cities with a ward or branch nearly doubling from six to 11, membership nearly doubling from 1,682 in 2000 to 2,885 in 2010, and the Church creating its first stake in the Lesser Antilles in Port of Spain in 2009. Notable success expanding outreach in Trinidad and Tobago occurred for several reasons. First, Trinidad and Tobago is the only country in the Lesser Antilles with over one million inhabitants. There are more opportunities to reach larger populations in Trinidad and Tobago than in many other sparsely populated countries and dependencies. Second, receptivity to the LDS Church has been higher than on most other islands due to greater religious diversity. Christians constitute slightly more than half the population whereas Hindus comprise one-quarter of the population. Religious heterogeneity accommodates the LDS Church into mainstream society better than countries and dependencies with little religious diversity outside of Catholicism and mainstream Protestant denominations. Missionaries report that the bulk of the convert baptisms in the West Indies Mission consistently come from Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. Third, the Church in Trinidad and Tobago exhibits the greatest self-sufficiency among countries in the region as demonstrated by increasing numbers of local members serving full-time missions and sufficiently large and experienced local priesthood manpower to staff the basic callings for a stake to operate. Fourth, the headquarters of the West Indies Mission has been located in Trinidad and Tobago for two decades allowing for greater availability in mission resources and leadership development than other countries. Fifth, the Church has more carefully ensured that dependent groups reach a certain level of self-sustainability to become branches. For instance, in the late 2000s missionaries attempted to organize a congregation in Caparo but few active members and convert baptisms prevented the creation of a branch.

Only a few countries had an official LDS presence established or reestablished in the 2000s but the Church made noticeable efforts to expand outreach to additional cities and towns in countries and dependencies that already had a church presence. For example, in Guadeloupe branches functioned in only two cities (Basse-Terre and Lamentin) in 2001 but branches operated in six cities (Basse-Terre, Capesterre, Lamentin, Le Gosier, Le Moule, and Les Abymes) by 2008.

Challenges

The Lesser Antilles number among the most heavily evangelized areas of the world by other missionary-focused faiths resulting in heavy competition for converts. Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals established a presence on most islands several decades prior to the LDS Church and today claim a sizable percentage of the population. All three of these groups report steady growth throughout the Lesser Antilles. Seventh Day Adventists constitute five percent or more of the population in Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and the United States Virgin Islands.^[8] In Montserrat, Adventists comprise approximately 25% of the island's tiny population of slightly more than 5,000. Receptivity to the LDS Church is consistently low throughout most of the Lesser Antilles as many previously receptive individuals have been shepherded and socially entrenched into other proselytizing denominations. Due to these conditions, present-day missionary efforts face the challenge to find interested individuals to teach that have not been evangelized by other groups.

The Church has struggled since its initial establishment in the Lesser Antilles to adequately administer so many small islands that exhibit differences in language, government, and culture. Many countries and dependencies have been reassigned to a different mission multiple times within the past two decades resulting in a lack of continuity in outreach expansion vision and mission resource delegation. Some mission leaders have implemented different policies regarding convert baptismal standards, opening new locations to missionary work, and the minimal requirements for a branch to operate. This has consequently made congregations more transient. Opening and closing branches has disrupted the sense of permanency of the Church in individual cities and towns and lessened missionary outreach to local populations. Diminished member activity rates and reduced penetration of missionary outreach throughout the region has occurred in some locations due to longer distances to attend church and some recent converts feeling a sense of abandonment from the closure of the sole branch in their community. However some locations have not appeared to experience a loss of many active members through the closure of recently organized branches such as in Guadeloupe. Returned missionaries report low levels of member and leader self-sustainability in most countries and dependencies in the Lesser Antilles, resulting in dependence on foreign full-time missionaries to satisfy administrative deficiencies. Most missionaries assigned to the region are Caucasian, reinforcing local stereotypes that the LDS Church is a white church. In a region where populations are predominantly black, the Church has experienced reduced receptivity due to perceived incompatibilities between non-white ethnicities and the LDS Church.

Secularism and nominalism in traditional Christian denominations pose a major challenge attracting converts in European dependencies. Missionaries report that organized religion is often not publicly discussed in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Saint Martin due to strong cultural ties maintained with France and the Netherlands. There are no teaching approaches and resources tailored for secular populations and few instances of successful missionary programs in secular countries worldwide. Many individuals in the region see little need for a personal religious lifestyle and weekly participation in worship services.

Solutions for Sustainable Outreach Expansion

Below are four solutions to facilitating sustainable outreach expansion in the Lesser Antilles:

1. Stage the establishment of congregations
2. Assign no more than one full-time missionary companionship per congregation.
3. Maintain reasonably high convert baptismal standards
4. Utilize seminary and institute for finding investigators, testimony development, prebaptismal preparation, convert retention, and fostering social cohesion.

These four guidelines can help the Church steadily expand missionary activity throughout the region, preserve local sustainability of church administration, produce resource-endowed congregations, and ensure permanency of LDS presence.

1. Stage the establishment of congregations.

Staging the establishment of the Church in a lesser-reached or unreached area provides a more gradual development of local leadership. Mission leaders can begin by organizing cottage meetings in the target location and holding sacrament meeting services in a members' home once or twice a month. The organization of a group that meets in a members' home or a rented facility constitutes the next step once there are sizable numbers of members and investigators attending church weekly and investigators becoming committed to joining the Church. Once there are enough active members to provide adequate manpower to staff the essential callings in a branch, the Church can organize a branch. By this time, the Church has ideally created a high-quality body of active members that do not depend on missionaries to meet their own administrative needs.

Staging the establishment of an LDS presence in a new location offers long-term solutions to meeting local needs and creating resource-endowed branches. If receptivity is too low to continue to progression previously outlined, the Church can continue to hold cottage meetings periodically, conduct sacrament meeting services once or twice a month to reduce travel times and costs for local members, or maintain the functioning of a group to make the Church more accessible to the local population and members in the area. Maintaining a least some form of permanency of LDS presence in additional locations will be critical toward taking advantage of future opportunities to proselyte if conditions improve and greater numbers of individuals attend meetings.

2. Assign no more than one full-time missionary companionship per congregation.

Returned missionaries and church leaders report countless examples of the detrimental effects of overstaffing small congregations with multiple missionary companionships. In some locations in the world the number of missionaries assigned to a branch exceeds sacrament attendance notwithstanding the Church operating the branch for many years or even decades. Although the Church in the Lesser Antilles has not overstaffed congregations to this extreme, there have been many instances of two, three, or four companionships assigned to a single branch. Overstaffing branches with multiple missionary companionships erodes local sustainability for several reasons. First, surplus missionary manpower often becomes channeled into ordinary member callings when there are not enough local members to fill needed positions. These callings may include elder's quorum president, a counselor in the branch presidency, and a Sunday school teacher. Second, multiple missionary companionships at times augment the number of convert baptisms but a lack of active members and emphasis on full-time missionaries finding investigators and retaining converts reduces member-missionary involvement. Third, a reduction in the number of missionary companionships or unexpected missionary transfers disrupts the continuity of missionary-held responsibilities resulting in reduced performance of the congregation to meet its own needs. In smaller branches or groups, assigning a missionary companionship to cover two congregations can reduce the possibility of local members and leaders becoming dependent on missionaries to meet their local needs without eliminating the teaching resource that full-time missionaries provide.

3. Maintain reasonably high convert baptismal standards.

Convert baptismal standards have historically been moderate to low in the Lesser Antilles as many converts appear to join the Church within only a matter of a few weeks after initially attending church and receiving missionary lessons. However, member

activity rates significantly vary country-to-country. For example, church attendance in Saint Lucia accounted for as much as 70% of nominal church membership in mid-2010 whereas church attendance in Aruba and Curacao appears less than 20% of nominal church membership as of late 2012. Ensuring that prospective converts develop habitual church attendance, engage in daily scripture study and prayer, and keep all basic church teachings required to pass a baptismal interview for a period of a couple months instead of a couple weeks can significantly improve convert retention rates over the medium and long term.

4. Utilize seminary and institute for finding investigators, testimony development, prebaptismal preparation, convert retention, and fostering social cohesion.

Seminary and institute provide many long-term benefits for the growth of the Church in addition to gospel instruction. Many areas of the world that experience high levels of self-sufficiency in church leadership utilize these programs for missionary-related purposes. For example, inviting a nonmember friend to an institute class can be less intimidating than an invitation to attend church. Seminary and institute occur in a more casual social context than sacrament meeting and Sunday school. Missionary activity based around seminary and institute has experienced success achieving a greater sense of LDS community in countries that experience low levels of receptivity to the Church such as in Central Europe.

Conclusion

Past efforts by mission leadership to expand outreach in the Lesser Antilles notwithstanding many challenges for church growth is admirable and has led to long-term successes in many areas of the Lesser Antilles. However, zealous attempts to rapidly expand outreach beyond the self-sustainability of active local membership resulted in the creation of many branches that had few resources and later necessitated consolidations. Following the four solutions to sustainable outreach expansion efforts previously outlined can help troubleshoot potential self-sufficiency problems and make the Church as accessible as possible to the local population with minimal involvement and reliance on full-time missionaries to accomplish this feat. The Church is unlikely to experience steady, sustainable outreach expansion in the Lesser Antilles until local membership undertakes more administrative responsibilities, regularly participates in member-missionary activity, and sends more local members on full-time missions.

[1] "Netherlands- Antilles," Country Profile, 8 October 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/netherlands-antilles>

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[4] "Saint Lucia," Country Profile, retrieved 22 October 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/saint-lucia>

[5] "Martinique," Country Profile, 8 October 2010. <http://newsroom.lds.org/country/martinique>

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[7] "Grenada," Country Profile, retrieved 11 November 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/grenada>

[8] "Statistical Report for 2010," www.adventistarchives.org, retrieved July 31st, 2012.
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