

LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Indigenous Australians (Aborigines) of Australia

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Overview

Indigenous Australians, also known as Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders or Aborigines, are the original inhabitants of Australia that settled the continent prior to European discovery and colonization. Aboriginal peoples number over half a million, have traditionally resided throughout the Australian continent, and are unrelated to other indigenous peoples in Oceania. Torres Strait Islanders have traditionally populated the Torres Strait Islands between extreme northern Queensland and New Guinea. Torres Strait Islanders number approximately 48,000 and are related to Melanesian and Papuan peoples. In mid-2011, there were an estimated 670,000 Indigenous Australians comprising 3.0% of the Australian population and accounting for 29.8% of the population of Northern Territory, 4.7% of Tasmania, 4.2% of Queensland, 3.8% of Western Australia, 2.9% of New South Wales, 2.3% of South Australia, 1.7% of the Australian Capital Territory, and 0.9% of Victoria.[1] The 2006 Australian census reported that 73% of the Indigenous population adhered to a Christian denomination. Approximately one-third of indigenous Christians are Catholic, one-third are Anglican, and one-third identify with other denominations. 24% of indigenous Australians report no religious affiliation and one percent follow traditional religious beliefs.[2]

This case study reviews past and current LDS outreach efforts among Indigenous Australians and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. The growth of the Church among Indigenous Australians is compared with other indigenous peoples in Oceania and contrasted with other nontraditional proselytism-focused Christian groups. Lastly, the outlook for future LDS growth among Indigenous Australians is provided.

LDS History

LDS missionary efforts among Indigenous Australians primarily began following the establishment of the Church in locations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reside in sizable numbers such as Northern Territory and northern Queensland. In the early 1960s, the Church established a presence in the Torres Strait Islands on Thursday Island.[3] In 1961, the Church created the Darwin Branch; the first unit in Northern Territory. In 1973, the Church created the Alice Springs Branch. Aboriginal Australians in Northern Territory have joined the Church in sizable numbers since the early 1970s. In December 1980, local church leaders in Darwin initiated Aboriginal-specific outreach in Northern Territory through coordinating with the Australia Adelaide Mission. Missionary efforts began in Ellicott among the Warumungu people and were well received. Up to 180 people from the community attended the first fireside where missionaries sung hymns and presented the film Man's Search for Happiness. In February 1981, first permanent full-time missionaries arrived to Ellicott and regular Sunday church services commenced. By early 1982, missionaries had begun visiting other Aboriginal peoples in Northern Territory.[4] In the mid-1980s, the Church built its first meetinghouse that primarily serviced Aboriginal people in Darwin, Northern Territories.[5]

The Church established a stronger foothold among Indigenous Australians during the 1990s and 2000s. Aboriginal Latter-day Saints began serving full-time missions since as early as 1991.[6] In January 1994, over 40 Aboriginal members from throughout Australia participated in a special gathering and temple work in Sydney. Some tribes represented in the event included the Larrakia and Wiradhuri. The event involved six Aboriginal families from Darwin, Melbourne, Mount Isa, and Tasmania.[7] In 1998, area leaders reported that there was an Aboriginal branch in Northern Territory and that missionaries were reporting increasing interest among Aboriginal peoples. However, convert retention challenges prevented many from attending the temple.[8] In 2000, LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley and LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland met with some 250 members in Darwin, including local Aboriginal members.[9] In 2003, an Aboriginal Latter-day Saint couple was serving a senior mission in Cairns among Indigenous Australians in the area.[10] The Thursday Island Branch had several

Torres Strait Islanders among active membership as of 2003.[11] In late 2003, the Thursday Island Branch had three members serving full-time missions.[12] In 2003, the Church had seven branches operating in Northern Territory in Alice Springs, Darwin, Elliott, Katherine, Nhulunbuy, and Palmerston but by the late 2000s there were only three branches that continued to operate in Alice Springs, Darwin, and Katherine.

Some Aboriginal Latter-day Saints have received special awards and government recognition for their contributions to society. In 2000, an aboriginal member who dedicated decades of prenatal service and care among Aboriginal communities in Northern Territory was among six Australians who received the Australian Achiever Award that year.[13] In 2001, an aboriginal Latter-day Saint won the 2001 Pax Christi International Peace Prize for his scholarship on aboriginal culture and interethnic relations.[14]

In the late 2000s, the Australia Adelaide Mission began revamping proselytism efforts among Aboriginal communities in Northern Territory. Most of these efforts were based in Alice Springs. Senior missionary couples in Alice Springs assisted in the translation of some LDS materials into simplified English for use among Aboriginal members with limited English literacy and comprehension, but there were no conscious efforts to translate materials into Aboriginal languages largely due to the small number of Latter-day Saints, the lack of written literature in these languages, the small number of monolingual speakers, and lack of competent translators. Sometime in 2009 or 2010, the Church recreated its branch in Tennant Creek.

In late 2011, missionaries serving in the Tenant Creek Branch reported that there were only about 10 active members; all but one of which were Aboriginal. No congregation appeared to function in Ellicott although missionaries occasionally visited to meet with isolated members and investigators. In mid-2012, the Darwin Branch had approximately 200 active members whereas the Alice Springs Branch had approximately 150 active members. In late 2012, missionaries serving in the Australia Adelaide Mission reported that Aboriginal peoples in the Alice Springs area attended church services in Alice Springs and that members occasionally held sacrament meetings in rural communities such as Engawala, Hart's Range (Atitjere), and Mulga Bore. At the time there were two missionary companionships that exclusively worked among Aboriginal peoples in rural communities surrounding Alice Springs. In late 2012, missionaries reported efforts to have Aboriginal families in the Alice Springs area to attend the temple for the first time.

Efforts to reach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been spotty outside of Northern Territory. In Western Australia, missionaries have reported that they have frequently taught and baptized Aboriginals in Karratha. Branches in Broome and Port Hedland also appear to have had some Indigenous Australian members. Missionaries report that small numbers of Torres Strait Islanders have joined the Church in several locations in Australia.

Successes

The Church has extended outreach among Indigenous Australians for decades notwithstanding their comparatively small numbers and high concentrations in remote, rural areas of central and northern Australia. Congregations have provided minimal outreach in the largest cities in these locations for 40 or 50 years such as in Alice Springs, Darwin, and Thursday Island. Organizing and maintaining congregations in these locations has been critical for initiating outreach among Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. The Church has established branches in additional towns with sizable numbers of Indigenous Australia in Northern Territory and Western Australia, albeit some locations no longer appear to have a branch or group functioning. In the Alice Springs area, local church leaders and the Australia Adelaide Mission have made recent efforts to make the Church more accessible to Aboriginal communities with tiny populations without organizing official congregations by holding simplified church services. This approach improves the visibility and proximity of the Church to Aboriginal peoples while exacting few resources and not placing significant administrative burdens on the handful of active members in these communities. Interest and care by the Australia Adelaide Mission to target Indigenous Australians in Northern Territory has appeared to be carefully approached and consistently handled over the past few years.

The Church has baptized and retained Indigenous Australians throughout the country notwithstanding their small numbers and marginalization in society. Some Aboriginal Latter-day Saints have had public exposure for their contributions to their communities and the country. Aboriginal members serving regular full-time missions and even senior couple missions offers good long-term prospects for leadership development and instilling self-sufficiency among Indigenous Australian Latter-day Saint communities.

Opportunities

English is widely spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that approximately four-fifths of the Indigenous population speaks English "well" or "very well."[15] The vast majority of Indigenous individuals speak only English in the home (86%) but the prevalence of Australian Indigenous languages varies by location, with a strong correlation between rural, remote location and indigenous language usage. For example, only one percent of Indigenous Australians living in major cities speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait language in the home whereas 56% of Indigenous Australians living in "very remote" areas speak an Indigenous language in the home. Approximately three-quarters of all Indigenous Australians who speak an Indigenous language reside in very remote areas.[16] These findings indicate that the Church has extremely few difficulties with language barriers when proselytizing Indigenous Australians in urban areas but that there is a need for some language-specific proselytism in rural areas. Senior missionaries have addressed this need by creating simplified English materials for members and investigators. Some Aboriginal Latter-day Saints pertain to ethnolinguistic

groups that have few, if any, remaining speakers of their tribal languages such as in southeastern Australia and in the Darwin area. These ethnic groups have virtually no need for translations of LDS materials.

There is little need to translate proselytism materials into Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages as most these languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers and are not written. Provided with the number of speakers, there are six indigenous languages that have over 2,000 speakers including Torres Strait Creole,[17] Kriol (10,000),[18] Eastern Arrernte (3,800),[19] Dhuwal (3,650),[20] Warlpiri (2,670),[21] and Pitjantjatjara (2,100).[22] Two languages may benefit from translations of LDS materials. Pitjantjatjara has approximately 2,100 speakers; 80% of which are monolingual and approximately 50-70% are literate in their native language.[23] Eastern Arrernte has approximately 3,800 speakers but only 10% of speakers are literate whereas 50% of speakers are literate in English.[24] However, few if any Latter-day Saint members appear qualified to translate materials into these languages.

There are cultural characteristics of some Indigenous Australians that have appeared to improve receptivity to LDS missionary efforts. Some Aboriginal peoples hold indigenous religious beliefs that share similarities with LDS teachings. For example, some Aboriginals have reported beliefs in a premortal life, life after death as a spirit, and in a deity that is the father of men. The central importance of family in society stands has an important belief[25] that has attracted some Aboriginals to the Church. Some Aboriginals believe that their ancestors arrived by boat to Australia; a myth that resonates with the Book of Mormon.[26]

Challenges

Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples remain socially stigmatized and marginalized in Australian society. Middle Eastern and aboriginal peoples are among the least integrated into Australian society and pose the greatest challenges for Latter-day Saints to effectively reach due to cultural differences. Missionaries report severe alcohol abuse in many Aboriginal communities. Illicit drug use and child abuse are additional concerns. The percentage of 17-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait children attending secondary school is half the percentage of non-Indigenous 17-year-old Australians attending secondary school (36% versus 66%).[27] Poverty and low socioeconomic status stands as another challenge. Indigenous Australians report only 59% of the median income of non-Indigenous Australians, with the most pronounced inequalities of wealth in rural areas.[28] These cultural differences hamper efforts to integrate Indigenous Australians into congregations that are predominantly white Australian or Polynesian; the predominant ethnicities of Latter-day Saints in Australia today.

Tiny populations spread over enormous geographical areas present a major challenge to extending LDS outreach among Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Many Indigenous communities are difficult to access due to long distance from sizable cities like Alice Springs and Darwin. The extremely small population of towns and villages located hundreds of kilometers from sizable cities creates a large administrative burden on mission and local church leaders with often only a handful of benefiting members and investigators. A lack of active members and a small target population has rendered traditional proselytism efforts unproductive in many locations, resulting in the Church closing branches in several towns and villages over the past decade that operated in areas predominantly populated by Indigenous Australians. Active members have appeared to relocate to urban centers for better employment and socialization opportunities, often disrupting any self-sufficiency developed by the Church in tiny branches and groups.

Aboriginal tribes hold some cultural practices which create obstacles for LDS mission outreach. The lack of written genealogical records among Indigenous Australians has created challenges for Aboriginal members working on family history research and temple work.[29] It is disrespectful to speak of the dead in some tribes as many keep family information secret. Most have no written genealogical records. These challenges complicate efforts for performing family history work and proxy temple ordinances among the deceased kin of Latter-day Saint aborigines.[30]

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has experienced significantly greater growth among the indigenous population of virtually all other countries and dependencies in Oceania with an LDS presence than among Indigenous Australians. In New Zealand, the indigenous population (Maori) constitute 7.9% of the national population but the 2006 census reported that half of self-identified Latter-day Saints were Maori.[31] The LDS Church reports a significant presence throughout Polynesia as nominal membership constitutes five percent or more of the population in most countries. The Church has achieved steady growth in Micronesia and Melanesia although both regions have a smaller LDS presence than Polynesia. The least-reached countries in Oceania by the LDS Church are Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands largely due to the recent establishment of the Church in these two nations. However, the Church has experienced steady growth in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands over the past two decades that has surpassed the growth of the Church among Indigenous Australians over the past half century.

Outreach-oriented Christians have reported little growth among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders over the past several decades for reasons similar to the LDS Church. Seventh Day Adventists operate a college specifically geared toward meeting the educational needs of Indigenous Australians.[32] Adventists began coordinated efforts to reach Indigenous Australians at approximately the same time as Latter-day Saints in the early 1980s but today operate a significantly larger outreach program that includes a specialized seminary to train Indigenous pastors.[33] Jehovah's Witnesses extend outreach among Indigenous Australians and report nine congregations in Northern Territory that operate in eight locations (Alice Springs, Borroloola, Darwin, Jilkminggan, Katherine, Nhulunbuy, Palmerston, Tennant Creek). Witnesses also maintain congregations in locations of Western Australia and northern Queensland with sizable numbers of Indigenous Australians such as Thursday Island.

However, Witnesses do not report any congregations that operate in an Indigenous Australian language.[34]

Limitations

There are no official figures provided by the LDS Church or the Australian government regarding the number of Indigenous Australians nominally affiliated with the Church or that self-affiliate as Latter-day Saint. Consequently demographics pertaining to the tribal affiliation of Indigenous Australian Latter-day Saints is largely unknown. Information pertaining to the number and location of dependent units that operate in isolated Aboriginal communities is not published by the Church and was unavailable for the writing of this case study. Most information pertaining to member activity rates and leadership development originated from returned missionary reports and official church sources. There were extremely few local member reports and no Indigenous member reports available for the writing of this case study. Congregational data from the early 2000s was retrieved from Marc Schindler's online atlas[35] and was not officially provided by the Church. No comprehensive unit statistics are available for the location and name of congregations in Australia prior to 2000.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among Aboriginal Australians is mixed. Mission leaders in some Australian missions have focused on reaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples through assigning traveling missionaries to visit isolated communities. These populations remain relatively receptive to LDS missionary outreach. However, the self-sufficiency of the Church in these Indigenous Australian communities remains relatively low. Small target populations spread over large geographical areas will continue to pose major challenges for outreach. The marginalized position of Indigenous Australians in society continues to create social integration challenges with the white majority with little indication of noticeable improve within the foreseeable future. Mission and local church leaders will need to maintain a delicate balance between full-time missionary and outsourced leadership involvement in local church administration and delegating these responsibilities to local Aboriginal members to ensure greater independence.

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