LDS Growth Case Studies

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Rapid Outreach Expansion in Papua New Guinea

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Overview

Within the past decade, the LDS Church in Papua New Guinea has achieved some of the most rapid expansion of missionary activity and outreach in the world while maintaining high rates of convert retention. This growth is evident in the number of cities and villages with an LDS congregation doubling, the organization of seven new districts, and consistent efforts to open unreached locations notwithstanding the extraordinary large administrative burden of the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission.

This case study reviews the history of LDS outreach expansion in Papua New Guinea and examines successes, opportunities, and challenges for establishing the Church in additional locations. A comparative growth section compares the outreach expansion of the LDS Church in Papua New Guinea to other proselytizing Christian groups in the country. Limitations to research findings and methodology are discussed. Lastly, future prospects for outreach expansion in the coming years are predicted and analyzed.

LDS Background

In late 1979, the LDS Church established an official presence in Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby. Within the first two decades of an official church presence, the Church primarily operated within Port Moresby and nearby communities in the National Capital District and Central Provinces. Located on a tiny island off the mainland in Western Province, Daru was one of the first cities outside the Port Moresby area visited by church leaders and proselytizing missionaries in 1990. [1] By year-end 1997, there was one stake (Port Moresby), one district (Nine Mile), and approximately half a dozen mission branches. The Church has traditionally spread to additional locations through members joining the Church in the largest cities and returning to their home villages and sharing their new found faith with family and friends.[2]

The Church began to experience noticeable national outreach expansion in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the number of congregations nationwide increased from 18 to 50 between 1997 and 2002. The Church organized seven new districts during this five year period in Daru (1999), Port Moresby Central (2000), Gerehu (2002), Goroka (2002), Isumo (2002), Kuriva (2002), and Oro (2002). Congregational growth was most rapid between year-end 1997 and year-end 2000 and between year-end 2001 and year-end 2002 as the number of branches increased by 14 and 18, respectively. By year-end 2002, there were approximately 17 mission branches unassigned to a stake or district located in the Sepik River area, Madang, Lae, rural areas southeast of Port Moresby, Rabaul, and Gulf Province. At year-end 2002, the Church had branches organized in at least 35 locations. A map of LDS units, stakes, and districts in 2002 can be found here.

The Church experienced virtually no expansion of national outreach between year-end 2002 and year-end 2009. During this period, the number of branches increased by three whereas the number of wards was unchanged. The Church also closed two districts (Isumo and Port Moresby Central); both of which were consolidated with a neighboring district or stake. One new district was organized during this period in Rigo.

Since year-end 2009, the Church has initiated another period of rapid outreach expansion in Papua New Guinea. During a three-year period from year-end 2009 to year-end 2012, the number of branches increased by 24 and six new districts were organized in Minj (2010), Sogere (2010), Suki (2011), Moveave (2011), Madang Lae (2012), and Sepik River (2012). All

mission branches were incorporated into a district during this period with the exception of the Rabaul Branch. By year-end 2012, the Church had branches organized in at least 62 locations, with at least 16 additional locations with groups operating. The Church also increased the number of missionaries serving in the country during this period. The number of missionaries assigned to Papua New Guinea increased from 28 in late 2010 to 106 in March 2012.[3] In late 2012, there were six zones in the mission (Goroka, Mount Hagen, New Britain, Northern, Sepik River, and Southern). A map of LDS congregations, stakes, and districts at present can be found here.

No reliable reports are available for the total number of dependent units (i.e. groups) currently operating in the country. Mission leaders have recently indicated that two districts have five or more groups, suggesting that there may be as many as 50 groups functioning nationwide if these two districts are representative of most districts in the country. Several groups may operate under the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission Branch in locations not administered by stakes or districts. Altogether the Church may have a presence in over 100 cities, towns, and villages nationwide considering all dependent units likely operate in locations without a ward or independent branch.

Successes

The Church has overall experienced excellent convert retention and stable or possibly increasing member activity rates over the past decade. Papua New Guinea was the only country in the world with over 35 wards and branches at year-end 2011 that experienced more rapid congregational growth than membership growth between 2001 and 2011. Consequently, the average number of members per congregation declined from 333 to 273, indicating fewer members per congregation in 2011 than in 2001. With nearly all of the approximately four dozen new branches organized between 2001 and 2011 operating in rural communities, the Church has created new units with smaller numbers of individuals than previously. The opening of these units has also coincided with a major expansion of national outreach into small cities and villages. Rapid congregational growth and well-attended district conferences indicate active membership growth outside the Port Moresby area. For example, a 2012 district conference for the Minj Papua New Guinea District had several thousand in attendance notwithstanding only five branches in the district.

Mission leaders have actively expanded outreach notwithstanding many unique difficulties and challenges for missionary work such as ethnic violence, safety concerns, risk of infectious disease, extreme linguistic and cultural diversity, small populations spread over large geographic areas, and transportation challenges. The Church has assigned proselytizing missionaries to many of these locations with relatively few difficulties. Rapid outreach expansion is evident in the organization of seven new districts within a four year period; more than any other country in the world since 2005. In the early 2010s, mission leaders began expanding outreach on New Britain and New Ireland, organizing groups in Karu, Kavieng, and Kimbe and assigning full-time missionaries. The expansion of missionary activity off the mainland constitutes another major accomplishment considering the vast size of the mission and ample opportunities for growth in locations more accessible to mission leaders on the mainland.

The Church has readily organized groups when there is an insufficient number of active members or priesthood holders to organize branches but where distance prohibits members and investigators to attend the nearest ward or branch. This approach and policy has significantly contributed to rapid national outreach expansion within the past decade. Groups have operated in both older and newer districts, suggesting recent progress in establishing the Church throughout the country outside the National Capital District. Organized in 2002, the Oro Papua New Guinea District had five groups (Alotau, Itiri, Kiorata, Utukiari, and Warigena) and three branches in 2012. Organized in early 2012, the Sepik River Papua New Guinea District had eight groups in addition to its six branches. Mission leaders in many areas of the world have delayed or discouraged the operating of as many dependent units as in Papua New Guinea, especially in locations with poor accessibility. For example, church leaders in the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission held the first convert baptisms in Gizo, Solomon Islands in 2012 but determined not to organize a group due to remote location and insufficient local leadership. Although it is unclear whether mission leaders in Papua New Guinea have frequently denied permission to organize groups in remote locations, both mission and local church leaders have appeared to be proactive and dedicated to bringing the church closer and more accessible to interested individuals.

The Church has developed a partially self-sufficient full-time missionary force comprised of local Papuan members. All foreign missionaries who serve in Papua New Guinea originate from within Oceania and frequently serve from French Polynesia, Samoa, and Tonga. Papua New Guinea numbers among the few countries in the world where the full-time missionary force is totally staffed by regional missionary manpower ranging from young proselytizing missionaries to the mission president. Surplus regional missionary manpower has been more readily channeled into productive locations such as Papua New Guinea, further facilitating rapid church growth.

The Church has established a pervasive presence in some locations where it numbers among the largest religious groups. A small island in Western Province populated by approximately 13,000 inhabitants, Daru appears to have the largest LDS presence of any city with more than 10,000 inhabitants as the Church operates five wards and headquarters a stake on the tiny island. Assuming that the five wards on Daru collectively have 1,900 members (the minimum number in order for a stake to operate), approximately 15% of the island population may be LDS whereas nominal LDS membership accounts for only 0.32% of the national population. This stands as a testament to rapid growth considering the Church established its initial presence on Daru only two decades ago.

The Church has achieved good outreach in rural areas and has steadily expanded outreach nationwide. At year-end 2012,

there were at least 54 villages with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants and an LDS presence according to 2000 census population figures. No other country in the world has as many LDS units operating in as many locations with fewer than 1,000 people than Papua New Guinea with the exception of Samoa, Tonga, and the United States. The impressive growth that has occurred in these rural areas advocates for similar outreach rural outreach expansion in other countries as the Church has conducted extremely few efforts to reach rural populations worldwide. The Church has also experienced increasing national outreach in Papua New Guinea as demonstrated by LDS units operating in additional administrative provinces. In 2002, 10 of the 20 provinces had at least one LDS congregation operating whereas in 2012 15 of the 20 provinces had at least one LDS congregation operating. A map displaying locations with an LDS congregation, populated places with over 1,000 inhabitants without an LDS presence, and provinces without an LDS presence can be found here.

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities to open additional missions. Surplus regional missionary manpower, indication that the local Papuan missionary force has recently experienced increasing numbers of members serving missions, highly receptive populations in many locations, the relatively tiny presence of the Church in the country at present, and the massive size of the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission all suggest that the Church may open one or more missions within the foreseeable future. There is little indication that the opening of additional missions could erode the high degree of efficiency achieved by the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission as long as regional self-sufficiency in staffing missionary manpower is maintained and mission leaders continue to propagate the vision of outreach expansion established by their predecessors. The Church could potentially organize a second mission based in the Central Highlands in Mount Hagen and a third mission in Western Province in Daru.

Five of the 20 administrative provinces remain unreached by the Church. Papua New Guinea's most populous province, Southern Highlands Province, has no wards or branches within its boundaries and no known dependent units operating notwithstanding a population of approximately 868,000. It is unclear whether the Church has not established a presence in Southern Highlands or the four other unreached provinces (Bougainville, Enga, Manus, and Sandaun) due to greater difficulty accessing these provinces from Port Moresby than other provinces, lower receptivity in these locations than others, few or no requests from isolated members or prospective members for missionary visits and an official church establishment, or a combination of these factors. Political instability appears to have only been a factor that has dissuaded outreach expansion into Bougainville due to ongoing tensions between local populations and the Papuan government.[4]

In Oceania, Papua New Guinea is the second least-reached country or territory with an LDS presence but is also the second most populous country in the region. Nominal LDS membership accounts for 0.32% of the national population, or one member per 312 people. Only the Solomon Islands has a lower percentage of members in the general population (0.066% if the population, or one LDS per 1,511) and only Australia supports a larger population than Papua New Guinea (22 million inhabitants). Current LDS congregations provide outreach to likely no more than 10% of the national population of Papua New Guinea. The lack of LDS outreach among such a large population and recent rapid congregational growth and steady membership growth suggests that there are abundant opportunities for additional outreach expansion if they are pursued by area, mission, and local church leaders.

Some of the greatest recent successes expanding outreach have occurred in locations with small villages and sparsely populated rural areas. For example, in Western Province the Church simultaneously organized eight new branches in the Sogere area to create a new district and four new branches in the Suki area to create a new district yet none of these 14 branches operate in locations populated by more than 1,000 people. Western Province is also the fifth least populated province (180,455 inhabitants in 2011) but encompasses the largest land area of any of the 20 provinces, resulting in the lowest population density of any province in the country (two people per square kilometer). The rapid growth of the Church in some of the least populated areas of the country indicates that other sparsely populated rural areas of the country may experience similar results if missionary activity and church growth is approached in a similar manner as in Western Province.

Challenges

Poorly developed national transportation and infrastructure, safety concerns, extreme ethnolinguistic diversity, and the enormous administrative burden of the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission create challenges for continued outreach expansion. Mission leaders frequently travel by airplane, boat, and car to conduct church business. Church leaders travel by a large convoy consisting of several cars for safety concerns due to high crime rates. Interethnic violence has at times threatened local members and LDS congregations. Mission leaders have become briefly stranded due to boating accidents while traveling to outlying areas only accessible by sea or river. Natural disasters such as flooding, earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis pose safety concerns and challenges for travel. Poor sanitation and high risk for infectious disease create challenges for assigning missionaries and have led to the deaths of dozens of members from cholera outbreaks. There are 830 living languages in Papua New Guinea.[5] Church leaders and missionaries utilize Tok Pisin for teaching and church business in most locations as only two other languages (Hiri Motu and Kiwai) have a translation of one or more basic proselytism materials. Extreme linguistic diversity creates challenges for church administration and testimony development but the Church has experienced relatively few difficulties thus far. The Church remains largely unable to meet individual language needs and proselytizing a predominantly rural population with only one mission, a dozen districts, and two stakes.

Papua New Guinea has one of the least urbanized populations in the world. In 2010, only 13% of the population resided in an urban location, indicating that 5.5 million of the country's 6.31 million inhabitants reside in rural areas. Rural areas present

many challenges for formal missionary activity utilizing traditional LDS proselytizing approaches. The assignment of a single missionary companionship per village is generally unfeasible due to a lack of mission resources, small target population, and difficulty training and managing missionary manpower spread over large and often difficult to access areas.

The Church has not made progress expanding outreach in the Port Moresby area and other major cities. Between 2002 and 2012, the Church discontinued the Port Moresby Papua New Guinea Central District and closed two of its three branches. Within the past decade, the number of wards and branches in the Port Moresby Papua New Guinea Stake and its three neighboring districts (Gerehu, Kuriva, and Nine Mile) has remained unchanged and the Church consolidated its two branches in Lae into a single branch. It is unclear why the Church has not experienced congregational growth in these locations, but populations have appeared to be less receptive and member activity and convert retention rates have been more problematic than in small towns and villages. There is a need for a revamped vision and strategy to reverse stagnant growth in these locations where population densities are high and accessibility is good. Building up the Church in Port Moresby will likely be requisite for the announcement of a temple in Papua New Guinea in order to provide a sufficient number of local members that reside within close proximity of the temple to staff the temple and reduce reliance on foreign senior missionary couples to meet temple needs.

Comparative Growth

Other nontraditional outreach-oriented Christian groups in Papua New Guinea report a presence similar in size and strength to the LDS Church or greater. The Seventh Day Adventist Church numbers among the largest nontraditional Christian groups and has a significant nationwide presence, reporting approximately a quarter of a million members and 900 churches.[6] Adventists operate possibly as many as 2,000 companies (small congregations) and have a presence in all 20 provinces but translate printed materials into only a small number of languages. Jehovah's Witnesses report 4,191 active members meeting in 60 congregations nationwide. Witnesses have experienced slow but steady growth over the past half century. Witnesses have translated basic proselytism materials into several languages including Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, Enga, Jiwaka, Kuanua, Melpa, and Orokaiva.[7] A map displaying Adventist and Witnesses congregation statistics can be found here.

Limitations

Member and returned missionary reports from Papua New Guinea are extremely limited due to few Papuans who regularly use the internet, language barriers, and the regional self-sufficiency of the full-time missionary force. Consequently, there is little available qualitative data on issues pertaining to leadership sustainability, member-missionary activity, and church policies regarding outreach expansion. Most data analyzed in this case study originated from official LDS sources such as its online meetinghouse locator, official membership and congregational statistics, and news articles or personal reports from past mission presidents and senior missionary couples.

Future Prospects

The outlook for continued outreach expansion and congregational growth appears good due to recent successes opening new areas to proselytism and organizing units, additional mission resources allocated to Papua New Guinea, the organization of several new districts, and the recent opening of proselytism areas off the New Guinea mainland in New Britain and New Ireland. The pace of outreach expansion will likely decelerate in the coming decade unless additional missions are organized as the number of member districts and geographic size of the mission have become unmanageable for a single mission. No additional districts appear likely to be organized until additional branches are organized. Locations which appear most likely to have separate districts created include Lae (separate from Madang), Morovamu, and Rabaul. Recent church growth trends suggest that the Church may establish its first official branches in the three unreached provinces on the mainland primarily through the efforts of district leadership. The Church may organize additional "district branches" to help effectively administer dependent units and service isolated members and investigators in remote locations under the jurisdiction of districts.

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[2] Worthen, Kaela. "The LDS Church in Papua New Guinea," LDS Living, 26 June 2012.
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[3] Worthen, Kaela. "The LDS Church in Papua New Guinea," LDS Living, 26 June 2012.
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[4] "Papua New Guinea Country Specific Information," Travel.state.gov, 27 May 2011.
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[6] "Papua New Guinea Union Mission," Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook, retrieved 2 January 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=PNGUM

[7] "2011 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," download.jw.org/files/media_books/yb11_E.pdf, retrieved 29 September 2011. download.jw.org/files/media_books/yb11_E.pdf