

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Reversing Stagnant Growth: A Story of Success from Cape Verde

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Overview

The recent acceleration of growth in Cape Verde numbers among one of the greatest successes in the worldwide Church reversing slow and stagnant growth. Growing from 200 members and one branch in 1991 to 4,964 members and 18 branches in 2001, the Church initially experienced rapid growth during the first decade of missionary work. Rapid growth was followed by a decade of stagnant growth in the 2000s where little progress was reported. By year-end 2009, there were 7,149 members and 19 branches. Notwithstanding nominal membership increasing by 44% between 2001 and 2009, the number of congregations increased by only one (5.6%) during this eight-year period.

Accelerated growth began in the early 2010s as membership increased from 7,149 in 2009 to 9,326 in 2012. In April 2012, the Church created its first stake from the Praia Cape Verde District. Over 1,000 attended the conference to organize the new stake[1] which initially included six wards and two branches. Substantial congregational growth began in 2012 as there were 18 branches in March 2012 whereas by March 2013 there were 26 official units (eight wards and 18 branches); a 44% increase in just a year. Provided with assigned district or stake in parentheses, new units organized between March 2012 and March 2013 included the Calheta Group (Praia), Congresso Branch (Fogo), Mindelo 5th Branch (Mindelo), Ponta do Sol Branch (Mindelo), Palmarejo Ward (Praia), Praia 5th Ward [originally organized as a branch at stake creation in April] (Praia), Relva Branch (Fogo), Ribeirão Manuel Branch (Praia), and Sal 2nd Branch (Mindelo).

Significant progress also occurred in regards to local members serving missions and the productivity of the Cape Verde Praia Mission. In April 2012, local church leaders anticipated that 100 members would begin full-time missionary service in 2012; a significant increase from the 40 that began serving in 2011.[2] In 2012, the Church in Cape Verde was self-sufficient in meeting its missionary needs. In other words, there were more native Cape Verdeans serving missions than missionaries assigned to Cape Verde. Many Cape Verdean missionaries have been called to serve in Portuguese-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa in countries such as Mozambique and Angola. Missionaries in the Cape Verde Praia Mission have reported that convert baptisms increased from approximately 25 a month in the late 2000s and in 2011 to 120-140 a month in late 2012 and early 2013. In 2013, the mission set a goal to baptize over 1,000 converts for the year due to recent successes augmenting the number of converts baptized in recent months. In early 2013, the Cape Verde Praia Mission opened two new zones on Sal and Santo Antão. Missionaries reported plans for reopening the island of Brava to missionaries after several years of no full-time missionaries assigned. Plans were also in progress to open the island of Boa Vista to missionaries for the first time. In 2013, the missionary complement for the Cape Verde Praia Mission was increased by 70.

A map displaying LDS congregations in Cape Verde can be found here.

Factors that Contributed to Accelerated Growth in the early 2010s

Increased emphasis on retaining and reactivating adult male converts has been a major contributor to accelerated congregational growth. In July 2011, President Oliveira began serving as the mission president of the Cape Verde Praia Mission.[3] Returned missionaries report that President Oliveira challenged local church leaders to reactivate five male members who were ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood in each branch and to train these reactivated priesthood holders for leadership positions. This challenge also included improved member-missionary efforts from local members. Reactivation and proselytism efforts were driven by a collaborative effort of local leaders and full-time missionaries and successfully rekindled testimonies in many less-active and inactive male members, resulting in improved self-sufficiency of congregations. Improved

member-missionary participation appeared the primary contributor to the creation of two additional wards in the Praia Cape Verde Stake within less than a year of the stake organization. This is a highly encouraging accomplishment considering all units in the stake were branches less than a year earlier and the Church generally does not organize additional wards in stakes that were organized from districts for several years as newly-organized wards often take years to reach enough active members to necessitate the creation of more wards. The March 2013 announcement that a stake would be formed in Mindelo the following May also appears directly related to recent member-missionary successes reactivating priesthood holders and baptizing and retaining larger numbers of converts as evidenced by the creation of a fifth branch in the city of Mindelo in early 2013 notwithstanding the planned organization of a new stake within a matter of a couple months.

Increasing numbers of full-member families has also contributed to accelerated church growth. Full-member families are families where all immediate family members are Latter-day Saints. These families provide strength and support to individual congregations by helping to keep members in their individual families active by providing support to one another. Full-member families offer resources to staff callings, diversify outreach to adults, youth, and children, and are more resilient to inactivity than part-member families. Church leaders in Cape Verde have observed that church membership has been consistently young and primarily comprised of youth and young single adults since the Church's establishment. In recent years, greater numbers of members have served missions and married within the Church resulting in increasing numbers of full-member families[4] that, in turn, has helped propel growth. Many returned missionaries have benefited from the Perpetual Education Fund to obtain low-interest loans to obtain college education and qualify for higher-paying and more stable employment.

Larger numbers of native members serving full-time missions has accelerated church growth. The number of Cape Verdean members serving full-time missions has doubled within the past couple years, providing manpower to staff not only the Cape Verde Praia Mission but other Portuguese-speaking missions in Africa. Members who serve full-time missions are more likely that members who do not serve full-time missions to remain active after they return home, marry within the Church, and serve in leadership positions. Increasing numbers of returned missionaries has provided more leadership manpower and has contributed to recent member-missionary successes and greater incidence of full-member families in individual congregations. It has been common practice for the mission to permit local Cape Verdean members to temporarily serve as companions with a full-time missionary. Frequently referred to as "mini-missionaries," these local members are young adults who are preparing to serve a full-time mission and have set aside a period generally lasting six weeks to team up with a full-time missionary. This practice has improved the efficiency of limited missionary resources as additional proselytism areas can be staffed with a full-time missionary paired up with mini-missionaries rather than requiring two full-time missionaries. Pairing local members preparing to serve missions with full-time missionaries can provide opportunities for prospective full-time missionaries to study the gospel, learn teaching skills, and overcome anxiety regarding proselytism.

There are several factors that have preserved good receptivity to the Church up to present day. The vast majority of the Cape Verdean population is nominally Catholic with moderate ethnoreligious ties to the Catholic Church, living conditions have improved within the past decade, and societal and political conditions are safe and stable. This has favored the application of teaching approaches tailored to individuals with a Christian background and the allocation of mission resources due to stability in society and government. Widespread use of Portuguese among the Cape Verdean population has also facilitated outreach efforts.

Strategic vision to open additional groups and branches in communities without a nearby ward or branch has helped drive recent congregational and membership growth. The establishment of first branches and groups in locations such as Ponta do Sol, Relva, and Ribeirão Manuel has provided additional outreach in areas with little to no previous LDS presence. Although individual branches and groups organized in previously unreached or lesser-reached locations generally yield few convert baptisms initially, there are good prospects for accelerating growth as a active membership base is established and if multiple areas open to proselytism on a regular basis. It is too early to tell how many recently organized units in locations that previously had no LDS unit will accelerate national trends in membership and congregational growth.

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities for the Church to continue to achieve real growth in Cape Verde. Increasing numbers of local leaders and assigned full-time missionaries provide sufficient manpower to accelerate outreach expansion in a responsible manner. Major population centers such as Praia and Mindelo have established priesthood leadership, revitalized member-missionary programs, and have experienced significant success in reactivating members and retaining new converts as evidenced by recent congregational growth and the establishment of stakes in both cities. Continuing to assess conditions for opening branches in lesser-reached areas of these two cities and in communities on the peripheries of these cities may result in perpetuating the recent trend of rapid growth experienced by the Church since the early 2010s. Opening an English-speaking branch in Praia may be effective in reaching foreign residents who primarily reside in the Praia area and speak Portuguese as a second language if they speak Portuguese at all. Continued use and promotion of the Perpetual Education Fund has good opportunities to curtail emigration and improve the self-sufficiency of church finances as members attain higher paying employment and become more financially stable.

Santiago Island accounts for 55% of the population of Cape Verde and presents some of the greatest opportunities for church planting and outreach expansion due to larger populations than other islands and greater availability of mission and stake resources. Five of the eleven cities and towns with over 1,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation are on Santiago. Some of the most favorable locations for outreach may include Pedra Badejo and São Domingos.

The Church has yet to assign proselytizing missionaries and organize branches on three islands (Boa Vista, Maio, and Sao

Nicolau). Initial outreach efforts may be difficult due to a lack of members on these islands but all three islands likely have several members who could be reactivated if congregations are established.

Challenges

Not all efforts to expand outreach have experienced noticeable success. Missionaries serving in Achada Grande, Fogo reported that an entire zone of missionaries operated in the town yet there were only three active members. Receptivity to missionaries in some locations has been low, particularly areas with few or no Latter-day Saints and no congregations. Many of these locations have small populations that exhibit strong ties to the Catholic Church. A lack of local priesthood leaders in recently opened areas can impede missionary efforts due to a lack of member support in proselytism and reactivation efforts.

The Church has undergone cycles of rapid and stagnant growth in Cape Verde. The recent acceleration of growth in the early 2010s may be short lived if future mission presidents reverse current policies regarding convert baptismal standards, member-missionary focus and reactivation efforts lose momentum, and the number of native full-time missionaries serving stops increasing or even declines. Experience in other countries has shown that growth rates accelerate and decelerate over time depending on the availability of resources, receptivity, member-missionary involvement, cultural and societal conditions, and the strength and sustainability of local priesthood leaders.

Inactivity and fluctuating numbers of active members in some congregations remains a major challenge for long-term growth. Missionaries report that some of the most severe inactivity issues have been on Fogo. In 2012 and 2013, inactivity problems and insufficient numbers of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders delayed the creation of the first stake on Fogo. One branch on Fogo had 120 attending church in early 2012 but by mid-2012 only 60 regularly attended. Missionary and local leader efforts in this branch were able to improve church attendance to 100 by the end of 2012. Similar reports have occurred in other locations often due to convert retention and local leadership sustainability problems.

The Church has not appeared to pursue any collaborative efforts among Cape Verdean Latter-day Saints living abroad. Currently there are more Cape Verdeans living outside Cape Verde than within their home country due to past droughts prompting many to emigrate. The United States and Portugal support the largest Cape Verdean communities abroad. Mission leaders may need to engage mission and local church leaders in these countries to keep good accountability for members who relocate elsewhere. Opportunities for specialized outreach among Cape Verdeans in the United States and Portugal may be productive. There have been some sporadic outreach among these communities in the past two decades in the United States and Portugal.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in Cape Verde has experienced a turnaround in reversing stagnant growth that has been unmatched in virtually all countries in the world over the past five years. Only the Church in Liberia has experienced a similar turnaround in overcoming stagnant congregational growth and accelerating membership growth in recent memory. Between 2002 and 2008, the Church in Liberia reported relatively stagnant growth as demonstrated by nominal membership increasing from 3,871 to 5,039, congregations increasing from nine to eleven, and the downgrading of the Church's sole stake in Monrovia into two districts. However, since 2009 the Church has reported a significant reversal in growth as indicated by the number of branches reaching 20 in early 2013, membership totaling 6,709 at year-end 2012, and the formation of a new mission based in Monrovia in 2013. Improved mission leader accountability for mentoring local leaders and retaining new converts and efforts to reduce travel times to meetinghouses have appeared the primarily influences on this recent reversal of stagnant growth for the Church in Liberia. The Church in Cape Verde reports the highest percentage of members in the general population of any country in Africa, Europe, and Asia at approximately two percent.

Other proselytizing Christian groups have extended more widespread outreach in Cape Verde than the LDS Church but have continued to experienced slow or stagnant growth for many years. In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 1,973 active members assembling in 35 congregations.[5] Witnesses operate on all inhabited islands and maintain more congregations than Latter-day Saints on every island with the exception of Fogo. The number of Witness and Latter-day Saint congregations in the largest cities of Praia and Mindelo are approximately the same. In recent years, Witnesses have experienced slow growth and typically report annual increases in active membership of less than 100. Only one or two new Witness congregations are organized a year. Locations with Witness congregations can be found here. In 2012, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 32 churches, 7,015 members,[6] and approximately 30 companies. With total membership increasing by approximately 300 a year, Adventists have reported stagnant congregational growth since 2004 and generally baptize between 200 and 500 new members a year.[7] The Church of the Nazarene is the largest Protestant denomination in Cape Verde[8] and reports approximately 50 churches and at least one church on every inhabited island.[9] Evangelicals claim an estimated three to seven present of the national population in various denominations.[10]

Limitations

No mission or local church leader reports were directly obtained during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish official statistical figures for sacrament meeting attendance, the number of missionaries serving in each mission, or the number of missionaries serving from particular countries. Consequently all data regarding sacrament meeting attendance and missionary service were obtained from mission and member reports or from isolated figures released in news articles published

by the Church. The Church does not publish the names and locations of dependent units and it is unclear how many groups and dependent branches have functioned or continue to function.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The recent success of the Church in Cape Verde reversing stagnant growth deserves attention from church leaders around the world due to the strength and speed that these efforts have yielded several robust indicators of growth. The implementation of similar methods to achieve rapid growth in Cape Verde in other countries that have experienced stagnant growth such as local leader and member-missionary focus on reactivation and finding and teaching new converts with coordination from full-time missionaries has good prospects to achieve similar results in a wide range of other countries that experience moderate to high receptivity to LDS outreach. Care must be taken by church leaders and missionaries to avoid quick-baptism tactics to reach arbitrary goals but to rather concentrate on preparing investigators for lifelong discipleship and activity in the Church, thereby becoming assets to their assigned congregations. Consistent member-missionary effort to find, teach, and retain new converts will be requisite for the Church in Cape Verde to exhibit a long-term reversal in stagnant growth trends.

The outlook for future growth in Cape Verde appears highly positive at present. The Fogo Cape Verde District may become a stake within the near future once individual branches are consistent in meeting requirements to become wards such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. The Praia Cape Verde Stake may divide to create a second stake in the coming decade if additional wards are organized and there are at least 4,000 members within the boundaries of the stake. Additional districts may be organized for Sal and Santo Antao once each island has at least three branches. Missionaries may be assigned to the three remaining inhabited islands that currently receive no outreach as indicated by recent reports for plans to open Boa Vista. More currently unreached cities and towns on islands that currently receive outreach will likely open to missionary work. Due to remote location and the organization of multiple stakes, the Church may announce a temple for Cape Verde in the medium-term to reduce travel times and improve accessibility to the temple for Cape Verdean members.

[1] Foster, Marilyn. "First Stake Created in Cape Verde," Church News and Events, 18 May 2012. https://www.lds.org/church/news/first-stake-in-cape-verde

[2] Foster, Marilyn. "First Stake Created in Cape Verde," Church News and Events, 18 May 2012. https://www.lds.org/church/news/first-stake-in-cape-verde

[3] "New mission presidents," LDS Church News, 29 April 2011. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/60838/New-mission-presidents.html

[4] Foster, Marilyn. "First Stake Created in Cape Verde," Church News and Events, 18 May 2012. https://www.lds.org/church/news/first-stake-in-cape-verde

[5] 2013 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses, http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/

[6] "Cape Verde Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 20 March 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=CVDM

[7] "Cape Verde Conference (2005-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 20 March 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10043

[8] "Cape Verde," International Religious Freedom Report 2011, retrieved 20 March 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192691

[9] "Nazarene Church Data Search," accessed 20 March 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=CV&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[10] "Cape Verde - People Groups," Joshua Project, retrieved 20 March 2013. http://joshuaproject.net/countries.php?rog3=CV