LDS Growth Case Studies

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The Island Effect: Do Island Nations Experience Greater LDS Growth than Mainland Nations?

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: April 29th, 2013

Overview

89 of the 244 countries and territories listed by the CIA World Factbook are island countries or territories. In this case study, I examine whether there is any significant difference in the size of LDS membership between continental and island countries. I provide a synopsis of LDS outreach and the size of membership for island countries and continental countries. The relationship between island versus continental location in regards to church growth is examined as measured by the percentage of the population claimed by the LDS Church and the percentage of countries with a church presence. An analysis of contributors to church growth in island countries is provided followed by an analysis of deterrents to church growth in island countries. The growth of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists in island versus continental countries is discussed.

NOTE:

We define island nations and territories as those which consists of a portion of an island (such as the Dominican Republic), an entire island (such as Bermuda), an island archipelago (such as Cape Verde), multiple island archipelagos (such as Indonesia), or which have the capital city on an island but also include areas on the continental mainland (such as Equatorial Guinea). Population figures were retrieved from the CIA World Factbook and are estimates as of July 2012. LDS membership figures are as of year-end 2011. We refer to territories, dependencies, and other administrative divisions with varying degrees of autonomy from their sovereign country as countries in this case study.

Island Countries

Approximately 707 million people live in the 89 island countries of the world that account for 10% of the world population. The average island country is 2.5% LDS. 19 of the 89 island countries of the world are at least one percent LDS. LDS membership residing in island countries accounts for 12% of world membership. 21 of the 89 island countries (24%) have no known LDS presence. However, the average population of these 21 unreached island countries is a mere 160,000 whereas the average population of island countries is 7.9 million. The average number of Latter-day Saints in an island country with an LDS presence is 25,700.

Continental Countries

Approximately 6.3 billion people live in the 155 continental countries of the world that account for 90% of the world population. The average continental country is 0.22% LDS. Chile is the continental country with the highest percentage of nominal members (3.3%). 14 of the 155 continental countries are at least one percent LDS. 88% of LDS membership resides in continental countries. 30 of the 155 continental countries (19%) have no known LDS presence. The average population of these 30 unreached continental countries is 16 million whereas the average population of continental countries is 40.7 million. The average number of Latter-day Saints in continental countries with an LDS presence is 102,600.

Analysis

The nine countries with the highest percentage of nominal members in the general population are on islands including Tonga

(56%), Samoa (37%), American Samoa (28%), Niue (22%), the Cook Islands (17%), Kiribati (15%), the Marshall Islands (8.5%), French Polynesia (8.0%), and the Federated States of Micronesia (4.0%). Of the 24 countries where nominal LDS membership constitutes more than one percent and less than four percent of the population, 10 are on islands including New Zealand (2.5%), Palau (2.1%), Vanuatu (1.9%), Fiji (1.8%), Tuvalu (1.6%), Cape Verde (1.5%), the Northern Mariana Islands (1.5%), Guam (1.4%), the Dominican Republic (1.2%), and Nauru (1.1%).

Island countries boast the highest percentage of nominal members in two world regions including Africa (Cape Verde - 1.5%) and Asia (Philippines - 0.64%). Three of the four countries in Europe where nominal Latter-day Saints account for at least 0.30% of the population are on islands (Isle of Man, Jersey, and the United Kingdom). Oceania entirely consists of island countries (Australia is a continent but the only country on the continent) and Tonga has the highest percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints of any country (56%). The Caribbean consists almost entirely of island countries (with the exception of the Guianas in northern South America where these three countries are typically considered part of the Caribbean due to cultural similarities and geographical proximity) and the Dominican Republic has the highest percentage of members in any Caribbean country (1.2%). There are no island countries in Central and South America. The Central and South American countries with the highest percentage of members are El Salvador (1.8%) and Chile (3.3%), respectively. A continental country, the United States is the country in North America with the highest percentage of members (2.0%).

Oceania experiences higher percentages of Latter-day Saints in individual island countries than in island countries in other world regions. 17 of the 19 island countries where LDS membership constitutes at least one percent of the population are in Oceania. When Oceania is excluded from the analysis, the average island country with an LDS presence has a mere 0.28% of the population claimed by the Church; dramatically lower than the 10% average for island countries in Oceania with an LDS presence. There is little difference between island countries outside of Oceania and island countries within Oceania in regards to the average number of members per country. The average number of members in island countries outside of Oceania with an LDS presence is 26,900 whereas the average number of members in island countries within Oceania with an LDS presence is 23,000.

Some statistical findings suggest that the Church may have experienced less growth in island countries compared to continental countries. There is a slightly lower percentage of island countries with an LDS presence (76%) than continental countries with an LDS presence (81%). This is due, in part, to the miniscule population of the average unreached island country (160,000 inhabitants) compared to the average unreached continental country (16 million inhabitants).

Contributors to Church Growth in Island Countries

Smaller populations in island countries compared to continental countries has made outreach efforts in island countries more efficient than in continental countries due to smaller population-to-missionary ratios. Many island countries have small land areas and high population densities, requiring few mission resources to effectively reach the population compared to continental countries. This has a resulted in the Church reaching the majority of the population with relatively few congregations and missionaries assigned. Island countries that exhibit good receptivity to LDS teachings have consequently experienced steady growth with Latter-day Saints comprising a sizable minority of the national population.

Cultural factors in many island countries have influenced higher rates of receptivity to proselytizing Christian groups compared to most continental countries. European colonialism has played an important role in shaping favorable conditions for proselytism during the past century. Europeans colonized all but a few island countries throughout the world during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Colonization coincided with the introduction of Christianity, namely mainstream Protestant faiths and Catholicism. The relatively recent establishment of multiple Christian denominations in these island countries has resulted in religious heterogeneity, instilment of traditional Christian values in mainstream society, and tolerance for conversion to another faith. The successes of nontraditional proselytizing Christian faiths in most island nations suggest that cultural conditions in many island nations enhance receptivity. Isolation from modernized and increasingly more secular continental countries in Western Europe, the Americas, and East Asia has likely played a role in preserving good receptivity decades longer than in many continental countries. These cultural conditions have resulted in some unique challenges regarding double affiliation as many individuals from small island nations are claimed by two or more religious groups due to long-term, aggressive proselytism efforts from multiple denominations targeting small populations.

The long duration of proselytism efforts in some island countries has coincided with increased growth, particularly in Oceania. The Church began its initial overseas missionary activity in island countries such as French Polynesia and the United Kingdom prior to 1850. The long duration of proselytism in these and other island countries has provided consistent outreach for over a century in some locations. Emigration to the United States has been less prominent in Oceania than in Western Europe during the nineteenth century, resulting in baptized converts building up the Church within their homelands whereas the vast majority of baptized converts in Western Europe resettled in the Intermountain West of the United States.

The high percentage of Latter-day Saints in several island countries in Oceania has occurred in part from effective outreach expansion and church growth methods implemented decades ago. The Church implemented an aggressive meetinghouse construction program in the mid-twentieth century in some island countries such as Tonga and Samoa. These efforts resulted in many individual towns and villages receiving a meetinghouse and establishing a permanent church presence with a sense of local community. The founding of church schools in locations such as Tonga and Kiribati has increased the awareness of the Church and has strengthened a sense of LDS community in these countries as these institutions have become nationally renowned.

Deterrents to Church Growth in Island Countries

Remote location constitutes the primary difficulty for outreach in island countries as many are distant from mainland countries where the vast majority of LDS membership resides and mission resources are most readily available. Proselytism conditions have been favorable in some island countries for many years or decades but tiny populations and long distance from the nearest mission have hampered efforts to reach these countries such as Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Equatorial Guinea, and East Timor (Timor-Leste). Mission and area leaders have concentrated outreach expansion efforts in lesser-reached continental countries due to often easier accessibility and larger target populations. Insufficient numbers of full-time missionaries serving within the past decade to staff current mission needs has also contributed to a lack of attention to opening remaining unreached island countries with sufficient religious freedom to missionary activity.

Some island countries consist of hundreds of thousands of populated islands, creating major logistical and administrative difficulties for proselytism. For example, in Indonesia there are 6,000 inhabited islands. Each island usually requires at least one mission outreach center to base proselytism efforts. Travel between islands must be done by boat or airplane and can be time consuming, expensive, and inconvenient compared to travel between different cities, towns, and villages on the same island. Poor living conditions, economic instability, and poverty are frequent challenges in archipelago countries that do not have strong ties to industrialized countries and have few natural resources.

Strong ethnoreligious ties in some island countries severely limit missionary successes. In Europe, traditional ties to the Catholic Church in Malta have posed a major barrier to outreach. Several island countries have severely restricted religious freedom due to the influence of Islam on legislation and government policies such as in Comoros and Maldives. Isolation from other countries, a lack of economic development, and low levels of secularism in government have contributed to unfavorable conditions for missionary activity or a ban on Christian proselytism altogether in some island nations.

Comparative Growth

Other proselytizing Christian groups report greater success converting higher percentages of the population in island countries than in continental countries. 19 of the 23 countries where Seventh Day Adventists report church membership of five percent or higher in the population are island countries, namely Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, Pitcairn, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Solomon Islands, Turks and Caicos, US Virgin Islands, and Vanuatu. All four countries with more than 10% of the population claimed as Adventist are island countries. Adventist growth in island countries has been concentrated in the Caribbean and in a few areas of Oceania.

Eight of the nine countries where Jehovah's Witnesses report active church membership constituting at least one percent of the population are island countries including the British Virgin Islands, Cook Islands, Curacao, French Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Niue, and Saint Helena. Dispersed around the world, these eight island countries all have strong ties to Western Europe or are a territory of a Westernized country.

Limitations

This analysis examined church growth in island countries versus continental countries rather than examining church growth in islands and continental places in a general sense. Consequently this case study did not take into account islands and archipelagos that pertain to continental countries that do not have autonomous status. Examples of islands excluded from this analysis include San Andres and Providencia in Colombia, islands in maritime Canada and the Canadian Arctic, islands that pertain to Greece in the Aegean Sea, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India. All population figures were retrieved from the CIA World Factbook and many are estimates. Data on the presence of the LDS Church, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses were retrieved from official sources from all denominations.

Conclusion

The Church has experienced greater growth in island countries in Oceania and a few island countries in Europe than in continental countries and island countries elsewhere as measured by the percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in the general population. The Church has experienced greater growth in a few island countries in other world regions (such as Cape Verde in Africa and the Philippines in Asia) but these instances are exceptions to the norm. The duration of LDS outreach, availability of mission resources commensurate to receptivity and population size, and the implementation of effective church growth strategies has appeared the primary influence on the size and prominence of the Church in various countries regardless of island or continental location.