

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Guatemala City

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Overview

Guatemala City is the capital of Guatemala and the most populous urban agglomeration in Central America with 2.85 million inhabitants.[1] The Guatemala City metropolitan area comprises Ciudad de Guatemala Department and extreme eastern areas of Sacatepéquez Department. In early 2013, the Church reported twenty stakes, three missions, one temple, and one missionary training center (MTC) based within Guatemala City. The average stake services 142,500 people.

This case study reviews the growth of the Church in Guatemala City as indicated by stake and congregational growth. Successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth are discussed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in Guatemala City to other cities in Guatemala and Latin America and contrasts LDS growth with other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups. Limitations to these findings are identified and prospects for future growth are discussed.

NOTE: In this case study, Guatemala City proper and adjacent cities are included when using the term "Guatemala City" unless otherwise specified.

LDS Background

The first missionaries arrived in Guatemala City in 1947 and held the first official church meeting in 1948.[2] In 1952, the Church organized the Central America Mission with headquarters in Guatemala City. In 1981, the Church announced a temple for Guatemala City and dedicated it in 1984. In 1994, the Church dedicated a new MTC in Guatemala City capable of housing 102 missionaries.[3] Two additional missions were organized in 1988 and 1993. In early 2013, nominal LDS membership was estimated to number over 72,000, or approximately 2.25% of the Guatemala City population.

Stake Growth

In 1967, the Church organized its first stake in Central America in Guatemala City with six wards.[4] Additional stakes were organized in Guatemala City in Utatlán (1975), Las Victorias (1976), Mariscal (1979), Atlántico (1986), Central (1986), Florida (1986), La Laguna (1988), Nimajuyu (1989), Milagro (1990), El Molino (1990), Villa Nueva (1991), Palmita (1995), Villa Hermosa (1995), Bosques de San Nicolás (1995), Montserrat (1995), Amatitlán (1998), Monte Maria (1998), Alameda (1999), La Esperanza (1999), and Villa Nueva El Frutal (2012). As of March 2013, the Church has discontinued one stake in Guatemala City: The Guatemala City Monte Maria Stake in 2008.

The number of stakes totaled one in 1970, four in 1980, eleven in 1990, twenty in 2000, nineteen in 2010, and twenty in early 2013.

LDS Congregation Analysis

In early 2002, there were approximately 144 congregations in Guatemala City. In early 2013, there were approximately 134

congregations in Guatemala City; a 6.9% decrease over 11 years. During this 11-year period, the number of wards declined by three and the number of branches declined by seven. At present the average congregation services 21,300 inhabitants.

Most stakes experienced slight congregational decline between 2002 and 2013 according to the configuration of stakes as of early 2002. Eleven stakes had one ward or branch closed (Guatemala City, Guatemala City Alameda, Guatemala City Bosques de San Nicolás, Guatemala City Central, Guatemala City Florida, Guatemala City Las Victorias, Guatemala City Mariscal, Guatemala City Monte, Guatemala City Nimajuyu , Guatemala City Palmita, and Guatemala City Utatlán) and one stake had two units closed (Guatemala City Montserrat). Two stakes experienced congregational growth during this period. The Church organized one new unit in the Guatemala City Villa Hermosa Stake and two new units in the Villa Nueva Guatemala Stake. Seven stakes experienced no net increase or decrease in the number of congregations (Amatitlán Guatemala, Guatemala City Atlántico, Guatemala City El Molino, Guatemala City La Esperanza, Guatemala City La Laguna, and Guatemala City Milagro).

Returned missionaries report that most wards had approximately 50 to 75 active members in the early 1980s. In the early 2010s, most wards appeared to have between 80 and 120 active members.

Successes

The Church in Guatemala City has been the headquarters for church operations in Central America for decades due to its long-term LDS presence and the number of stakes and congregations in a single metropolitan area. The Church established a formal, permanent presence in Guatemala City prior to most other country capitals in Latin America. There are more stakes in Guatemala City than in any other country in Central America with the exception of Honduras. The first temple in Central America was dedicated in Guatemala City; the only temple in the region between 1984 and 2000. The size and strength of local leadership and is evidenced by area headquarters based in Guatemala City and the operation of a missionary training center for at least two decades. LDS outreach in Guatemala City has also outpaced most other areas of Guatemala. The saturation of LDS congregations in Ciudad de Guatemala Department is higher than all but a few of Guatemala's twenty-two administrative departments, providing greater outreach to the most populous city in the country than in less populated cities, towns, and rural areas.

The Church in Central America has achieved self-sufficiency in meeting its full-time missionary needs. In 2009, area leaders reported that the Central America Area sent as many members on full-time missions as the number of missionaries assigned to the area. Guatemala City has played a pivotal role in achieving this success due to the large number of stakes. The Church has achieved self-sufficiency in meeting its full-time missionary needs in few world regions. This success has been achieved notwithstanding low member activity rates in the area.

Opportunities

There are dozens of lesser-reached neighborhoods and communities in the Guatemala City metropolitan area that appear favorable for church planting. Most of these locations likely have several active members and sizable numbers of inactive members who may be more easily reactivated if a group or branch begins meeting within their community. Receptivity to proselytism efforts will likely be higher in these locations than in those where there has been a long-term LDS presence due to reduced missionary outreach incurred by distance from the nearest meetinghouse. Efforts to spur growth in lesser-reached areas of the city will be most effective if members take a central role in fellowshipping and leading missionary work and church administration. Holding cottage meetings provides a low risk method for church leaders to assess receptivity and begin establishing additional units without making formal recommendations to organize a branch or a ward; a process that takes months or even years. Dependent units can be organized relatively quickly and can even mature into wards by the time church leaders make the recommendation to apply for official unit status.

The Church operates no wards or branches that specifically service non-Spanish speakers despite the large number of Amerindian peoples that speak other languages. The Church has baptized thousands of Amerindians outside Guatemala City and operates wards and branches that accommodate speakers of Spanish and other languages including Q'eqchi', Mam, K'iche', and Kaqchikel. It is unclear whether many Amerindian Latter-day Saints reside in Guatemala City at present but most, if not all, Amerindian members in Guatemala City are bilingual in their indigenous language and Spanish. The formation of even a few branches that hold church services in the most commonly spoken Amerindian languages can help establish a sense of LDS community among Amerindian Latter-day Saints residing in Guatemala City and provide outreach to nonmember Amerindians. The Church has translated basic proselytism materials and select passages of the Book of Mormon into several of these languages, providing opportunities for specialized outreach and personal testimony development for these peoples.

Challenges

No net increase in the number of wards, branches, and stakes since 2002 constitutes the most concerning church growth finding and reflects low convert retention, mediocre member activity rates, and major difficulty achieving natural growth through children born into the Church. The population of Ciudad de Guatemala Department increased by approximately 666,000 people between 2002 and 2012; a 26% increase yet the Church reported a decline in the number of congregations in Guatemala City during this period. The discrepancy between city population increases and unit growth appears to have no relationship to the number of convert baptisms and increase in children of record as the Church has reported steady membership growth during this period for Guatemala as a whole. The Church in Guatemala reported a net increase of 43,245 members between 2002 and

2011 (a 23% increase) but reported a 6.5% decline in the number of wards and branches during this period. If the average number of active members per ward or branch was unchanged between 2002 and 2011, it would suggest that the Church has actually experienced a decline in the number of active members during this period.

Other proselytizing Christian groups have achieved considerable church growth progress in Guatemala City during the past decade and pose challenges for the LDS Church to find receptive individuals. These groups shepherd thousands of receptive individuals each year that may have been also receptive to the LDS Church. A lack of member-missionary activity among Latter-day Saints and vibrant member-missionary programs in other denominations pose a major challenge for the Church to achieve self-sustainable growth, higher convert retention, and to reverse stagnant growth trends that have persisted for over a decade. Local populations do not appear to have significantly exhibited a decrease in receptivity to the LDS Church over the past couple decades yet LDS growth trends have markedly changed from strong membership and congregational growth to stagnant "real growth." It is possible that receptivity to the LDS Church may decline in the coming years and decades if individuals who are interested in joining nontraditional Christian groups are contacted, fellowshipped, and socialized into other denominations.

Comparative Growth

Guatemala City ranks as the metropolitan area in Central America with the most LDS stakes and missions but is also one of the few major cities in the region that experienced congregational decline within the past decade. Guatemala City is one of only two metropolitan areas in Central America that has ever had a stake permanently discontinued (the other being Panama City). LDS outreach in Guatemala City is more pervasive than most other major metropolitan areas of Latin America. The average unit in Guatemala City currently services 21,300 people whereas the average unit in Lima, Peru services 36,300 people, the average unit in Mexico City services 55,500 people, and the average unit in Sao Paulo, Brazil services 80,400 people. In Guatemala, the Church has established a more widespread presence in some small cities and rural areas such as cities and towns in Retalhuleu, Totonicapán, and Sacatepéquez Departments and among the Q'eqchi' in the Polochic Valley of Alta Verapaz Department.

Other proselytizing Christians report a presence in Guatemala City comparable in size to the LDS Church or more widespread than the LDS Church. Most groups have experienced steady growth over the past several decades. Evangelicals are a sizable minority and have experienced rapid growth for many years. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 327 congregations in Guatemala City. Witnesses maintain several non-Spanish speaking congregations and groups servicing speakers of Cakchiquel (6), K'iche' (6), Guatemalan Sign Language (3), Q'eqchi' (3), Achi (1), Korean (1), and Mam (1). In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 68 churches, 27 companies, and approximately 18,600 members in Guatemala City and Santa Rosa Department.[5] The Church of the Nazarene reports a widespread presence in Guatemala City.

Limitations

No data was available on the geographic boundaries and population demographics for the 22 administrative zones of Guatemala City. Consequently, no geospatial analysis could be completed to analyze differing church growth trends by zone. Few member reports were available regarding church attendance, member activity, and convert retention rates. No official data is released by the Church regarding language usage among membership in Guatemala. 2002 congregation data was retrieved from Marc Schindler's online LDS atlas and is not an official source for unit data. No congregational data was available for years prior to 2002.

Future Prospects

The ongoing trend of stagnant congregational growth, sizable numbers of convert baptisms year to year but little, if any, increase in active membership due to poor convert retention and low member activity rates, the discipleship of many previously receptive individuals into other Christian denominations, and a lack of outreach expansion vision predict serious challenges for the LDS Church in Guatemala City to achieve real growth for the foreseeable future. The city population exhibiting good receptivity to the LDS Church and improved self-sufficiency in the Central America Area in meeting its full-time missionary needs are conditions that will favor church growth if appropriate missionary tactics are consistently implemented. Within the foreseeable future, the Church may discontinue one or two stakes and create one or two stakes depending on how congregational growth trends behave.

[1] "THE PRINICPAL AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 3 April 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] "Guatemala," www.mormonnewsroom.org, retrieved 3 April 2013. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/guatemala/

[3] "Guatemala training center dedicated," LDS Church News, 12 February 1994. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/24160/Guatemala-training-center-dedicated.html

[4] Hansen, Terrence L. "The Church in Central America," Ensign, Sep 1972, 40

[5] "Metropolitan Guatemala Conference (2005-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 4 April 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10603