LDS Growth Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach Expansion in Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Overview

Located in Indonesia, Sulawesi is the world's eleventh largest island and known for its contorted shape. Over 17 million people inhabit Sulawesi, accounting for approximately seven percent of the population of Indonesia. Austronesian peoples have populated Sulawesi for millennia and originally followed indigenous beliefs. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese and later the Dutch established colonies on Sulawesi. The Netherlands ruled Sulawesi until the independence of Indonesia in the mid-twentieth century. Past proselytizing efforts by Islamic and Christian missionaries have resulted in most the population identifying as Muslim with sizable numbers of Christians in several areas of the island.

This case study briefly reviews the history of the Church in Sulawesi and its current status as of early 2013. Recommendations for expanding outreach and spurring church growth are provided. Challenges for missionary activity in Sulawesi are identified and discussed.

LDS Background

In 1984, the Church created its first and only branch on Sulawesi in the city of Manado. Returned missionaries report that the branch had less than 30 active members until the late 2000s. In the early 2000s, the Indonesia Jakarta Mission appeared to assign the first full-time missionaries. In 2007, the Church obtained legal recognition from the city government of Manado and relocated the meetinghouse for the Manado Branch to a more centralized location in the city. In 2011, a recent convert baptized less than a year earlier was called as the new branch president, replacing the previous branch president who served for over two decades. In the early 2010s, most branch leadership callings were staffed by converts baptized since 2007. In 2012, the mission assigned a senior missionary couple to provide leadership support for the branch. At the time, two full-time missionary companionships were assigned to the Manado Branch. In early 2013, approximately 50 of the 110 members in the Manado Branch were active and six young elders and a senior missionary couple were assigned to the branch. As of mid-2013, mission leaders have not extended any formal proselytism efforts to additional locations on Sulawesi. Full-time missionaries report that stagnant outreach expansion has occurred over the past three decades due to converts relocating to Java, past convert retention and member activity challenges, limited local leadership manpower, and opposition from other Christian groups. Recently returned missionaries report that approximately 20 Latter-day Saints reside on Sulawesi outside of Manado in Palu, Airmadidi, Tondano, and Tomohon with varying degrees of church activity.

Recommendations

Mission leaders have followed traditional methods to help reverse stagnant growth in the Manado Branch by assigning a senior missionary couple and three sets of full-time missionaries. Young full-time missionaries have served in Manado for decades yet there has been a poor response to their efforts as evidenced by extremely slow growth in active membership in the branch until the late 2000s. The more recent assignment of a senior missionary couple has good opportunity to revitalize the Church in Manado through greater focus on leadership development and emphasis on member-missionary involvement. However, the assignment of so many missionaries to a small branch poses additional challenges for the branch to become more self-sufficient in meeting its basic administrative and ecclesiastical needs with surplus missionaries who have relatively few investigators to

teach. Oftentimes in these situations full-time missionaries officially or semi-officially hold callings in small branches due to a lack of active members and missionaries observing a need to help the branch run more smoothly. However, these efforts can be counterproductive if these responsibilities are not handed off to local members who are mentored and trained to hold particular callings and member responsibilities. It is unclear how well the Manado Branch would function if a situation arose in which no full-time missionaries could be assigned to Manado. However, it is encouraging that the relocation of the branch meetinghouse to a more centralized location in the city and larger numbers of recent converts serving in leadership positions have helped augment active membership in the Manado area.

Holding cottage meetings in unreached locations with isolated members and investigators is a low-risk missionary approach that provides outreach to otherwise unreached cities, towns, and villages. Few mission resources are needed to hold cottage meetings other than finding and financing transportation for missionaries and local church leaders. Cottage meetings may occur in member or investigator homes and require only a handful of individuals to operate. In a cottage meeting, a basic program that focuses on a missionary lesson or a specific doctrine in the Church is provided followed by time for attendees to socialize afterwards. Mission leaders can gauge receptivity in specific locations through implementing a cottage meeting approach and extend increasing amounts of focus and resource allocation to those areas where receptivity is highest. This method permits church leaders to prudently and judiciously distribute extremely limited mission resources in Indonesia to those locations that exhibit the greatest probability for church growth. Organizing cottage meetings in locations with known Latter-day Saints such as Palu, Airmadidi, Tondano, and Tomohon have the highest probability for success for assessing and preparing for outreach expansion.

The use of Facebook and other social media sites to target specific locations in Sulawesi with advertisements for a free copy of the Book of Mormon, an audiovisual material, and meetings with missionaries has good potential to find interested individuals and hold cottage meetings in locations with sizable numbers of prospective investigators and isolated members. The Indonesia Jakarta Mission has utilized some of these approaches and has baptized at least one convert in the Manado area who was initially introduced to the Church through the website mormon.org. The most populous cities offer some of the best opportunities due to large populations concentrated in small geographical areas. These conditions provide missionaries with greater opportunities to find interested individuals without traveling inordinate distances over large geographical areas. There are nine cities on Sulawesi with 100,000 or more inhabitants including Makassar (1,331,391), Palu (310,168), Kendari (264,673), Gorontalo (173,951), Bitung (155,385), Parepare (125,207), Palopo (116,152), Baubau (106,638), and Watampone (104,796). Success in utilizing social media in initial finding and proselytizing efforts will likely be occur in cities that have known Latter-day Saints, sizable numbers of Christians, and good accessibility for mission leaders such as Bitung and Palu.

Mission and area leaders may find success reversing stagnant outreach expansion in Sulawesi by requesting some Indonesian families to relocate to unreached cities in an effort to establish a permanent LDS presence in additional locations. This tactic has not been utilized by mission and area leaders around the world for many years due to concern over active families becoming inactive if they relocate away from areas with a preexisting church presence. Difficulty assimilating into a new city, finding employment, distance from friends and family, and safety concerns appear additional concerns that have dissuaded church leaders from implementing this tactic. There are few approaches that offer as much potential for church growth and permanent outreach expansion as active Latter-day Saint families moving to locations without a preexisting church presence due to member-missionary opportunities for family members to find and teach new friends and acquaintances and parents providing minimum leadership for organizing a group. This approach must be carefully evaluated by church leaders, specifically in the process of selecting "planter families" who are requested to move to a new city to ensure that these families would be appropriate for this assignment. The Church has experienced some of its greatest growth through member families moving to previously unreached locations, starting small congregations, and reaching out to the local population. Coordination from mission leaders to purposefully and tactfully select particular families and locations could yield good results in an era of stagnant outreach expansion for the Church in Indonesia. In 2013, returned missionaries report that there are at least three inactive Latter-day Saint families who have moved to Palu for employment purposes. These families still remain in contact with the Church but the risk of active planter families become inactive when relocating to a target city must be carefully evaluated in order to select families that would be least likely to become inactive in wake of the unique stressors and challenges faced by isolation from fellow active members.

Use of Indonesian full-time missionaries serving from wards and branches on Java to orchestrate the expansion of outreach in predominantly Christian areas has good potential for success. Indonesian full-time missionaries are fluent in the Indonesian language and can immediately provide teaching and proselytism without months of language study required by foreign missionaries to proficiently learn the language to effectively communicate. Foreign full-time missionaries are extremely limited in number due to government restrictions on the number of visas given to the Church. Although the size of the indigenous Indonesian full-time missionary force is tiny compared to the enormous population of Indonesia, small numbers of Indonesian missionaries can be assigned to unreached areas of Sulawesi with few, if any, complications with government officials. The greatest success in opening more locations to missionary work in Sulawesi will require greater member-missionary involvement from ordinary members in Manado and petitions from isolated members outside Manado who have found and prepared individuals to receive the mission leaders.

Emphasis on the seminary and institute programs may be an effective method to revitalize growth in Manado and improve convert retention and reactivation efforts. Seminary and institute provide good socialization and gospel study opportunities before and after baptism.

Concentrating initial outreach expansion in locations with sizable numbers of Christians or a Christian majority may be the most effective method of establishing a permanent presence due to cultural challenges overtly proselytizing Muslims. Two areas in Sulawesi appear to have a Christian majority: North Sulawesi and in central South Sulawesi in the Pare-Pare area.

Challenges

There has been no expansion of LDS outreach in Sulawesi since the organization of the Manado Branch. The lack of active membership growth and congregational growth has been commonplace for the Church throughout Indonesia within the past two decades. Visa frustrations, focus on districts in Java reaching stake status, and safety concerns have made mission and area leaders extremely cautious about opening additional locations to missionary work. Delays in opening more locations to missionary work, even in North Sulawesi such as Airmadidi, Bitung, Tomohon, and Langowan may result in missing opportunities to reach individuals who are currently receptive but over time may join other proselytizing Christian groups. The tiny size of the LDS community in Manado is difficult for attracting new members due to limited socialization opportunities and opposition from other Christian groups. Missionaries have reported several instances of converts and prospective converts facing intense family opposition to joining the Church.

The anemic growth and development of local leadership has constituted a major difficulty that has resulted in the formation of no additional congregations in Sulawesi and persistent difficulties with church administration. The pattern of church growth and missionary work in other areas of the world has been such that mission leaders postpone potential expansion of outreach until currently operating branches achieve greater self-sufficiency and growth. Recent success in staffing leadership positions with recent converts may signal a permanent improvement in reversing stagnant growth in Manado but time will tell whether this growth continues and one day necessitates the organization of additional units.

Christian-Muslim violence has occurred in some areas of Sulawesi primarily prior to the mid-2000s. Church leaders must take care to avoid placing missionaries in locations where conflict between Christians and Muslims is occurring. Central Sulawesi may be the most precarious area to place missionaries due to the persecution of Christians and religious violence within the past decade. In the past few years, there have been few, if any, reports of major conflict between Muslims and Christians in Sulawesi[1] as local police have been effective in protecting church and houses of worship.[2] The Indonesian government has been effective in reducing violence and religious conflict through deploying troops in Sulawesi during the early 2000s, resulting in relatively few risks to assigning missionaries to locations with sizable numbers of Christians.

The high degree of ethnolinguistic diversity in Sulawesi may pose challenges for future missionary activity. There are approximately 112 ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to Sulawesi that each speak their own language. There are no translations of LDS materials in local languages endemic to Sulawesi. Only translations of scriptures and materials in standard Indonesian are available; a commonly spoken second language. Translations of materials into additional languages such as Manado Malay do not appear vital towards achieving growth in the near term but will likely be needed in the long-term if converts join the Church with limited fluency and command in standard Indonesian. Many ethnic groups exhibit traditional ties to Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Chinese religions, or a combination of these religions. Mission leaders will need to adapt teaching approaches to meet the religious background of various ethnolinguistic groups in Sulawesi in order to improve gospel comprehension and testimony development.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced no progress expanding outreach on other major islands in Indonesia. All but three LDS branches operate on Java and no new congregations have been organized on Java for many years with the exception of a couple member groups. The Church has continued to operate only one branch on Sumatra for many years. In Papua, the Church briefly operated a small branch in the mid-2000s but closed the branch due to active members relocating elsewhere. The Church recently organized its first branch on Bali but has not appeared to extend any overt missionary activity on this island. A member groups has also recently begun meeting in Batam.

Other proselytizing Christian groups report a small to large presence in Sulawesi. The Seventh Day Adventist Church numbers among the largest nontraditional Christian groups in Sulawesi as at year-end 2012 Adventists reported 65,522 members and 554 churches. Adventists have achieved steady growth over the past half century and claim over three percent of the population in some locations in North Sulawesi such as Tomohon.[3] Adventists comprise the smallest percentage in Sulawesi in southern areas where they constitute as little as 0.04% of the population.[4] Jehovah's Witnesses report a limited presence that includes 13 congregations - all but two of which are located in North Sulawesi Province.[5]

Limitations

All data on church attendance trends, leadership development, and cultural conditions were retrieved from young full-time missionary, senior missionary, mission president, and area authority reports. No reports from local members were available. The Church does not publish any official statistics on church membership figures for the Manado Branch or Sulawesi, including the number of convert baptisms and member activity rates. Membership data was obtained from recently returned missionary reports. Standards and definitions for membership and congregations differ between the LDS Church and other denominations resulting in limited utility in comparing statistics between these denominations.

Future Prospects

Stagnant outreach expansion for the Church in Indonesia over the past two decades, long-term struggles for achieving

noticeable active membership growth in the sole LDS branch on Sulawesi in Manado for most of the past three decades, limited full-time missionary manpower in Indonesia due to the tiny size of the Church and few foreign missionary visas, and success in other Christian groups converting many receptive individuals over the past several decades predict a poor likelihood of LDS outreach expansion in Sulawesi within the foreseeable future. Emphasis on holding cottage meetings in locations without an official LDS presence and known Latter-day Saints, implementing and maintaining viable seminary and institute programs, taking care to avoid oversaturating the Manado Branch with full-time missionary companionships, and implementing nontraditional LDS outreach expansion tactics such as using planter families and social media ad campaigns may be steps that can help revitalize the Church in Sulawesi. Care must be taken to ensure the safety of missionaries in locations with religious conflict and to promote the development of additional church leadership manpower in the region.

[1] "Indonesia," International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, retrieved 17 April 2013.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192629

[2] "Indonesia," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127271.htm

[3] "Minahasa Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 16 April 2013.
http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=SMHC

[4] "South Sulawesi Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 16 April 2013.
http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=SSUC

[5] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 16 April 2013.
http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E