

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Auckland, New Zealand

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Overview

Auckland is the most populous metropolitan area in New Zealand and the most populous metropolitan area in Oceania outside of Australia. The Auckland metropolitan population has steadily increased within the past two decades and has outpaced population growth rates for New Zealand as a whole. Between 1996 and 2012, the metropolitan population increased from 1.04 million in 1996 to 1.40 million in 2012[1] (a 35% increase) whereas the national population increased from 3.73 million to 4.43 million (a 19% increase).[2] Auckland pertains to the Auckland Region, one of sixteen administrative regions in the country, and the Auckland metropolitan area accounts for 93% of the Auckland Region population. Of the 1.3 million people counted in the 2006 New Zealand census who lived in Auckland Region, 699,000 were of European ancestry (53.6%), 234,000 were Asian (18%), 178,000 were Pacific peoples (13.7%), 137,000 were Maori (10.5%), and 218,000 were of other ethnicities (16.8%). Major languages spoken in the Auckland Region at the time included English (1.15 million - 88%), Samoan (57,800 - 4.4%), and Maori (33,200 - 2.6%).[3]

This case study reviews the growth of the Church in Auckland within the past half century and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth. A comparative growth section compares LDS outreach in Auckland to other cities in the region and contrasts LDS growth in Auckland to other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are discussed followed by prospects for future growth.

NOTE: Unless otherwise stated, the use of Auckland and the Auckland metropolitan area are synonymous in this case study.

LDS Background

The first LDS missionaries arrived in Auckland during the mid-nineteenth century but the Church did not organize its first stake in Auckland until 1958 which is today known as the Auckland Mt Roskill Stake. Additional stakes were organized in Manurewa (1968), Harbour (1973), Manukau (1977), Henderson (1981), Tamaki (1987), Panmure (1994), Papakura (1996), Papatoetoe (1996), Waterview (1997), Otara (2013), and Redoubt (2013). The number of stakes totaled one in 1960, two in 1970, four in 1980, six in 1990, ten in 2000, and twelve in early 2013. In early 2013, 12 of the Church's 28 stakes in New Zealand (43%) were in Auckland.

In the 2000s, the Church reported slow congregational growth rates. In late 2001, there were 68 congregations (64 wards, four branches) in Auckland. By April 2013, there were 81 congregations (80 wards, one branch). The number of congregations designated for languages spoken by Pacific Islanders (Samoan, Tongan, and Niuean) increased from 23 in 2001 to 27 in April 2013. In April 2013, there were 13 Samoan-speaking wards, 13 Tongan-speaking wards, and one Niuean-speaking ward. Congregational growth rates between 2001 and April 2013 were almost perfectly commensurate for Pacific Islander units and English-speaking units (17.4% versus 17.8%, respectively). Census figures report that Latter-day Saints are generally the third largest group among various Pacific Islander peoples such as Tongans, Niueans, and Cook Island Maoris. In 2001, one young single adult (YSA) ward and one Chinese-speaking branch operated in Auckland but both of these units were closed sometime in the mid or late 2000s. In the early 2010s, missionaries reported that Mandarin-speaking missionaries began serving in Auckland. In 2013, a Chinese-speaking branch was reestablished. Congregational growth occurred in most stakes between 2001 and early 2013. Only two stakes - Auckland Henderson and Auckland Mt Roskill - reported a decline in units of three and one, respectively. The stakes that experienced the greatest congregational growth according to stake boundary configurations in 2001 where three stakes in southern Auckland (Manurewa, Papakura, and Tamaki) where the collective number of units

increased from 17 to 30. Currently the highest concentration of LDS units is in southern Auckland whereas the lowest concentration of LDS units is in western and northern Auckland. Maps of LDS units and stakes are available for 2001 and present day.

The Church has not published membership statistics for the Auckland Region but the 2006 census reported that there were 19,227 self-identified Latter-day Saints in Auckland Region representing 44% of the 43,536 self-identified Latter-day Saints for the entire country. National figures on birthplace indicate that 76% of self-identified Latter-day Saints were born in New Zealand whereas 16% were born in the Pacific Islands and 8% were born in other locations.[4] Approximately 1.5% of the Auckland population is a self-identified Latter-day Saint. However, the estimated number of nominal members in Auckland appears as high as 40,000 considering there are 81 congregations in Auckland and the average congregation in New Zealand had 508 members as of 2011. The percentage of total members in Auckland may be as high as 3.1%. These findings suggest that member activity rates in Auckland are likely around 30-35% considering not all self-identified members attend church weekly.

In the early 2010s, missionaries reported a surge in convert baptisms in the Auckland area with the most new converts joining the Church in south Auckland. Since 2009, the mission has baptized over 1,000 new converts a year and most of these converts were baptized in Auckland. At the time the mission operated proselytizing programs in several languages including English, Samoan, Tongan, and Mandarin Chinese. In 2013, the Church announced that it would divide the New Zealand Auckland Mission to create a third mission for the country based in Hamilton.

Successes

The Church in Auckland has the most stakes of any metropolitan area in Oceania with over one million inhabitants. The only other location in Oceania with more stakes than Auckland is Nuku'alofa, Tonga where there are 13 stakes. As of mid-2013 no stakes have ever been discontinued in Auckland indicating that the Church has been successful overall in avoiding the consolidation of wards and baptizing and retaining sufficient numbers of new converts to replace any active members that relocate elsewhere.

The Church in Auckland has experienced the most rapid congregational growth of any city in New Zealand within the past decade. Nearly all other administrative regions in New Zealand experienced stagnant growth or a slight increase or decrease in the number of wards and branches. With the exception of Hamilton, no other city in New Zealand has had a new stake organized since 1997. The number of wards and branches in New Zealand increased by only three between 2001 and early 2013 (a 1.4% increase) whereas the number of wards and branches in Auckland increased by 12 between 2001 and early 2013 (a 17.6% increase). This stands as a significant achievement due to member and missionary reports indicating that hundreds, if not thousands, of New Zealander Latter-day Saints have relocated to Australia for employment opportunities and many or most of these members previously resided in Auckland.

The New Zealand Auckland Mission has sustained increased numbers of convert baptisms for several years. The mission has baptized at least 1,000 new converts a year since 2009; a major achievement considering most missions in New Zealand and Australia baptize only a couple hundred converts a year and experience modest retention. Convert retention and member activity rates have appeared moderate since larger numbers of converts have been baptized according to missionary and member reports.

Opportunities

The Church currently has no YSA wards or branches in Auckland notwithstanding a dozen stakes and a pervasive presence in most areas of the city. The organization of several YSA congregations may be an effective method for the Church to improve convert retention and member activity rates for YSAs as these specialized congregations offer increased opportunity for socializing with fellow Latter-day Saints and marrying within the Church. It may be necessary for the Church to establish language-specific YSA units for English, Samoan, and Tongan speakers due to the large church presence among speakers of these languages. The Church has avoided the organization of YSA units in most countries due to a tiny church presence and limited numbers of priesthood leadership to staff both ordinary "family" units and YSA units. However, the current size and strength of the Church in Auckland suggest that it would be feasible to organize several YSA units to experiment whether this approach would encourage higher convert retention and member activity rates among this demographic.

There are good opportunities for organizing language-specific units for additional Pacific Islander peoples. Missionaries report small numbers of Kiribati Latter-day Saints who have difficulty attending English-speaking wards due to language barriers. The designation of one or two missionary companionships to target other smaller Oceanic ethnolinguistic groups such as Fijian, Kiribati, Niuean, Tokelauan, and Tuvaluan speakers may be effective for diversifying outreach and establishing a stronger LDS community among these peoples. Although there are hundreds of Maori-speaking Latter-day Saints in Auckland, bilingualism among Maori speakers reduces the need for Maori-speaking wards and branches as less than 2,000 of the 33,200 Maori speakers in the Auckland Region are monolingual.[5] There are additional opportunities to organize language-specific efforts among non-Oceanic peoples who have immigrated to New Zealand such as peoples from Africa and Asia. Forming language-specific Sunday School classes, translating church services into additional languages in English-speaking units, and holding cottage meetings for specific ethnic groups can reach many of these peoples with relatively few resources.

There are some favorable opportunities to establish additional congregations in lesser-reached communities that exhibit good

receptivity to the Church, particularly those communities with large numbers of non-Anglo New Zealanders. Identifying communities where distance from the nearest meetinghouse may have deterred regular church attendance and where sizable numbers of investigators reside could be beneficial for organizing dependent units and branches if approved by local church leadership.

Challenges

The influence of secularism on society and member activity and convert retention problems have resulted in city population growth outpacing both LDS congregational growth and the growth in the number of self-identified Latter-day Saints on the census. Secularism and irreligiousness in New Zealander society has steadily increased within the past several decades. The census reported that the number of individuals reporting "no religion" increased by 50% nationwide between 1996 and 2006.[6] The Auckland population grew at a faster rate than LDS congregational growth rates for both Pacific Islander units and English-speaking units between 2001 and early 2013. This finding suggests that active LDS membership has increased at a less rapid rate than the general city population as increasing active membership correlates with net congregational growth. 2006 census data also supports the finding that the percentage of active members in the Auckland area has declined in recent years assuming that the large majority of self-identified Latter-day Saints on the census were active members at the time the census was conducted. The number of self-identified members on the census increased from only 41,166 in 1996 to 43,539 in 2006 for the entire country; a 5.8% increase over a decade. On the other hand, the New Zealand population increased from 3.62 million to 4.03 million during this period; a 11.3% increase. These figures suggest that the New Zealand population increased at a rate twice as rapid as the number of active Latter-day Saints between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, an alarming statistic considering the Church increases membership through both natural growth (increase of children of record) and convert baptisms. Natural increase alone should equal or surpass general population growth rates due to Latter-day Saints generally having more children than the average New Zealander family. In other words, member activity challenges are problematic for both individuals raised in the Church and those who convert as youth or adults. Emphasis on programs that can help improve convert retention and member activity rates such as seminary and institute and the formation of YSA units may help the Church to accelerate active membership growth to match or exceed the rate of Auckland city population growth.

The Church continues to experience challenges converting Anglo New Zealanders due to lower receptivity incurred by secularism, materialism, and disinterest in organized religion. Public perception that the Church is a predominately Maori and Pacific Islander institution has appeared to also reduce receptivity among white New Zealanders.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Auckland numbers among one of the only three cities in Oceania populated by over one million people that has had multiple stakes organized within the past decade as only Brisbane, Australia and Melbourne, Australia have had multiple stakes organized. In early 2013, Auckland was the metropolitan area with the most stakes without a temple among all metropolitan areas in the world. The Church in no other city in Oceania and the Southern Hemisphere has as many language-specific units for as many languages as in Auckland. No other city in New Zealand has as many stakes and has experienced as rapid congregational growth as Auckland.

Other nontraditional proselytizing groups report a widespread presence in Auckland but slow or stagnant growth in membership. Jehovah's Witnesses report 47 congregations in Auckland. Witnesses provide church services in 17 languages including English (31 congregations), Samoan (five congregations), Chinese (two congregations), Korean (two congregations), Fijian (one congregation), Hindi (one congregation), New Zealand Sign Language (one congregation), Niuean (one congregation), Rarotongan (one congregation), Tagalog (one congregation), Tongan (one congregation), Arabic (one group), Cambodian (one group), French (one group), Japanese (one group), Spanish (one group), and Vietnamese (one group).[7] The Seventh Day Adventist Church does not publish the number of members or congregations in Auckland but in 2011 reported 9,848 members, 59 churches, and 32 companies on the entire North Island. Adventists generally baptize between 200 and 500 converts a year on the North Island but have reported stagnant membership growth and no increase in the number of churches.[8] The Church of the Nazarene reports nearly one dozen churches in the Auckland area, including several Samoan congregations.[9]

Limitations

There are limited data available from missionary and member reports regarding convert retention rates within the past five years. It is unclear how much the self-identified Latter-day Saint population reported by the census has increased during this period as no census figures have been published since 2006. No 1996 census data on religious affiliation was available for individual administrative regions in New Zealand such as Auckland Region, resulting in no comparison of Latter-day Saint census numbers for the Auckland Region between 1996 and 2006. The Church does not publish information on language usage, member activity, or country of origin for its membership.

Future Prospects

Sustained increases in the number of convert baptisms in recent years combined with accelerated congregational growth during the past two years suggest that the Church will experience steady growth in the Auckland area for the foreseeable future. No stakes appear close to dividing due to the recent organization of two new stakes and no stakes currently possessing a sufficient

number of units to organize additional stakes. Prospects appear favorable for a temple in Auckland due to the large number of stakes in the area, recent increases in temple attendance for New Zealand, and the Church reporting preliminary plans to construct a temple next to the new MTC in Auckland although no formal announcement has been made.

[1] "NEW ZEALAND: Auckland," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 9 April 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/newzealand-auckland.php

[2] "NEW ZEALAND: Major Urban Areas (estimated population)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 9 April 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/NewZealand-UAEst.html

[3] "2006 Census," Statistics New Zealand, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity.aspx

[4] "2006 Census," Statistics New Zealand, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity.aspx

[5] "2006 Census," Statistics New Zealand, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity.aspx

[6] "2006 Census," Statistics New Zealand, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity.aspx

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[8] "North New Zealand Conference (2001-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=NNZC

[9] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 27 April 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=NZ&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=