



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Expanding LDS Outreach in Peninsular (West) Malaysia

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Overview

Between 2002 and 2012, the Church has experienced some of its most rapid membership and congregational growth in Malaysia among countries with fewer than 10,000 members. During this period, the number of members increased from 1,922 to 8,967 and the number of branches increased from 15 to 33. Although the Church reported increases in branches and members throughout the country, most of this growth was concentrated in East Malaysia during this period as several cities in this region were opened to missionary work first time and have since had multiple branches organized. To contrast, the Church in Peninsular Malaysia, also known as West Malaysia, has experienced slow outreach expansion during this period in its 11 states (Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor, and Terengganu) and two federal territories (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya).

This case study summarizes demographic characteristics of Peninsular Malaysia and reviews the history of the Church with a focus on outreach expansion and congregational growth. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for church growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church in other Southeast Asian countries and East Malaysia are compared to church growth in Peninsular Malaysia. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups is contrasted to LDS growth in Peninsular Malaysia. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are discussed.

Background on Peninsular Malaysia

Also known as West Malaysia, Peninsular Malaysia consists of 11 states (Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor, and Terengganu) and two federal territories (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya) that altogether account for 22.5 million of Malaysia's 28.3 million inhabitants. Ethnic Malays constitute the majority and exhibit strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam. Malays comprise the strongest majority in eastern coastal states including Terengganu (97%) and Kelantan (96%). Other prominent ethnic groups include Chinese, Indians, and migrant workers. Chinese comprise a strong minority in Kuala Lumpur (43%), Penang (46%), Johor (34%), and Perak (30%) and traditionally follow Buddhism and traditional Chinese religions. Indians comprise a strong minority in Negeri Sembilan (15%), Selangor (14%), Perak (12%), and Kuala Lumpur (10%) and traditionally follow Hinduism. Ethnic Malays constitute less than 50% of the population in only two administrative divisions: Pinang (44%) and Kuala Lumpur (46%).^[1]

Muslims comprise the highest percentage in Putrajaya (97%), Terengganu (97%), Kelantan (95%), and Perlis (88%) and the lowest percentage in Pinang (45%), Kuala Lumpur (46%), Perak (55%), Johor (58%), and Selangor (58%). Buddhists comprise the highest percentage in Kuala Lumpur (36%), Pinang (36%), Johor (30%), and Perak (25%) and the lowest percentage in Putrajaya (0.4%), Terengganu (2.5%), and Kelantan (3.8%). Christians comprise the highest percentage in Kuala Lumpur (5.8%), Pinang (5.1%), Perak (4.3%), and Selangor (3.8%) and the lowest percentage in Terengganu (0.2%), Kelantan (0.3%), Perlis (0.6%), and Putrajaya (0.9%). Hindus comprise the highest percentage in Negeri Sembilan (13%), Selangor (12%), and Perak (11%) and the lowest percentage in Kelantan (0.2%), Terengganu (0.2%), and Perlis (0.8%).^[2]

LDS Background

The Singapore Mission has administered Malaysia since its organized in 1974. In 1980, the Church organized its first district in Peninsular Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. In 2001, the Church reported nine branches meeting in five cities in Peninsular Malaysia including Kuala Lumpur (Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya 1st, Petaling Jaya 2nd), Ipoh (Ipoh 1st, Ipoh 2nd), Klang, Malacca, and Penang. In mid-2013, the Church reported 12 branches meeting in seven cities including Kuala Lumpur (Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Puchong, and Subang Jaya), Johor Bahru (Johor Bahru and Masai), Butterworth, Ipoh, Malacca, Penang, and Sitiawan. During this 12-year period, the Church opened its first branches in three locations (Butterworth, Johor Bahru, and Sitiawan) and closed its sole branch in Klang. Two additional districts have been organized in Ipoh (2003) and Johor Bahru (2011). In early 2013, the Church opened a member group in Klang and assigned a full-time missionary companionship. At the time the Singapore Mission Branch administered Kelantan State and central and northern areas of Johor State whereas other branches administered all other areas of Peninsular Malaysia. Maps are available displaying the [location of LDS units](#), the [most populous unreached cities](#), and the [estimated number of Latter-day Saints by administrative division](#).

LDS proselytism efforts have exclusively targeted non-Muslims. The teaching of Muslim Malays and other Muslim peoples is prohibited in the Singapore Mission. Missionaries primarily target Chinese, migrant workers, and indigenous peoples from East Malaysia. Due to the status of religious freedom with the Malay government, foreign missionaries do not obtain official religious visas and frequently travel to Singapore to renew tourist visas in order to comply with visa laws.

Full-time missionaries report that the Church in Peninsular Malaysia has implemented a "centers of strength" policy, focusing limited mission resources into cities with the most church members in an effort to prepare the largest districts to become stakes. As of early 2013, only the Kuala Lumpur Malaysia District appears likely to become a stake in the foreseeable future as it is the only district with branches that have sizable numbers of active members and a sufficient number of branches to create a stake. Currently most branches report member activity rates of approximately 30%.

Successes

The Church has experienced steady membership and congregational growth in Peninsular Malaysia notwithstanding proselytism efforts targeting less than half of the population. Membership and congregational growth have coincided in recent successes opening additional cities to missionary work. In the 2000s and early 2010s, the Church organized a branch for the first time in three additional cities including Butterworth, Johor Bahru, and Sitiawan. In Johor Bahru, the Church established its first branch and organized a second one within this period. The Church in each of these cities has had a local member serve as branch president for most or the entire duration of these branches operating. The Church has made some good progress in developing local leadership in these and other cities. Returned missionaries report that current church leaders are highly dedicated and provide valuable service to support their congregations notwithstanding their small numbers.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities to assign missionaries and organize member groups in the most populous unreached cities in Peninsular Malaysia. 17 of the 18 cities in Malaysia with over 100,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation are in Peninsular Malaysia including nine cities that have at least 200,000 inhabitants. Many of these cities have sizable numbers of non-Muslims including Chinese, Indians, peoples from East Malaysia such as the Iban, and migrant workers. Cities distant from current mission outreach centers that appear the most favorable for assigning full-time missionaries and establishing member groups include Kluang, Kuantan, Taiping, and Alor Setar. There are several cities within close proximity to locations with branches and missionaries that are lesser-reached or unreached but boast large populations. Many of these locations also pose favorable prospects for concentrated mission outreach such including Bukit Mertajam, Kulim, Shah Alam, Seremban, and Sungai Petani. It is likely that many of these cities have small numbers of members who were baptized in other cities but have lost contact with the Church since moving to these locations. Local church leaders and Singapore Mission leaders regularly visiting these cities to visit isolated members, hold cottage meetings, organize a member group if feasible, and prepare for the assignment of a full-time missionary companionship present some of the most practical and efficient methods for expanding outreach into these and other currently unreached locations.

Conditions for expanding missionary efforts among Chinese populations present good opportunities for church growth. Chinese populations comprise the highest percentage of the population in western states of Peninsular Malaysia and the Church has assigned Chinese-speaking missionaries to some of these locations. Returned missionary reports indicate that leadership development and convert retention have been generally more successful among Chinese than other ethnicities in Malaysia suggesting good opportunities for additional mission outreach among this demographic. Prospects appear favorable for the establishment of Chinese-speaking Sunday Schools and, when feasible, member groups in locations such as Ipoh, Johor Bahru, Kuala Lumpur, and Pinang.

Challenges

The Church has struggled to develop local leadership in sufficient numbers to adequately meet local administrative responsibilities for branches and districts while simultaneously meeting responsibilities for finding and retaining new converts. The number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders is limited due to mediocre member activity and convert retention rates. Extremely few Malaysian Latter-day Saints have served full-time missions - further limiting available priesthood manpower. The shortage of male leadership and priesthood manpower has necessitated full-time missionary involvement in

meeting many local member and leader responsibilities such as reactivation work, finding investigators, and convert retention. The mentoring and missionary support provided to local leadership and members in many branches has been largely unsuccessful in reducing full-time missionary involvement. At present, several branches have developed dependence on foreign missionaries to meet their local needs. Branches in the Kuala Lumpur area demonstrate the greatest self-sufficiency in meeting leadership and missionary needs but nonetheless a shortage of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders continues to delay the organization of a stake as stakes generally require at least 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders to function. Self-sufficiency problems in many branches have siphoned missionary resources in the Singapore Mission, reducing the manpower and vision that can be dedicated to opening additional areas to proselytism and concentrating on reaching the non-LDS population.

Modest convert retention and member activity rates in Peninsular Malaysia are largely attributed to the large number of migrant worker converts baptized by missionaries rather than by the conversion of permanent residents or Malaysian citizens. Migrant workers has been strongly receptive to LDS outreach but has been highly transient and are culturally diverse. The vast majority of these converts either become inactive due to fellowshipping problems or losing contact with the Church if they relocate to another city or return to their home country. Full-time missionaries have rushed prebaptismal preparation for many of these individuals to achieve area, district, zone, or mission baptismal goals. Consequently many of these converts fail to develop a sufficient testimony of the Church and achieve habitual church attendance resulting in diminished personal conversion and increased liability to their assigned congregations.

The influence of Islam on society and government poses challenges for reaching unreached areas in Peninsular Malaysia. The Church has achieved higher receptivity in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah due, in part, to sizable Christian populations. Consequently only 36% of the Church's branches in Malaysia operate in Peninsular Malaysia notwithstanding 80% of Malaysia's population residing in Peninsular Malaysia. Six of the 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia (Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan, and Perlis) have no branches and no known member groups in operation. These six unreached states have a combined population of 7.3 million and account for 32% of the population of Peninsular Malaysia. Homogenous Muslim populations pose the biggest barrier to the establishment of an LDS presence in two of these states (Terengganu and Kelantan) as only five percent or less of the population can be reached by missionary efforts. A strong Muslim majority in three additional unreached states (Perlis, Pahang, and Kedah) challenge efforts to establish a church presence as less than 25% of the population in these states can be reached by the Church. The Church has good opportunities to establish a presence in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan States due to Muslims comprising approximately 58% of the population but a lack of any previous LDS outreach in these states poses challenges for mission leaders to initiate outreach expansion while remaining sensitive to cultural and societal conditions that discourage Christian proselytism efforts.

Delays opening additional cities to missionary work may result in missed opportunities for growth. The status of religious freedom in Malaysia is threatened by some Muslim groups who aspire for a Islamic state that would likely impose greater restrictions on proselytizing Christians and discourage conversion to Christianity for all religious groups. Postponing the opening of other major cities to missionary work such as Kuantan or Kuala Terengganu may result in totally missing opportunities to establish the Church in these cities if religious freedom conditions deteriorate to the point that it becomes unfeasible or prohibited to assign foreign missionaries to these locations.

The number of active members in individual branches is too small to merit the organization of language-specific branches in most cities at present. The Church has semi-officially designated some branches for members who speak particular languages. For example, full-time missionaries reported that the Kuala Lumpur Branch primarily serviced English speakers whereas the Cheras Branch primarily serviced Malay speakers. Efforts to establish segregated language units in other locations have been largely unsuccessful. For example, mission leaders established a Malay-speaking group under the predominantly Chinese Sitiawan Branch in the early 2000s. Member activity and local leadership development problems prompted church leaders to disband the Malay-speaking group by early 2013 as the group generally had fewer than 20 individuals attend church services after approximately two years of operation. Full-time missionaries primarily heading efforts to establish additional congregations has been a serious shortfall for the Church in Malaysia due to a lack of local member participation and limited leadership manpower.

Comparative Growth

The size and growth of the Church in Peninsular Malaysia has shared many similarities with the Church in other countries in Southeast Asia. The Church in Indonesia has experienced some of the highest member activity rates in the region due to a largely self-sufficient full-time missionary force. The Church has focused on building centers of strength in Indonesia resulting in the maturation of two of the three member districts into stakes during the early 2010s. However, no additional cities have opened to missionaries within recent memory. The Church in Thailand has reported no progress opening additional cities to missionary work within the past five or six years as resources have been concentrated into several of the largest cities where mission leaders have endeavored to strengthen member districts to become stakes in the near future. The Thai government has also significantly limited the number of visas issued to the Church for foreign missionaries. The Church in Cambodia has not expanded to any additional cities within the past five years as church leaders have focused on building centers of strength in currently reached cities and helping member districts in Phnom Penh become stakes. The Church in East Malaysia has been the only location in Southeast Asia where significant outreach expansion has occurred within the past five or six years. The Church in Malaysia numbers among one of the few countries in the region where there are no significant limitations on the number of visas that can be obtained, resulting in greater mission resource allocation than countries where government limit the number of foreign missionaries or prohibit their service altogether.

Other proselytizing Christian faiths maintain a more widespread presence in Peninsular Malaysia than the LDS Church. At

year-end 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 5,338 members, 28 churches, and 11 companies in Peninsular Malaysia. Adventists have generally reported between 100 and 200 baptisms annually and slow membership growth over the past decade. Adventist congregational growth has been nearly stagnant as the number of churches increased by only two and the number of companies increased by only three during this period.^[3] Jehovah's Witnesses have a presence in many locations in Peninsular Malaysia but do not publish statistics on membership and congregational figures exclusively for this portion of Malaysia. In 2012, Witnesses reported 116 congregations and approximately 4,300 active members in the entire country. Witnesses have reported slow membership growth in recent years. Both Adventists and Witnesses maintain a more widespread presence in East Malaysia than in Peninsular Malaysia.

Limitations

Several local member, young returned missionary, and senior returned missionary reports provided data on member activity and convert retention rates and cultural challenges for church growth in Peninsular Malaysia. However no official articles from the Church that identify these issues were available. The Church does not publish sacrament meeting attendance, the number of temple recommend holders per country, or other more meaningful measurements of member activity. Consequently no official member activity and convert retention rates are available. No official membership figures are available for Peninsular Malaysia although membership data is available for Malaysia as a whole. No official data on language use in Peninsular Malaysia is available.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth in Peninsular Malaysia is favorable due to relatively few limitations on the number of foreign missionaries assigned and recent successes opening additional cities to missionary work and establishing branches and member groups. Prospects appear favorable for the creation of a stake in Kuala Lumpur within the next five years if the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders reaches the minimum requirement for a stake to operate. Additional cities may open to missionaries in areas with sizable numbers of Chinese, Indians, East Malaysians, and migrant workers such as Kluang, Kuantan, Seremban, and Taiping. The formation of language-specific member groups and branches may become more likely in the coming years when there are a sufficient number of active members to staff multiple units in the same city. There appear no realistic prospects for reaching the Muslim Malay population within the foreseeable future due to cultural and societal norms that forbid conversion from Islam.

^[1] "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics," Department of Statistics, Malaysia, retrieved 11 May 2013.
http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=130%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-de

^[2] "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics," Department of Statistics, Malaysia, retrieved 11 May 2013.
http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=130%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-de

^[3] "Peninsular Malaysia Mission (1988-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 10 May 2013.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10367