

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Recent Missionary Successes in Pohnpei, Micronesia

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Overview

Inhabited by 36,196 people in 2010,[1] Pohnpei is the second most populated state in the Federated States of Micronesia after Chuuk. The LDS Church has experienced steady growth in Pohnpei over the past several decades as evidenced by new branch creations and active membership growth. Within the past year, missionaries have reported accelerated growth on Pohnpei as more members have begun to serve full-time missions and the district has become closer to reaching stakehood.

This case study briefly reviews the history, culture, and demographics of Pohnpei. The history of the LDS Church and recent church growth developments are examined. Successes, opportunities, and future prospects for growth are analyzed. The growth and size of the LDS Church on Pohnpei is compared to other states in the Federated States of Micronesia and other countries in Oceania. The size of nontraditional proselytism groups is highlighted. Lastly, prospects for future growth are discussed.

Pohnpei Background

Archaeologists estimate that Pohnpei was first settled approximately two millennia ago by peoples inhabiting islands to the east, south, and west. Chiefdoms ruled the island for centuries until European powers colonized the island, namely the Spanish and Germans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pohnpeians violently resisted European colonialism and more peacefully opposed occupation and administration by Japan and the United States during most of the twentieth century.[2] In 1986, Pohnpei and several neighboring island groups gained independence as the Federated States of Micronesia. Agriculture currently drives the local economy. Due to strong cultural influences from Europe and the United States, many local customs and traditions have been lost or adapted.[3] Limited economic opportunities and strong ties with the United States and other industrialized nations have prompted many Pohnpeians to emigrate or pursue migrant work abroad.

The population is evenly divided between Catholics and Protestants, with more Catholics residing in the east side of the island and more Protestants residing on the west side of the island. Past interdenominational rivalry forged denominational divisions by clans which have remained until present day. These ethnoreligious ties between clan and church affiliation have been blurred in recent years due to intermarriage.[4] Currently nearly one-quarter of the population is evangelical.[5]

LDS Background

In 1977, the Church organized its first branches on Pohnpei (Kolonia and Mand). In 1979, a third branch was organized (Sapwalap) and in 1985 the Church organized its first member district on Pohnpei. In 1988, there were 700 members.[6] In 1992, a fourth branch was organized in Sekere. Additional branches have since been organized in 2004 (Palikir and Uh), 2007 (Kitti), and 2011 (Nett). Prior to reaching branch status, the Nett Branch originally met as a group. The number of branches reached three in 1980, four in 2000, seven in 2010, and eight as of mid-2013.

In late 2012 and in 2013, full-time missionaries reported several church growth and missionary work developments. More intense and specific preparation began for the district to meet the minimum qualifications for a stake to be organized. In late 2012, the Uh Branch had as many as 100 attending church services. In late 2012, full-time missionaries reported that there were two branches that appeared to meet the minimum qualifications to become wards whereas three more branches appeared closed to meeting the minimum qualifications for ward status. In early 2013, a senior missionary couple who focused on

strengthening the seminary program finished their mission and by the time they left they had local members teaching many of the seminary classes on the island. In early 2013, over 200 (members and nonmembers) participated in a combined activity with the Nett and Uh Branches. In 2013, senior missionaries reported an unprecedented number of youth and young adults preparing for full-time missionary service. Members who have submitted missionary applications have been called to serve in missions in Australia, the United States, the Philippines, Canada, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. Senior missionaries have organized activities such as dance festivals and movie nights that offer unpressured opportunities for member-missionary work within individual branches. In February, missionaries reported that the mission president received permission for the Barrigada Guam Stake President to give over 50 members on Pohnpei patriarchal blessings. In March, a separate missionary companionship was assigned to Sokehs Island. Missionaries serving in the Kolonia Branch reported that there were over 600 members on the branch records and sacrament meeting attendance rarely exceeded 100. In March, a new district presidency was sustained. That same month as many as 70 youth from across the island attended a seminary scripture event. In April, senior missionaries observed that never in the Church's history in Pohnpei had so many members taken serious preparation for serving full-time missions. In May, the mission opened three new proselytism areas (Awak, Kolonia East, and Sapwalap North) due, in part, to the recent surge in the worldwide full-time missionary force that has increased the missionary complement for the Micronesia Guam Mission. That same month the Church started a new member group in Rohi that met under the Kitti Branch. Distance from the nearest meetinghouse initiated the requests to form a new unit. A month after the Rohi Group was organized there were 30 attending church services. In June, there were 28 young full-time missionaries (six sisters, 22 elders) and three senior missionary couples serving on Pohnpei. In June, senior missionaries reported that the Sapwalap Branch was baptizing five converts a week due to coordination between branch members and full-time missionaries.

In 2013, the average branch on Pohnpei serviced 4,500 inhabitants. At the time five percent of the island population was LDS, or approximately 1,800 people.[7] A map displaying branch boundaries for the island can be found here.

Successes

Mission and district leaders have regularly advocated for the opening of additional member groups and branches on Pohnpei within the past decade. Starting additional member groups has increased the saturation of LDS outreach, making church services more accessible to the island population as a whole. Church leaders have been practical and resourceful in securing meetinghouse locations that have included makeshift shelters and rented buildings to provide sufficient space to accommodate small and newly organized congregations. Vibrant member-missionary programs operate in several branches resulting in greater potential for new converts to remain active after baptism due to social connections forged between new converts and local members. The number of branches doubling within the past decade coupled with the steady expansion of LDS outreach has contributed to increases in active church membership and church attendance. Local leadership has been well developed for individual congregations as all branches have appeared to have been led by a local branch president for several years.

Young single adult (YSA) members have responded to the call for full-time missionary service in larger numbers than ever before. This sizable increase began after the October 2012 announcement regarding the lowering of the minimum age for missionary service. Senior missionary couples have played an intimate role in preparing members for full-time missions through strengthening member fellowship, helping prospective missionaries obtain needed items for their missions and receive proper pre-mission medical and dental treatment, and strengthening the sense of LDS community by spiritually and emotionally supporting members as they are set apart and leave for the full-time mission field. The institute and seminary programs have been an important catalyst in strengthening member testimonies, retaining new converts, reactivating less-active and inactive members, and providing socialization opportunities for church members and investigators. These efforts have successfully tempered previous concerns held by many members that have discouraged missionary service such as anxiety about leaving Pohnpei for foreign countries and worry about whether social supports provided by family and friends would remain during missionary service and thereafter. Ongoing increases in the number of members serving full-time missions has created excitement among general church membership and has potential to further augment the number of local members serving missions into the years to come.

The Church has translated at least 46 materials into Pohnpeian,[8] including select passages of the Book of Mormon and General Conference addresses.[9] This sizable body of materials translated into a language spoken by only 31,000 worldwide [10] has provided needed instructional and gospel study resources for local leadership and testimony development. Few languages spoken by as small of a population as Pohnpeian have received as many church resources and attention for translating materials and scriptures. Full-time missionaries learn to speak and teach in the Pohnpeian language, improving gospel comprehension and proselytism efforts.

Opportunities

There remain many lesser-reached communities on Pohnpei that do not have an LDS unit nearby. Full-time missionaries report that many of these villages and communities have small numbers of members and investigators who often struggle to regularly attend church services in their assigned branch. Some members and investigators walk three to four hours one way to attend the nearest meetinghouse. Mission and district leaders assessing the feasibility of opening member groups and branches in these locations presents good prospects for continued outreach expansion and active membership growth. Locations that appear favorable for church planting tactics include Alohkapw, Pwel Weite, and Sokehs Island.

There are several culture and societal conditions that have likely increased receptivity to the LDS Church. Church attendance among religious groups is relatively high[11] and this societal norm has likely improved member activity and church attendance

among recently baptized LDS converts. The population is homogenously Christian but with relatively high amounts of religious pluralism among Protestant denominations. These conditions can facilitate greater acceptance of nontraditional religious groups like the LDS Church into mainstream society. The importance of family in society complements LDS teachings on the centrality of the family in religion. Children are highly praised by society.[12]

Challenges

Some branches experience low member activity rates. Located in the only city on the island, the Kolonia Branch has an estimated member activity rate of as low as 15-20% as there are hundreds of less-active and inactive members on the rolls. Emigration and migrant work opportunities in the United States have drawn many active members to relocate off of Pohnpei and disrupt leadership and the sense of LDS community. These conditions have likely reduced member activity rates in the Kolonia Branch as well as other branches when individuals in leadership positions leave the island. Poor member activity rates in Kolonia pose a serious challenge for the Church to establish a center of strength in an important administrative, economic, and population center. If the Church were to maintain an activity rate of 50% among its membership that resides within the boundaries of the current Kolonia Branch, two ward-sized congregations could be feasibly organized and would likely provide the impetus to progress the district into a stake. Poverty and low levels of economic self-sufficiency have likely improved receptivity to the Church but have also created challenges for members to meet their financial needs without seeking for employment abroad.

Some cultural and societal practices oppose LDS teachings or pose barriers for proselytism efforts. Church leaders have openly prohibited the chewing of betel (Areca) nut by members which is a known carcinogen, stains the teeth, and is addictive. Betel nut consumption is widespread throughout Pohnpei and Micronesia. High rates of marijuana use is a barrier to proselytism. Many Pohnpeian maintain strong familial and clan ties to particular denominations, creating significant challenges for converts who have family and friends that disapprove of joining the LDS Church.

Comparative Growth

The Church has achieved similar levels of outreach in Pohnpei as in other islands in the Federated States of Micronesia. The average branch on Pohnpei includes 4,500 people within its boundaries whereas the average branch on Kosrae includes 3,300 within its boundaries, the average branch on Chuuk includes 5,400 within its boundaries, and the average branch on Yap includes 5,700 within its boundaries. However, the Church in Pohnpei has been the only state among the four states of the Federated States of Micronesia that has experienced congregational growth within the past decade. The Church in Pohnpei ranks average among countries in Oceania in terms of the extent of LDS outreach and the percentage of the population on LDS Church records (~5%). The Solomon Islands is the least reached country in Oceania (0.090% LDS) whereas Tonga ranks as the most reached country (58% nominally LDS). The Church has established a significantly more pervasive presence in most Polynesian nations than in Pohnpei. If the ratio of LDS units to country population for Tonga (one unit per 633 inhabitants) were applied to Pohnpei, there would be 57 units on Pohnpei. The number of members from Pohnpei beginning full-time missions within the past year has appeared to increase at a more rapid rate than in any other country or administrative division within the Micronesia subregion that inclues Guam, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report a smaller presence in Pohnpei than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses report only one congregation that meets in Kolonia. Witnesses report one Pohnpeian-speaking congregation abroad that operates in Hawaii.[13] Seventh Day Adventists do not report membership and congregational figures for Pohnpei but have experienced slow growth within Micronesia within the past decade.[14] Adventists have operated a high school on Pohnpei in Kolonia for many years. The Church of the Nazarene reports two congregations on Pohnpei that meet in Kolonia and Kitti.[15]

Limitations

Several high-quality reports from full-time missionaries were available at the writing of this case study, providing detailed data on member activity and convert retention for several branches. However, there were no local member or church leader reports available. The Church has not published any recent membership figures for Pohnpei making it difficult to assess how many nominal members there are on the island. No data were available on seminary and institute enrollment for Pohnpei. Consequently it is unclear how much of an impact recent senior missionary efforts have had on revitalizing these programs and increasing participation.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth on Pohnpei appears favorable as increasing numbers of members have begun full-time missionary service, member-missionary activity has augmented the number of convert baptisms in several branches, and mission and district leaders have continued to consider additional opportunities for opening more missionary proselytism areas and member groups and branches. Prospects appear favorable for the formation of a stake within the next five years once there are at least 120 active, full-tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders and there are at least five branches that meet the qualifications to become wards. The translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Pohnpeian in addition to other LDS scriptures appears likely for the foreseeable future.

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[3] "Pohnpei - Religion and Expressive Culture," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 28 June 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Pohnpei-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html

[4] "Micronesia - Federated States of," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 28 June 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208248

[5] "Ponapean of Micronesia, Federated States," www.joshuaproject.net, retrieved 28 June 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/print.php?rog3=FM&peo3=14439

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[8] store.lds.org, retrieved 28 June 2013.

[9] http://www.lds.org/languages/pon?lang=eng

[10] "Pohnpeian," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 28 June 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/pon

[11] "Micronesia - Federated States of," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 28 June 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208248

[12] "Pohnpei - Marriage and Family," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 28 June 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Pohnpei-Marriage-and-Family.html

[13] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 25 June 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[14] "Guam-Micronesia Mission of SDA (2004-Present)," www.adventist.org, retrieved 25 June 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10179

[15] "Nazarene Church Data Search," retrieved 28 June 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=FM&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=