LDS Growth Case Studies

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The Church in China: New Website For Greater Member Accountability

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Overview

In March 2013, the Church announced that it launched a new website for providing information on the Church's operations in the People's Republic of China (PRC) called http://mormonsandchina.org/.[1] The website answered questions regarding the operation of the Church such as the guidelines governing the segregation of Chinese nationals and foreigners, the distribution and possession of LDS materials, and the teaching and baptism of converts. For the first time since the establishment of branches comprised of Chinese nationals in mainland China, the Church provided the public with an online method for members of the Church who are Chinese nationals to contact church leadership and obtain information on the location and meeting times for branches and member groups throughout the country. The Church has published meetinghouse locations and worship service times for English-speaking branches on its official meetinghouse locator lds.org/maps for several years but no information has been provided for Chinese branches. Consequently it is likely that many Chinese nationals who joined the Church abroad have lost contact with the Church following their return to China or were unaware of LDS congregations operating in many of the largest cities. The new website can help raise awareness among church members and leaders around the world of the Church's presence in mainland China and help returning Chinese nationals remain active and obtain the location and times for church services.

This case study reviews the history of public statements and information made by church leaders regarding the Church in China. Information provided by the new website is summarized. The potential influence of the new website on church growth trends in China is analyzed and predicted.

LDS History in Mainland China

The Church has admitted that over the years it has released few details regarding its operations in mainland China.[2] In 2004, the Church held its first church services for PRC citizens in mainland China.[3] In 2006, the first male PRC member to serve a mission completed his mission. In 2008, LDS apostle Elder Russell M. Ballard reported that there were approximately 20 branches for PRC citizens that operated in mainland China.[4] In 2010, the Church announced plans to "regularize" its activities in mainland China among PRC nationals.[5] By 2013, the Church acknowledged that the number of Latter-day Saints who were born in China numbered in the thousands as most joined the Church through temporary employment or education opportunities abroad.[6] In recent years, the number of PRC citizens serving full-time missions at any given time has increased dramatically from only a couple individuals in the mid-2000s to over 40 in 2010. By 2013, the Church had assigned Mandarin Chinese-speaking missionaries to several missions around the world such as in Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. Many Chinese taught and baptized by missionaries were PRC citizens who were temporarily living abroad for employment or educational purposes. Some Chinese-designated wards and branches number among the highest baptizing church units in missions where Chinese-specific outreach occurs.

By the early 2010s, isolated member and church leader reports indicate that the Church in mainland China has a branch or member group designated for Chinese nationals established in most, if not all, cities with over one million inhabitants. There may be as many as 200 cities that have an LDS congregation operating.

Content of New Website

The homepage on the new website clearly describes its purpose to give "needed basic information for PRC Chinese members

returning to China, including whom to contact for information, attending Sunday Church meetings and encouragement to observe relevant Chinese laws."[7] The Church emphasizes the importance of respecting PRC laws and regulations governing religion. The homepage informs users that the Church blocks access to the website "so it cannot be viewed inside China" and adds that the Church "has built a strong relationship of trust...by always respecting the important laws and traditions of [the PRC]."[8] Contact information is provided on the homepage and consists of the email address for the China Administrative Unit (CAU) director (caudir@ldschurch.org). Information provided on the website is provided in English and Chinese (traditional and simplified characters). Content on the website is divided into four sections: Frequently Asked Questions by Church Leaders and PRC Chinese Members Outside China, Frequently Asked Questions by PRC Chinese Members Outside China, Frequently Asked Questions by Church Leaders, and Non-Chinese Members Visiting or Moving to China.

The Frequently Asked Questions by Church Leaders and PRC Chinese Members Outside China advises Chinese nationals returning to back to mainland China to contact the China Administrative Unit (CAU) director via email. Chinese nationals are instructed that they will receive information from the CAU director on the location and time for worship services and ensuring that their membership records are properly transferred to their new home congregation. This section also informs church leaders and PRC converts that LDS congregations function in many locations throughout the country and that they will be able to experience fellowship and gospel instruction as they would in other countries with an LDS presence.[9]

The Frequently Asked Questions by PRC Chinese Members Outside China section provides information on church policies for PRC nationals returning to China. No church meetings jointly occur with foreign passport holders and Chinese nationals and the Church does not number among the five recognized religions in China. The website instructs PRC Chinese members living abroad that they may introduce their nonmember family members to the Church and that they may attend Sunday meetings, get taught the gospel, and get baptized but that they cannot have their friends taught and baptized within the PRC. The Church requests that PRC Chinese members living or visiting China to not distribute any religious literature, attempt to attend church meetings with foreigners, or set up religious-based blogs or websites on the internet that could be misconstrued as promoting the LDS Church in the PRC. Chinese nationals may "pursue personal individual belief and practice" in the PRC, suggesting that there are no restrictions on members studying the gospel and engaging in personal and family religious activities within their homes. The Church instructs Chinese members from Taiwan or Hong Kong to attend congregations with PRC members if they reside in mainland China and to attend congregations with foreign passport holders if they are visiting for business or tourist purposes.[10]

The Frequently Asked Questions by Church Leaders section provides simple direction to church leaders outside mainland China in regards to the conversion and retention of PRC Chinese converts. This section normalizes the conversion process for PRC converts and refers church leaders to follow the basic protocol for fellowshipping converts such as maintaining communication through available social media and other methods. The Church advises church leaders to not send church materials or magazines to converts who return to mainland China. Church members are permitted to bring only one copy of each church material when they return home for personal use.[11]

The Non-Chinese Members Visiting or Moving to China section briefly provides the contact email for foreign passport holders to obtain information on worship service meeting locations and times from an expatriate church leader in Beijing. This section reminds non-PRC citizens that they cannot meet in the same congregations as PRC citizens.[12]

Impact of the New Website on LDS Growth Trends in Mainland China

The development of an official church website that simply explains to church leaders and Chinese nationals how to find the Church in mainland China has great potential to improve the accountability of Chinese nationals who join the Church and return to mainland China. This may result in increased member activity rates and more accurate church membership record keeping. Publicly providing the email address for the CAU director permits Chinese nationals who are church members to obtain information on the location and times for worship services. It is unknown what percentage of PRC converts baptized abroad remain active after their return to mainland China. A lack of awareness of the Church's operation in mainland China among Chinese nationals has likely contributed to a lack of church leader accountability for converts baptized. The new website helps improve awareness of the Church's presence in mainland China and directs church leaders and new converts with contact information so PRC members who return to China can remain in contact with the Church and continue to attend church services.

The Church may experience greater national outreach expansion in mainland China due to the Church launching the new website. Within the first decade of a church presence among PRC citizens residing in mainland China, the Church has achieved phenomenal outreach expansion that has been unparalleled in its scope to any other country that the Church has established official church units in within the past several decades. The Church grew from operating in only a handful of locations in 2004 to likely several hundred by 2013 without a single full-time missionary serving within mainland China. To contrast, the Church in Russia has had a full-time missionary presence for over two decades and operates wards and branches in fewer than 100 cities nationwide notwithstanding greater religious freedom in Russia compared to China. The growth of the Church in mainland China began and continues to strongly rely upon the conversion of Chinese living abroad for temporary employment and educational purposes. PRC converts baptized abroad have originated from cities throughout China and not from a narrow selection of major cities or a couple provinces. When these converts return home they have coordinated with CAU leadership to establish a member group in their city or town if no church presence was previously established. This fortuitous, passive approach to expanding outreach has yielded unmatched results in the speed and scope of the operation of the Church in a single country. Use of the new website has potential to accelerate outreach expansion and facilitate coordination with CAU leadership and new move-ins.

Challenges for Growth

No online LDS presence accessible to members living in mainland China poses a significant barrier to growth as there are likely many members who have returned to China and have lost contact with the Church. The current website is not accessible to individuals living in the PRC due to government restrictions on religious freedom and the Church's care to fully comply with national laws and regulations. Many PRC members who joined the Church abroad prior to the release of the new website did not have a reliable source to contact the Church upon their return to China and have no method to contact CAU leadership due to a lack of awareness and government restrictions on access to religious information on the internet. The only method that the Church may use to reach these members are any addresses and phone numbers on baptismal records obtained from church leaders abroad if these contact details were ever obtained.

The Church categorizes its districts and branches as "sensitive" and consequently there is no information available to public regarding the number and location of LDS congregations. Internet users that utilize the Church's online meetinghouse locator can only obtain the location and meeting time for English-speaking branches for foreign passport holders, creating the illusion that there are no branches operating for Chinese nationals. The sensitive nature of the Church in mainland China prohibits the Church from publicizing the location and meeting times of Chinese national branches. The new website provides the needed contact information for PRC members to obtain this information but is the only method that PRC members can utilize unless they have personal contacts with local church leaders who are Chinese nationals.

There are cultural and societal conditions that pose challenges for LDS growth. The increasing influence of materialism and Western secularism on mainstream Chinese society and culture has potential to erode Chinese traditions and standards that are in harmony with LDS teaching. This can result in reduced receptivity to the LDS Church over time. Sexual immorality has become increasingly more accepted in society within the past couple decades. Judeo-Christian concepts and beliefs commonly understood in Western countries are not widely accepted or understood in mainland China. Chinese religion consists of a syncretic mix of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religion. Consequently the concepts of sin and the need for a Savior are foreign to many Chinese. There is a need for LDS teaching approaches and resources that are tailored to the religious background of Chinese and other peoples in East Asia that do not have a Christian background.

Limitations

No recent reports from local members and church leaders were available at the writing of this case study. The Church does not publicly disclose the number of official branches and member districts that service PRC nationals and operate in mainland China due to the sensitive nature of the Church in the country. It is unclear how many member groups operate in mainland China but some member reports received several years ago suggest that there may be 100 or more member groups. The Church does not publish the number of member groups in any countries as these type of congregations are semi-official and are not included in official LDS congregational totals reported in statistical reports.

Future Prospects

The impact of the newly launched website helping PRC members to find the Church in mainland China and to understand church policy and procedures for members within the country has good potential to improve the Church's worldwide accountability for PRC converts and possibly accelerate national outreach expansion and improve member activity rates. However, there remain major restrictions on religious freedom for the Church that prevent the assignment of full-time missionaries and the implementation of traditional LDS proselytism tactics. The ongoing national outreach expansion of the Church in mainland China among Chinese nationals will likely continue to depend on the baptism and retention of converts who join the Church abroad and return back to China. However, greater growth in individual locations will require PRC members to share the gospel with their family and relatives within the bounds of the law and church policy at present.

[1] "New Church Website Will Help Chinese Nationals, Church Leaders Around the World," News Release, 15 March 2013. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/china-website-mormons

[2] "New Church Website Will Help Chinese Nationals, Church Leaders Around the World," News Release, 15 March 2013. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/china-website-mormons

[3] "Frequently Asked Questions by PRC Chinese Members Outside China", retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/

[4] "Elder Ballard speaks on future BYUH, PCC roles," BYU Hawaii Newsroom, 11 June 2008. http://newsroom.byuh.edu/node/1762

[5] "Church in Talks to "Regularize" Activities in China," News Release, 30 August 2010.

http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-in-talks-to-regularize-activities-in-china

[6] "New Church Website Will Help Chinese Nationals, Church Leaders Around the World," News Release, 15 March 2013. http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/china-website-mormons

[7] "Purpose of this Website," retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/

[8] "Purpose of this Website," retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/

[9] "Frequently Asked Questions by Church Leaders and PRC Chinese Members Outside China", retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/

[10] "Frequently Asked Questions by PRC Chinese Members Outside China", retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/

[11] "Non-Chinese Members Visiting or Moving to China", retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/

[12] "Frequently Asked Questions by Church Leaders", retrieved 3 August 2013. http://mormonsandchina.org/