LDS Growth Case Studies

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Recent Missionary and Church Growth Developments in Vietnam

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Overview

With 92.5 million inhabitants, Vietnam is the world's fourteenth most populous country. The LDS Church initially established a presence in Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century but closed its congregations and lost contact with any remaining members following the end of the Vietnam War. The Church reestablished a presence in Vietnam during the early 1990s and has largely experienced slow growth within the past two decades. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church in Vietnam experienced several church growth developments that suggest accelerated growth may occur in the near future.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Vietnam since the early 1990s and identifies past growth successes and opportunities and challenges for future growth. A comparative growth section compares the size and growth of the LDS Church in Vietnam to other Southeast Asian countries that experience limited religious freedom. A synopsis of the size and growth of nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Vietnam is provided. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

Reestablished in the early 1990s, the Church organized one branch each in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In 1996, there were 19 members in the Hanoi Branch.[1] In 1997, the Church reported 100 members and two branches in Vietnam.[2] In the 2000s, Vietnamese members from Vietnam and other countries began serving full-time missions in Vietnam under the Cambodia Phnom Penh. In 2006, Vietnamese government officials gave permission to the Church to baptize converts within Vietnam.[3] In 2008, there were nine native Vietnamese members serving full-time missions - all from the Ho Chi Minh City Branch. In the late 2000s, sacrament meeting attendance appeared to be around 125 for the Ho Chi Minh City Branch and 50 for the Hanoi Branch. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the U.S. Department of State estimated that there were 1,000 Latter-day Saints in Vietnam[4] and reported no increases in this number within this five-year period.

Sometime in the early 2010s, the Church organized the Hanoi Vietnam District to service the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City Branches. District conferences have since been held in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In 2012, the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission President reported that missionaries assigned to Vietnam were not allowed to wear nametags unless inside an LDS meetinghouse. Full-time missionaries who had at least one Vietnamese parent were permitted to serve in Vietnam during the early 2010s. Mission leadership reported that missionaries found and taught investigators through member referrals and English classes. In mid-2012, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City each had four missionaries assigned (two elders and two sisters). In September 2012, three native Vietnamese members began serving full-time missions in the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission. In late 2012, there were at least 12 missionaries in the Hanoi Vietnam Zone. In March 2013, there were approximately eight Vietnamese full-time missionaries assigned to Ho Chi Minh City.

In July 2013, the Cambodia Phnom Pehn Mission President divided the Ho Chi Minh City Branch to create a second branch in the city. In July 2013, the two branches in Ho Chi Minh City included the Thao Dien and Than Son Nhat Branches. Church services appeared to be held in Vietnamese for all branches in Vietnam at the time but with English translation capabilities for expatriate members via headsets.

Successes

The organization of a second branch in Ho Chi Minh City constitutes a significant church growth development. With 8.05 million inhabitants, Ho Chi Minh City is the most populous city in Vietnam and has three times the population of the second most populous city of Hanoi.[5] The Church in Ho Chi Minh City has achieved good self-sufficiency as evidenced by the relatively large number of members serving full-time missions, members consistently serving full-time missions over the past five years, native Vietnamese comprising the majority of membership in the branches, and the number of active members and active priesthood holders warranting the creation of a second branch in 2013.

The self-sufficiency of the Church in Vietnam has appeared to improve within recent years. The Church has maintained a full-time missionary force in Vietnam entirely staffed by ethnic Vietnamese missionaries. Increasing numbers of missionaries have been assigned within the past year and suggest greater focus by mission leaders to accelerate growth. These developments have been possible through improving levels of religious freedom within the past decade as evidenced by government officials permitting the Church to hold convert baptismal services in the country and to assign full-time missionaries. The Church has also achieved good self-sufficiency in local leadership as all local church leadership positions are filled by native members or foreigners who live in the country for employment purposes. Consequently full-time missionaries appear to play a minimal role in leadership development and meeting any local church administration shortcomings.

The Church has conducted Vietnamese-specific outreach in the United States, Australia, and Cambodia for many years. Missionary efforts in other countries have appeared to be instrumental in the establishment of the Church among native Vietnamese in Vietnam and augmenting the number of ethnic Vietnamese serving full-time missions. The Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission has maintained a Vietnamese-speaking missionary program since the organization of the mission in 1997; nearly a decade before the first young missionaries were assigned to Vietnam. The Church currently operates three Vietnamese-designated branches and a district in Phnom Penh. Over the years, many Vietnamese have joined the Church in these branches and small numbers have since relocated to Vietnam.

Opportunities

There may be opportunities for the Church to expand outreach within Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Mission, district, and branch leadership can coordinate to organize family home evening (FHE) groups in locations distant from meetinghouses. FHE groups can provide a weekly opportunity for local members and investigators to fellowship one another in a member's or investigator's home and receive a basic lesson on a gospel topic. These meetings may not be regulated by the Vietnamese government due to their informal nature as long as FHE groups privately assemble in a home and if members and investigators attend by personal invitation. Member groups may be organized to hold Sunday meetings once there are a sufficient number of members regularly attending FHE groups and if permitted by the law and government policies that regulate the operation of religious groups. This strategy presents one of the most feasible and low-cost methods for the Church to focus on expanding outreach while conserving its extremely limited mission and local leadership resources.

There appear good opportunities to continue to strengthen local members and engage in passive proselytism tactics. The seminary and institute programs have good potential to strengthen local members and provide missionary opportunities to find, teach, and fellowship investigators if these programs are permitted by government officials. Local members attending seminary and institute can help sustain the steady stream of local members serving full-time missions as individual gospel study and conversion to LDS teachings are emphasized. These programs offer excellent pre-baptismal and post-baptismal gospel study support as well as socialization opportunities for members and investigators. The Church has held English classes for Vietnamese interested in studying English and has used this service activity as a passive finding technique. English education continues to pose good prospects for finding investigators and baptizing additional converts if local members also participate and are involved in the conversion process.

Little ethnolinguistic diversity in Vietnam simplifies missionary efforts. The national population is 85% Viet and Vietnamese is widely spoken throughout the country as a first or second language.

Challenges

Government restrictions on religious freedom pose one of the greatest challenges for the Church to accelerate growth. Legislation governing the operation and regulation of religious groups is complex and difficult for many groups to complete. Religious groups must register its places of worship, local leadership, and activities for each local administrative area through filing this information with relevant authorities. Failure to do so can result in government officials closing down places of worship and forbidding religious assembly. National registration requires a religious group to document 20 years of consistent and stable operations. National registration is also a required step to qualify for full legal recognition. In addition to obtaining national registration, religious groups must hold a national convention for electing national leadership and the government must approve of the group's activities, structure, and leadership. Once a religious group obtains full recognition, it has the right to publish materials, operate and construct places of worship, and train religious leaders. There have been recent instances of local and administrative officials delaying or not granting registration to some religious groups who undergo the registration process for individual congregations.[6]

Religious freedom restrictions and government regulations require the LDS Church to properly file all needed paperwork and documentation in order for it to officially operate a congregation in a local administrative division that previously had no LDS

presence. Consequently it make take many years for the Church to register a congregation with local government authorities if mission leaders endeavor to expand outreach to administrative divisions that previously had no official LDS presence. Furthermore, the complex and arduous process may dissuade mission and area leaders from pursuing outreach expansion efforts within the foreseeable future. The Vietnamese government has limited the number of officially registered congregations for religious groups. As of 2010, the Church appeared to have only two officially registered congregations in the entire country.[7] Actively engaging in national outreach expansion efforts through open proselytism and assigning full-time missionaries to locations without a local membership base is prohibited due to the current status of religious freedom. It is unclear whether the Church was able to officially register its second branch created in Ho Chi Minh City in 2013 or whether the newly organized branch falls under the registration for the original branch in the city.

The Church does not publish information online regarding the location of its meetinghouses for branches in Vietnam due to the sensitive nature of the Church in the country. The lack of information on the Church in Vietnam available on official LDS websites makes it appear to the public and general church membership that there is no LDS presence in Vietnam. Full-time missionaries and mission leaders have reported instances of Vietnamese joining the Church in Cambodia or other countries and returning home to Vietnam unaware of an LDS presence. Only a minority of these converts appear to find the Church through coincidentally running into members or full-time missionaries. Members and investigators frequently experience challenges finding meetinghouses due to no official information published online. Many individuals who find the Church in Vietnam appear to do so through contacting the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission, the Asia Area office, or through an unofficial website maintained by a church member that provides the addresses for branch meetinghouses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.[8]

Proselytism restrictions for full-time missionaries pose challenges for missionary activity if local members do not provide a steady stream of investigators for missionaries to teach. Missionaries report that they are not allowed to openly proselyte and at times have difficulty finding productive activities. Full-time missionaries are unable to perform their own finding efforts if local members do not provide a sufficient number of teaching referrals. These conditions may maintain moderate to good levels of convert retention and member activity as virtually all converts are either self-referred or referred by a local member to take the missionary lessons. Consequently local members appear to be involved in the conversion process and can provide pre- and post-baptismal fellowshipping and support.

Non-Vietnamese missionaries are not permitted to serve in Vietnam. This requires any increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Vietnam to depend on increasing numbers of Vietnamese Latter-day Saints serving missions. The number of Vietnamese members serving missions worldwide is extremely small and insufficient to staff missionary forces that engage in Vietnamese-specific outreach in missions in Cambodia, Australia, and the United States. The Church heavily relies on non-Vietnamese missionaries to staff Vietnamese-directed proselytism efforts outside of Vietnam. Augmenting the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Vietnam will rely on increasing numbers of Vietnamese members serving missions from Vietnam, Cambodia, the United States, and other countries unless government and LDS officials approve the assignment of non-Vietnamese missionaries. Native Vietnamese full-time missionaries are limited in locations they can serve in Vietnam as mission leaders avoid assigning a full-time missionary to their home branch.

There are some societal and cultural conditions that pose significant challenges for missionary work. The vast majority of the Vietnamese population does not practice a religious faith and identify as nonreligious. Atheism has been instilled through communist rule for over half a century resulting in little to no foundation of belief and faith. Some members have reported challenges for formerly Atheist converts to understand and live LDS teachings.

The extremely small LDS presence in Vietnam suggests that a church establishment among the non-Viet population remains nearly impossible. There do not appear to be any Latter-day Saints among most of the major ethnic minority groups such as the Tay, Muong, Khome, Hoa, and Nun. Many of these groups reside in remote areas distant from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Vietnam numbers among one of the most self-sufficient countries in the region and has experienced steady growth compared to other Southeast Asian countries where there are significant religious freedom restrictions. No other country in Southeast Asia with significant restrictions on religious freedom has a member district operating. In Laos, the Church organized its first branch in 2004 and by 2013 there were approximately 200 members on church records and 100 attending church meetings in the sole branch in the country. In 2013, the Church assigned its first young missionaries to primarily provide service and teach and baptize investigators referred by local members. In Burma, the Church has had a branch organized for over a decade but there remain less than 100 members and no young missionaries have been assigned. In mainland China, the Church has experienced rapid membership and congregational growth over the past decade without any full-time missionaries assigned.

Other nontraditional, outreach-focused Christian groups report similar challenges as the LDS Church but significantly larger number of members and congregations. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 10,590 members, 12 churches, 122 companies, and 424 converts baptized for the year.[9] Adventists maintained a presence before, during, and after the Vietnam War and claimed thousands of members by the early 1990s.[10] In 2010, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 55 congregations operating in 18 provinces and 3,000 members nationwide.[11]

Limitations

The Church has not published official membership and congregational statistics for Vietnam since 1997. Member activity and convert retention rates are largely unknown due to extremely limited reports from native Vietnamese members and Vietnamese full-time missionaries assigned to Vietnam. It is unclear whether any member groups operate outside of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and if any additional branches are organized that meet in additional locations. Current missionary or returned missionary reports from Vietnamese members serving missions in Vietnam are extremely limited.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Vietnam appears mixed as the church will likely continue to experience increasing numbers of active members through ongoing missionary efforts but the extremely small size of the Church, only a handful of full-time missionaries assigned to the country, and government restrictions on religious freedom limiting or entirely prohibiting the expansion of national outreach into currently unreached areas suggest that little progress will occur achieving significant growth unless some of these conditions improve. Additional branches may be organized in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City within the coming decade and separate member districts may be organized for these two cities. Member groups may be organized in additional major cities such as Da Nang or Can Tho if there are multiple active members and if the operation of a member group in additional locations is permitted by Vietnamese law. The organization of a separate LDS mission based in Vietnam appears unlikely for many more years until there is a large enough missionary force to staff a separate mission. The positive relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government combined with the Church's operation in Vietnam for two consecutive decades suggests that the Church may receive full recognition within the coming decade.

[1] "News of the Church," Ensign, Aug 1996, 71-80

[2] "Membership Statistics," Deseret News 1999-2000 Church Almanac, p. 546

[3] Anderson, D. Allen. "Growth of the Church (In U.S.)," Asia Area Presidency Messages 2006, retrieved 9 March 2010. http://www.lds.org.hk/ldsorghk_0908/english/gospel_library/asia_leader_messages/year/2006/index.htm

[4] "Vietnam," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 August 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208280

[5] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 12 August 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[6] "Vietnam," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 9 August 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208280

[7] "Vietnam," July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, 13 September 2011. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168382.htm

[8] http://www.ldsviet.com/

[9] "Vietnam Mission (1957-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 12 August 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10516

[10] "Vietnam Mission (1957-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 12 August 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10516

[11] "Vietnam," July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, 13 September 2011. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168382.htm