



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Augmenting the Size of the Indian Full-time Missionary Force: The Urgent Need and Strategies for Growth

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Overview

India is the world's second most populous country with over 1.22 billion people. There are 53 cities with over one million inhabitants.^[1] Notwithstanding the enormous size of the population, the LDS Church in India maintains a comparatively tiny missionary force of less than 200 missionaries administered by two missions headquartered in Bangalore and New Delhi. Although the Church has attempted to increase the number of missionaries serving in India to make greater church growth inroads, visa restrictions have prevented church leaders from utilizing foreign missionaries to accomplish this feat. Consequently any increase in the number of missionaries serving in India will likely require substantial increases in the number of Indian Latter-day Saints who serve missions and are called to serve within their home country.

This case study briefly reviews the history of the Church in India and articulates the urgent need for augmenting the size of the full-time missionary force in India. Strategies for increasing the number of missionaries serving in India are described and challenges for accomplishing this task are analyzed. Growth trends in the number of missionaries serving from other nearby countries are summarized. Limitations to this case study are provided. Future prospects for increasing the size of the full-time missionary force in India are predicted.

LDS Background

The LDS Church established a permanent presence in India in the 1960s but membership for the country as a whole did not reach 1,000 until the early 1990s. The Church organized its first mission in India in 1993 and based mission headquarters in Bangalore. Prior to this time the Singapore Mission supervised missionary activity in India. In 1993, there were 30 missionaries serving in the India Bangalore Mission.^[2] In 2007, the Church organized a second mission headquartered in New Delhi. In the late 2000s, the number of LDS missionaries in India appeared to number as many as 150. In 2012, the Church created its first stake in India based in Hyderabad. Membership reached 10,000 that same year. In mid-2013, the Church had branches operating in 15 cities and towns in India and reported one stake, six districts, six wards, and 35 branches. At the time there appeared to be no more than 150 missionaries serving in India.

The Urgent Need

India presents an urgent need for proselytism due to its massive population. There are as many people in India as there are in North America, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean combined yet there are only two LDS missions headquartered in India whereas there are 275 missions headquartered in the Americas. The average LDS mission in the Americas services 3.5 million people whereas each of the LDS missions in India service populations numbering in the hundreds of millions. If the ratio of 3.5 million people per mission in the Americas were applied to India there would be 349 LDS missions in India - a number that exceeded the worldwide total of LDS missions prior to July 2013.

Many other Christian groups have aggressively proselytized India for decades and have likely shepherded many individuals and families into their denominations who would have been previously receptive to LDS outreach. The number of Christians remains extremely small as 2001 census data indicate only 2.3% of the Indian population is Christian.^[3] Baptists are one of the most prominent groups and number 2.5 million.^[4] The Seventh Day Adventist Church claims the most members of any country of the world in India, numbering 1.6 million in 2012. Adventists have experienced phenomenal membership growth and number

among the most rapidly growing Christian groups. Adventist membership reached 1,000 in 1921, 10,000 in 1948, 50,000 in 1970, 100,000 in 1979, 500,000 in 2001, one million in 2005, and 1.5 million in 2010. Adventists have also experienced steady congregational growth as the number of churches reached 100 in 1933, 500 in 1969, 1,000 in 1995, 2,000 in 2003, 3,000 in 2006,^[5] and 4,000 in 2011. The number of Adventist companies (small congregations) has also mushroomed from 1,802 in 1997 to 5,503 in 2010.^[6] Jehovah's Witnesses number among the smallest proselytizing faiths in India but nonetheless reported 37,095 active members assembling in 441 congregations in 2011.

As the number of members serving full-time missions in the LDS Church skyrocketed in 2013, the number of missionaries serving in India did not noticeably increase and appeared to decrease in some locations. The political situation in India has disfavored foreign Christian groups that proselyte resulting in major challenges for the Church to obtain foreign missionary visas and to review expired visas. Many North American members called to serve full-time missions in India are unable to obtain a visa and are reassigned to another mission. Some North American missionaries who serve in India are unable to renew their visas and serve the remainder of their mission elsewhere such as in the United States or the Philippines. The Church has consequently been unable to consistently increase the missionary complement for either of its Indian missions over the past five years but has appeared to increase the percentage of Indian missionaries staffing the ranks of the two missions. Visa difficulties have been so severe that the India Bangalore Mission president and his wife were unable to be in the country for an extended period of time because of delays receiving their visas. Senior missionary couples were unable to be assigned to the India New Delhi Mission for a three-year period in the late 2000s and early 2010s due to visa problems. In 2012, senior missionaries serving in the India New Delhi Mission reported that there were 55 single missionaries in the mission (32 in India, 23 in Pakistan) at the end of the year and that several foreign single and senior couple missionaries were unable to receive visas and were reassigned to other missions. In mid-2013, the India Bangalore Mission combined the two missionary zones in Hyderabad into a single zone due to many foreign missionaries leaving the country or new missionaries being unable to obtain a visa. Although the Church in India has had sizable numbers of native members serving missions, the Church has been unable to expand outreach unless foreign missionaries are utilized due to their small, slightly increasing numbers over the past several decades.

In 1974, former LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball suggested that increasing the number of members serving full-time missions from individual countries will be crucial for the Church to make greater headway to taking the gospel to the entire world.^[7] President Kimball observed the following about missionary efforts in Mexico during the 1970s that share many parallels to the Church in India at present-day.

"In Mexico we have around 54,000,000 people with about 92,000 members. We have 489 full-time missionaries now serving in that country, only 122 of which are native Mexicans. We have had some difficulty getting missionaries from the United States into Mexico or we would have far more. There has been a limitation of about 360 American missionaries that could get visas. We are unable to send a new elder from the United States until another elder is released and has surrendered his visa. In addition to this problem, the cost of placing missionaries in Mexico has greatly increased, and so for both these reasons there is ample argument that Mexico, with its nine stakes and five missions, should furnish its own missionaries, or the equivalent."^[8]

President Kimball made an additional statement regarding the potential for growth in the Philippines that was under-realized in his day. This statement has application for LDS growth in India:

"The millions of people in the Philippines would receive the gospel in large numbers if it were properly presented to them. We have two missions and a stake there. We should use their own young men as missionaries and then every facility that is available to bring them to a knowledge of the true church."^[9]

There has been some recent progress in augmenting the number of Indian members serving missions. In 2012, Indian sister missionaries began serving in India for the first time. In 2013, senior missionaries reported progress sending local members on full-time missions. In June, the Bangalore India District had 22 members serving full-time missions. In July, senior missionaries reported that nine members from within the boundaries of the mission reported to the Philippines MTC for training and all nine would be assigned to missions in India. Senior missionary couples indicate that a handful of Indian missionaries serve abroad such as in the United Kingdom.

Strategies for Increasing the Size of the Indian Full-time Missionary Force

Increasing the size of the Indian full-time missionary force will require increasing the number of active members throughout the Church's wards and branches in India. Maintaining effective, collaborative member missionary programs will be critical for baptizing larger numbers of mission-aged young single adults and youth in order to bolster the pool of prospective missionaries in the coming years. The number of Latter-day Saint families remains extremely small in India as single members and part-member families constitute the vast majority of membership. Focus on youth and young adult outreach among the friends, neighbors, and family of Latter-day Saints will be crucial towards baptizing and retaining increasing numbers of converts.

Church leaders have described successful instances of the Church in India achieving good results in reactivating less-active members. In a General Conference address in April 2013, Young Men General President David L. Beck recounted the story of successful member-led reactivation efforts in a branch in Bangalore. President Beck noted that in 2012 when a new branch was created in Bangalore there was only one young man who attended the branch priesthood meeting. This young man teamed up with the Young Men's president and branch president to visit less-active male youth in their homes and invite them

back to church. Once a second young man in the branch became active through these efforts he also participated in reactivation efforts by visiting less-active young men, sharing what he had learned in priesthood meetings, and visiting or calling these members on their birthdays. President Beck described that the less-active young men in the branch returned to church activity one by one as they were invited to young men's activities and quorum meetings. Less than a year later, all young men in the branch were active in the Church.^[10] In this account, the successful reactivation of youth in the branch depended on the collaborative efforts of active youth members and local church leaders. Similar results may occur in additional wards and branches in India as members and church leaders team up to consistently engage in visiting and fellowshiping less-active and inactive members.

Full-time missionaries currently serving missions in India have potential to influence the number of members who prepare for missionary service through pairing up missionaries with youth or young adult members. This method can double the productivity of a single missionary companionship as each missionary teams up with a youth or young adult for several hours at a time. Youth and young adults preparing for missionary service can observe full-time missionaries teaching investigators and less-active members and performing proselytism efforts. Members may actively participate in these activities when appropriate.

The seminary and institute program offered through the Church Education System has tremendous potential to increase the number of Indian full-time missionaries for many reasons. First, seminary and institute instills many basic personal religious practices that many members struggle to fully develop such as daily scripture study. Converts who join the Church and attend seminary or institute are more likely to remain active in the long-term due to receiving greater education on LDS teachings and developing personal religious habits. Second, seminary and institute provides a less formal and more educational invitation for members and full-time missionaries to invite less-active members, investigators, and contacts. Seminary and institute has been an effective finding tool for many areas of the world. Third, seminary and institute provide socialization and fellowshiping opportunities for members and nonmembers alike. Seminary and institute frequently hold special activities that provide opportunities to engage in gospel-related conversations in church meetinghouses or members' homes while engaging in social activities.

Humanitarian and development projects that provide educational opportunities to youth and young children can provide passive LDS outreach which can result in some of these youth joining the Church. One LDS couple who resides in a city outside of Chennai established the Pathway Orphanage to provide rehabilitation and education to disabled or abandoned children over the past several decades.^[11] The facility provides the opportunity for children and youth to attend church services held on the site and many have joined the Church over the years. Similar programs implemented in additional areas have potential to alleviate dire needs among children and youth and in the long-term these programs can help bolster the number of mission-aged members of the Church.

There are opportunities to increase the number of full-time missionaries serving in India through the assignment of larger numbers of missionaries with Indian ancestry. The Church in Fiji has thousands of Indian-descendent members and supplies small numbers of full-time missionaries. The assignment of larger numbers of these missionaries to Indian missions is more likely to be approved by government officials who regulate foreign missionary visas as returned missionaries report that Indian-descent individuals frequently obtain missionary visas to India with relatively few complications. There are a handful of Indian-descent Latter-day Saints in the United States, Europe, and Mauritius that may also be utilized for helping increase the size of the full-time missionary force in India.

The assignment of senior missionary couples that specifically focus on preparing larger numbers of youth and young adults for full-time missionary service is a practical solution that has high potential for growth. Currently at least one senior missionary couple has assisted the India Bangalore Mission President with the task of preparing full-time missionary candidates and has appeared to make a significant impact on helping members successfully complete pre-mission preparation. Senior missionary couples can have the greatest impact through coordinating with local stake or district leaders and branch presidents for mission branches. Senior missionary couples may also host special firesides and trainings on mission preparation for youth and young adults.

The establishment of a missionary training center (MTC) in India has potential over time to increase the size of the Indian full-time missionary force. Currently missionaries must travel to the Philippines MTC in Manila for training - a costly and lengthy trip. The current number of members serving missions from India is relatively small and would only require a small MTC that trains anywhere from five to 30 missionaries at a time. Indian members may serve missions in larger numbers if a MTC is established in one of the major cities such as New Delhi, Hyderabad, or Bangalore as awareness to help young men and women serve full-time missions would be heightened and greater responsibility to sufficiently staff a MTC for India would be placed on local church leaders. The establishment of an India MTC could not only provide training to Indian missionaries but also newly called missionaries from Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. However the pattern of MTC construction for the Church suggests that several additional growth developments would need to occur before an India MTC would become more feasible to establish, including the construction of a temple in India in order for newly called missionaries to participate in temple ordinances, the number of Indian members serving full-time missions substantially increasing to legitimize a full-time facility, and the number of missionaries trained in the Philippines MTC overwhelming its capacity.

Challenges

Natural increase through the birth of children into LDS families has historically been the primary method for augmenting the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide. However, the Church in India has very few full-member families where both

parents and their children are members and are active. The lack of members raised in the Church in India poses challenges for consistently supplying larger numbers of full-time missionaries as Indian members who serve missions generally joined the Church in their youth or young adulthood. Consequently the supply of prospective missionaries fluctuates according to the number of convert baptisms over the years and changes in convert retention rates.

The size of total church membership for India remains extremely small compared to India's burgeoning population. Currently there is only one Latter-day Saint per every 111,000 people in India and there are dozens of cities with over one million inhabitants that appear to have no LDS presence of any kind. The massive population totally overwhelms current church resources resulting in heavy emphasis from mission and area leaders to implement a strict "centers of strength" policy that discourages the opening of previously unreached cities to missionary activity.

There are few church resources allocated to India. Visa restrictions have prevented many senior missionary couples from serving their entire missions in India or entering the country at all. A lack of senior missionary couples has created serious challenges for mission leadership to delegate overstretched mission resources, let alone considering under-realized opportunities for augmenting the number of Indian members serving full-time missions. The Church has depended on foreign missionary manpower and resources to properly function in some areas of the country. Some branches experience moderate to low member activity rates resulting in many mission-aged youth who lack the desire, testimony, and gospel living standards to serve a mission. Many Indian members have little money and the cost of serving a mission is a major sacrifice that requires proper financial preparation and planning.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced surprising numbers of members serving full-time missions from other countries in South Asia. However, the Church has struggled to noticeably increase the number of members serving missions from these nations over the long-term. In Pakistan, the Church has maintained a self-sufficient full-time missionary force entirely staffed by Pakistani Latter-day Saints. In the early 2010s, the number of missionaries assigned to Pakistan generally ranged from 20 to 30 and did not appear to noticeable change for several years. A sizable minority of Pakistani members serving full-time missions do not serve in Pakistan but in the Philippines, the United States, and the United Kingdom. No sister missionaries serve in Pakistan. In Nepal, the Church has had comparatively large numbers of members serve full-time missions from the sole Kathmandu Branch with as many as seven or eight missionaries serving from a branch with less than 100 active members. Many of these Nepalese missionaries serve in neighboring India as the Church does not assign any proselytizing missionaries to Nepal. Some of these returned missionaries have either relocated to a different country such as India or have become inactive. In Sri Lanka, the Church has had a handful of members serving full-time missions at any given time and these members tend to serve missions within their home country due to visa restrictions that have prevented the assignment of foreign missionaries to Sri Lanka for many years.

Limitations

The Church does not release figures on the demographics for full-time missionaries serving such as country of origin, native language, ethnicity, and gender. There are no data available to the public on the trends of Indian Latter-day Saints serving full-time missions. It is unclear whether the number of Indian members serving full-time missions noticeably increased as a result of the Church's 2012 decision to lower the minimum mission age for men and women. Data from full-time missionaries recently serving in India is extremely limited due to only a handful of foreign missionaries remaining in the country and a lack of data online from Indian missionaries regarding their mission experiences. The Church does not publish any data on member activity and convert retention rates.

Future Prospects

The increasing self-sufficiency of the Church in India and the willingness of many youth and young adult converts to prepare to serve missions suggests that there are some good opportunities for substantially augmenting the number of native Indian members serving full-time missions. However, trends in the number of members serving missions significantly depends on the number of youth and young adult converts baptized due to a lack of natural growth in India. Prospects for noticeably increasing the number of members serving full-time missions will hinge on ordinary members and church leaders actively and consistently engaging in reactivation efforts among less-active members and participating in member-missionary work among nonmember friends, families, and acquaintances in order to provide a larger number of future missionary candidates. The establishment of a separate MTC in India that services South Asia has potential to improve the self-sufficiency of the Church in the region, raise awareness of the need and importance of full-time missionary service, and foster a sense of LDS community.

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