



# LDS Growth Case Studies

>

## Opportunities for National Outreach Expansion in Cambodia

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: October 11th, 2013

### Overview

The Church established its initial presence in Cambodia in the mid -1990s. During the first decade of formal proselytism, rapid membership and congregational growth occurred as the number of church-reported members increased from 200 in 1995 to 7,465 in 2005 and the number of branches increased from three to 20. In the 2000s, the Church opened cities outside the Phnom Penh area for the first time in Kampong Cham (2000), Battambang (2003), Siem Reap (2007), and Kampong Cham (2007) and organized districts in Kampong Cham (2005) and Battambang (2010). The number of districts in Phnom Penh has steadily increased over the years from one to four as districts have been organized in Phnom Penh North (1995), Phnom Penh Central [Vietnamese] (2001), Phnom Penh South (2002), and Phnom Penh East (2012). By mid-2013, there were 28 branches that operated in five cities.

Notwithstanding strong membership and congregational growth rates during most years in the 1990s and 2000s, the Church in Cambodia has experienced slow national outreach expansion in recent years notwithstanding strong receptivity and several major cities that continued to be unreached. This case study summarizes recent church growth and missionary developments in Cambodia and identifies past successes expanding national outreach. Opportunities and challenges for opening additional areas of the country to missionaries are analyzed. Trends in outreach expansion and church growth in Cambodia are compared to other areas of Southeast Asia. A synopsis of the growth and size of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Cambodia is provided. Limitations to data utilized in this case study are identified and the outlook for church growth and national outreach expansion is predicted.

### Recent Church Growth and Missionary Developments

In the early 2010s, some cities have reported substantial increases in the number of members attending church meetings. District conference attendance in the Kampong Cham Cambodia District increased from 250 in 2012 to 350 in 2013. In May 2013, approximately 500 members in Phnom Penh attended a special member meeting with visiting area authorities. The same month the mission held a country-wide young single adult conference with over 700 in attendance, including more than 60 from Battambang, 60 from Kampong Cham, and 20 from Kampong Thom. In the early 2010s, the Siem Reap Branch sufficiently increased sacrament meeting attendance, permitting the construction of a meetinghouse. In July 2013, the Kampong Thom Branch reached a new sacrament meeting attendance record of 97.

The number of missionaries assigned to Cambodia increased from approximately 100 in 2004 to approximately 150 in mid-2013. Native Cambodians have generally comprised approximately half of the full-time missionary force within the past decade. In September 2013, missionaries report that native Cambodians comprised 35% of young elder missionaries and 70% of sister missionaries. In 2012, the mission reported 600 convert baptisms in Cambodia.

There have been some efforts to extend outreach to groups of members living far from branch meetinghouses. In March 2013, the mission president directed local church leaders in Ta Khmau to organize a member group in Baku - a village on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Members held weekly church services within a member's home and traveled to Ta Khmau for monthly church services with the Ta Khmau 1st Branch. A full-time missionary companionship assigned to Ta Khmau also began serving in the Baku area three days a week. In Kampong Cham, missionaries reported dozens of new converts who joined the Church from a village located tens of kilometers away from the nearest meetinghouse. In August 2013, missionaries reported that there were approximately 30 members that lived in the village.

The mission has focused on preparing branches and districts in Phnom Penh to become wards and stakes since the mid-2000s. In September 2013, missionaries reported that the area presidency would begin training the mission president and the various district presidencies in Phnom Penh on how districts would begin to operate as stakes due to some districts nearly meeting the minimum qualifications to operate as stakes. At the time most branches in Phnom Penh appeared to have between 50 and 150 active members.

## **Successes**

Mission leadership has continued to focus on expanding outreach in Phnom Penh notwithstanding the creation of stakes constituting one of the primary goals for the Church in Phnom Penh for many years. The Church created two additional Khmer-speaking branches in late 2011 (Ta Khmau 2nd) and early 2012 (Steung Mean Chey 3rd Branch) and the mission organized a fourth district in early 2012 (Phnom Penh Cambodia East). The organization of a third Khmer-speaking district and two new branches suggest that the mission may be focusing on a more immediate need for reactivation work, outreach expansion efforts due to the population exhibiting strong receptivity to LDS missionaries, and branch-level leadership development rather than focus on consolidating small branches or delaying the creation of branches to bolster church attendance, the number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders per branch, and district-level leadership development. The organization of the Baku Group under the Ta Khmau 1st Branch in early 2013 also signals balanced efforts by mission leadership to simultaneously expand outreach and prepare districts to become stakes.

The advancement of districts in Phnom Penh into stakes has tremendous potential to free up mission resources that were previously channeled into leadership development, reactivation efforts, and administrative responsibilities. Districts in Phnom Penh have gradually progressed towards reaching the minimum qualifications to operate as stakes. Currently mission leadership fulfills many of the administrative responsibilities of a stake president for these districts as well as other districts in Cambodia and Vietnam. With four member districts in Phnom Penh, the mission allocates a considerable amount of time, energy, and resources to servicing the needs of these districts. In addition to the ordinary missionary responsibilities of finding and teaching investigators and less-active members, many full-time missionary companionships in Phnom Penh dedicate significant amounts of time and vision into strengthening branches and mentoring local leadership. The advancement of even one or two of these member districts into stakes can liberate sizable amounts of mission resources to aid national outreach expansion efforts.

## **Opportunities**

There are excellent opportunities to open additional areas to missionary activity as populations in virtually all areas where missionaries have served have exhibited high receptivity to LDS outreach. Many factors suggest that opening additional cities to missionary work will be successful. The Church in Cambodia experiences moderate to good levels of self-sufficiency in staffing its own missionary needs. Cambodia is one of the only Southeast Asian countries where sizable numbers of local members serve full-time missions and most of these members serve within their home country. There do not appear to be any restrictions or difficulties for the Church to obtain larger numbers foreign missionary visas, suggesting that greater numbers of foreign missionaries can be assigned to provide the needed manpower to initiate accelerated national outreach expansion. Cambodia presents some of the highest levels of religious freedom for proselytizing Christian groups among Asian countries. There have been no recent reports of governmental or societal abuses of religious freedom and foreign Christian missionaries may proselyte without restrictions.<sup>[1]</sup> To contrast, nearly all other Southeast Asian countries either have government-imposed restrictions on religious freedom or government officials severely limit the number of foreign missionary visas granted to the Church. With surpluses in the worldwide full-time missionary force numbering in the tens of thousands, considerable progress can be achieved expanding outreach through utilizing greater numbers of foreign full-time missionaries. Large numbers of youth and young single adult members and an established sense of LDS community that encourages young members to serve full-time missions provides excellent opportunities for increasing the number of Cambodian members serving full-time missions, thereby providing additional manpower to augment the size of the missionary force.

Prospects for opening additional areas to missionary work appear most favorable in the most populous unreached cities and in communities nearby Phnom Penh with small numbers of members and investigators. There are nine cities in Cambodia with 30,000 or more inhabitants without a known LDS presence including Poipet, Sihanoukville (Kampong Saom), Sisophon, Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang, Suong, Kouk Kduoch, Kampot, and Kambol. Most of these cities are located within reasonably close proximity to other cities with an LDS presence from which to base investigatory visits and initial missionary outreach. Several of these cities likely have small numbers of members who joined the Church elsewhere in the country but have lost contact with the Church. The Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission Branch administers most of these most populous unreached cities. There may be hundreds of members who currently live in areas serviced by the mission branch. Mission leaders and senior missionary couples periodically visiting locations where these members are known to reside and assessing conditions for organizing member groups will be vital towards accomplishing any significant acceleration of national outreach expansion. Additional cities located on the outskirts of Phnom Penh also appear highly favorable for outreach expansion efforts due to sizable populations, close proximity to mission headquarters, and likely small numbers of members and investigators who reside in these communities. Examples of locations nearby Phnom Penh that appear favorable to target for church planting efforts include areas on the western fringes of Phnom Penh such as Tropang Krosang and Ou Deum, riverbank communities on islands or the eastern shores of the Mekong River such as Kok Okhna Tei and Prek Ta Kov, and cities and large towns within 50 kilometers of Phnom Penh such as Prey Veng and Udong.

## **Challenges**

The Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission has likely not opened any additional cities to missionary work since 2007 due to mission leadership concentrating on strengthening branches in Phnom Penh in order for these branches to reach the minimum qualifications to operate as wards. There have been instances of the mission organizing new branches within the past five years but these new units have been located in cities that have already had an LDS presence established such as in Battambang and Phnom Penh. The Church has endeavored to advance Phnom Penh districts into stakes for many years, especially since the late 2000s. Mediocre member activity rates in some branches, leadership development frustrations, and concerns regarding the motivation of some converts to join the Church have delayed the creation of stakes. The creation of a third Khmer-speaking district in 2012 suggests that mission leaders have sought to continue expanding outreach in Phnom Penh and focus on reactivation efforts rather than to consolidate smaller branches to create ward-sized units. Although this has appeared an effective strategy for further saturating Phnom Penh with additional congregations and encouraging greater accountability for new converts and less-active members, there has not been a sufficient amount of vision, focus, and resources to open additional provinces and cities to missionary activity. As a result of these conditions, there has been little emphasis or interest to expand national outreach within the past six or seven years.

The mission has a large administrative burden due to seven districts within its boundaries, a massive target population, and its large geographical area. The Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission includes both Cambodia and Vietnam - a combined population of over 100 million. In the early 2010s, the mission has focused on making greater inroads in establishing the Church in Vietnam due to improving religious freedom conditions, growth in native membership and leadership, and minimal outreach extended to the two cities where branches operate (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City). Larger numbers of missionaries have begun serving in Vietnam due to these conditions for the first time in several years. Mission leaders frequently travel to Vietnam to meet with missionaries and local church leaders, reducing focus and energy that can be channeled into unreached areas of Cambodia.

Continued delays in opening additional provinces and cities to missionary activity could result in the Church missing its window of opportunity to baptize and retain receptive individuals and families. Other proselytizing Christian groups have rapidly expanded their operations into these areas and are likely shepherding many individuals and families who would have been receptive to LDS outreach. Religious freedom conditions and the number of foreign missionary visas granted to the Church may become more limited and restricted in the coming years and decades. The Cambodian population is homogenously Buddhist and many Buddhist leaders have expressed fears and concerns that foreign Christian groups pose a threat to the country's traditionally Buddhist identity.

## **Comparative Growth**

The Church in Cambodia has experienced some of the most rapid growth among non-Christian majority countries in the world. In 2013, Phnom Penh was the only city in the world that had more than two districts (4). Cambodia is currently the country with the most nominal members and no stakes established. Within the past decade, the Church has experienced rapid growth in other Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia but rapid growth in other countries has been accompanied by significant strides in national outreach expansion. Cambodia is the only country in Southeast Asia has experienced significant congregational growth within the most populous city of the country during the past decade. Restrictions on the number of missionary visas granted to the Church constitutes one of the greatest limiting factors on growth in most Southeast Asian countries, such as in Thailand and Indonesia. Only three countries in Southeast Asia have stakes organized (Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand). Several Southeast Asian countries have a sensitive or semi-sensitive LDS presence such as Brunei, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam.

Other proselytizing Christian groups generally report fewer members than the LDS Church but maintain a more widespread national presence. The LDS Church is one of the most prominent Christian groups in Phnom Penh. Evangelicals have maintained a presence in Cambodia for many decades and currently claim that 1.6% of the national population is evangelical.<sup>[2]</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses report 17 congregations in Cambodia that operate in Phnom Penh (9), Battambang (2), Siem Reap (2), Kampong Cham (1), Sihanoukville (1), Sisophon (1), and Takeo (1).<sup>[3]</sup> Witnesses have achieved steady membership growth and rapid congregational growth. The number of Witness congregations increased from 10 at year-end 2012<sup>[4]</sup> to 17 by September 2013. Jehovah's Witnesses have established a more widespread national presence in Cambodia than Latter-day Saints notwithstanding significantly fewer members. However, Latter-day Saints operate twice as many congregations in Phnom Penh compared to Witnesses. The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Cambodia reports 5,800 members, six churches, and 28 companies. Adventists have reported slow membership growth and stagnant congregational growth within the past decade.<sup>[5]</sup>

## **Limitations**

No reports were available from mission leaders regarding reasons for why additional cities in Cambodia have not opened to missionary work within the past six years. No data is available on the number of members who reside in cities without an LDS presence. Attendance figures for large meetings and sacrament meeting services and the location of member groups were obtained from mission leaders and full-time missionaries. The Church does not publish official numbers regarding member activity and convert retention rates, the number of converts baptized annually in each country, the number of missionaries serving from each country, the number of missionaries assigned to each mission for each year, or the number and location of member groups.

## **Future Prospects**

The outlook for the Church in Cambodia opening additional areas to missionary activity and establishing member groups and branches in these locations appears favorable once at least one district in Phnom Penh matures into a stake. Mission leaders in other areas of the world have frequently exhibited heightened interest and concern to open additional cities and towns to missionary activity following the establishment of the first stake in a country such as in Hungary and Ukraine in the 2000s. Fortuitous church planting instigated by active members relocating to unreached locations appears the most likely method that the Church will expand national outreach within the near term. The most populous unreached cities that appear most likely to receive future LDS outreach include Poipet, Sisophon, Kampong Chhnang, Suong, Kambol, and Kampong Speu. The Church may organize a second mission in Cambodia to help reduce current administrative strains on mission leadership servicing Vietnam and to better orchestrate the opening of additional areas of Cambodia to missionary work.

[1] "Cambodia," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 14 September 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208220>

[2] "Cambodia," Operation World, retrieved 14 September 2013. <http://www.operationworld.org/camb>

[3] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 14 September 2013. [http://www.jw.org/apps/E\\_FRNsPnPBrTZGT](http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT)

[4] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org, retrieved 14 September 2013.

[5] "Cambodia Adventist Mission (2002-Present)," [www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org), retrieved 14 September 2013. [http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view\\_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10041](http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10041)