



Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Slow National Outreach Expansion and LDS Growth in Tanzania

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Overview

Inhabited by over 48 million, Tanzania ranks as the 28th most populous country in the world. The LDS Church established its initial presence in Tanzania during the early 1990s. LDS missionary operations were constricted to Dar es Salaam until 2008 when the Church opened a second city to missionary work and organized a branch. Notwithstanding widespread religious freedom in most areas and rapid growth experienced by other missionary-minded groups, the LDS Church has experienced slow national outreach expansion and anemic membership and congregational growth within the past two decades.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Tanzania and identifies past church growth and missionary successes. Opportunities and challenges for expanding national outreach are explored and analyzed. The growth of the Church in other East African nations is compared to the Church in Tanzania and the growth of other nontraditional, missionary-focused groups is contrasted to the growth of the LDS Church in Tanzania. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

The Church in Tanzania held its first sacrament meeting services in Dar es Salaam in 1991 and organized the first branch and obtained legal recognition the following year. The Church created two additional branches in Dar es Salaam by the late 1990s and a fourth branch in 2004. In 2005, the Church organized the four branches into a district. In 2008, the Church organized its first branch in Arusha and assigned the first missionaries to the city. In 2011, the Church organized its first branch in Mwanza and assigned full-time missionaries. The Kenya Nairobi Mission has administered Tanzania since its creation in 1991. The number of cities with an LDS branch increased from one in 1992 to two in 2008 and three in 2011.

There were 100 members nationwide in 1995. Membership reached 406 in 1999, 540 in 2002, 720 in 2004, 797 in 2006, 915 in 2008, 1,007 in 2010, and 1,220 in 2012. Annual membership growth rates ranged from as low as 3.8% in 2009 to as high as 18.3% in 2003.

In 2011, local members reported that the Church had approved church services and proselytism activities to occur in Swahili instead of English. However, it did not appear that this change was fully implemented until the beginning of 2012.[1] In late 2012, the Church held its first country-wide young single adult (YSA) conference with 61 YSAs in attendance. In September 2013, there were approximately 60 members in the Mwanza Branch.[2]

Successes

The recent use of Swahili in church services and proselytism has been a necessary change that has enormous potential for growth. Returned missionaries report that the lack of Swahili-speaking missionaries serving in Tanzania and church services conducted in English were the primary barriers to greater church growth as few Tanzanians spoke English well enough to study the gospel and actively participate in church. The implementation of Swahili language use in the Church has appeared correlated with increasing numbers of convert baptisms as evidenced by accelerating annual membership growth rates in 2011 (8.8%) and 2012 (11.3%) compared to the previous three years (3.8-6.0%).

The Church has made some progress expanding outreach to additional cities within the past six years as only Dar es Salaam had an official LDS presence prior to 2008. The Church began formal missionary activity in predominantly Christian areas for the first time when Arusha opened to missionary work in 2008, providing for greater prospects for growth among populations who will likely exhibit more tolerance and interest in LDS outreach compared to their Muslim counterparts in Dar es Salaam.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures into Swahili notwithstanding comparatively few Swahili-speaking Latter-day Saints worldwide and the Church not conducting church services in Swahili in any country until the early 2010s. In 2013, there were a sizable number of proselytism and gospel study materials translated into Swahili.[3]

Opportunities

The government of Tanzania upholds religious freedom and most locations experience few, if any, societal abuses or restrictions on missionary activity and proselytism. The most limited religious freedom for Christians occurs on Zanzibar where an estimated 98% of the population is Muslim. There have been reports of church burnings in some coastal areas of mainland Tanzania, particularly in Dar es Salaam.[4] However, most areas of the country experience religious tolerance and open proselytism may occur without any objection from local community leaders and government officials. Other outreach-oriented Christian groups have taken advantage of these favorable conditions for missionary activity and report a significant presence in the country today. There does not appear to be any major challenges for the Church to obtain foreign missionary visas, suggesting that the Church could likely substantially increase the size of the full-time missionary force with little difficulty from government and immigration authorities.

The ongoing surge in worldwide missionary force presents an unprecedented opportunity for mission and area leaders to utilize this manpower to establish an LDS presence in additional cities and implement church planting tactics in Dar es Salaam, Arusha, and Mwanza. Tanzania supports a large population that has remained minimally reached by LDS missionary efforts for decades. The decline in the number of members serving full-time missions in the 2000s appears partly responsible for minimal outreach extended by the Church in the country since its initial establishment. The organization of a separate mission headquartered in Dar es Salaam that solely services Tanzania is desperately needed in order to channel greater mission resources into the country and provide greater mission leader focus and vision on expanding national outreach.

There are current opportunities to expand outreach in Tanzania notwithstanding no Tanzanian LDS mission at present. Many of the most populous unreached cities likely have a handful of isolated members and investigators who can help lay the foundation for establishing member groups. There are currently 16 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants that have no LDS congregations and most of these cities are located in predominantly Christian areas. Senior missionary couples and mission leaders visiting these cities, meeting with isolated members and investigators, holding cottage meetings, and assessing conditions for establishing member groups are important steps that can be taken to make greater inroads in revamping national outreach expansion. Cities that appear most likely to have member groups established include Mbeya, Morogoro, Dodoma, and Moshi.

Challenges

The Church has no separate mission headquartered in Tanzania and continues to rely on the Kenya Nairobi Mission to service both countries. The combined population of Kenya and Tanzania is 92 million - an enormous population for a single mission to effectively reach. Potential for growth is strong in both countries yet the Church has extremely few missionaries assigned at present. If the Church maintained its ratio of missions to population currently experienced in the Americas (one mission to 3.5 million people), there would be 14 missions headquartered in Tanzania alone. The Church has been cautious about making significant increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the Africa Southeast Area through utilizing North American missionary manpower. This caution appears rooted in concerns on instilling regional self-sufficiency in missionary efforts and building from centers of strength.

Continued delays in more aggressively expanding LDS outreach in Tanzania may coincide with the Tanzanian population exhibiting reduced levels of receptivity to the Church. Receptivity rarely remains consistent for extended periods of time due to political, societal, cultural, and economic changes. Furthermore other proselytizing Christian groups likely convert many individuals and families who would have been receptive to LDS outreach but later on exhibit little to no interest due to becoming shepherded into other denominations.

Local church self-sufficiency and administration appear less developed for the Church in Tanzania than compared to many other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Church in some countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been successful in achieving rapid congregational growth in several locations notwithstanding no full-time missionaries assigned. To the contrary, the Church in Tanzania has been largely unable to drive outreach expansion efforts and greater success in member-missionary work without the assistance of full-time missionaries and mission leaders. Although the development of member groups and branches in Arusha and Mwanza initially occurred through active members relocating to these cities, there has been little success in these members significantly augmenting active membership and taking greater initiative to strengthen branches and organize additional units in these locations.

Comparative Growth

The Church has more aggressively targeted other countries in East Africa that have had a continuous LDS presence for at least

two decades. In Ethiopia, the Church has focused on opening member groups and branches in several additional cities and towns within the past five years. Consequently the number of cities, towns, and villages with a branch or member group operating increased from two in 2007 to six in 2012. In Kenya, the number of cities, towns, and villages with an LDS unit doubled from 12 to 24 between 2001 and 2012. In Uganda, the number of cities with an LDS presence increased from four to 13 within a five-year period between 2007 and 2012.

All other worldwide missionary-focused Christian groups report a widespread presence in Tanzania. Evangelicals claim 17.9% of the population and report strong success in church planting and reaching traditionally non-Christian peoples.[5] The Seventh Day Adventist Church numbers among the largest denominations in Tanzania. In 2012, Adventists reported 477,237 members, 2,152 churches, and 2,204 companies.[6] The total number of Adventist congregations in Tanzania (4,356) nearly matches the total number of LDS congregations for all of Africa, Asia, and Europe combined. Adventists have reported rapid growth between 2003 and 2012 as evidenced by the number of churches increasing from 1,410 to 2,152, the number of companies increasing from 1,860 to 2,204, church membership increasing from 307,604 to 477,237, and the annual number of baptisms increasing from 29,000 to over 52,000.[7] The number of new members baptized into the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Tanzania in one year surpasses the number of total Latter-day Saints in all but three countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana). In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 16,476 active members and 454 congregations. Witnesses have experienced rapid growth in recent years. The Church of the Nazarene reports approximately 250 congregations in Tanzania.[8]

Limitations

Very few reports were available from returned missionaries and senior missionary couples during the writing of this case study. There were no reports available from native Tanzanian church leaders and members. The Church does not publish the location, names, and numbers of member groups. It is unclear whether any member groups function in Tanzania at present. The Church does not publish membership statistics on the geographic distribution of members by administrative division for individual countries with the exception of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Consequently it is unclear how many members reside in each administrative division in Tanzania. There are no official statistics available to the public regarding the annual number of convert baptisms for Tanzania, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, the average sacrament meeting attendance, and other measurements of member activity.

Future Prospects

The recent transition of using Swahili instead of English for church services and missionary activity and increasing numbers of members serving missions worldwide suggest that the Church will likely begin to experience a significant acceleration of growth in Tanzania within the next decade that will likely include the formation of the first LDS mission, the establishment of member groups and branches in additional cities, and the organization of additional branches in cities currently reached by the Church. Prospects appear favorable for larger numbers of Tanzanian members to serve full-time missions thereby bolstering the self-sufficiency of the Church in Tanzania meeting its own missionary needs. However, past experience of the Church in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that only a handful of additional cities will open to missionary activity within the foreseeable future. The immense size of the population and the concentration of LDS leadership and congregations in locations with less-receptive Muslim populations in Dar es Salaam suggest that there may be problems with a future mission in Dar es Salaam capitalizing on favorable opportunities for growth in Christian areas distant from mission headquarters.

[1] Albright, Mark. "Missionary Moment: How the Church is Blossoming in Tanzania," Meridian Magazine, 10 June 2013. <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/12815/1>

[2] "Focus on Mwanza - Northern Town of Tanzania Embraces LDS Church," mormonnewsroom.co.ke, 16 September 2013. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.co.ke/article/focus-on-mwanza---northern-town-of-tanzania-embraces-lds-church>

[3] store.lds.org, retrieved 10 October 2013.

[4] "Tanzania," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 10 October 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208204>

[5] "Tanzania," Operation World, retrieved 15 October 2013. <http://www.operationworld.org/tanz>

[6] "Tanzania Union Mission (2003-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 10 October 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10111

[7] "Tanzania Union Mission (2003-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 10 October 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10111

[8] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 10 October 2013.

