

Case Studies on Analyzing Growth Trends by City or Administrative Division

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

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Overview

Abidjan is the most populous city in Cote d'Ivoire and second most populous city in West Africa with an estimated 4.95 million inhabitants in the urban agglomeration[1] and 3.84 million inhabitants within the city boundaries.[2] Abidjan served as the political capital of Cote d'Ivoire until the government relocated the capital to Yamoussoukro in 1983 and remains the commercial center of the nation. Rapid economic growth and urban development occurred following the independence of Cote d'Ivoire from France in 1960. Abidjan remains an important commercial and industrial center for the region notwithstanding little economic growth since the 1980s. The city's demographics remain diverse due to the permanent resettlement of migrant workers over the past half century from surrounding nations. Abidjan is divided into 10 administrative communes.

The LDS Church has achieved some of its most rapid growth worldwide in Abidjan within the past two decades. Today the city receives some of the most widespread LDS outreach among Sub-Saharan African metropolitan areas with one million or more inhabitants. This case study reviews LDS growth trends in Abidjan and explores successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. A comparative growth section compares the growth of the LDS Church to other major cities in Sub-Saharan Africa and contrasts LDS growth with other outreach-oriented Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1988, the Church created its first branch in Abidjan. In September 1989, the Church created a second branch (Cocody) and organized its first district in the city.[3] In 1993, the Church relocated the Cameroon Yaounde Mission to Abidjan and renamed the mission as the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission. A second mission headquartered in Abidjan was organized in 2014 (Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan West). In 1997, the Church created its first stake, today called the Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire Toit Rouge Stake. Additional stakes were created in Abobo West (2000), Cocody (2006), Abidjan Niangon North (2010), Port-Bouët (2012), Abidjan Niangon South (2014), and Abobo East (2014).

The number of units in Abidjan totaled two (all branches) in 1989, 11 (all wards) in 1997, 13 (all wards) in 2001, 35 (34 wards, 1 branch) in late 2012, and 60 (59 wards, 1 branch) in early 2015. The number of congregations located within the city limits of Abidjan by stake as of early 2015 were as follows: Abidjan Niangon North (6 wards), Abidjan Niangon South (6 wards), Abidjan Toit Rouge (14 wards), Abobo East (8 wards), Abobo West (7 wards, 1 branch), Cocody (9 wards), and Port-Bouët (9 wards). There were six congregations assigned to stakes based in Abidjan that serviced locations outside the city limits including the Ahoutoue Branch (Cocody), Bingerville Ward (Cocody), Grand-Bassam 1st Ward (Port-Bouët), Grand-Bassam 2nd Ward (Port-Bouët), and Songon Branch (Abidjan Niangon North). In early 2015, the average ward or branch in Abidjan serviced a geographical area populated by approximately 82,500 people. Maps displaying LDS units in Abidjan are available for 2001 and present-day.

Successes

The Church in Abidjan has developed a highly self-sufficient full-time missionary force comprised of Ivorian members capable of

meeting missionary needs within Abidjan. The growth in the size of the missionary force and rapid expansion of LDS outreach elsewhere in the country necessitated the organization of a second mission in 2014. Some Abidjan stakes have had several dozen members serving missions at any given time. The development of a self-sufficient missionary force in Abidjan has been crucial towards continuing rapid church growth as political instability has prevented the assignment of North American missionaries for all but two years during the past decade. Convert retention and member activity rates appear to rank among the highest in the Africa West Area; the church area that has historically had one of the highest member activity rates in the world.[4] The size and strength of local priesthood leadership has provided ample opportunities for missionary preparation and temple worship, further strengthening the Church in Abidjan. In early 2013, church leaders noted that three of the five Abidjan stakes ranked within the top 25 stakes in the worldwide Church for the percentage of adults who submitted family names for temple work in 2012.[5]

The Church maintains a presence within close proximity of most of Abidjan's population. Eight of the 10 communes have at least one LDS congregation that primarily services areas within the commune. The two communes without LDS units (Treichville and Plateau) are the least populated communes with 213,000 and 12,000 inhabitants, respectively. Populations in these two least-populated communes account for five percent of the Abidjan city population. The average congregation services fewer than 50,000 inhabitants in two communes (Abobo and Yopougon). Congregational and stake growth has been concentrated in Abobo and Yopougon. Each of these communes has approximately one million inhabitants and 20 or more LDS congregations. A map of Abidjan communes and status and degree of LDS outreach can be found here.

Virtually all areas of Abidjan have experienced steady congregational growth within the past five years. Comparing the number of congregations that functioned in mid-2001 with present day sheds insight into how congregational growth rates have varied over time by location. Some stakes that operated in early 2015 consisted of a single ward in 2001. The Church in 2001 operated one ward with the current boundaries of two stakes (Abidjan Niangon North [currently six wards within Abidjan city limits] and Abidjan Niangon South [currently six wards]), two wards within the current boundaries four stakes (Abobo East [currently eight wards], Abobo West [currently seven wards and one branch], Abidjan Toit Rouge [currently 14 wards], Port-Bouët [currently 9 wards within the Abidjan city limits]), and three wards within current boundaries of one stake (Cocody [currently 9 wards within the Abidjan city limits].

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities for church planting in Abidjan. Lesser-reached communities in Cocody, Koumassi, and Marcory Communes present some of the best opportunities for church planting and outreach expansion. Populations in these communes exhibit high receptivity to the Church. Active membership growth has fueled consistent congregational growth within the past decade. In Cocody, there are at least nine communities without an LDS congregation (Abata, Agien, Akouedo, Angre, Anono, Bonoumin, M'bandon, M'pouto, Rosier) that appear favorable for church planting due to distance to the nearest LDS meetinghouse and high receptivity to the Church in the area. A map displaying potentially favorable locations for church planting can be found here.

The Church has not taken advantage of ethnic-specific outreach efforts in Abidjan. All church meetings appear to be held in French in order to promote ethnic integration and to simplify church administration. Opportunities abound to target Burkinabe, Malian, Ghanaian, Nigerien, and Guinean workers and their families. Successes teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts among the non-Ivorian population may one day facilitate the establishment of the Church in currently unreached nations such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea. With the increasing size of the Church in Abidjan, prospects to organize language-specific units will improve as a larger body of church leadership develops and a greater need to accommodate linguistic minority groups arises.

Challenges

Meetinghouse construction appears a significant challenge that hinders the Church from reaching its potential growth in Abidjan. With high population density and urban planning problems in the most densely populated communes, the Church has constructed few meetinghouses throughout the city. Many meetinghouses service two or three wards and a few meetinghouses house as many as four wards. Delays and challenges constructing additional meetinghouses has likely postponed ward divisions and forming additional units due to a lack of space. It is unclear whether meetinghouse construction has been delayed due to political instability, local government corruption, a lack of skilled labor, local church financial issues, or a combination of two or more of these challenges. The introduction of a meetinghouse construction program that trains returned missionaries in masonry and construction skills may help ameliorate the demand on insufficient chapel space. In early 2012, the Church began a meetinghouse construction program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in an effort to meet the pressing demand to construct dozens of additional meetinghouses to accommodate growing active membership. The Church in Abidjan may accelerate meetinghouse construction if specialized workers are trained and employed by the Church to build chapels that are economical and functional for church use.

Political instability constitutes one of the greatest challenges for church growth . The United States Department of State has issued travel warnings for years. In 2012, there were attacks on United Nations peacekeepers, police stations, military checkpoints, and power plants.[6] Recent civil wars and ongoing ethnic and political tensions between rebels in the north and the central government in the south may dissuade the Church from constructing a temple in Abidjan until consistent political stability is achieved. The Church has historically hesitated to expand elsewhere in Cote d'Ivoire, including cities and towns near Abidjan. Ethnic integration issues do not appear to have hampered growth but have potential to do so if church leaders do not

remain dedicated to maintaining church policies pertaining to political neutrality.

The Church has experienced slower growth in more affluent areas of Abidjan. Both communes without an LDS unit are located in the city center in some of the wealthiest areas. It is unclear whether a lack of an LDS presence in these affluent areas is due to materialism, the influence of European secularism on society, or a lack of LDS meetinghouses or missionary efforts targeting these locations.

Comparative Growth

Congregational growth trends for the LDS Church in Abidjan have outpaced all other major metropolitan areas within Sub-Saharan Africa within the past 15 years as the number of congregations increased from 13 to 60. The number of wards and branches between 2001 and year-end 2014 increased from seven to 18 in Antananarivo, Madagascar; eight to 22 in Harare, Zimbabwe; 16 to 60 in Accra, Ghana; 16 to 43 in Benin City, Nigeria; 21 to 61 in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; and 32 to 60 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The average LDS congregation services 35,000 in Benin City, 74,000 in Accra, 83,000 in Abidjan, 104,000 in Harare, 120,000 in Antananarivo, 148,000 in Johannesburg, and 169,000 in Kinshasa.

Other proselytism-focused Christian groups report a similarly-sized presence in Abidjan as the LDS Church but a significantly more widespread presence elsewhere in Cote d'Ivoire. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 100 congregations in the Abidjan area; approximately four-fifths of which are designated as French speaking. Witnesses maintain congregations that service specific linguistic minority groups such as Twi (9 congregations), Baoule speakers (9 congregations, 4 groups), Ewe (5 congregations), English (4 congregations), Jula (1 congregation, 2 groups), American Sign Language (1 congregation, 2 groups), Attié (2 groups), Bété (2 groups), Anyin [Indenie] (1 group), and Yacouba (1 group).[7] Seventh Day Adventists do not publish the number of congregations in the Abidjan area online but reported 60 churches (large or well-established congregations), 88 companies (small or recently established congregations), and 5,126 members nationwide in 2013.[8] Over the past decade, Adventists have experienced slow congregational growth and moderate membership growth. The Church of the Nazarene reports at least half a dozen congregations in Abidjan and over 100 congregations nationwide.[9]

Limitations

The Church does not publish annual, country-by-country data on the number of convert baptisms, the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the increase of children of record. No data is available to the public regarding official LDS statistics on member activity and convert retention rates. Reports from current missionaries have been scarce within the past couple years, creating challenges to accurately assess the number of active members within Abidjan or in most congregations. The Church does not report an official list of its member groups by country or for the entire world. Consequently member groups may operate in Abidjan that are not reported in this case study. The Church in Cote d'Ivoire does not publish a breakdown of its membership by administrative division.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Abidjan appears highly favorable within the foreseeable future due to ongoing rapid congregational growth, increasing priesthood manpower as evidenced by the creation of four stakes within the past five years, the organization of a second mission in 2014, and sizable numbers of local members serving missions. If the Church were to duplicate the congregational growth rates experienced within the 2000s into the 2010s and early 2020s, the Church may have as many as 100 units in Abidjan and possibly as many as 13 stakes by 2022. Prospects for the construction of a temple in Abidjan appear forthcoming but will likely depend on political stability and continued faithful temple attendance.

[1] "THE PRINCIPAL AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 1 January 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] https://www.ppiaf.org/sites/ppiaf.org/files/documents/Cote-d-Ivoire_Solid-Waste-French.pdf

[3] "Ivory Coast," Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 501

[4] LeBaron, Dale E., Devotional, as cited in Ricks College News Release, April 5, 2001.

[5] Lloyd, Scott R. "Elder Cook Addresses Members and Investigators in Ivory Coast," Ensign, July 2013. https://www.lds.org/ensign/print/2013/07/news-of-the-church/elder-cook-addresses-members-and-investigators-in-ivory-coast

[6] "Cote d'Ivoire," Travel Warning U.S. Department of State, 16 November 2012. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5701.html

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[8] "Cote d'Ivoire," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 29 January 2015. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2556607

[9] "Nazarene Church Data Search", 29 January 2015. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/