

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Rapid LDS Growth in Abuja, Nigeria

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Overview

Abuja is the sixth most populous metropolitan area in Nigeria with 1.62 million inhabitants as of October 2013.[1] Government and political leaders determined to relocate the nation's capital from Lagos to Abuja in 1991 in order to ameliorate ethnic and religious divisions in the country. Rapid population growth has occurred within the past two decades as a result of many nonlocal Nigerians relocating to the city and its surroundings largely for employment purposes. Today urban areas within the Abuja conurbation are not only located in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) but also adjacent areas in Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Niger States. The LDS Church has experienced significant growth in the Abuja metropolitan area within the past decade as evidenced by accelerated congregational growth and the organization of the first stake in the city in 2012.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Abuja. Past growth successes are summarized and opportunities and challenges for future growth are identified and discussed. The growth of the Church in other major cities in Nigeria is compared to the growth of the Church in Abuja and the growth of other missionary-focused groups within the Abuja area. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church likely organized its first branch in Abuja sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s. In 1997, the Church organized a district headquartered in Abuja. By 2001, three branches operated in Abuja (Kubwa, Garki, and Wuse). Between 2001 and 2006, additional branches were organized in Bwari, Idu, and Nyanya. There were five branches by year-end 2008. In 2009, the Church organized two additional branches (Karu and Lugbe). In 2011, the Church organized three additional branches (Jabi, Jikwoyi, and Mpape). The Kaduna Branch began operating under the Abuja Nigeria District sometime in the early 2010s. In 2012, the Abuja Nigeria District became a stake with eight wards (Bwari, Jabi, Kaduna, Karu, Kubwa, Nyanya, Suleja, and Wuse) and three branches (Jikwoyi, Lugbe, and Mpape). In 2013, the Church organized two new congregations (the Kubwa 2nd Ward and the Masaka Branch) and the Lugbe Branch became a ward.

The number of congregations in the Abuja area increased from three in 2001 to five in 2008, seven in 2009, 10 in 2011, and 12 in 2013. A map displaying the location of LDS congregations and the status of LDS outreach by populated places within the Abuja area can be found here.

Successes

The Church has experienced rapid congregational growth in the Abuja area within the past five years and has had most of its congregations become wards since the organization of a stake in 2012. Five of the 12 congregations in Abuja were organized between 2011 and 2013 and currently three of these five congregations are wards. Congregational growth has continued despite the advancement of the district into a stake; a noteworthy achievement as congregational growth rates typically slow immediately before and after the Church advances a district into a stake. This phenomenon occurs as a result of church leaders strengthening individual branches to become wards and augmenting the number of active members per congregation.

Within the past five years, the Church has opened branches in areas of the city that previously had no LDS congregations

functioning. Congregational growth has occurred in both areas that have had a long-term LDS presence such as Kubwa and areas where an LDS presence has been recently established such as Karu. The organization of new congregations in several areas of the city has been essential towards recent rapid church growth.

Opportunities

There are abundant opportunities to open additional communities to missionary activity and organize member groups and branches. The Abuja Nigeria Stake includes only select urban areas within the Abuja metropolitan area. The jigsaw puzzle-like shape of the stake includes at least eight communities with no nearby LDS congregation (Asokoro [FCT], Asokoro [Nasarawa], Dakwa, Gudu, Gwarimpa Estate, Madalla, Maitama, and Sabojibi). There are approximately 30 communities within the Abuja area that are outside the Abuja Nigeria Stake boundaries. Most of these communities are located in southwestern Abuja between Gwagwalada and central Abuja. Many of these communities present highly favorable opportunities for organizing member groups or branches due to large target populations, close proximity to locations with established wards and branches, and the Church's recent successes opening congregations in additional communities within the metropolitan area.

Prospects appear favorable to not only expand the Church's operations into additional communities with the Abuja metropolitan area but also into other cities in central Nigeria. In 2013, the Church reduced the geographic size of the Nigeria Enugu Mission to include only one stakes (Abuja), three districts (Enugu, Jos, and Onitsha), and a few mission branches. Prior to the mission boundary realignment the mission serviced five additional stakes and two additional districts for a grand total of six stakes and five districts. Fewer stakes and districts within the mission now permit mission leaders to more thoroughly saturate cities with an LDS presence with mission resources and concentrate greater focus on national outreach expansion within the mission boundaries. Increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to the Nigeria Enugu Mission due to the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides an unprecedented opportunity for mission leaders to expand outreach into additional urban areas in Abuja. As the Church in Abuja has experienced the most rapid growth among cities currently within the boundaries of the mission, it is likely that mission leaders will continue to allocate surplus missionary manpower and resources into missionary efforts in Abuja in order to capitalize on good receptivity. The evolving LDS center in Abuja presents additional opportunities to open member groups and branches in nearby cities that may have isolated members and a sufficient number of worthy, qualified priesthood holders. These locations include Bida, Keffi, Lafia, Lokoja, and Minna.

The Church in other Nigerian cities has aggressively opened multiple new branches simultaneously in order to accelerate growth through a church-planting versus a church-splitting approach. Traditionally, the Church has waited for congregations to increase active membership in sufficient numbers in order to organize new congregations as opposed to opening additional congregations to reduce travel times, provide a base for missionary outreach within individual neighborhoods or communities, and promote leadership development and a more local sense of LDS community. In 2012, the Church implemented an aggressive church planting approach in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State as the number of branches increased from two to eight in a single year. This significant increase in branches appeared motivated by stake and mission leadership to improve the saturation of LDS outreach and spark greater growth as only one stake operated in this major Nigerian city. A similar approach appeared underway in the Port Harcourt Nigeria Stake during 2013 as four new branches were organized that year in highly urbanized areas where limited LDS outreach was previously extended. Although it is too early to determine whether these recent church planting approaches in Uyo and Port Harcourt will result in increasing numbers of convert baptisms, higher convert retention and member activity rates, and the advancement of newly organized branches into wards, the Church has implemented similar tactics in other West African nations and has experienced improvements on all three of these factors. Implementing church planting tactics in Abuja similar to those carried out in Uyo and Port Harcourt could result in a dramatic improvement in the accessibility of the Church throughout the Abuja metropolitan area as well as larger numbers of convert baptisms and improvements in convert retention and member activity rates.

Challenges

Distance from mission headquarters in Enugu poses administrative challenges for mission leadership. The Abuja Nigeria Stake is the most isolated stake in Nigeria, located approximately 300 kilometers from Enugu and nearly 400 kilometers from the nearest stake in Benin City. Long travel times, poorly developed national transportation infrastructure, and transportation costs all pose challenges and limitations for mission leaders to supervise and frequently visit missionaries in Abuja.

Recent political and societal conditions require local church leaders and mission and area leaders to exercise caution with conducting missionary activity in Abuja and surrounding areas. Radical Islamist groups have carried out violent attacks targeting Christians in central and northern Nigeria, including a few recent incidents that have occurred in Abuja.[2] Consequently the Church may avoid opening areas to missionary work that have no previously known members in order to avoid potential misunderstandings and conflicts with local community leaders. These conditions may limit LDS outreach to only areas of Abuja that are regarded as the most stable and secure in order to mitigate safety concerns for full-time missionaries and stake and mission leaders.

The Church may limit its outreach expansion efforts in Abuja until additional districts within the Nigeria Enugu Mission become stakes. The Enugu Nigeria and Onitsha Nigeria Districts are the oldest districts currently in operation in Nigeria as both were organized in 1988. Both districts have had additional branches recently organized and appear close to becoming stakes within the near future. The mission may delay greater mission resource allocation to Abuja until these districts become stakes as missions frequently assign full-time missionaries in larger numbers to large districts to provide assistance in reactivation and leadership training efforts so that these districts meet the minimum qualifications to operate as stakes. Past experience has

shown that missions often redistribute resources following the maturation of districts into stakes, which may provide greater resources to the Church in Abuja once remaining districts become stakes.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Abuja has experienced the most rapid congregational growth among cities where the Church has established its first stake within the past decade. However, the Church has experienced more rapid congregational growth during this period in several locations where stakes do not currently operate. The Ekpoma Nigeria District, for example, had only one branch in 2005 whereas in late 2013 there were 10 branches in the district. In Yenagoa, the Church organized its first branch in late 2009 and in late 2013 organized its first district in the city with four branches. The Church has experienced stagnant congregational growth or slight congregational decline in all other cities in central and northern Nigeria within the past decade and no additional cities have had an LDS presence established for the first time during this period. In Jos, the number of branches in the city declined from three to two. Only one congregation functioned in Kaduna and Bauchi during this period. Ethnoreligious conflict between Christians and Muslims in the region appears primarily responsible for the lack of LDS growth in these cities as few mission resources are allocated due to distance and safety concerns. Some members who have resided in these locations may have relocated to less conflict-ridden areas of the country due to safety concerns.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a presence in Abuja similar in size or larger than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in the Abuja area. In early 2014, Witnesses reported 76 congregations in the FCT, 12 congregations within the Abuja metropolitan area within Niger State, and 11 congregations within the Abuja metropolitan area within Nasarawa State.[3] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence in the Abuja area. The Church of the Nazarene does not publish statistics regarding its membership and congregations in Abuja.

Limitations

The Church does not publish the annual number of converts baptized per district, stake, mission, country, or church area. It is unclear how much of recent LDS growth in Abuja has been attributed to new member move-ins versus convert baptisms. The Church does not publish the annual number of members per administrative division or city in Nigeria. No reports were available from local members or church leaders, mission leaders, or returned or current full-time missionaries. No data is available regarding the ethnic composition of the Church in Abuja. No data is available regarding past growth trends for other missionary-focused denominations within the Abuja area.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Abuja appears highly favorable due to the recent organization of the Abuja Nigeria Stake and ongoing rapid congregational growth A second stake may be organized within the near future as the Abuja Nigeria Stake currently has a sufficient number of wards to divide to organize a second stake in the city. The Church may headquarter a mission in Abuja one day due to distance from Enugu, the increasing administrative demand the Church in the city plays on mission leadership as a result of rapid growth, and opportunities to expand missionary work into additional locations in central Nigeria. However, safety concerns resulting from ethnoreligious violence and terrorism and limited numbers of African missionaries serving in Nigeria may delay the formation of a separate mission in Abuja and the opening of additional cities for many years or several decades to come.

[1] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 6 January 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] "Nigeria," International Religious Freedom Report For 2012. retrieved 6 January 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208182

[3] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 6 January 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT