



International Resources for Latter-day Saints

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Missionary and Church Growth Successes in Sierra Leone

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Overview

Located in West Africa, Sierra Leone has a population of 5.6 million that is predominantly Muslim (77%) with a sizable Christian minority (21%).^[1] An English-based Creole language called Krio is spoken by 95% of the population as a language for interethnic communication. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Sierra Leone for a quarter of a century and has at times experienced rapid membership and congregational growth. Within the past five or six years, LDS growth rates have accelerated and several other important milestones have been reached such as the creation of the first mission in the country, the organization of the first stake, and the opening of additional cities to missionary work.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church in Sierra Leone and examines recent missionary and church growth successes. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are discussed. Recent LDS growth trends in other West African countries are reviewed and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Sierra Leone are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1988, the Church organized its first branch in Sierra Leone in Goderich. Branches were organized in more central areas of Freetown shortly thereafter. In 1990, the first young proselytizing missionaries arrived and the Church held its first official meetings in Bo. By year-end 1991, the Church had organized three districts located in Freetown (1990), Bo (1991), and Wellington (1991). Rapid congregational growth occurred during the first five years of an official church presence as the number of branches increased from one in 1988 to 14 in 1993 whereas stagnant congregational growth occurred between 1993 and 2005. LDS membership increased from 200 in 1989 to 1,900 in 1993, 2,700 in 1997, 3,920 in 2000, and 5,168 in 2003. Annual membership growth rates ranged from over 100% to as low as 6.3% between 1988 and 2004. In 2004, the Church assigned the first missionaries to Kenema.^[2] At the time, the Church operated branches in three cities: Freetown (11), Bo (5), and Kenema (1). In 2005, districts in Freetown and Wellington were consolidated into a single district.

In 2007, the Church organized the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission - the first LDS mission to operate in the country. Prior to this time, the Ghana Accra Mission and later the Ghana Cape Coast Mission administered Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission also included Liberia within its boundaries until the Church organized the Liberia Monrovia Mission in 2013. Accelerated congregational growth began following the organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission as the number of congregations increased from 17 in 2006 to 18 in 2007, 22 in 2009, 23 in 2010, 24 in 2011, 27 in 2012, and 30 in late 2013. In 2011, the Church organized a second district in Freetown (Freetown East) and in late 2012 organized a separate district in Kenema. In 2012, the Church organized its first stake in Sierra Leone with eight wards from the Freetown Sierra Leone District. Membership totaled 6,938 in 2006, 8,330 in 2009, and 11,664 in 2012. Annual membership growth rates declined to a low of 3.4% in 2009 and accelerated to a high of 15.7% in 2012. During the early 2010s, several member groups began functioning in lesser-reached areas of major cities and became branches shortly thereafter.

In 2012 and 2013, the Church in Sierra Leone began opening additional cities to missionary work for the first time in nearly a decade. In late 2012, the Church assigned the first missionaries to Waterloo and shortly thereafter organized a member group. In April 2013, the Church formally organized the Waterloo Branch. By late 2013, the mission organized a separate missionary zone for Waterloo. In October 2013, the Church baptized its first converts in Makeni and mission leaders reported that there were approximately 50 members who lived in the city that joined the Church elsewhere in the country and relocated to Makeni. A member group had previously functioned in the city for many years but limited missionary resources, distance from mission headquarters, and the mission previously administering Liberia likely delayed mission leaders from opening the city to missionary work and organizing a branch. In November 2013, the Church organized its first official branch in Makeni. On the first Sunday as an official branch, over 20 walk-ins attended who were not members as well as many isolated Latter-day Saints that previously did not know that there was an LDS congregation in Makeni. Sacrament meeting attendance reach as high as 174 within the first few weeks of the new branch operating. Prior to the formal organization of the branch, senior missionaries secured missionary apartments and a building where the branch could hold its meetings.

Provided with the number of wards and branches as of late 2013, the Church reports a presence in the Freetown metropolitan area [includes Waterloo] (16), Bo (8), Kenema (4), and Makeni (1). The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission Branch services areas in the country outside the boundaries of the stake, three districts, and the Makeni Branch. A map displaying the location of LDS units and the status of LDS outreach by populated place can be found [here](#).

Successes

The recent opening of Waterloo and Makeni to missionary work constitutes a significant missionary and church growth development as no other cities have opened to missionaries since Kenema in 2004. Mission leaders have carefully evaluated conditions prior to opening additional locations to missionary activity and establishing official branches. Local members have served as the first branch presidents in both of these newly organized branches and missionaries have reported high receptivity among the population of both cities. The first converts baptized in Makeni prepared for many months or even years prior to joining the Church. This long-term preparation will improve the likelihood that these members will remain active throughout their lives and will become contributing members in their cities that play a significant role in the future growth and maturation of the Church. Favorable missionary conditions in Waterloo and Makeni may encourage mission leadership to open additional locations as many currently unreached areas may experience similar LDS growth results.

The Church has accelerated membership and congregational growth rates within the past several years. No other year for the Church in Sierra Leone has had as high of an annual increase in membership than for 2012 of 1,580. Membership increased by 13.2% in 2011 and 15.7% in 2012 - the highest annual percentage increases seen in the Church in Sierra Leone since the late 1990s when poor convert retention rates occurred. Commensurate membership and congregational growth rates since 2005 indicate significant improvements in convert retention and member activity rates as the average number of members per ward or branch only slightly increased from 418 in 2005 to 432 in 2012. To contrast, the average number of members per congregation steadily increased between 1991 and 2005, reaching 200 in the late 1990s, 300 in 2003, and 400 in 2005. The organization of a second mission in Ghana in 2005 that improved mission leader accountability and contact with the Church in Sierra Leone as well as the establishment of a separate mission in Sierra Leone in 2007 appear largely responsible for establishing commensurate membership and congregational growth rates since this time. Mission leaders have appeared to maintain minimally sufficient convert baptismal standards since the mid to late 2000s resulting in improved convert retention rates as evidenced by increasing numbers of active members and the organization of new congregations.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church in Sierra Leone has achieved greater success in local leadership development and self-sufficiency than in previous years. The organization of two additional districts and the establishment of the first stake within less than two years testifies to increasing numbers of full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders and substantial progress in local leadership development. Improved self-sufficiency in local leadership has permitted mission leaders to allocate greater amounts of resources from reactivation and leadership support to national outreach expansion efforts as evidenced by the opening of Waterloo and Makeni to missionary work.

There have been some instances of the Church engaging in church-planting efforts in lesser-reached areas of major cities. In the early 2010s, the Church organized two member groups in Kenema under the jurisdiction of the Kenema Branch to service areas distant from the branch meetinghouse. By late 2011, these two member groups became official branches and in late 2013 the original Kenema Branch split to create a fourth branch in the city. In late 2011, the Church in Freetown opened a member group in Kossoh Town which became a branch less than a year later.

Opportunities

The increasing prominence of the Church in Sierra Leone presents greater opportunities for national outreach expansion than ever before. The Church has experienced rapid membership growth within the past decade resulting in nominal church membership accounting for 0.20% of the population (one LDS per 481 people). The diverse ethnic composition of major cities such as Freetown, Bo, and Kenema has arisen due to many relocating to urban areas from rural communities throughout the country. Consequently the Church has appeared to baptize members from many, if not most, major ethnic groups native to Sierra Leone. Some of these members have since relocated to cities, towns, and villages where there is currently no LDS presence. The Church in Makeni, for example, had over 50 members in the city prior to the formal organization of a branch. Many other cities and large towns likely have as many as several dozen members such as Koidu, Lungi, Port Loko, and Tongo. Periodic visits from mission leadership and senior missionary couples to these and other cities and large towns on assignment to locate, teach, reassure, and administer isolated members and investigators provides a thrifty and efficient approach to assessing which locations exhibit the strongest receptivity and where member groups may be established. Mission leadership may determine to assign several full-time missionary companionships to a city or large town in order to open it to missionary work.

The reduced geographic size of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission provides excellent opportunities for accelerated national outreach expansion and church growth. The mission has consisted of only the country of Sierra Leone since July 2013. This has resulted in diminished administrative burden on mission leadership who previously traveled to Liberia to supervise full-time missionaries, districts, and mission branches. Concurrent increases in the numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the mission presents an unprecedented opportunity to make considerable progress in expanding national outreach at a pace never before experienced in the history of the Church in the country.

There are good opportunities for organizing additional congregations in the most populous cities such as Freetown, Bo, and Kenema. The Freetown metropolitan area constitutes nearly one-quarter of the national population and presents excellent opportunities for church planting. Currently the average ward or branch has 83,000 people within its boundaries. There remain many communities and neighborhoods that are lesser-reached by missionaries. Organizing member groups and branches that specifically service some of these individual neighborhoods and renting a space to hold worship services in these locations has enormous potential to accelerate growth. Recent church planting efforts in Freetown have been highly successful as evidenced by the number of congregations in the metropolitan area increasing from 11 in 2008 to 16 in late 2013. Communities and neighborhoods that may be favorable for the establishment of member groups or branches in this metropolitan area include Aberdeen, Allen Town, Angola Town, Baoma, Calaba Town, Devil Hole, Hastings, Jui, Kortright, Lakka, Mirimboe, Murray Town, Pamuronko, Regent, Rokel, and lesser-reached neighborhoods in the Waterloo area.

The recently opened cities of Waterloo and Makeni also present excellent opportunities for establishing member groups. The Church could feasibly organize two or three member groups in each city through utilizing surplus full-time missionary manpower and doubling missionary housing facilities for holding Sunday worship services; similar to the Church's pattern in Ghana and other countries in West Africa. Higher numbers of convert baptisms and more rapid congregational growth would likely occur in both these cities if the mission implements a church-planting approaches versus a church-splitting approach. Organizing member groups often correlates with greater local self-sufficiency, a stronger sense of LDS community, higher rates of member-missionary participation, and more penetrating LDS outreach than waiting for a single branch to reach an arbitrary number of active members to warrant the creation of a second branch.

Challenges

Past experience in other Sub-Saharan African nations suggests that the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission will only open a couple additional cities to missionary work within the foreseeable future if any additional cities open at all. Reports from missionaries serving in late 2013 indicate that the vast majority of surplus missionary manpower is channeled into branches that already have one or two missionary companionships assigned, with no intent to organize additional groups or branches within these areas. Building from a "centers of strength" model will likely delay the opening of many additional cities, towns, and villages for years or even decades to come unless mission leaders take a proactive stance to visit these locations and petition area leadership to expand missionary activity. This may result in the Church missing its window of opportunity when populations are most receptive, mission resources are most plentiful, and government and society are stable.

Several cultural conditions pose challenges for missionary activity and church growth. Sexual immorality is accepted by many. The Church has struggled to instill its teachings of chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage into both investigators and members. Missionaries have reported instances where individuals contemplating baptism participate in a polygamous marriage and therefore cannot join the Church unless they divorce all but one spouse. Although a handful of formerly polygamous individuals have taken measures to be in compliance with this requirement and have since joined the Church, there appear to have been many individuals who have not joined the Church because of this common cultural practice. Poverty and unemployment are serious societal problems that limit the Church's local self-sufficiency. Sierra Leone ranks as one of the poorest nations in the world as the GDP per capita was only \$1,400 in 2012.^[3] The undeveloped economy presents difficulties for the Church to locate suitable facilities to rent for organizing new congregations and for local members to become more financially stable.

Some branches experience low member activity and convert retention rates. Member activity problems appear the primary reason for why districts in Freetown East and Bo have not become stakes. In 2013, one missionary reported that his branch in Bo had only 100 of the 400 members on church records regularly attending church. Rushed prebaptismal preparation and a disconnect between full-time missionaries and local members and church leaders appear largely responsible for these activity problems. Casual societal attitudes regarding church attendance also appear partly responsible for these challenges.

The Church in Sierra Leone has historically experienced many leadership development problems. Many church leaders have limited leadership experience and struggle to adequately meet the minimal requirements for serving in these local leadership positions. Within the recent past, corruption in society has also appeared to spillover into the Church in a few locations. Returned missionaries report that the Church has released some past church leaders due to the mishandling of church finances.

The Church has not translated gospel study, missionary materials, or any LDS scriptures into the most commonly spoken indigenous languages such as Krio, Mende, and Themne. These and other indigenous languages in Sierra Leone have few individuals who are literate in these languages and may require audio translations to be effective in proselytism and gospel study. Nonetheless the translation of even a handful of church materials such as Gospel Principles and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet into these languages could improve testimony development and finding efforts.

Comparative Growth

Within the past five years, the Church in West Africa has experienced accelerated membership and congregational growth in most countries where the Church has an official presence. In Cote d'Ivoire, annual membership growth rates rebounded from generally 6-10% a year in the late 2000s to 14.5% in 2012. The annual net increase in the number of congregations swelled from two to six a year during most years in the late 2000s to 11 in 2012 and 18 in late 2013. The number of cities with an LDS presence also substantially increased during this period from five to 13. In Liberia, annual membership growth rates jumped from 2-9% between 2003 and 2011 to 14.4% in 2012. The number of congregations has more than doubled between 2007 and late 2013 from nine to 22 whereas the number of congregations was unchanged between 2000 and 2007. In Ghana, the Church has maintained nearly the same annual membership growth rates over the past couple decades although the net annual increase in congregations has increased from less than 10 a year to 21 in 2009, 19 in 2012, and at least 21 in 2013. The number of missions headquartered in Ghana has increased from only one in 2004 to four in 2013. Dozens of additional cities, towns, and villages have had an LDS congregation established for the first time within the past five years. In Togo, the Church has achieved approximately 20% or higher annual membership growth rates since 2009. The number of branches was unchanged between 1999 and 2005 although the number of branches increased from three in 2008 to 11 in 2012. In Benin, annual membership growth rates have accelerated from 17% in 2008 to 60% in 2012. The number of branches in Benin has increased from one in 2007 to 10 in 2013. In Nigeria, the Church has experienced annual membership growth rates of 5-6% since 2007; a reduction from 7-9% annual membership growth rates between 2002-2006. However, congregational growth

rates have accelerated in Nigeria from 1-6% for most years in the early and mid-2000s to 11.2% in 2009 and 11.1% in 2012. The net increase in the number of congregations in Nigeria has increased from generally 2-15 a year prior to 2009 to 17-35 a year since 2009 with the exception of the year 2011.

Other missionary-focused groups report similar growth trends as the LDS Church and many have comparable numbers of members and congregations. Evangelicals report a limited presence in Sierra Leone and claim 3.9% of the national population. [4] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintained a presence in Sierra Leone for several decades prior to the arrival of the LDS Church. Adventists have achieved steady membership growth and rapid congregational growth within the past 15 years as the number of total congregations increased from 57 in 1997 (51 churches [large congregations], 6 companies [small congregations]) to 129 in 2012 (52 churches, 77 companies). Adventists currently report 17,065 members. [5] No indigenous languages spoken in Sierra Leone appear to have translations of Adventist materials. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in Sierra Leone but have reported slow membership and congregational growth in recent years. In 2012, Witnesses reported 2,030 active members, 97 convert baptisms, and 35 congregations. [6] Witnesses currently maintain 34 congregations nationwide in the Freetown metropolitan area (14), Bo (3), Kenema (2), Buedu (1), Daru (1), Dia (1), Foadu (1), Kabala (1), Kailahun (1), Kangama (1), Koindu (1), Makeni (1), Moriba Town (1), Moyamba (1), Porto Loko (1), Sarma (1), Sefadu (1), Sondokolo Bendu (1). Provided with the number of congregations and groups conducted in each language, Witnesses conduct worship services in Krio (26), Kisi (7), American Sign Language (1 congregation, one group), and French (1 group). [7] Witnesses publish proselytism materials into six indigenous languages including Eastern Maninkakan, Kisi, Krio, Mende, Pular (Fulani), and Susu. [8] In 2012, the Church of the Nazarene reported 193 full members, an average of 925 attending weekly worship, 99 new members who joined the Church that year, and 36 congregations (two organized churches [established congregations], 34 unorganized churches [recently planted congregations]). [9]

Limitations

No reports from local church leaders or members were available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish the annual number of converts baptized per country. The Church does not publish data on the country of origin for missionaries serving and there were no reliable reports available regarding the number native members serving full-time missions. The Church does not publish the number of members per administrative division, city, or congregation.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Sierra Leone appears favorable for the foreseeable future due to significant increases in the number of missionaries assigned to the country, moderate levels of convert retention, high receptivity in most areas, recent efforts to expand missionary activity into additional cities, commensurate membership and congregational growth rates over the past five years, and two districts becoming close to reaching the minimal criteria to be organized as stakes. However, it is unclear whether mission leaders will take a proactive stance on opening additional cities, towns, and villages to missionary activity due to the Church's centers of strength policy and focus on assisting remaining districts to become stakes. The recent experiences of opening Waterloo and Makeni to missionary work and organizing member groups in lesser-reached areas of major cities deserves serious consideration for additional locations throughout the country as the primary mechanism for perpetuating growth.

[1] "Sierra Leone," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 18 November 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208192>

[2] Thomas, President Kent; Thomas, Sister Carolyn. "Church, tribal leaders pleased with start of first chapel in Sierra Leone," LDS Church News, 6 November 2004. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/46437/Church-tribal-leaders-pleased-with-start-of-first-chapel-in-Sierra-Leone.html>

[3] "Sierra Leone," The World Factbook, cia.gov, retrieved 18 November 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sl.html>

[4] "Sierra Leone," Operation World, retrieved 16 November 2013. <http://www.operationworld.org/country/sier/owtext.html>

[5] "Sierra Leone Mission (1945-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2247607

[6] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrtZGT

[8] "Publications," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 16 November 2013. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=sus>

[9] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2002-2012," nazarene.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDwQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnazarene.org%2F>