

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Missionary and Church Growth Successes in Liberia

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Overview

Liberia is a West African nation inhabited by 4.1 million people. Christians comprise a strong majority (85.6%), whereas Muslims constitute the largest religious minority group (12.2%). The most populous ethnic groups include the Kpelle (20.3%), Bassa (13.4%), Grebo (10%), Grio (8.0%), Mano (7.9%), Kru (6.0%), Lorma (5.1%), Kissi (4.8%), and Gola (4.4%). English is the official language but is only spoken by approximately 20% of the population.[1] Most of the population speaks their ethnic language as a first language.

The LDS Church has maintained an official presence in Liberia since the late 1980s and experienced slow to moderate growth during most years in the 1990s and 2000s. Within the past few years, the Church in Liberia has begun to experience accelerated growth and greater opportunities for national outreach expansion.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Liberia and highlights recent church growth and missionary successes. Opportunities and challenges for growth are analyzed. The size and growth trends of the Church in Liberia are compared to the Church in other West African countries with an LDS presence and contrasted to the growth and size of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence in Liberia. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church established its initial presence in Liberia during the mid-1980s. In 1985, the Church held its first meetings in Monrovia.[2] In 1987, senior missionaries arrived and baptized the first converts, and the Church dedicated the country for missionary work.[3] In 1988, the Church organized the Liberia Monrovia Mission. The mission closed in 1991 due to civil war and Liberia was reassigned to the Ghana Accra Mission. In 2007, the Church reassigned Liberia to the newly organized Sierra Leone Freetown Mission. Liberia became its own mission in 2013 when the Church organized the Liberia Monrovia Mission.

Variable membership growth rates have occurred throughout the duration of an LDS presence. In March 1988, there were 133 members.[4] Membership reached 900 in 1991, 2,000 in 1997, 2,956 in 2000, 4,016 in 2003, 5,039 in 2008, 5,863 in 2011, and 6,709 in 2012. Between the early 1990s and early 2000s, annual membership growth rates ranged from as low as 7.1% (1994-1995) to as high as 27.8% (1992-1993) but generally ranged from 10-15%. Slow membership growth occurred during the mid and late 2000s as annual membership growth rates ranged from 3.3% (2005) to 8.6% (2007) and averaged around 3-5%.

Stagnant congregational growth rates have occurred most years since the establishment of an LDS presence. The number of congregations totaled eight in 1991, seven in 1993, nine in 1997, and 12 in 1999. The Church organized its first district (Monrovia) in 1989. A second district began operating in 1995 (Monrovia Bushrod Island). In 2000, the Church organized the Monrovia Liberia Stake from the two former districts and closed three branches, resulting in the total number of congregations decreasing to nine (eight wards, one branch). No change in the number of congregations occurred until 2007 when the Church discontinued the Monrovia Liberia Stake and returned all wards to branch status. The Church reorganized two member districts to service membership within the former stake and utilized the same names as the discontinued districts that operated in the late 1990s.

Several significant church growth developments have transpired since the late 2000s. Steady congregational growth has occurred as the number of branches increased from nine in 2007 to 11 in 2008, 12 in 2009, 13 in 2010, 18 in 2011, 20 in 2012, and 22 in 2013. In 2008, the Church organized its first branches outside of the Monrovia metropolitan area in Harbel and Kakata; however, missionaries were not assigned to these cities until mid-2013. Annual membership growth rates accelerated during the early 2010s to 7.6% in 2011, 14.4% in 2012, and 20.5% in 2013; substantially higher rates than during the previous decade. In early 2014, the Church had 10 branches in the Monrovia Liberia Bushrod District, nine branches in the Monrovia Liberia District, and three branches assigned to the Liberia Monrovia Mission (Harbel, Kakata, and the Liberia Monrovia Mission Branches). In mid-2014, the Church organized a third district in Monrovia called the Paynesville Liberia District.

There have been several noteworthy developments pertaining to member activity and the efficiency of missionary work. In late 2013, the mission reported that 78 male members were sustained to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood in the Monrovia Liberia District and that 66 male members were sustained to received the Melchizedek Priesthood in the Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island District. The Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island District had over 1,200 people in attendance at district conference in late 2013 and 940 in attendance at a district conference in March 2014. Missionaries reported that 1,201 converts join the Church in Liberia in 2013 and that the average missionary baptized 18 converts during the year.

In early 2014, most branches appeared to have 100 or more active members. Some branches have significantly fewer active members. In February 2014, a missionary serving in one branch reported that only 20 members attended sacrament meeting on some Sundays.

In early 2014, missionaries serving in the Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island District reported that the district presidency had a goal for the district to become a stake in 2014.

In 2013, the average branch in Monrovia included 65,300 people within its geographical boundaries.

Successes

The reversal of stagnant congregational growth in the late 2000s and early 2010s has constituted a major success for the Church in Liberia as stagnant congregational growth persisted from the 1990s to mid 2000s. The creation of new congregations strongly correlates with "real growth" indicators such as increasing sacrament meeting attendance and larger numbers of active priesthood holders. Between 2007 and 2012, the number of branches increased by 122% yet membership increased by only 37%. Congregational growth rates outpacing membership growth rates suggests improving convert retention and member activity rates, and the establishment of congregations in additional locations. These findings have been supported by recent reports of well-attended district conferences in Monrovia and steady growth in church attendance for many branches.

Monrovia is the second most well-reached metropolitan area in Sub-Saharan Africa with one million or more inhabitants as evidenced by the ratio of branches to the city population. The average branch including approximately 65,000 people within its boundaries, providing good saturation of LDS outreach and easy accessibility for most of the urban population. The comparatively large number of congregations to metropolitan population size suggests that the Church has not only been proactive in increasing the proximity of branches to the population but that the city's inhabitants have exhibited strong receptivity to outreach, thereby encouraging mission leaders to organize additional congregations.

The permanent assignment of missionaries to Harbel and Kakata in 2013 constitutes a major success for the Church in expanding outreach outside of Monrovia. Missionary efforts in these small cities have yielded good results despite the short duration that missionaries have served in these locations. By early 2014, missionaries serving in both locations indicated that the branches had nearly outgrown their meetinghouse facilities. Missionary work successes in these locations may encourage mission leadership to consider the opening of additional cities and towns to missionary activity.

The reestablishment of a mission in Liberia presents good opportunities to help the Church grow and expand outreach due to increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned and more supervision and contact with mission leadership. The Church has allocated limited mission resources and missionary manpower to Liberia for nearly its entire history as foreign missions have serviced the country for all but a few years. A mission presidency that exclusively concentrates its efforts on missionary work in Liberia has excellent potential to take advantage of favorable conditions for outreach expansion and local leadership development.

The Church has translated two materials into Kpelle, namely Gospel Principles (old edition) and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet. These materials provide missionaries with proselytism opportunities among those who are literate in Kpelle but exhibit limited fluency in English.

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities for expanding missionary activity to additional cities and towns due to greater mission resource allocation since the organization of the Liberia Monrovia Mission in 2013, good receptivity to LDS outreach in all locations where

missionaries have proselytized, and many medium and small cities yet to be reached by missionaries. There are seven cities with 20,000 or more inhabitants that do not have an LDS presence. All these cities present some of the most favorable conditions for expanding missionary activity, including Gbargna, Buchanan, Ganta, Zwedru, Harper, Pleebo, and Foya. Gbargna and Buchanan are the second the third most populous cities in Liberia, respectively, and coincidentally are among the closest in geographic proximity to Monrovia. Mission leaders and senior missionary couples visiting these locations to assess conditions, locate isolated members and investigators, and hold cottage meetings will be necessary steps to open these cities to missionary activity. Based upon the pattern that the Church opened Harbel and Kakata, the Church may elect to organize member groups in locations where multiple members who actively follow LDS teachings reside prior to the arrival of full-time missionaries. However, it will be necessary for church leaders to open some locations to missionary work even if no known members reside in the city. Experience in other West African cities that opened to missionary work where no Latter-day Saints where known to previously reside has demonstrated impressive results as long as a church-planting versus a church-splitting approach is utilized, such as in Sunyani, Ghana.

Monrovia continues to present good opportunities for opening additional congregations despite is relatively high concentration of LDS mission outreach centers. Urban areas on the outskirts of the metropolitan area have received minimal outreach and offer some of the greatest opportunities for growth. Many of the most recently organized branches have been created in these locations and have experienced steady growth such as the Banjor, Brewerville, and Tinker Village Branches. Prospects appear favorable for growth if mission and district leadership focus on the establishment of member groups and branches in northern areas (Chase Town and Jahtono) and southern and eastern areas (Duazon, Kaiph Town, and Wamba Town).

Small towns and villages remain unreached by LDS outreach but nonetheless provide good opportunities for outreach. Most ethnolinguistic groups native to Liberia are predominantly Christian and followers of indigenous religions. Tolerance for Christian proselytism is high in most areas. However, rural conditions will likely make the assignment of full-time missionaries to these locations prohibitive due to small target populations and remote location. The assignment of a few missionary companionships as traveling missionaries may effectively reach these populations, identify suitable locations for holding cottage meetings, and lay the foundation for member groups. Traveling missionaries can work from a central location and visit surrounding communities to meet with members and investigators, and assess conditions in previously unreached locations.

Challenges

The Church in Liberia has experienced problematic member activity and convert retention rates within the past two decades. These problems are evident in stagnant congregational growth for many years and the return of the Monrovia Liberia Stake to district status. The First Liberian Civil War (1989-1996) and the Second Liberia Civil War (1999-2003) each displaced LDS populations, disrupted LDS operations, and destabilized local leadership. During the civil war in the early 1990s, there were 400 members unaccounted for, 400 who fled the country, and 400 who remained in Liberia.[5] Many Liberian Latter-day Saints displaced by the two civil wars have relocated to the Buduburam Refugee Camp near Accra, Ghana and today comprise two wards in the Accra Ghana Kasoa Stake. Political conditions have remained stable in Liberia for over a decade, resulting in an end to the displacement of LDS populations. However, inactivity and convert attrition problems remain problematic as a result of quick-baptism tactics. This finding is evident in district conference attendance constituting less than half of total church membership within districts.

Local leadership development problems also significantly contributed to the discontinuation of the Monrovia Liberia Stake in 2007. The stake appeared to be discontinued due to inadequate numbers of active, tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders, administration and leadership challenges, and low member activity rates. In addition to setbacks with maintaining the number of needed active Melchizedek Priesthood holders to properly function, there appeared to be significant local leadership development problems as evidenced by missionaries reporting problems with local leaders mishandling church finances in the late 2000s. Tribalism, corruption, illiteracy, and poverty all present challenges for achieving self-sufficient church leadership and perpetual growth due to limited economic opportunities and potential for ethnic conflict.

Low literacy rates and linguistic diversity challenge efforts to open additional cities to missionary work outside of Monrovia. Local Liberian full-time missionaries may be instrumental in the opening of these areas to missionary work if they have language abilities in the languages spoken in these areas. Only Kpelle has LDS materials translated, and these materials are limited to only two proselytism and member instruction resources. Prospects for additional LDS materials translated into Kpelle and other most commonly-spoken indigenous languages such as Bassa and Grebo dialects appear likely in the coming years. Several languages are not written, which will require audio-translations if LDS materials are translated into these languages one day.[6]

There are a handful of ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to Liberia that maintain strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam. These people groups are clustered along the Sierra Leonean and Guinean borders, and include the Gola, Vai, Manya, and Maninka.[7] Although these Muslim peoples present unique proselytism opportunities for the Church due to local laws permitting missionary work among these peoples, receptivity of these groups to other missionary-focused Christian groups has been very low. Consequently, it is likely that the Church will experience slow growth if outreach occurs in locations where these people groups traditionally reside.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Liberia has experienced one of the most intense accelerations in growth among countries in West Africa within

the past five years. Prior to this acceleration, the Church in Liberia experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth trends in the region. Most countries in West Africa have experienced steady or accelerating membership and congregational growth rates within the past decade. In Sierra Leone, annual membership growth rates increased from 3-12% between 2000 and 2010 to 13.2% in 2011, 15.7% in 2012, and 12.1% in 2013. The number of congregations has more than doubled between 2005 and early 2014 from 15 to 31 whereas the number of congregations increased by only one between 1993 and 2005. In Cote d'Ivoire, annual membership growth rates rebounded from generally 6-10% a year in the late 2000s to 14.5% in 2012 and 21.4% in 2013. The annual net increase in the number of congregations swelled from 2-6 a year during most years in the late 2000s to 11 in 2012 and 19 in 2013. The number of cities with an LDS presence also substantially increased during this period from five to 13. 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 20 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 11 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, 11.1% in 2012, and 8.0% in 2013. 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.

Essentially all missionary-focused Christian groups with a worldwide presence report a significantly larger presence in Liberia than the LDS Church. Many of these groups operate throughout the country, unlike the LDS Church whose operations remain restricted to Monrovia and only two other cities. Evangelicals have a pervasive presence and claim 14.6% of the population.[8] In 2013, Witnesses reported a high of 6,184 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 260 baptisms, and 114 congregations.[9] Witnesses translate proselytism materials into Bassa, Kisi, and Mende.[10] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence in Liberia and has experienced slow growth within the past decade. In 2002, Adventists reported 38 churches (large congregations), 58 companies (small congregations), 1,993 baptisms, and 19,604 members, whereas in 2012, Adventists reported 66 churches, 39 companies, 1,938 baptisms, and 20,656 members.[11] The Church of the Nazarene maintains a widespread presence and currently experiences slow growth. In 2012, Nazarenes reported 6,226 full members, 886 associate members, 526 conversions, 225 baptisms, an average weekly worship attendance of 3,739, and 123 congregations (82 organized, 41 not yet organized).[12]

Limitations

The Church does not publish country-by-country data for many church growth indicators such as the number of convert baptisms, the increase in children of record, the number of members serving full-time missions, and the number of full-time missionaries assigned. No data is released to the public regarding various member activity indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders. Although several reports from young full-time missionaries, senior missionary couples, and mission presidents were available regarding recent church growth developments, there were no reports available from local members and church leaders. The Church does not publish a breakdown of its membership distribution by administrative division for Liberia.

Future Prospects

Accelerated membership and congregational growth within the past five years, the creation of the Liberia Monrovia Mission in 2013, the organization of a third member district in 2014, and progress with Monrovia districts nearing the qualifications to become stakes suggests that the outlook for future LDS growth in Liberia appears favorable. The Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island District may become a stake within the near future as nominal membership and congregation requirements appear close to reaching the needed number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders to operate as a stake. Prospects for opening additional cities to missionary work will substantially improve once at least one of the districts becomes a stake in order to liberate mission resources previously allocated to stake preparation and member and leadership support. Maintaining acceptably high standards for convert baptism and gradually handing off leadership responsibilities to local members will be essential for the Church to avoid previous member activity, convert retention, and leadership development problems that persisted during much of the 1990s and 2000s.

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[3] "9 missions created; world total now 221," LDS Church News, 19 March 1988. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17973/9-missions-created-world-total-now-221.html

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