

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Rapid LDS Growth in Cotonou, Benin

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Overview

Initially established in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Church in Cotonou, Benin has recently experienced some of the most rapid LDS growth in the world. Within the past five years, the number of members and branches in the country has quintupled. This rapid growth has occurred due to increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to the country, high receptivity to LDS outreach, good member activity and convert retention rates, prolific member group and branch growth, and the organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2012.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Cotonou, Benin and highlights statistical figures that evidence rapid church growth. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth are discussed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in Cotonou to other countries and cities West Africa and contrasts the size of other nontraditional Christian groups in Cotonou to the LDS Church. Limitations to these data and findings are discussed. Prospects for future growth are examined.

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LDS Background

The Church established its initial presence in Benin during the late 1990s. The Church evacuated a French-speaking senior missionary couple previously assigned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission due to civil war and commissioned them to obtain legal status for the Church in Benin and Togo. In 1998, missionaries baptized the first convert in Benin and organized a member group. In 2003, the Cotonou Group had approximately 25 members; including seven Melchizedek Priesthood holders.[1] In 2005, the Church reported 95 members and one branch:[2] the Cotonou Branch (later renamed Gbedjromede). Membership increased to 216 in 2007 and 676 in 2011. In 2008, two additional branches were organized (Akpakpa and Menontin). In 2011, the Church organized the Benin Cotonou Mission from the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission. The new mission serviced both Benin and Togo. The number of members enrolled in seminary and institute increased from 92 during the 2009-2010 school year[3] to 157 during the 2011-2012 school year;[4] a 71% increase.

In April 2012, the number of branches increased from three to six as the mission organized three new branches (Fidjrosse, Finagnon, and Gbegame). In October 2012, the Church organized the Cotonou Benin District - the first member district in the country - with all six branches pertaining to the new district. In October 2012, missionaries reported plans to organize a member group and later a branch in the Aibatin area. By year-end 2012, the number of members on church records increased to 1,081; a 60% annual increase. In 2013, the number of branches increased from six to 10 as four new branches were organized (Aibatin, Avotrou, Cococodji, and Jericho).

During the first half of 2013, missionaries reported that approximately 70 converts were baptized a month among the three missionary zones in Cotonou. Missionaries serving in some branches reported inadequate seating for members and investigators during Sunday meetings resulting in full-time missionaries standing during sacrament meeting services. Organized as a member group in May 2013, the Cococodji Branch reached over 100 members and investigators attending church services on Sundays prior to becoming an official branch in July 2013. In mid-2013, senior missionaries reported plans to organize two additional branches in Cotonou before the end of the year with the possibility of a third branch to be created for a grand total of 10 or 11 branches by year-end 2013. A map displaying the current location of branches in Cotonou can be found here.

Successes

The recent rapid growth of the Church in Benin illustrates the remarkable success that the Church can achieve when sizable mission resources are allocated to a location that previously received minimal outreach but has a population that exhibits good receptivity. The organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission occurred when there were only three branches that reported directly to the mission as no member district operated at the time. Within approximately the first two years of the mission in operation, the Church established its first member district and organized seven additional branches. Church membership tripled in size during this short period - a feat that often takes many more years or even decades to accomplish among countries with comparable numbers of members on church records. The Church in neighboring Togo experienced similar congregational and membership growth trends under the jurisdiction of the Benin Cotonou Mission. The small administrative burden on the mission president, plentiful mission resources to expand outreach, and a church-planting rather than a church-splitting approach to growth has resulted in some of the most spectacular growth that the LDS Church has achieved within the past decade. The conditions in which the Benin Cotonou Mission was organized gives reason to suggest that the Church may achieve comparable results if missions are organized in additional countries with a fledgling church presence, no LDS missions at present, and populations that exhibit good levels of receptivity. The Church in countries with at least one LDS branch that may experience similar growth as achieved in Benin include Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gabon, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, and South Sudan. Accelerating growth and organizing missions in these countries will likely depend on whether the Church can secure an adequate number of visas to accommodate larger numbers of missionaries to properly staff a mission.

The Church in Benin has been self-sufficient in meeting local leadership needs. All branches are led by a local member serving as branch president and mission leaders have carefully consulted with branch presidents in making plans to open additional member groups and branches. Commensurate membership and congregational growth trends in Benin suggest that the Church has successfully augmented the size of priesthood leadership manpower by helping new converts progress in their activity in the Church to the point that they become leadership assets to their congregations. This finding repudiates the erroneous assumption held by some members and church leaders that rapid membership growth coincides with low convert retention rates and undeveloped local leadership. The strength of local leadership development is further attested by the Benin Cotonou Mission organizing branches into their own member district during this period.

Current membership and congregational growth rates are impressive. The Church in Benin may double total membership on church records within a single year from 1,081 at year-end 2012 to over 2,000 by year-end 2013 if missionaries maintain the rate of convert baptisms achieved during the first half of 2013 of approximately 70 converts a month. Within a two-year period, the number of branches increased from three to 10. To contrast, the Church in most countries has taken many years or decades to double the number of members and congregations.

Mission leaders have consistently implemented a church planting vision that has focused on continuously opening additional member groups and branches in lesser-reached areas of Cotonou. Several recently opened branches initially met as member groups. Travel costs have prevented some members from attending church regularly but this challenge has encouraged branch, district, and mission leaders to organize additional member groups and branches closer to members who reside far from the nearest LDS meetinghouse. Strong receptivity combined with outreach expansion vision and good progress in local leadership development have culminated in rapid growth.

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities for the expansion of LDS outreach in Benin. Unreached cities and towns within close proximity of Cotonou have large populations that are easy to access from mission headquarters in Cotonou. The inhabitants in these urban areas will likely exhibit similar levels of receptivity to LDS outreach as in Cotonou due to similar demographic and cultural characteristics. Cities that appear most favorable for the introduction of official proselytism efforts include Abomey, Calavi, Come, Ekpe, Godomey, Ouidah, and Porto-Novo. Each of these locations could feasibly have multiple missionary companionships initially assigned to organize two or more member groups for holding church services. Success in expanding outreach to these locations will be more likely if local branch and district leaders participate in the process. Senior missionaries report that there are several members who reside in Porto-Novo, suggesting that this city will be the next location to open to formal missionary activity and have a member group established if a member group does not already function.

There remain additional opportunities to open member groups in lesser-reached areas of Cotonou notwithstanding the rapid saturation of LDS outreach in the city within the past couple years. The recapitulation of the church planting strategy currently employed by the mission continues to pose good prospects for additional growth. Communities within the city that appear favorable for the organization of member groups include Agonkame, Ayelawadje, Enagnon, Gbedokpo, Houeyiho, Kokotome, Tchanhounkpame, Yagbe, and Zogbo. In addition to reaching lesser-reached communities in Cotonou, there are opportunities to organize language-specific congregations in the Cotonou area that service speakers of English and additional languages such as Yoruba.

Challenges

Only small numbers of Beninese serve full-time missions resulting in the mission heavily depending on foreign missionaries to staff its ranks. With the vast majority of church membership joining the Church within the past two years, it is expected that few members serve missions due to the comparatively small size of total church membership and the Church requiring full-time missionaries to have joined the Church to wait at least one year prior to beginning missionary service. Methods that can be

implemented to help augment the number of Beninese members serving missions include full-time missionaries pairing up with local members for a day or an evening, assigning a mission-aged member to serve a "mini-mission" with a full-time missionary for a missionary transfer period, and holding missionary preparation classes offered though the Church Education System that are accessible and engaging for youth and young adults.

The Church has only had one mission president preside over the Benin Cotonou Mission since its organization, President Weed. Consequently it is unclear whether his successors will implement similar growth strategies as aggressively and tactfully as he has since the beginning of his service. There is a risk of rapid growth coming to a dramatic halt if the succeeding mission president reverses outreach expansion vision in order to organize ward-size branches so that a stake can be organized in Cotonou. Past experience in the Church in other West Africa countries has shown that continuing to open additional congregations without consolidating smaller ones is often the most appropriate and effective course of action to prepare districts to become stakes and to maintain steady congregational and active membership growth.

The Church has virtually no translations of missionary and gospel study resources in indigenous languages commonly spoken in Benin. Fon is the only language with a translation of a church material and the Church reports only one proselytism material translated into this language (the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith).[5] Literacy rates for Fon and other indigenous languages are extremely low (i.e. 10% for Fon)[6] and suggest that no urgent need exists for printed church materials for many of these languages.

Comparative Growth

The Church has not experienced as large of a numerical increase in the number of branches in any other country that had only one branch in 2007. The Church in Benin has experienced some of the most rapid annual membership growth rates of any country in the world within the past couple years. Compared to many major cities in West Africa, the Church in Cotonou remains significantly less prevalent. In 2013, the average branch in Cotonou included 124,000 people within its boundaries whereas the average congregation in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire included 110,000 people within its boundaries, the average congregation in Freetown, Sierra Leone included 88,700 people within its boundaries, the average congregation in Monrovia, Liberia included 65,300 people within its boundaries, and the average congregation in Benin City, Nigeria included 37,400 people within its boundaries.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report a more widespread presence in Cotonou compared to the LDS Church. In mid-2013, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 29 congregations based within Littoral Department that provided church services in six different languages;[7] approximately three times the number of LDS branches in operation. Witnesses maintain a pervasive presence in southern areas of Benin and a widespread presence in the central and northernmost Departments such as Alibori and Atacora. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a small presence in Benin compared to other West African countries as in 2011 there were 5,400 members, 16 churches, and 43 companies.[8] Adventists have reported strong membership growth but slow congregational growth in recent years. The Church of the Nazarene reports a pervasive presence in Benin with over 1,000 congregations nationwide.[9]

Limitations

Although there were abundant reports from full-time missionaries regarding recent growth developments in Cotonou, no local member reports were available. The Church does not publish data on the number of convert baptisms a year in individual missions or countries. It is unclear how many converts are baptized a year in Cotonou and what percentage of members are active. The Church does not publish data on member activity and convert retention rates. Only official congregations (wards and branches) are reported on the Church's online meetinghouse locator. It is unclear whether any member groups currently function within Cotonou or other areas of the country.

Future Prospects

Increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to the Benin Cotonou Mission, the worldwide surge in the full-time missionary force, and continued outreach expansion vision maintained by mission leaders generate a positive outlook for future LDS growth in Cotonou, Benin. Additional branches will likely continue to be organized with perhaps at least one or two new branches organized every year. The creation of a stake may be forthcoming within the next five years if there are at least five ward-sized branches established and the district provides enough active, full-tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders to meet the minimal qualifications for a stake to operate. A second member district may be organized instead of a stake if warranted by local needs. Prospects appear favorable for the creation of a separate mission for Togo within the near future which would allow for greater outreach expansion focus to be placed on opening additional cities to missionary activity in southern Benin such as Porto-Novo, Abomey-Calavi, and Godomey.

[1] "Sunday School group in Benin prepares way for legal status," LDS Church News, 31 May 2013. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/43820/Sunday-School-group-in-Benin-prepares-way-for-legal-status.html

[2] "2005 Membership Statistics," Deseret News 2007 Church Almanac, p. 629

[3] "Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2011"

[4] "Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2013"

[5] store.lds.org, accessed 1 August 2013.

[6] "Fon," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 August 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/fon

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," www.jw.org, retrieved 1 August 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[8] "Benin Mission (1989-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 1 August 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10025

[9] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 1 August 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=BN&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=