

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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The Opening of Tamale, Ghana to Missionary Work

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Overview

Located in northern Ghana, Tamale is a city of approximately 350,000[1] to 560,000 people[2] and the regional capital of Northern Region. Climate consists of one rainy season from April to September and one dry season from October to March. Harmattan winds bring sand and dust from the Sahara during the dry season and can cause public health problems and transportation disruptions due to low visibility. Tamale serves as the commercial center for northern Ghana and has experienced rapid modernization and economic growth in recent years. Approximately 84% of the city population is Muslim whereas approximately 14% of the city population is Christian. Major Christian groups include Catholics (6% of city population) and Pentecostals (3% of city population). Approximately two-thirds of the Tamale Metropolitan district resides in urban areas.[3]

This case study reviews the recent establishment of an LDS missionary presence in Tamale and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. The opening of Tamale to missionary work is compared to the opening of other cities in Ghana to missionary work. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups in the Tamale area is summarized. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for future growth are summarized.

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LDS Background

In late 2011, mission leaders in the Ghana Accra Mission announced to full-time missionaries preliminary plans to open Tamale to proselytizing missionaries within the next couple years. In July 2012, the Church created a third mission in Ghana based in Kumasi from a realignment of the Ghana Accra and Ghana Cape Coast Missions. In late 2012, the Ghana Kumasi Mission president visited Tamale to assess conditions for assigning missionaries and meet with isolated members who had relocated to the city for education or employment purposes.

In early February 2013, eight full-time missionaries were assigned to Tamale, including four black African and four white North American elders. Mission leaders reported that the number of members located in the city had risen to over 20 by the time missionaries arrived. Two member groups were simultaneously organized under the Ghana Kumasi Mission Branch with high expectation that these groups would reach branch status within the near future. Due to the predominantly Muslim population and the newly established church presence in the city, mission leaders admonished full-time missionaries to avoid overtly proselytizing Muslims and to seek out Christians for teaching opportunities. However, it was unclear whether this policy remained in effect as of early 2015.

By mid-April 2013, missionaries reported that the number of investigators nearly outnumbered the number of members attending church services in one of the groups and that the first convert baptisms were planned. Missionaries also reported plans to operate four member groups within the Tamale area to reduce travel times and further saturate the city with LDS outreach.

The Church organized its first two branches in Tamale during the spring of 2014, namely the Education Ridge and Vitin Branches. The mission organized a third branch in late 2014 called the Kanvilli Branch. The Church created its fourth branch

(Kalpohin) in early 2015.

Local members in Tamale have reported significant progress baptizing and retaining new converts indigenous to northern Ghana. Members reported approximately 200 members in the Tamale area in March 2015 and noted that 85% of church membership in the city were natives to northern Ghana. Multiple members who serve in branch presidencies are natives to Tamale. One member reported that 70% of members in his branch were active and that 80-89% of new converts remained active one year after baptism.

Local members reported in March 2015 that the Ghana Kumasi Mission was making preliminary plans to organize the four Tamale branches into its own district and to create two additional member groups in the Tamale area. Members also reported that a group of Latter-day Saints who reside in Bolgatanga. However, it was unclear whether these members were organized into a member group.

Successes

The Church has taken great care to tactfully open Tamale to formal missionary activity. Church leaders located over 20 Latter-day Saints prior to the assignment of full-time missionaries. Local members offer valuable local member support and leadership development needed to establish a permanent and self-sufficient church presence. Mission leaders simultaneously organized two member groups when proselytizing missionaries were initially assigned to the city, thereby providing two locations from which to base proselytism efforts and provide greater proselytism saturation compared to a single member group. The Church has since organized four branches that appear to have branch presidencies fully staffed by local members - a significant accomplishment considering formal missionary activity has only occurred since February 2013. The Church has achieved good convert retention rates as evidenced by the advancement of member groups to branches and high member activity rates within the city. Mission leaders have also continued to advocate for the opening of additional member groups to further saturate the city with congregations and establish the Church in additional communities.

The opening of Tamale to formal proselytism marks the first time the Church in Ghana has initiated missionary work in the predominantly Muslim north. The assignment of an equal number of North American and African missionaries during the initial opening of the city to missionary work demonstrates wise appropriation of surplus missionary manpower from North America. This tactic has curtailed potential dependence on non-African missionaries to expand outreach due to equal allocation of Black African missionaries. Native African full-time missionaries exhibit greater familiarity with local culture than North American missionaries, thereby improving the Church's ability to tailor teaching approaches to the needs of African investigators.

Opportunities

Widespread, long-term political stability and pervasive religious freedom in Tamale generates a highly favorable environment for missionary activity notwithstanding strong ethnoreligious ties with Islam for some major ethnic groups indigenous to the area. Societal norms and local laws in most Muslim-majority cities do not permit open Christian proselytism. Consequently the Church has unique opportunities to engage in open proselytism in Tamale compared to other locations with predominantly Muslim populations. Tamale may offer a safe testing ground for the Church to experiment with adapting teaching and proselytism approaches to the religious background and cultural conditions of Muslims. Tamale's location distant from previously established outreach centers offers new opportunities to reach ethnic groups who have previously received no Latter-day Saint gospel witness such as the Dagbani. Many of these previously unreached ethnic groups are traditionally Muslim with small numbers of Christians.

Tamale provides good opportunities to base future outreach expansion in northern Ghana. As of April 2015, no other location in the three northern regions of Ghana had an LDS presence including the entire Upper East and Upper West Regions. Cities with at least 20,000 inhabitants located in these three northern Ghana regions include Bakwu, Bolgatanga, Navrongo, Salaga, Savelugu, Wa, and Yendi. Each of these cities pose good prospects for future LDS outreach if initiated by mission leaders due to small but visible numbers of Christians in each of these locations, sizable populations concentrated in small geographical areas, and widespread religious freedom in the region. Mission leaders could assign a senior missionary couple to Tamale with the purpose of conducting investigatory efforts in currently unreached cities to determine which locations may be most receptive to prospective outreach. It is likely that many of these most populous unreached cities have a few isolated members who may become active if missionaries visit them and orchestrate the establishment of member groups.

The large size of Tamale's population provides extensive opportunities for the establishment of additional member groups and increasing the saturation of LDS outreach. The Church would need to operate 25 member groups if the Church were to duplicate its efforts to plant new groups in Tamale to the same level of saturation as in Sunyani - a city recently opened to LDS outreach in 2010 where the average member group serviced 22,000 people within the first year of formal proselytism. Perceived lower rates of receptivity to LDS teachings in Tamale and limited missionary manpower would make such a massive effort to open so many miniature member groups impractical. However, there are good opportunities to regularly establish additional member groups in proportion to the availability to mission resources, receptivity to outreach, and advancement of previously established member groups into branches.

The small but steadily increasing number of new converts in Tamale offer immediate opportunities for member-missionary work. The Church has not always benefited from this resource in opening additional locations to proselytism. Member collaboration

and mentoring in the finding, teaching, and convert retention processes could yield long-lasting results in terms of the development and continued maturation of cohesive, self-sufficient, missionary-minded congregations that exhibit high convert retention rates.

High member activity rates permit missionaries to primarily concentrate on finding and teaching investigators. Full-time missionaries can almost exclusively focus on finding investigators and preparing converts for baptism rather than channeling sizable amounts of energy and time into reactivation and post-baptismal convert retention efforts. Maintaining sufficiently high convert baptismal standards and ensuring investigators become socially integrated into cohesive branches and member groups will be crucial towards achieving long-term "real growth."

Challenges

The Church in Ghana continues to rely on area and mission leaders to head the expansion of LDS missionary activity into previously unreached areas. Although the structure and function of the LDS Church is such that mission and area leaders are needed to approve the opening of new member groups and the assignment of full-time missionaries to additional locations, greater involvement from local church leaders and ordinary members in these efforts can yield better results. Member-missionary work has significantly fewer limitations and administrative hurdles to overcome in order to preach the gospel to additional locations and accelerate growth. Mission leaders have been effective in locating isolated members in locations where no formal church presence operates, but limited manpower and time constraints seriously restrict the number of visits to previously unreached areas. Greater delegation of mission responsibilities to local members, senior missionary couples, and young, full-time missionaries has enormous potential to open previously unreached areas to missionary work and improve member-missionary participation.

Restricting missionary activity to non-Muslims poses a serious challenge for long-term missionary work. It is unclear why such strict proselytism protocols have been put into place considering no such restrictions are implemented in other West African countries with sizable numbers of Muslims such as Sierra Leone and among Muslims in southern Ghana. Unfamiliarity with local culture and the recent establishment of a church presence for the first in northern Ghana have likely influenced mission leader policies to avoid proselytizing Muslims at present. It is unclear whether this policy remains in effect. Muslims residing in Tamale appear to exhibit higher rates of religious observance compared to Muslims in Sierra Leone and in southern Ghana. Stronger ethnoreligious ties to Islam with some ethnic groups native to the Tamale area such as the Dagbani may have influenced mission leaders to avoid outreach among Muslims at present, especially as the Church seeks to build a positive relationship with local government and community leaders during the initial period of proselytism.

The Church has delayed the opening of Tamale to missionary work for decades. This has likely resulted in missed opportunities to reach some individuals who have been previously receptive to LDS outreach but who are no longer interested. It took the Church 35 years from when it established an official presence in Ghana to open Tamale to missionary activity notwithstanding Tamale ranking as the third most populous city in the country. Small amounts of mission resources allocated to the Africa West Area in comparison to other church areas, distance from cities and towns with an LDS presence, a lack of outreach expansion vision until the past five years, and a Muslim-majority population deterred the introduction of proselytizing missionaries to Tamale for many years. Other proselytizing Christian groups have maintained a presence in Tamale for years or decades longer than the LDS Church and have converted many individuals who may have previously been receptive to the Church. Delays establishing an official church presence in Tamale has resulted in a significantly smaller LDS presence in Tamale today compared to other major cities in Ghana. It make take many years or decades for a widespread LDS presence to be established in Tamale due to the recent establishment of the Church. It is possible that the Church in Tamale may never extend as penetrating outreach extended in other major Ghanaian cities due to delays in establishing a church presence and the Muslim-majority population.

Distance from mission headquarters and other cities with an LDS presence pose difficulties for administration and mission logistics. It currently takes missionaries assigned to Tamale half a day to travel from mission headquarters in Kumasi. No senior missionary couple has appeared to have been permanently assigned to Tamale despite the Church frequently assigning a senior missionary couple to newly opened cities. Limited numbers of senior missionary couples may pose difficulties for leadership development and the expansion of LDS outreach into additional cities in the region. The continuity of church growth vision may be diminished due to the cycling of young full-time missionaries in and out of Tamale. Senior missionaries provide vital experience to assist in leadership development such as the preparation for the formation of districts from mission branches. It is unclear how the absence of a senior missionary couple will affect long-term growth trends in comparison to other cities in Ghana with a senior missionary couple assigned.

No translations of LDS materials are available in the most commonly spoken indigenous languages of northern Ghana such as Dagbani, Farefare, Mampruli, and Southern Dagaare. Literacy rates for speakers of these languages are generally less than 10%, suggesting no immediate need to translate printed materials into these language due to few literate speakers. Audio translations of church materials and print translations of a couple basic proselytism materials such as the Articles of Faith and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith may be appropriate to conduct missionary activity and foster testimony development in illiterate or semi-literate investigators and members.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Ghana has exhibited increased interest in opening previously unreached cities to missionary work and the

expansion of LDS outreach in lesser-reached cities within the past five years. In late 2010, the Church assigned six young proselytizing missionaries and one senior missionary couple to Sunyani, Ghana to simultaneously open three member groups notwithstanding no known Latter-day Saints previously residing in the city. By early 2015, the Church reported five branches and one district in Sunyani with several hundred active members. The Church has opened or reopened several other cities in Ghana to missionaries in recent years including Bibiani, Obuasi, and Techiman. The Church opened Techiman to initial missionary activity in mid-2013 and reported four branches in the city by late 2014. The Church has significantly augmented the number of wards and branches in nearly all major cities in Ghana such as Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast.

Other proselytizing Christian groups with a presence in Tamale report a relatively small presence in the city compared to other major cities in Ghana. However, most of these groups have maintained a presence for many years or decades. The Church of the Nazarene numbers among the largest denominations and reports 37 churches in Tamale.[4] Jehovah's Witnesses report five congregations in Tamale.[5] Witnesses translate basic proselytism materials into Farefare and Southern Dagaare.[6] Although no city-specific statistics are available for Tamale, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reports over 5,000 members, 17 churches, and 83 companies in the three northern regions of Ghana.[7] Adventists translate publications into Dagbani but no other major languages indigenous to the Tamale area and northern Ghana.

Limitations

The Church does not provide any official statistical numbers on membership and congregational data for individual cities or administrative divisions aside from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Consequently it is unclear how many members actually reside in the Tamale area and what percentage attend church regularly. Demographic data on religious affiliation and urbanization was retrieved from 2000 census figures[8] as no current data was available. No reports from current mission presidents in Ghana were available in regards to church policies and procedures for opening additional locations to missionary work and the proselytism of Muslims.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Tamale appears positive within the foreseeable future. The maturation of four member groups into branches within the first two years of proselytism, high convert retention and member activity rates, and the development of local leadership native to the Tamale area indicate that the Church has laid a solid foundation from which to organize a member district, establish additional member groups, and form a center of strength capable of expanding outreach into surrounding areas of northern Ghana. The organization of a separate mission headquartered in Tamale that administers northern Ghana may be likely in the medium or long term due to distance from other mission headquarters in Kumasi and good opportunities for growth. The likelihood of a mission based in Tamale will hinge on the long-term sustainability of increases in the worldwide missionary force, the responsiveness of the Tamale and northern Ghanaian population to LDS outreach, and mission and area leaders maintaining outreach expansion vision.

[1] "Tamale Metropolitan," Ghana Districts, retrieved 24 April 2013. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/districts/?r=6&_=80&sa=4018

[2] "World Gazetteer: Ghana," retrieved 22 April 2013. http://bevoelkerungsstatistik.de/wg.php?x=1364584526&men=gcis&lng=de&des=wg&geo=-85&srt=npan&col=adhoq&msz=1500&p

[3] "Tamale Metropolitan," Ghana Districts, retrieved 24 April 2013. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/districts/?r=6&_=80&sa=4018

[4] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 22 April 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=tamale&y=GH&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[5] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 20 April 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E

[6] "Featured Items," jw.org, retrieved 22 April 2013. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/

[7] "North Ghana Mission (2000-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 22 April 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10297

[8] "Tamale Metropolitan," Ghana Districts, retrieved 24 April 2013. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/districts/?r=6&_=80&sa=4018