

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Rapid LDS Growth in Lome, Togo

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Overview

Officially established in the late 1990s, the Church in Togo has experienced some of the most rapid church growth in the world during the past five years as church membership has doubled and the number of branches has nearly quadrupled. This rapid growth has been made possible through assigning increasing numbers of full-time missionaries and opening groups and branches in lesser-reached areas but has remained restricted to the capital city of Lome.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Togo 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 Lome to other countries and cities West Africa and contrasts the size of other nontraditional Christian groups in Lome to the LDS Church. Limitations to data and findings are discussed. Prospects for future growth are examined.

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LDS Background

In 1997, the Church established its first member group in Togo in Lome with 25 members. In 1999, the Church organized its first official branch.[1] The Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission administered Togo from 1999 to 2005 and from 2008 to 2011. In 2005, Togo was assigned to the Ghana Cape Coast Mission and was reassigned to the Ghana Accra Mission in 2007. In 2011, Togo was reassigned to the newly organized Benin Cotonou Mission.

The number of branches increased from one in 1999 to two in 2006, three in 2008, four in 2009, five in 2010, six in 2011, ten in 2012, and eleven in early 2013. Provided with year of organization in parentheses, additional branches organized have included the Tokoin (2006), Hedzranawoe (2008), Be-Kpota (2009), Ablogame (2010), Doumassesse (2011), Akodessewa (2012), Anfame (2012), Attiegou (2012), Wuiti (2012), and Adidogome (2013) Branches. Congregational growth has been commensurate with active membership growth. For example, the average number of members per branch has oscillated between 175 and 375 within the past six years suggesting stable or improving member activity rates. Seminary and institute enrollment increased from 185 during the 2008-2009 school year[2] to 588 during the 2011-2012 school year.[3] The number of individuals enrolled in seminary and institute has remained 20-30% of nominal church membership for Togo within the past five years notwithstanding membership doubling during this period.

As there has been no known LDS presence outside of Lome as of early 2013, official LDS membership figures for Togo reflect LDS membership growth trends for Lome with the exception of small numbers of individuals that may reside in other cities. In 1999, there were 122 members. Membership reached 361 in 2002, 504 in 2004, 575 in 2006, 793 in 2008, 1,246 in 2010, and 1,861 in 2012.

The Church organized its first district in 2009. In early 2013, most branches appeared to have between 50 and 100 members and investigators attending church services. In early 2013, all eleven branches pertained to the Lome Togo District. At the time there were approximately 50 missionaries serving in Togo.

A map displaying the location of branches and areas lesser-reached or unreached in the Lome metropolitan area can be found

here.

Successes

Since 2005 no other country in the world has experienced as rapid congregational growth as Togo. There was only one branch in 2005 whereas in early 2013 there were eleven - all of which were staffed by local branch presidents with the possible exception of one or two branches. Although the Church in many other countries reported a higher increase in the number of wards and branches than Togo during this period, the Church reported no other country that had only one branch in 2005 and as many branches in early 2013. The organization of so many branches in a country that was minimally reached by the Church in 2005 constitutes a major achievement for the international Church. The Church in Togo has demonstrated how regularly opening additional groups and branches can accelerate virtually all statistical measurements of church growth such as membership growth, seminary and institute attendance, and increasing numbers of priesthood leadership. The success of a "church planting" approach has been especially productive due to the population exhibiting high receptivity to the LDS Church.

The Church has maintained good convert retention and member activity rates as evidenced by the advancement of member groups into branches, the splitting of branches to form additional branches, increasing seminary and institute enrollment figures, and commensurate membership and congregational growth. In 2011, the average branch had 259 members; slightly lower than the 300 members per average ward or branch in Sub-Saharan Africa at the time. Congregational growth has outpaced membership growth over the past five years indicating improved member activity and convert retention rates. Reducing travel times to church for members and investigators by forming additional groups and branches and establishing more meetinghouses has had a strong influence on accelerated real growth.

Rapid church growth in Lome began in the late 2000s notwithstanding frequent reassignment of Togo to several missions in the region. The location of mission headquarters in neighboring Cotonou, Benin since 2011 has not appeared to deter growth or leadership development notwithstanding the mission operating from another country. Larger amounts of mission resources channeled into the two countries has played a critical role in recent prolific congregational growth trends in both Lome and Cotonou. The formation of the Benin Cotonou Mission occurred shortly before the simultaneous organization of three member groups in Lome; all of which attained branch status by year-end 2012.

The formation of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2011 was a significant catalyst in accelerating church growth in Togo due to the new mission channeling greater amounts of mission resources. The organization of the new mission from the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission corresponded with increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to Togo and the formation of three member groups. Mission leaders in the Benin Cotonou Mission have captured the vision necessary to capitalize on excellent conditions for missionary work and church growth through repeatedly and consistently opening additional groups and branches. This recapitulation of congregations allows for increasing the saturation of LDS outreach within Lome. Just as increasing the surface area of an object accelerates the speed of chemical reactions, the opening of additional congregations and assigning more missionaries allows for greater saturation of the target population and increased numbers of convert baptisms.

The organization of five new branches in late 2012 and early 2013 significantly improved the saturation of LDS outreach in Lome as the average population serviced per branch decreased from 262,000 to 143,000. Smaller target populations for individual branches and missionary proselytism areas allows for more efficient and penetrating outreach to occur among the overall city population. High receptivity, good local leadership development, and moderate to high rates of convert retention have been manifest in steady congregational growth as increasing active membership is generally required to create new congregations.

The Church has utilized seminary and institute as effective convert retention and testimony development programs for new converts. In 2011, seminary and institute enrollment accounted for 28% of LDS membership; one of the highest percentages in the world.

Opportunities

There remain abundant opportunities for additional church planting and outreach expansion within the Lome metropolitan area. No LDS outreach has occurred on the outskirts of Lome, specifically coastal areas east toward Lac Togo and northwestern areas toward the town of Kovie. These unreached areas may be fertile grounds for assigning missionaries and opening groups due to recent successes establishing new groups and branches in communities that border these areas such as Adidogome and Anfane. There remain many additional neighborhoods and communities within areas serviced by the Church's eleven branches that may be suitable for the establishment of groups or new branches. However, additional church planting in these areas may become more successful once the Church strengthens its branches to become ward-sized units in order for a stake to be organized if long distance to meetinghouses does not hamper member activity and convert retention rates.

There are good opportunities to conduct proselytism efforts among the non-French and non-Ewe-speaking population. All current branches appear to hold services in French with some Ewe usage. No congregations provide specialized outreach to non-French speakers. Full-time missionaries frequently rely on local members to attend lessons with investigators to provide translation from French to Ewe. The formation of one or two English-speaking units appears needed due to large numbers of Africans from nearby English-speaking countries that reside in the Lome area. English-speaking members in the past have experienced some activity challenges due to language barriers at Church.

Challenges

Large numbers of convert baptisms and few church leaders in individual branches pose challenges for maintaining good convert retention and increasing the size and strength of leadership manpower. These challenges appear rooted in the high correlation between increasing the number of missionaries assigned to Lome and the number of converts baptized. Missionaries report that the large numbers of recent converts in some newly organized branches have been difficult for a single missionary companionship to sufficiently provide post-baptismal teaching, encouragement, and fellowship as local leadership cannot adequately meet these needs without missionary assistance. Although stalwart members may be found throughout Lome, the relatively large number of new converts and comparably few seasoned, active members challenges individual branches to take sufficient accountability for assimilating new members into their respective congregations. Consequently many new members face difficulties faithfully attending church every week, strengthening their testimonies, and holding and magnifying church callings. Steady increases in seminary and institute attendance and the organization of new branches signal success in the retention of many new members. However, the number of members with sufficient gospel knowledge and priesthood leadership experience to serve in administrative callings has been limited and requires full-time missionary support to effectively train and hand off these responsibilities to local members. The challenge of new members to meet these responsibilities appears also attributed to rushed prebaptismal preparation that sacrifice quality over quantity.

LDS outreach in Togo has historically experienced many setbacks and frustrations. Until 2011, the Church administered Togo from missions headquartered in countries that either did not speak French (Ghana) or that were not bordering Togo (Cote d'Ivoire). Few mission resources were available to assign to Togo until the early 2010s. Little additional growth would have likely occurred if an official church establishment occurred earlier than 1997 due to political conditions that limited religious freedom. However, delays in expanding mission outreach in Togo during the early and mid 2000s is partially responsible for the Church's more limited presence in Lome compared to other major West African cities reached by the Church for over a decade.

There appear to be few Togolese that have served missions or that are currently serving missions. Consequently Africans from other countries and North Americans staff the missionary force. Emphasis on missionary preparation through institute courses and mission leadership and district and branch leadership interventions will be critical for improving the self-sufficiency of the missionary force and providing larger numbers of returned missionaries who can staff leadership positions upon their return home.

There are no Ewe translations of LDS scriptures notwithstanding its widespread usage in Lome and the Volta Region of Ghana. Only two basic church materials have been translated into Ewe: Gospel Principles (old edition) and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.[4] There is a need for the Church to translate scriptures and additional church materials into Ewe as it is a widely spoken language in Togo and neighboring countries, 30-60% of first language speakers are literate in Ewe,[5] and missionaries sometimes rely on local members for translating missionary lessons into Ewe. The Benin Cotonou Mission has no language program for missionaries to learn and use Ewe for gospel teaching.

Togo numbers among the most impoverish nations in the world with a GDP per capita of $1,100 in 2012.[6] Low levels of economic development and high unemployment create challenges for the Church in Togo to achieve financial self-sufficiency independent of international church funds. There are good opportunities for continued humanitarian and development work in Lome to help improve economic self-reliance and provide passive proselytism opportunities.

Comparative Growth

In 2011, Togo ranked among the ten countries that reported the highest annual percentage increase of membership. The Church in Lome has experienced similar growth trends to the Church in Cotonou, Benin as the Church in Cotonou has experienced rapid membership growth and prolific congregational growth in recent years (membership has quintupled within the past five years and the number of branches increased from one in early 2008 to six in late 2012). The Church in both Togo and Benin continues to operate in only the most populous city of each country, leaving all other areas totally unreached by formal proselytism efforts. Togo is the second most recently reached country by the Church in West Africa after Benin (first branch organized in 2003). Other cities in West Africa with at least one million inhabitants located in countries with an LDS presence typically have at least one stake or district operating.

Other proselytizing Christian faiths report a more widespread presence in Lome than the LDS Church and a presence in additional Togolese cities. However, these denominations have not experienced as rapid membership and congregational growth as the LDS Church in recent years. Jehovah's Witnesses report over 100 congregations that meet in Lome including 78 Ewe-speaking, 26 French-speaking, and seven English-speaking congregations.[7] Witnesses report 259 congregations nationwide. Seventh Day Adventists report a significantly smaller presence in Togo compared to other West African nations as there were 40 churches and 90 companies nationwide at year-end 2011. Adventists generally baptize between 400 and 600 converts nationwide each year.[8] The Church of the Nazarene reports 95 churches in Togo.[9]

Limitations

Although many full-time missionary reports provided data on church attendance figures, the organization of new groups and branches, and recent missionary activity there were no local member reports available during the writing of this case study. The

Church does not publish data on sacrament meeting attendance, member activity rates, the location and names of member groups, the number of convert baptisms per country, or language use by church membership in particular countries. No official data is available regarding the number of members residing in Togo outside of Lome.

Future Prospects

High receptivity to the Church, excellent church planting vision maintained by mission leaders in recent years, greater amounts of mission resources dedicated to the Benin Cotonou Mission, and increasing numbers of active members predict ongoing rapid church growth in Lome for the foreseeable future. In early 2013, missionaries reported that the Lome Togo District met or was close to meeting the minimum qualifications to be organized into a stake but that the creation of a stake would only occur after the Church completed its first church-built meetinghouse to serve as a stake center. As of May 2013, this meetinghouse had just been completed. In early 2013, missionaries reported plans to organize a separate mission headquartered in Togo sometime in the near future.

[1] "Togo," Country Profile, 18 October 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/country/togo

[2] Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2010

[3] Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2013

[4] store.lds.org, accessed 8 April 2013. store.lds.org

[5] "Ewe," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 13 April 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ewe

[6] "Togo," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 11 April 2013. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/to.html

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," accessed 8 April 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[8] "Togo Mission (1989-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 8 April 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=TOGM

[9] "Nazarene Church Data Search," retrieved 13 April 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=TO&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=