

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Church Growth Developments in Rwanda

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Overview

In 2006, the LDS Church began assessing conditions for establishing the first official branch and assigning missionaries in Rwanda. In 2007, area leaders assigned Rwanda to the Uganda Kampala Mission and an official group began functioning in Kigali. In early 2008, the Uganda Kampala Mission president visited Kigali and organized the first branch. By the end of 2008, the Church reported 17 members on church records. In the late 2000s, the mission assigned its first senior missionary couple to Rwanda on humanitarian assignment. Membership slowly increased to 48 in 2009, 68 in 2010, and 90 in 2011. In August 2009, LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Rwanda for missionary work.[1]

Significant church growth developments occurred in 2012 and 2013. The first proselytizing missionaries were assigned in September 2012. In the latter-half of 2012 and in early 2013, mission leaders opened two additional branches in Kigali named the Kigali 2nd and Kigali 3rd Branches and assigned a separate proselytizing missionary companionship to each branch. The decision to organize the additional branches centered on reducing travel distances for members and investigators as long distance prevented some from previously attending church regularly. In early 2013, there was a combined church attendance of 100 for the three branches in Kigali. Local members reported plans for organizing one or two additional branches in Kigali and a district within the near future. All areas outside of Kigali pertain to the Uganda Kampala Mission Branch. In 2012, the Church sent its first four members on full-time missions.

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Successes

Mission leaders have had strategic vision to spur church growth through opening small branches to provide greater saturation of outreach. Each of the three branches has its own meetinghouse within the geographical boundaries of each respective branch. Congregations with smaller geographic areas provide for more penetrating outreach and triple the productivity of missionary work as three separate outreach centers function instead of just one. The number of branches and young, proselytizing missionaries has commensurately increased and demonstrates frugality and strategic vision for outreach expansion. Avoiding the assignment of multiple missionary companionships to a single small branch stimulates greater member-missionary participation, efficiently delegates limited mission resources, and over time may lead to increased self-sufficiency in local leadership as full-time missionaries hand off any administrative responsibilities they initially undertake to new converts and church leaders. Mission leaders have implemented a church growth plan that concentrates on organizing small units rather than waiting for active membership growth in a single branch to warrant the organization of additional units. A church-planting approach oftentimes greatly accelerates growth as the Church has additional centers to base proselytism efforts from and local leaders face fewer challenges for some members and investigators who live far from their church meetinghouse to attend church. The organization of branches instead of groups signals that there are sufficient numbers of local members to staff general branch leadership positions; a noteworthy success considering there are less than an estimated 200 members on church records nationwide as of early 2013.

Convert retention and member activity rates are among the highest in the world. Officially-reported membership for Rwanda at year-end 2011 was 90 yet by the end of 2012 local members indicated that sacrament meeting attendance was slightly more than 100. Assuming that church membership did not increase by more than 50 during 2012, the member activity rate for the Church in Rwanda may be as high as 85%. High convert retention and member activity rates have occurred largely as a function of member-missionary efforts and investigators attending church services for extended periods of time prior to baptism.

These findings are similar to many other countries with a recent church establishment and that have had few, if any, full-time missionaries assigned.

The first four native Rwandan members serving a full-time mission within the same year is a major accomplishment for the Church considering the tiny size of church membership and limited numbers of members who have been members for at least a year to qualify for full-time missionary service. The number of missionaries serving from Rwanda in nearly the same as the number of missionaries currently assigned. These successes are largely attributed to devoted converts and the valuable mentoring and support provided by senior missionary couples, mission leaders, and local church leaders. Returned missionaries offer excellent prospects for providing needed manpower to staff leadership positions due to their experience and familiarity serving in the Church as missionaries, witnessing the function of church administration in locations with a more established church presence when they served their missions, and greater resilience to remain active throughout their lives than their counterparts who do not serve missions. The impact of returned missionaries on Rwandan church leadership development may not be visible until as late as 2015 or 2016 as the first missionaries to serve from Rwanda began their missions in 2012.

There have been no reported instances of ethnic conflict or discord at Church between Hutus and Tutsis. Local members report that members simply identify as "Rwandan" and "Latter-day Saint," instilling unity among native membership notwithstanding the past brutal ethnic conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis. The integration of these two ethnic groups into the same congregations simplifies outreach and promotes church growth.

Opportunities

No LDS outreach has occurred outside of Kigali. Rwanda has the highest population density of any continental African country yet only 19% of the population resides in urban areas. Most rural areas have large numbers of villages. The most populous unreached cities have good prospects for growth once church leaders begin to expand outreach outside Kigali. Cities that may be the most favorable to assign missionaries and organize groups include Gitarama, Kabuga, and Byumba as these three cities are among the ten most populous unreached cities in the country that are within the closest proximity to Kigali. Rural proselytism and church planting opportunities are favorable due to high population densities and relatively close proximity to Kigali.

There are excellent opportunities for further church planting and outreach expansion within Kigali. There are approximately 1.15 million people within the Kigali metropolitan area, many of whom reside in locations distant from the three LDS meetinghouses. Good receptivity among the Rwandan population and outreach expansion vision by mission leaders could feasibly decrease the ratio of city population to church units from their current level (one per 383,000) to as low as one per 100,000 people, or 11 or 12 branches, within the next five. This prediction appears likely if current outreach expansion rates continue and the Church duplicates its congregational growth in other countries with a similar fledgling church presence such as Togo and Benin. The outlook for rapid congregational growth within the next five years appears most likely if the three current branches experience increasing church attendance, member activity and convert retention rates remain constant, a sufficient number of local church leaders is reached to organize a district, and if future mission leaders continue to have the same church-planting vision in Kigali as their predecessors.

With the recent change in the law regarding the operation of religious groups that are in the process of obtaining government registration, the Church can assign more missionaries and potentially establish a separate mission for Rwanda. The surge in the worldwide missionary force expected to reach as many as 90,000 by year-end 2013 provides needed manpower to staff a new mission if church leaders determine that a separate mission based in Rwanda would be justified. The large administrative burden of the Uganda Kampala Mission that also includes Ethiopia, Uganda, South Sudan, and Djibouti limits mission resource allotment to Rwanda and reduces mission president visits. A separate mission based in Rwanda could speedily expand outreach within Kigali and into additional cities and promote the use of the Kinyarwanda (Rwanda) language for teaching, proselytizing, and conducting church meetings if approved by mission and area leaders. There is extremely little linguistic diversity in Rwanda compared to other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa - thereby simplifying future outreach expansion. The population homogenously speaks Kinyarwanda as their first language. The central location of Kigali provides an excellent headquarters for outreach expansion efforts.

The recent success of sending four local young male members on full-time missions suggests good potential to attract additional Rwandan members to serve missions. Holding missionary preparation classes through the institute program, emphasizing Preach My Gospel study and preparation before mission service begins, and youth and young adults teaming up with full-time missionaries to increase productivity may be suitable methods to continue sending members on missions.

Challenges

There are extremely few individuals with experience in church administration and leadership. All members have joined the Church within the past five years with the exception of individuals who were baptized in other countries and relocated or returned to Rwanda. The recent baptism of most members into the Church provides good opportunities for member-missionary work as many new members likely have many friends, family, and acquaintances outside of the Church and may be more open to sharing their faith than seasoned members who have become socially entrenched in their congregations. However, limited training and experience in leadership pose challenges for properly administering the local church and require greater oversight and assistance from mission leadership and full-time missionaries. The tiny size of the current three branches may pose some

socialization problems for members and investigators that have few fellow members that are their age and have similar backgrounds. For example, a branch that is hypothetically comprised of adults and young children may be challenging to baptize and retain teenage converts.

Changes in mission policies may frustrate prospects for rapid growth. Future mission leaders implementing contradicting current outreach expansion efforts could lead to diminished growth, especially if a "centers-of-strength" model for church growth is implemented that discourages the organization of additional units and rather attempts to have each of the three branches become ward-sized before any new units are organized. The implementation of quick-baptism tactics that specifically target children and teenagers could significantly reduce member activity and convert retention rates if local branches cannot adequately support and fellowship new members independent of full-time missionaries.

There are some societal and legal factors that could pose future challenges for growth. Rwanda experiences low levels of economic development and pervasive poverty. 45% of the population lives below the poverty line and most rely on subsistence agriculture to survive. Meeting the humanitarian needs of those in deep poverty takes precedence over meeting their spiritual needs. Although a lack of modernization and economic prosperity has likely improved receptivity of Rwandans to the Church, there is little self-sufficiency in the Church meeting its own financial needs through monetary contributions from members within the country. It is unclear whether the current status of the Church with the government will be maintained in the coming years and decades and whether the Church will face any difficulties obtaining larger numbers of foreign missionary visas.

The Church has not translated the Book of Mormon or most basic church materials into the Kinyarwanda language. The official status of English and French permits use of these languages in proselytism efforts and church meetings. However, the translation of materials and usage of Kinyarwanda in church meetings and missionary efforts will be important due to the widespread usage of Kinyarwanda and its official status in government.

Comparative Growth

No other country in Africa in recent memory has had as few members on church records and as many branches operating. The simultaneous assignment of the first proselytizing missionaries and opening of two new branches has been unprecedented in other African countries as branches generally operate for many years or even decades before full-time missionaries are assigned and additional branches are created. Recent congregational growth trends and the small size of church membership are somewhat comparable to the Church in Burundi where six full-time missionaries and two senior couples reestablished a church presence in September 2010. However, the Church in Burundi experienced significantly faster membership growth and multiple missionary companionships were assigned to the same group that became the first branch in early 2011. Mission leaders in Burundi have appeared to focus on a church-splitting approach to growth rather than a church planting approach as evidenced by the splitting of the Bujumbura Branch within six months of its creation due to active membership growth and reducing travel times but no additional congregations have been created as of early 2013.

Other nontraditional outreach-focused faiths have a pervasive presence in Rwanda that began decades before the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim one-quarter of the Rwandan population.[2] The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Rwanda has a presence that dwarfs the size of the LDS Church in any African nation as Adventists report over half a million members, 1,612 churches,[3] and approximately 550 companies.[4] Adventist membership accounts for approximately five percent of the national population. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 500 congregations and 22,734 active members in Rwanda.[5] The Church of the Nazarene reports nearly 100 congregations in Rwanda.[6] These denominations have historically been more aggressive than the LDS Church in establishing a presence in additional countries.

Limitations

There were no full-time missionary reports available from young proselytizing missionaries assigned to Rwanda at the time of the writing of this case study. All information regarding the organization of new branches, future plans for missionary activity, the history of the Church in Rwanda, current legal status, and activity rates were obtained from local members, senior missionary couples, and past young proselytizing missionaries who served in mission leadership positions. The Church does not publish data on the number of members outside of Kigali. There are extremely few news articles and information from the Church providing official information on church growth and church activity in Rwanda. Membership qualifications and the organizational structure of other missionary-focused groups varies by denomination and these differences were not reviewed in this case study.

Future Prospects

The recent organization of two new branches, the assignment of a single missionary companionship per branch, several local members currently serving missions, and worldwide augmentation of the full-time missionary force predict highly favorable prospects for future church growth in Rwanda for the foreseeable future. In the near future, the Church will likely organize additional units and form a district in Kigali whereas in the medium-term the Church may create a separate mission headquartered in Kigali and open units in rural areas on the outskirts of Kigali and in the largest cities such as Gitarama. Rapid church growth will most likely hinge on the quality and pervasiveness of member-missionary activity, maintaining reasonably high convert baptismal standards, and continuously opening additional units, sending local members on full-time missions, and training and mentoring local members to meet their local leadership and member responsibilities.

[1] "Dedication blesses two African nations," LDS Church News, 5 September 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57850/Dedication-blesses-two-African-nations.html

[2] "Rwanda," Operation World, retrieved 4 February 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/rwan

[3] "Rwanda Union Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 4 February 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=RWUM

[4] "Rwanda Union Mission," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 4 February 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=RWUM

[5] "Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," 2013 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses, http://www.jw.org/en/publications/

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