

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Successful LDS Outreach Expansion in Botswana

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Overview

The LDS Church in Botswana limited its operations to only two cities (Gaborone and Lobatse) for the first 14 years of an official presence. Since 2005, the Church has opened wards or branches in four additional cities and organized the first stake.

This case study reviews past outreach expansion efforts in Botswana and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth. A comparative growth section compares the growth of the LDS Church in Botswana with other Sub-Saharan African countries and contrasts LDS growth in Botswana with other proselytizing Christian groups. A future prospects section predicts the outlook for LDS growth in the coming years.

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LDS Background

In 1991, the Church created its first branch in Gaborone. By year-end 1993, there were two branches in Gaborone and one branch in Lobatse. In 1995, the Gaborone Botswana District consolidated with the newly created Roodepoort South Africa Stake. By 1999, both branches in Gaborone became wards. In 2005, a branch was created in Francistown. In 2008, missionaries opened a group in Molepolole that became a branch in 2009. In late 2009, the Church created a third ward in Gaborone for young single adults (YSAs) and opened Kanye and Mochudi to missionary work. In late 2011, groups in Kanye and Mochudi became branches. In the early 2010s, the Church opened two groups under the Francistown Branch and another group in Kasane. In early 2012, there were three wards, five branches, and three groups. In November 2012, the Church created its first stake in Botswana with six wards (Gaborone Broadhurst, Gaborone West 1st, Gaborone West 2nd [YSA], Lobatse, Molepolole, and Mochudi) and two branches (Kanye and Mafeking [in South Africa]). The Francistown Branch and groups under its jurisdiction do not pertain to the new stake and report directly to the South Africa Johannesburg Mission. In late 2012, missionaries reported that groups operated in additional locations but without assigned missionaries.

A map of LDS units in Botswana can be found here.

Successes

LDS mission leaders in the South Africa Johannesburg Mission have been proactive and tactful in opening additional cities in Botswana to proselytism within the past five years. It is likely that the Church's operations within Botswana would remain limited to Gaborone and only one or two additional cities without the efforts of recent mission presidents to expand outreach. The number of cities with an independent branch doubled from three to six between 2009 and 2011 as a result of steady numbers of convert baptisms and the development of local leadership to staff administrative callings in new branches. Returned missionaries report that virtually all recent efforts to expand outreach have been highly successful. The self-sufficiency of local leadership, good member activity rates, and an adequate number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders to advance branches into wards in two recently opened cities (Mochudi and Molepolole) enabled the Church to create a separate stake in Botswana.

There would likely be no stake in Botswana today if it were not for these outreach expansion efforts. The creation of a ward

within a three-year period in Mochudi stands as a testament to rapid membership growth and leadership development considering missionaries virtually started from scratch and within three years the congregation met the minimum criteria for a ward to operate, including 12-15 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders.

Mission leaders have generally achieved good results baptizing and retaining scores of converts in recently opened cities to proselytism. In Francistown, missionaries report strong growth. Returned missionaries estimate that as many as 80% of recent converts are active compared to approximately half of converts across the entire mission. Virtually all recently opened cities appear to have member activity rates of 50% or higher.

Local leadership self-sufficiency stands as another noteworthy achievement for the Church in Botswana. All branches have a local member serving as branch president. In Molepolole, missionaries report that before the branch became a ward it was well organized and functioned better than many other branches in the mission. Well-developed leadership capabilities are no more apparent than in the organization of a stake with close to the minimum number of nominal members for a stake to operate as there were approximately 2,000 members within the stake's boundaries when it was organized.

Local members have begun to move to cities without an LDS presence, facilitating the creation of new congregations. Ordinary active members relocating to unreached cities constitute one of the primary methods the Church expands outreach around the world. The Church established a group in a city with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants for the first time (Kasane) due to members relocating to this city. Prospects appear good for this process to occur in additional locations.

Opportunities

Abundant opportunities exist to open additional cities to missionary activity as local populations exhibit high receptivity to the Church, the Church has quickly developed self-sustaining local leadership in recently opened cities, recent mission leaders have more enthusiastically approached church planting than their counterparts in many other African countries, and many of the most populous cities remain unreached. Only one-quarter of the national population resides in a city with a ward or branch and 19 of the 25 cities with over 10,000 inhabitants have no LDS congregations. Unreached cities nearby Gaborone with over 10,000 inhabitants offer some of the greatest opportunities for outreach expansion while minimizing logistical challenges such as distance from established church centers. Provided with the most recent population figures, cities in the Gaborone area that appear most favorable for assigning missionaries, holding cottage meetings, and organizing groups include Mogoditshane (58,079), Tlokweng (36,323), Ramotswa (28,952), Thamaga (21,471), Moshupa (20,016), Mmopane (15,450), and Gabane (15,237). To maximize limited manpower, mission leaders could assign some missionary companionships stationed in Gaborone, Mochudi, and Molepolole to visit these cities once or twice a week to search for isolated members, find investigators, teach lessons, organize cottage meetings, and hold sacrament services if there is a sufficient number of interested individuals. A map displaying cities with over 10,000 and status of LDS outreach can be found here.

The organization of the first stake in Botswana may prompt mission leaders to redistribute mission resources from congregations that once depended on missionaries to properly function to currently unreached cities and towns, thereby initiating a new phase of national outreach expansion. The incorporation of branches in Kanye, Mochudi, and Molepolole into the Roodepoort South Africa Stake and the recent organization of the Gaborone Botswana Stake to include these units reduces the administrative burden for congregation-level administrative duties previously borne by the mission presidency. This, in turn, becomes a catalyst for reevaluating prospects for opening additional cities to proselytism as mission resources previously directed for member and leadership support can be liberated for other uses. Although the situation surrounding the creation of the first stake in Botswana differs from most countries in that most units previously pertained to a stake headquartered in another country rather than a district based within the same country, some missionary resources in Botswana were dedicated to meet leadership and membership needs, especially in newly organized branches. National outreach expansion in most countries experiences accelerated growth following the creation of the first stake. For example, in Hungary mission leaders assigned missionaries to eight additional cities within the first two years following the organization of the first stake whereas no additional cities opened to proselytism during the previous five years. In Uganda, the opening of approximately half a dozen cities to proselytism occurred in tandem with the creation of the first stake in 2010 or shortly thereafter due to the freeing of mission resources and increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to the Uganda Kampala Mission. It is highly likely that mission leaders will consider opening additional locations to proselytism due to high receptivity to the Church in every previously opened city to missionary work over the past five years. Opportunities appear good for the creation of a separate mission in Botswana due to favorable national outreach and church growth conditions and the enormous administrative burden placed on the South Africa Johannesburg Mission, which currently services the entire Johannesburg area and northeastern South Africa.

Challenges

Notwithstanding one of the highest GDP per capita in Sub-Saharan Africa and better living conditions than in many neighboring countries, Botswana has the world's second highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rate among adults. Approximately one-quarter of the adult population is infected with the disease. The widespread presence of HIV/AIDS poses a safety concern for missionaries and members due to risk of infection. The stability of LDS families, maturity of local leadership, and long-term growth of the Church may be jeopardized if sizable numbers of members are infected with the diseased due to shortened life spans.

Ongoing administration of Botswana by the South Africa Johannesburg Mission poses many challenges. The Church has experienced difficulty obtaining residency permits and visas for foreign missionaries to serve in Botswana from South Africa.

Consequently, missionaries assigned to Botswana only serve within the country for a portion of their missions and serve the beginning or remainder of their missions in South Africa. Distance from mission headquarters limits visits from mission leaders. The Church has established a mission region for Botswana that is administered by a member of the mission presidency living in Gaborone, providing some representation of leadership within Botswana. Distance from Johannesburg and crossing international boundaries limit the number of missionaries assigned to Botswana and disrupt efforts for foreign missionaries to proficiently learn Setswana.

There have been a few member activity challenges in Kanye. Missionaries report some inactive problems due to socialization problems as some member families and individuals report few friends at church. In 2010, there were approximately 100 members and investigators attending church but by April 2012 there were as few as 40 attending church. In 2012, missionaries continued to report high receptivity in the Kanye area as indicated by having as many as 30 investigators with a baptismal date. Committing investigators to develop habitual church attendance before baptism remains a significant barrier as missionaries typically report fewer than 10 investigators attending church at the Kanye Branch on an average Sunday.

Comparative Growth

No other country in southern Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced as rapid national outreach expansion within the past five years as Botswana. In Namibia, no additional cities opened to missionary work and no new congregations were organized. In South Africa, a handful of additional cities had their first congregations established and missionaries assigned such as Bethlehem, Hammanskraal, and Phuthaditjhaba. In Swaziland, one branch and one or two new groups were organized. In Lesotho, a new branch and a new group were organized. In Zimbabwe, new wards or branches were organized in three previously unreached cities - two of which were on the outskirts of Harare. In Zambia, only one additional city had its first branch organized (Kawama). In Angola, the Church opened its first branch in one additional city and organized groups in two additional cities.

Other proselytizing faiths report a significantly more widespread presence in Botswana than the LDS Church. Seventh Day Adventists report 33,485 members, 100 churches,[1] and approximately 100 companies. Adventists have baptized approximately 1,000 converts a year in Botswana over the past decade.[2] Adventists print publications in several commonly spoken languages including Tswana, Kgalagadi, Khwe, and Yeyi.[3] Jehovah's Witnesses report 50 congregations and operate congregations or groups in four languages: Tswana, Chinese, English, and South African Sign Language. Witnesses operate congregations in all but four cities with 10,000 or more inhabitants.[4]

Future Prospects

Recent successes expanding outreach and establishing self-sufficient congregations, high receptivity to LDS teachings, and the recent organization of the Gaborone Botswana Stake paint a positive outlook for future church growth within the coming decade. Remaining branches within the stake may mature into wards such as Kanye. Once groups in the Francistown area mature into branches, a district may be organized in Francistown. The organization of a separate stake for Botswana has good potential for mission leaders to refocus mission resources from recently opened cities to commencing official missionary activity in currently unreached cities. Medium-sized cities near Gaborone and Francistown and Maun appear likely possibilities for introducing missionaries and establishing groups. The creation of a separate mission to service Botswana may occur in the near future as a result of the steady increase in the number of missionaries assigned to the country and the extremely large administrative burden of the South Africa Johannesburg Mission.

[1] "Botswana Union Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 6 November 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=BOTU

[2] "Botswana Union Mission (2004-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 6 November 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U_BOTU

[3] "148th Annual Statistical Report - 2010," www.adventistarchieves.org, retrieved 6 November 2012. http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR2010.pdf

[4] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 6 November 2012. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT