



Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

>

LDS Growth in the Kilungu Hills, Kenya

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: July 2012

Overview

The Kilungu Hills are located approximately 100 miles southeast of Nairobi and consist of hilly terrain subject to semi-tropical climate. Scores of villages dot the area and the indigenous population overwhelmingly speaks Kamba; a language spoken by 3.96 million nationwide.^[1] Nearly the entire population resides in small villages. In 2009, the town of Wote was the most populous urban location in the Kilungu Hills with 9,875 inhabitants. There are no population figures available for the Kilungu Hills as a whole. Agriculture drives the local economy and most the population adheres to Christianity.

This essay examines the growth of the LDS Church in the Kilungu Hills and highlights successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth.

//

LDS History

In 1992, the Church organized its first branch in the Kilungu Hills in Kyambeke. It is unclear how the Church established its initial presence. Individuals and families from the Kilungu Hills that joined the Church in Nairobi and returned back to their home villages appears the most likely method the Church was introduced. Two additional branches were organized in Kilili (2000) and Ilima (2001). In 2009, a fourth branch was created in Matini. By June 2009, there were 185 attending the new Matini Branch. A year later, church attendance reached as high as 270 in Matini.

In 2009, a senior missionary couple serving in the Kilungu Hills reported that 163 convert baptisms occurred during their service in the area that lasted for about two years. Senior missionaries also coordinated four temple trips that permitted 58 members to attend the Johannesburg South Africa Temple. By mid-2009, there were 11 members serving full-time missions or had received mission calls. In 2010, over 200 youth from the four branches attended the first combined young men and young women activity. In late 2010, the Church relaxed its policy demanding a certain level of English proficiency for investigators to pass a baptismal interview. Some interviews began to be conducted in Kamba. In the early 2010s, young full-time missionaries were assigned for the first time and a fifth congregation was organized in Matua as a group under the Matini Branch. The Matua Group had over 75 members in early-2011; many of which were part of the same extended family. In early 2011, the Ilima Branch had over 120 children attending primary. In 2011, missionaries reported that the Church approved plans to begin translating church materials and scriptures into the Kamba language. In early 2012, senior missionaries escorted a group of 23 members from the Kilili Branch to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple.

In mid-2012, none of the four branches were assigned to a stake or district and instead reported directly to the Kenya Nairobi Mission. A map of the branches can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Kilungu Hills number among the few rural locations in Africa where LDS outreach has occurred for two decades and multiple congregations operate. The four branches are not concentrated in a single area of the hills but are dispersed throughout the area. The Church in Africa and in most regions of the world has avoided opening rural areas to proselytism due to generally small populations distributed over large geographical areas that are difficult to access. The Kilungu Hills stands as

an anomaly as a sizable community of Latter-day Saints perhaps numbering as many as 700 to 1,000 in 2012 has steadily grown in numbers and congregations.

Many members regularly participate in member-missionary work and have been principally responsible for most convert baptisms and church growth. In many areas of the world young full-time missionaries and senior missionary couples head missionary efforts. However local church leaders and members have taken the responsibility to share the gospel with others. It is likely that there would be no LDS presence in the Kilungu Hills today if member-missionary work had not occurred due to rural location, the small size of church membership in comparison to the Kenyan population, and relatively few mission resources assigned to Kenya. Member missionary activity exacts fewer mission resources than full-time missionaries. The strong member-missionary program maximizes missionary allocation efficiency as missionaries primarily teach and prepare investigators for baptism rather than finding investigators, fellowshiping new converts, and reactivating less-active and inactive members.

Mission leaders regularly visit and provide leadership training and support notwithstanding remote location and poor road conditions that make many meetinghouses difficult to access. Church administrative efforts have perpetuated between successive mission presidents for over a decade notwithstanding the enormous administrative burden of the Kenya Nairobi Mission that prior to the creation of the Uganda Kampala Mission consisted not only of Kenya and Tanzania but also Uganda and Ethiopia. Today the mission continues to serve both Kenya and Tanzania - a combined population of 87 million people - yet mission leaders have continued to be proactive about strengthening congregations, facilitating more self-sufficiency from native leadership, and responding to high receptivity to the Church in the area. Church leaders have continued to expand outreach, albeit slowly, as indicated by the opening of additional branches and groups.

Mission leaders have exercised skill and vision in assigning senior missionaries to provide support and assistance to all four branches. Senior missionary couples have been consistently assigned for the past five years to provide a wide range of services and supports to church membership. These services and supports have included leadership training, development projects, English classes, missionary preparation classes, music education, and temple trips. Missionary preparation classes and temple trips in particular have helped generate many stalwart members who become pillars of strength for their congregations. Temple trips require often six months to a year in planning to obtain the needed visas and documentation for members to make the long journey to Johannesburg, South Africa; the closest temple to Kenya.

Expectations for converts to achieve a certain level of commitment to the Church as manifest by developing habitual church attendance prior to baptism has resulted in good convert retention and member activity rates in the Kilungu Hills. The mission standard for investigators to pass their baptismal interview in English has encouraged longer prebaptismal preparation. Fluency in English is poor among most the population in the area, resulting in many investigators preparing for several months to be baptized by not only attending church services but also English classes often taught by senior missionary couples. Mission leaders have relaxed this language standard in recent years as some investigators had habitually attended church for six months or even a couple years but were unable to learn English sufficiently well to pass a baptismal interview conducted in English.

Church approval to begin translating LDS materials and the Book of Mormon into Kamba is a major success that presents many opportunities for improved gospel comprehension and testimony building among Kamba speakers. In the past, restricting language usage to only English has produced mixed results for the Church in the Kilungu Hills. Requiring converts to develop a certain level of fluency in English prior to baptism has reinforced higher convert baptismal standards, producing better convert retention outcomes than in many other areas. However, the heavy emphasis on English usage in church limits the comprehension of non-English speaking members and can frustrate missionary efforts as Kamba is most widely spoken.

Opportunities

High receptivity, a member-missionary focused Latter-day Saint community, and stable political conditions that permit steady, strong growth in a rural area exist in other areas of Kenya. There remain countless opportunities for the Church to replicate comparable growth experienced in the Kilungu Hills in many areas of Kenya. However a lack of vision, few local church resources, and reliance on foreign missionaries to staff missionary manpower have prevented mission-initiated church planting efforts in rural locations with few or no Latter-day Saints.

The extent of LDS outreach in the Kilungu Hills is tiny and occurs among only a small subset of the population. Notwithstanding this limited presence, opportunities to expand outreach are plentiful as the four established branches are scattered throughout the area. Increasing numbers of active members in the four established branches permit greater resources to channel into locations within the geographic jurisdiction of these branches to plant additional congregations. Many villages located several kilometers away from the four branch meetinghouses have Latter-day Saints and appear suitable to organize additional groups. Each branch could potential administer to two to five additional family groups that report under the independent branch, thereby expanding and magnifying outreach to include as many as one to two dozen locations. High receptivity, maturing local leadership, and overall good member activity rates suggest that if mission leadership adopts an effective church planting vision half the population of the Kilungu Hills or more could reside within walking distance of a location with LDS worship services. Smaller congregations also reduce the challenge to find adequately large spaces for church services, which can be held in members' homes, public facilities, makeshift structures, or outdoors.

In the medium and long terms, large numbers of youth and children attending church services present opportunities for

developing leadership, augmenting missionary manpower, and forming Latter-day Saint families. In 2010, the Kyambeke Branch had over 50 young men and young women and most were preparing to serve missions as young adults. Most members serve missions in Africa. Recently, several members have been called to serve missions in the United States. Missionaries serving in the United States can witness firsthand generally strong and well-trained leadership in action and apply learned skills to their home branches. Serving a mission in the United States may make some returned missionaries more vulnerable to immigrating to the United States, which could drain potential leadership manpower and setback growth.

Challenges

Low standards of living, poverty, and poor access to healthcare comprise the major challenges faced by the Church in strengthening and expanding its presence. Death, disability, and insufficient medical treatment pose difficulties for many church members to build up the Church and experience a higher quality of life. Low living standards prevent senior missionary couples assigned to the Kilungu Hills to live in the area and instead senior missionaries generally live in Nairobi. Senior missionaries drive approximately 160 kilometers to visit the branches, the last 30 kilometers of which consists of poorly maintained dirt roads. The trip generally takes about two and a half to three hours one way.

Although the Kilungu Hills are located closer to the Kenya Nairobi Mission headquarters than many other areas of Kenya with an LDS presence, transportation presents many challenges for mission leaders to regularly visit and head outreach expansion efforts. The poor quality of roads within the hills can prevent mission leaders from efficiently visiting meetinghouses and providing frequent training and support. During storms and muddy road conditions, some meetinghouse are inaccessible. Isolation from mission headquarters and no assigned young full-time missionaries until recently may have improved convert retention and local leadership self-sufficiency as there is a greater sense of responsibility for local leaders and ordinary members to fill these roles.

Local church administration remains highly dependent on senior missionary couples and mission leaders to properly function. The Church has not organized a district for the four branches in the Kilungu Hills. This suggests that the number of qualified priesthood holders to fill district leadership positions remains too few to staff both district and branch callings. The often short duration between when many church leaders initially joined the Church to present day poses a major obstacle for the Church to assign ecclesiastical duties beyond the experience and skills acquired by fledgling members. The increasing number of members serving missions augments future priesthood manpower to develop self-sufficient leadership on a larger scale but appears many years away from coming to fruition. Appointing a senior missionary to serve as district president with two local members serving as counselors appears the most likely course of action for a district to be organized in the near future. The Church has followed this pattern in a couple locations with a recent church establishment and limited numbers of experienced priesthood holders such as in Honiara, Solomon Islands and Sunyani, Ghana.

Opposition from other Christian groups has occurred in some areas. Senior missionaries report that this has largely occurred due to new converts leaving their former churches, resulting in pastors receiving less income from their congregations. However relatively few converts have returned to their former churches because of this issue at present. Senior missionaries report that scores of individuals will join the Church at a time and large baptismal services frequently occur.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has experienced steady growth in two other rural areas of Kenya within the past two decades, namely the Chyulu Hills and rural areas to the northwest of Eldoret. Unlike the Kilungu Hills, the Church in these two other areas has organized districts and experiences greater self-sufficiency in leadership.

The Chyulu Hills are located between Nairobi and Mombasa and today have ten branches that pertain to a single district, but there are no cities or towns in the area that have over 10,000 inhabitants. The Church established its first presence in the Chyulu area at approximately the same time as in the Kilungu Hills, but has experienced much more rapid and self-sufficient growth. In recent years, members in the Chyulu Kenya District have focused on becoming a stake as the district meets many of the minimal requirements for a stake to function. However, many of the branches appear to have too few members to become wards to form a stake, indicating that prospects for a stake in Chyulu may be several years away from realization.

The Church has operated several small branches in rural villages located between Eldoret and Kitale for many years. There were just two branches in this rural area in 2001, the Kiminini First and Kiminini Second Branches. In 2011, branches in this area were incorporated into the newly organized Eldoret Kenya District. By early 2012, the number of branches in this region increased to four (Mautuma, Misikhu, Naitiri, and Sikhendu). Like the Chyulu area and the Kilungu Hills, these four branches operate in fertile areas for church growth but lack knowledgeable and skilled church leaders. The creation of the Eldoret Kenya District appeared only possible due to available leadership manpower primarily provided by the four branches within the city of Eldoret.

Future Prospects

Maturing local leadership, regular temple trips, local members consistently serving full-time missions, church approval to begin translation of materials into Kamba, high receptivity, and some recent outreach expansion efforts indicate a favorable outlook for

future LDS growth in the Kilungu Hills. The formation of a district to administer to branches and groups in the area appears highly likely within the near future. Limited numbers of priesthood leaders trained to serve in branch or district presidencies and low living standards appear the primary barriers for greater growth in the near term.

[1] "Kamba," Ethnologue.com, retrieved 6 June 2012. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=kam