

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS Outreach Expansion in Madagascar

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Overview

The LDS Church in Madagascar has arguably experienced the most rapid national outreach expansion of any country in the past decade. In 2002, the Church reported no wards or branches outside the capital city Antananarivo yet by early 2012 the Church operated wards, branches, or groups in 12 additional cities, towns, and villages. This essay chronicles the progress of the LDS Church expanding outreach in Madagascar and identifies opportunities, challenges, and prospects for future growth. A comparison of LDS outreach expansion in Madagascar and other African countries is also provided.

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Background

In 2005, the Church organized its first branches outside Antananarivo in Antsirabe, Fianarantsoa, Fort Dauphin (Taolagnaro), and Toamasina (Tamatave). In 2009, the Church formed a branch in Mahajanga. Since 2010, the Church has created branches in Sarodroa, Anjoma, and Manandona and groups in Ambositra, Ankazobe, a few villages nearby Manandona, Moramanga, and Toliara. The number of cities with an LDS congregation increased from one in 2000 to five in 2005, approximately seven in 2009, and 13 in early 2012.

Successes

The Church has accomplished several impressive outreach expansion feats. In less than a decade, the number of cities with an LDS presence increased from one to 13. This represents one of the greatest outreach expansion achievements for the Church in the twenty-first century that has been unmatched in any other country as no other nation had only one city opened to proselytism a decade ago and today has close to as many cities with LDS congregations operating as Madagascar. The Church has opened multiple large cities to proselytism throughout the country even if these previously unreached cities were geographically distant from cities with established LDS congregations. In most countries, the Church restricts outreach expansion to cities within close proximity of locations with an established LDS presence to minimize the demands of long distances on the often already large administrative burdens taken upon by mission leaders. In Madagascar, the Church has effectively dealt with these difficulties without any noticeable impact on the quality of missionary performance and ecclesiastical accountability for new converts. Several small towns and villages in remote, rural communities are opened to missionary activity with groups or branches established whereas the Church in most African nations has no presence or a tiny presence limited to a handful of small towns and villages. The establishment of multiple congregations in rural areas demonstrates some of the most significant progress to date as 70% of the national population resides in rural areas and the rural populations of most African nations are almost totally unreached by the LDS Church. Outreach expansion has also occurred within lesser-reached communities and neighborhoods of the most populous cities. Within the past decade, the number of wards and branches in Antananarivo tripled from six to 18 and the number of branches in Toamasina increased from one to five.

Rapid outreach expansion would not be possible if the Church had not developed a reasonably high level of self-sufficiency in local church leadership. The Church has maintained reasonably high standards for the organization of branches by requiring groups to sustain self-sufficiency in local leadership for a period of at least six months before a branch is formally organized. Many outlying groups and branches have maintained prebaptismal standards that mandate regular church attendance for an extended period of time before consideration for baptism. Many group leaders have seriously investigated the Church for a long period of time before joining the Church and have demonstrated faithfulness in following the recommendations given by mission

leadership to progress toward become a branch. This in turn has reduced convert attrition and improved the functioning of congregations in meeting their local needs with little or no direct involvement from full-time missionaries. The Church in most African countries has not come close to replicating the recent prolific outreach expansion in Madagascar due to lower levels of local leadership sustainability in established church centers that siphon full-time missionary resources to adequately meet administrative and ecclesiastical needs.

Opportunities

Some of the most populous cities remain unreached by the LDS Church. Five cities have over 50,000 inhabitants and no LDS congregations (Antsiranana, Ambovombe, Antanifotsy, Mananara Avaratra, and Amparafaravola). Long distances from established church centers appear partially responsible for no LDS presence in these cities today. All five of the most populous unreached cities present excellent opportunities for introducing an official church presence as tens of thousands are concentrated in a small geographic area. High population density permits the Church to extend outreach with fewer mission outreach centers. Mission leaders capitalizing on high receptivity in cities already opened to proselytism appears another contributing factor in no LDS presence in these cities today.

Many who populate larger cities originally relocated from towns and villages in rural areas. The Church has the opportunity to reach these individuals who may later return to visit their home villages and share the gospel with family and friends. Success in retained converts sharing the gospel in their home towns and villages results in a natural expansion of LDS outreach that is self-perpetuating and independent of foreign full-time missionaries. This process appears to be one of the driving forces for outreach expansion in rural communities today as the Church has not appeared to initiate any missionary activity in rural areas which had no previous contact with the Church from the friends or family.

The most populous cities in Madagascar continue to present excellent conditions for the Church to localize church congregations in individual neighborhoods that are lesser reached or distant from meetinghouse locations. Some of the most populous cities have only one LDS congregation, such as Fort Dauphin, Mahajanga, and Toliara. Opening additional groups or branches in each of these cities closer to the homes of members can accelerate growth and accelerate outreach expansion. Antananarivo has ten times as many people as Madagascar's second most populous city. The LDS Church has yet to take greater advantage of expanding outreach in lesser-reached communities. With 18 wards and branches, the average unit has over 100,000 people within its geographical boundaries whereas the average branch in the second most populous city (Toamasina) has 52,000 people within its geographical boundaries. Missionaries report that receptivity in the largest cities appears fairly consistent and continues to be high, suggesting that the Church can anticipate ongoing rapid outreach expansion in the most populous cities where mission resources can be easily and efficiently distributed.

There remain scores of medium-sized and small cities within close proximity of Antananarivo without LDS outreach. Soavinandriana, Arivonimamo, Antanifotsy, Faratsiho, Betafo, and Ambatolampy each have over 20,000 inhabitants and are located nearby or between Antananarivo and Antsirabe. One of the more distant communities from the city center of Antananarivo with an LDS presence, Sabotsy Namehana was opened to missionary work in the late 2000s and experienced steady growth resulting in the group maturing into a branch by 2010. Few surplus leadership resources in operating wards and branches within Antananarivo pose the biggest obstacle to capitalizing on prime opportunities for outreach expansion in these easily accessible locations. Notwithstanding this challenge, local leaders and missionaries can mobilize to investigate and test the waters of the scores of lesser-reached and unreached communities that circumscribe Madagascar's most populous city. Intermittent proselytism campaigns in which local leaders hold cottage meetings, organize service projects, and distribute church literature in lesser-reached neighborhoods, suburban communities, or rural villages within their geographic jurisdiction foster self-sustainability in church growth and efficiently utilize limited resources available for spreading the gospel to additional locations.

In addition to the scores of urban centers within close proximity of Antananarivo, there are hundreds of villages in rural areas that present good opportunities for church planting and growth. The Church has experienced excellent growth and self-sufficiency in rural villages with LDS congregations such as Manandona, Sarodroa, and Anjoma. Distance from established church centers and infrequent contact with full-time missionaries has required local members to learn administrative tasks and exhibit commitment to follow church teachings and keep commitments in order for additional visits and guidance from mission leadership to continue. The Church has demonstrated flexibility and resourcefulness in finding places to hold church meetings in these rural communities, which has included constructing tents and makeshift structures from available materials. Although the recent introduction of the Church into rural communities has been encouraging and impressive, only a handful of villages have been reached. The degree of success and progress achieved in these villages may be representative of the potential success that could occur in other unreached villages.

Challenges

Reliance on foreign missionary manpower to open additional cities constitutes the primary barrier to national outreach expansion. With the exception of a few groups or branches in small towns or villages, the Church has assigned full-time missionaries to every location prior to the organization of a branch. The number of Malagasy members serving missions remains too small and relatively insignificant compared to the over 20 million inhabitants of Madagascar and thousands of cities, towns, and villages which remain unreached by the LDS Church. To effectively expand outreach without drawing upon limited worldwide mission resources, the Church will need to retain youth converts, provide missionary preparation, and educate local leaders in the methods and process for recommending members to serve missions.

Due to the lack of native members serving missions and limited numbers of missionaries assigned to Madagascar, purposeful national outreach expansion efforts headed by local leaders, mission presidents, and area leaders appear to primarily occur after active members relocate to additional areas. Few, if any, cities have had missionaries assigned which previously had no known Latter-day Saints. High receptivity, isolated members in many unreached cities, and limited mission resources dedicated to Madagascar have deterred mission leadership from opening cities without members as it has been impractical to assign missionaries to a city without church members when there are other locations with small numbers of Latter-day Saints who request the establishment of the Church in their city, town, or village. This reactionary approach does not appear to have stunted LDS growth potential in recent years due to these favorable outreach expansion conditions, but limited mission resources and reliance on foreign missionaries to staff the full-time missionary force remain persistent challenges as the Church relies on a series of fortuitous circumstances for the Church to open additional cities to missionary work. Notwithstanding favorable conditions at present, growth potential in the 1990s and early 2000s was significantly diminished due to missionary activity restricted to Antananarivo. If LDS leaders had assigned missionaries to additional cities and coordinated with local church leaders to augment the number of members serving missions, the Church in Madagascar could possibly have been established in every major city and most medium-sized cities by 2010.

Remote location and distance from established LDS outreach centers presents challenges for opening additional locations to missionary work. Travel to rural villages can be difficult and time consuming. Many of the most populous unreached cities are located in the most distant areas from mission headquarters. Mission leaders travel by airplane to visit some areas due to distance such as Fort Dauphin.

The administrative burden on the mission has grown enormously with the opening of additional cities. The time and effort to continue to expand into additional locations while simultaneously meeting administrative and ecclesiastical needs in member districts and mission branches will require close collaboration with senior missionary couples and mission presidency counselors to prevent burnout or decline in leadership quality. If these needs are not promptly and proficiently handled, a decline in the rate of outreach expansion may result and be compounded by convert retention challenges.

The Church has faced challenges finding locations to hold church services. Meetinghouse allocation presents the greatest difficult in urban areas as it is more difficult to find substitutes for meetinghouses when sufficiently large rented spaces are unavailable. In Toliara, missionaries reported in early 2012 that the fledgling group had outgrown their current meetinghouse facility but that it would be likely several more months before a larger meetinghouse could be secured. In Manandona and Sarodroa, the Church has held meetings in large tents outdoors as no buildings were available for lease. Meeting meetinghouse needs in rural communities exact fewer challenges as church services can be held outdoors or in makeshift structures until a permanent building can be constructed.

Convert retention challenges in some of the largest cities have siphoned missionary resources for reactivation and administrative duties. Distance to church meetinghouses, reduced standards for convert prebaptismal preparation, and the over-involvement of full-time missionaries in heading finding efforts and local church administration constitute the major causes for current retention problems in some congregations in Antananarivo.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Madagascar experienced the most rapid national outreach expansion within the past decade of any country in the world. Other countries which experienced substantial gains in LDS outreach expansion were primarily in Africa. In Mozambique, the number of cities with an LDS presence increased from three in 2001 to 10 in 2011. During this same time period, the number of cities or villages with a church presence increased from one to three in Tanzania, two to three in Malawi, two to seven in Botswana, three to nine in Uganda, seven to 14 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, nine to 11 in Zimbabwe, and 11 to approximately two dozen in Kenya.

Other Christian groups report a presence in nearly every city and often tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of members. The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence in Madagascar; virtually every sizable town and city has an Adventist congregation. In 2010, Adventists reported 29,371 members meeting in 132 churches in Antsiranana Province alone whereas the LDS Church had no presence in Antsiranana.[1] Other denominations have relied on local members to open new areas to proselytism and start new congregations whereas the LDS Church has relied on mission leaders and full-time missionaries to head these efforts.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS outreach expansion remains highly favorable due to strong receptivity, enthusiasm and vision to open additional locations to missionary activity, and moderate to high rates of convert retention in most locations outside Antananarivo. Due to the increasing administrative burden on the mission presidency to effectively administer to rapid growth in virtually every area of the country with an LDS presence, the organization of a second mission will be warranted in the short to medium term. If the current pace of outreach expansion continues, it is likely that the Church will have a presence in every city with over 50,000 inhabitants by 2020.

[1] "Antsiranana Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 2 March 2012.