

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS Outreach Expansion in Awasa and Surrounding Areas in Southern Ethiopia

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Overview

Ethiopia has a population of approximately 94 million that primarily follows Christianity and Islam. The LDS Church established its initial presence in Ethiopia during the early 1990s in Addis Ababa and opened a branch in a second city (Debre Zeit) in 2002. In the late 2000s, the Church established a branch in the southern portion of the country for the first time in Awasa and experienced rapid outreach expansion in the early 2010s.

This case study provides background information on the Awasa area and reviews the history of the LDS Church in the area. Past growth successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in the Awasa area to other locations in East Africa and summarizes the growth and size of other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in the Awasa area. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Background Information

Located in south central Ethiopia in the Ethiopian Highlands, Awasa is the sixth most populous city in Ethiopia and is the regional capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region. Shashemene is another major city nearby Awasa located in the Oromia Region less than 50 kilometers northeast of Awasa. Terrain consists of mountains, hills, and several large lakes which are subject to temperate climate due to high altitude. Amharic, English, and Tigrigna are the national languages of Ethiopia but none of these languages are commonly spoken as a first language in the Awasa area. Provided with the number of speakers, the most commonly spoken native languages include Borana-Arsi-Guji Oromo (3.63 million) and Sidamo (2.9 million), both of which pertain to the Cushitic language family.[1] Christians account for the majority and Muslims constitute a sizable minority. Most Christians are Ethiopian Orthodox. Ethnic violence sparked by land use disputes has occurred within the past decade between the Oromo and Sidama.[2] Shashemene is a Rastafarian cultural and religious center.[3] Most of the population is employed in agriculture.

LDS History

An LDS Ethiopian family who spoke English as a second language began holding church meetings in their home in Awasa as early as 2003. In 2008, the mission president from the Uganda Kampala Mission visited Awasa to organize the first official branch. At the time there were approximately 20 members and investigators attending church services. In March 2009, full-time missionaries were temporarily assigned to Awasa for a couple weeks to provide leadership training and doctrinal teaching to ensure that LDS doctrines were correctly taught and understood. At the time, missionaries reported that the Awasa Branch met in a rented home and that only ten members and a handful of investigators attended church meetings. During the two-week period, missionaries performed proselytism activities and held a fireside with over 30 in attendance. In mid-2009, the first member from Awasa filled out his paperwork to serve a full-time mission.[4] Until 2010, the Awasa Branch held only sacrament meeting and Sunday School due to few members in attendance.

Full-time missionaries were permanently assigned to Awasa sometime in 2010. In August 2010, full-time missionaries reported that approximately 20 members attended church regularly and that nearly all members were under age 21. Unlike some branches in Ethiopia, the number of active male youth was sufficient in the Awasa Branch to administer the sacrament without the assistance of full-time missionaries. During fall 2010, the LDS Church in Awasa achieved greater missionary success as church attendance reached as high as 70 by November and dozens of nonmembers attended church meetings. During this period full-time missionaries more diligently studied Amharic to assist their teaching of members and investigators and the sacrament prayers were performed in Amharic for the first time. Several pastors from other churches residing in nearby cities and villages began learning about the LDS Church and joined the Church shortly thereafter, introducing church teachings to members of their former congregations.

In May 2011, full-time missionaries reported that three member groups were organized in Shashemene, Wendo Genet, and Ch'iko and that the combined church attendance of the four congregations was over 100. In July 2011, church attendance in the Shashemene Group generally ranged from 25-35 whereas there were as many as 90 attending church services in Wendo Genet. In 2011, church attendance widely fluctuated in the Awasa Branch from as many as 70 to as few as 30.

In early 2012, the Wendo Genet Group became its own branch and had a native member serving as branch president. Sometime in 2012, a member group began functioning in Negele and a senior missionary couple was assigned to Awasa. Missionaries reported that an open house event in Shashemene had over 200 attend from the community within a two-hour period and that approximately 50 individuals gave their phone numbers for missionaries to learn more about the Church. In late 2012, missionaries reported that there were two branches (Awasa and Wendo Genet) and three groups (Dilla, Negele, and Shashemene) in the southern portion of Ethiopia. It is unclear whether the Ch'iko Group continued to operate or was closed. At the time, sacrament meeting attendance in the Awasa Branch was approximately 65 and missionaries reported regularly baptizing new converts.

In early 2013, missionaries reported that sacrament meeting attendance generally ranged from five to 20 in the Shashemene Group and from 60 to 140 in the Awasa Branch. In mid-2013, there were eight full-time missionaries assigned to the Awasa area that served in Awasa (4), Shashemene (2), and Wendo Genet (2). Missionaries reported efforts to create a second branch in Awasa once a sufficient number of members and investigators attended church in the current branch. Missionaries also reported the possibility of creating a separate district to service branches in southern Ethiopia sometime in the near future. As of late 2013, the Awasa and Wendo Genet Branches and all member groups pertained to the Addis Ababa Ethiopia District.

Successes

The Church has rapidly expanded outreach in the Awasa area notwithstanding remote location from mission headquarters in Uganda, distance from church leadership in Addis Ababa, and few mission resources available. The increase in the number of members and congregations from 10 members meeting in one branch to over 100 people collectively attending church services in four congregations within a two-year period constitutes a major success considering a lack of experienced members, low living standards, and the slow pace at which the LDS Church has grown in other areas of Ethiopia within the past two decades. The baptism of local religious leaders into the LDS Church is a major accomplishment which has expanded outreach into additional communities and accelerated church growth. Retention rates appear moderately high for most branches and groups as most converts attend church services for extended periods of time before baptism and continue to attend church at present. The permanent assignment of missionaries to additional communities outside of Awasa within the past couple years such as Shashemene and Wendo Genet mark significant milestones in extending more penetrating outreach and strengthening congregations. The Church has appeared dynamic in forming member groups throughout the region following the introduction of full-time missionaries and has since advanced one of these member groups into a branch.

Increasing sacrament meeting attendance in the Awasa Branch in 2013 has been a welcome development after several years of widely fluctuating numbers of members and investigators attending church. This successes provides opportunities for the Church to establish a stronger center of strength in southern Ethiopia that can help lay the foundation for establishing a district within the foreseeable future.

The assignment of a senior missionary couple has greatly facilitated local leadership development and the coordination of missionaries and local leaders. A senior missionary couple offers greater potential for LDS-sponsored clean water projects, wheelchair donations, and agricultural and literacy programs due to poor living standards and low literacy rates.

Opportunities

The population exhibits high receptivity to missionary-focused, nontraditional Christian groups presenting good opportunities to expand missionary operations into additional cities, towns, and villages. Cities that may be most favorable for future LDS outreach include Aleta Wendo, Kofele, Sodo, and Yirga 'Alem. Senior missionaries, mission leadership, young elder missionaries, and local branch and group leaders visiting these and other communities to assess conditions for future outreach, meet with isolated members and investigators, hold cottage meetings, and organize member groups when warranted presents the most practical and efficient method of expanding outreach in the region.

The traditional practice of Orthodox Christianity in the region provides most with a basic understanding of Christianity and has likely improved receptivity to LDS missionaries. The use of Amharic as a second language simplifies language needs for the

Church in the region and permits the utilization of LDS translations of the Book of Mormon and proselytism and gospel study materials.

The sizable number of youth converts since 2010 offers excellent prospects for increasing the self-sufficiency of the Ethiopian full-time missionary force over time if baptisms continue, converts are retained, and local church leaders and full-time missionaries help members with completing mission paperwork and preparations for missionary service. Due to ease of accessibility and their large populations, Awasa and Shashemene will likely to become future LDS mission outreach centers for southern Ethiopia one day if mission outreach continues to expand and Ethiopia becomes its own separate mission Continued efforts by senior missionaries and young elders to hand off leadership responsibilities to new coverts, maintain convert retention and reactivation efforts, and encourage greater member-missionary involvement may result in the advancement of additional member groups into branches.

There are good opportunities for church-planting efforts within the city of Awasa. Awasa is the most populous city in southern Ethiopia with 225,700 inhabitants in 2013.[5] Focus on organizing additional member groups in lesser-reached areas of the city or where distance from the current meetinghouse poses challenges for members and investigators to regularly attend church can help accelerate growth and maximize outreach potential with relatively few resources.

Challenges

Problems with congregations experiencing setbacks in steadily increasing church attendance and augmenting priesthood manpower constitutes the greatest immediate challenge for the Church in the area. Oscillating sacrament meeting attendance numbers remains an ongoing challenge for the Awasa Branch which likely indicates low comprehension of LDS teachings by investigators and new converts. This presents ongoing challenges for minimally-trained local leadership to efficiently delegate responsibilities to other members to provide adequate fellowshipping and member-missionary efforts. Finding and training qualified leadership presents additional challenges in member groups in the area.

LDS missionary resources allocated to Ethiopia have minimal since the establishment of a church presence in the early 1990s notwithstanding Ethiopia ranking as the second most populous nation in Africa and widespread religious freedom enjoyed for decades. The lack of an official LDS presence in Awasa until 2008 appears due in part to the Uganda Kampala Mission administering Ethiopia in addition to Uganda, Djibouti, Rwanda, and South Sudan. Comparatively few full-time missionaries are assigned to Africa notwithstanding high receptivity in many, if not most, areas. Insufficient missionary resources continue to hamper efforts to open additional areas as the Church traditionally relies on full-time missionaries to expand outreach. Distance from the center of LDS Church operations in Addis Ababa creates additional administrative and logistical challenges providing training and support for local leaders and missionaries assigned to the Awasa area. No indigenous languages in the Awasa area have LDS materials available, limiting the practicality of utilizing English and Amharic language materials. Extremely low literacy rates create barriers for administrative self-sufficiency and testimony-building for illiterate converts and investigators. The conversion of several local religious leaders to the LDS Church and their subsequent efforts introducing others to LDS missionaries may present future challenges if these leaders exercise authority over LDS converts and attempt to supersede the appointed LDS priesthood authority for officially established LDS congregations.

Extremely low literacy rates are a major barrier for church growth. However the LDS Church benefits from little linguistic diversity in the Awasa area as only two indigenous languages are spoken: Borana-Arsi-Guji Oromo and Sidamo. Speakers of indigenous languages to the Awasa area were likely not found among Ethiopian Latter-day Saints until the establishment of the LDS Church in the region in the late 2000s. Prospects for future LDS translations in Borana-Arsi-Guji Oromo and Sidamo appears unlikely for the foreseeable future as literacy rates for Borana-Arsi-Guji Oromo and Sidamo are estimated at less than one percent[6] and between one and five percent,[7] respectively. Audio translations of LDS materials and scriptures are warranted to reach illiterate speakers of these languages.

Comparative Growth

The Church has expanded outreach in the Awasa area more quickly than in any other area of East Africa over the past decade as multiple new congregations were organized within a matter of months in 2011. Local leader sustainability has presented greater challenges in the Awasa area than in most other areas of Sub-Saharan Africa as indicated by a lack of qualified church leaders needed to organize branches from groups and reliance on full-time missionaries for administrative and ecclesiastical support. The assignment of full-time missionaries to the Awasa area is unusual for the Church in East Africa as many isolated congregations do not have full-time missionaries assigned for years or even decades from their initial organization.

Unlike Latter-day Saints, other Christian groups have experienced rapid congregational growth in many areas of Ethiopia due to greater mission resource availability and self-sufficient missionary programs. Evangelicals comprise the largest Christian minority group and today account for approximately one-fifth of the national population.[8] Most missionary-focused groups report a more widespread presence in southern Ethiopia than the LDS Church and have historically experienced more rapid growth. Dozens of evangelical churches likely operate in Awasa and Shashemene alone. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 51,000 members, 358 churches, and136 companies in southern Ethiopia in 2012. Adventists report between 2,000 and 6,000 baptisms in southern Ethiopia a year.[9] Jehovah's Witnesses report 44 congregations in the South Region of Ethiopia, including three congregations in Shashemene, two congregations in Awasa, and one congregation each in Negele, Wendo Genet, and Dilla.[10]

Limitations

Although several detailed reports from young elders serving in southern Ethiopia were available during the writing of this case study, no reports from mission leaders, local church leaders, or ordinary members were available. The Church does not publish the number of active members per country or member activity and convert retention rates. It is unclear what percentage of converts baptized in southern Ethiopia within the past four years remain active today. There were no data available on the growth and status of the Church in Wendo Genet since 2011. The Church does not publish information on the location and names of member groups. It is unclear whether the Ch'iko and Dilla Groups continue to operate or were disbanded.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future growth in southern Ethiopia is favorable due to recent outreach expansion in the Awasa area but a lack of qualified leaders, widely fluctuating sacrament meeting attendance numbers, and some developing dependence of new converts on full-time missionaries create challenges for sustaining growth. Groups meeting in Shashemene and Negele may become independent branches within the near future if several male converts remain active, receive the priesthood, and obtain leadership training. A second branch in Awasa may also be organized in the near future. Once a sufficient number of active priesthood holders is reached, a district for congregations in the Awasa area may be organized. Prospects for the translation of LDS materials into the Arsi-Guji-Oromo and Sidamo languages appear unlikely for several decades until a sizable following of Latter-day Saints who are not proficient in Amharic is reached. Additional groups may be organized in communities nearby cities with LDS congregations such as Aleta Wendo and Kofele.

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