

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS Church Planting in Sunyani, Ghana

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Overview

Located in west-central Ghana, Sunyani is a city of approximately 80,000 and the regional capital of Brong-Ahafo. Surrounding terrain consists of forested plains and rolling hills subject to semi-tropical climate. In addition to serving as a center for commerce and tourism in central Ghana, Sunyani possesses higher living standards than many other areas of the country due to good access to potable water sources.[1] However rapid urbanization has caused economic and health hazards, especially in slums. Harmattan winds are a natural hazard. Twi and English are the predominantly spoken languages in Sunyani. Traditional councils possess an important role in local government. Akan are the dominant ethnic group in Sunyani (71.1%).[2] Brong-Ahafo is the only region in Ghana which has a higher percentage of Catholics in the regional population than Pentecostals. Sunyani is historically a Catholic center in Ghana.[3] The urbanized population of Sunyani Municipal accounts for 74.3% of the municipal population.[4]

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Sunyani, identifies past church growth and missionary successes, and analyzes opportunities and challenges for future growth. The growth of the Church in Sunyani is compared to other cities recently opened to missionaries in the Ghana Kumasi Mission. The size and growth of other nontraditional, proselytizing Christian groups is summarized. Limitations to this case study are provided and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

No organized LDS congregations functioned and no known Latter-day Saints were known to reside in Sunyani prior to the assignment of LDS missionaries from the Ghana Cape Coast Mission in late 2010. Initially six young full-time missionaries and a senior missionary couple were stationed in Sunyani and simultaneously organized three groups under the Ghana Cape Coast Mission Branch to facilitate growth in the communities of Estates, Nkwabeng, and Penkwase. The three groups had a combined church attendance of 70 within a month of their organization. A fourth group was created shortly thereafter in Fiapre and the number of young full-time missionaries assigned increased from six to ten by mid-2011. Half of the missionaries assigned at the time were black Africans. The four groups originally assembled in rented spaces which also functioned as missionary living quarters. By mid-2011, sacrament meeting attendance was approximately 50 in three of the four groups and three of the groups were close to meeting the standards to become independent branches. The Fiapre Group had approximately 30 attending meetings in September 2011. Missionaries reported that the standard for a branch to operate in Sunyani was five full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders and 20 active members. A conference for all four congregations was held in early 2011 and the first temple trip occurred in mid-2011. By October 2011, groups in Estates, Nkwabeng, and Penkwase became independent branches with local members serving as branch presidents. 150 attended a conference for all four congregations in late 2011.

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Street contacting has been the primary finding method for full-time missionaries as very few if any Latter-day Saints initially resided within the geographical boundaries of each congregation. Investigator and new convert referral appear to be additional methods which have been employed to find investigators. Missionaries have undertaken almost all administrative tasks and responsibility for teaching gospel principles and doctrines to new converts and in mid-2011 appeared to lead church services in

all four groups. Investigators appear to establish habitual church attendance generally lasting over a month prior to baptism. Consequently, retention and member activity appear high. In the fall of 2011, full-time missionaries reported that local members in some of the groups set yearly baptismal goals for their units to accomplish.

In May 2012, the Church organized the Sunyani Ghana District with over 200 members and investigators in attendance. A senior missionary couple served as the district president and the new district initially included four branches (Estates, Nkwabeng, Penkwase, and the Sunyani Ghana District Branch). In mid-2012, the Fiapre Group became a branch and the Church closed the Sunyani Ghana District Branch that previously contained the Fiapre Group. The Fiapre Branch remained the smallest branch in Sunyani with only 20 active members for most of the rest of 2012. Plans were considered to open a member group in Chira in mid-2012 but it is unclear whether a member group was ever established. During 2012, the branches made significant progress in developing greater self-sufficiency in church administration such as organizing primary programs for sacrament meeting and additional numbers of male members receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood. Some branches such as Estates and Nkwabeng began to outgrow their facilities, requiring missionary housing to be relocated away from the branch meetinghouse and plans to find larger spaces to hold church services. In early 2013, the mission reorganized the district presidency to consist entire of local members. The district also organized a sporting activity for all four branches to attend to foster fellowship among members within the newly organized district. 27 investigators attended the activity and received a missionary lesson afterwards.

In 2012, senior missionaries reported that successes opening Sunyani to missionary work have captured the attention of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency and plans were being considered for using the approach to missionary work in opening cities that have previously had no LDS presence. Termed the "Sunyani Model," missionaries reported plans to open additional cities to missionary work in a similar fashion by simultaneously opening multiple member groups and holding church services for these groups in large houses that double for housing missionaries. Once membership in a group grows sufficiency large to become a branch and outgrows the area of the house originally used for church services, missionaries move out of the house to provide additional space for the branch. As of September 2013, the Sunyani Model or slight derivations of it have appeared to be applied in both cities that have had no previous LDS presence and in cities where there was an extremely limited LDS presence such as Cotonou, Benin; Gagnoa, Cote d'Ivoire; Kumasi, Ghana; Tamale, Ghana; Techiman; Ghana; and Lome, Togo.

A map displaying branches in Sunyani can be found here.

Successes

The opening of Sunyani to missionary activity has been a major success for the LDS Church in Ghana as a church-planting paradigm was implemented despite no preexisting church infrastructure and no known Latter-day Saints in the city, three of the four groups becoming independent branches approximately a year after their organization, the population exhibiting high receptivity to LDS teachings and missionaries, and the success of opening Sunyani encouraging mission leaders in West Africa to implement similar approaches in other locations. The ratio of one LDS missionary companionship per congregation for the first year or two of missionaries serving in the city has encouraged growth and provides adequate resources for new converts, investigators, and the general population without fostering overreliance on full-time missionaries. The creation of several congregations at once in a city of less than 100,000 that had no previous LDS presence illustrates the feasibility of church planting paradigms in small and medium-sized unreached cities as LDS mission planners generally organize only one congregation in small or medium-sized cities when any LDS presence is initially established.

At the time, the opening of Sunyani to missionary work was a rare occurrence for the LDS Church in Africa considering its remote location from other mission outreach centers in the Ghana Cape Coast Mission, the number of full-time missionaries initially assigned when the city opened for proselytism, and the lack of any preexisting church unit or known Latter-day Saints in the region. It is unclear what motivated mission and area leadership to choose to open Sunyani for LDS outreach. Generally in the Church in Africa a basic church unit operates for several years in a city before full-time missionaries are introduced. The decision by mission and area leaders to implement a tactful, ambitious approach to expanding LDS outreach in Ghana's untouched northern regions has provided excellent results to date and may fuel greater implementation of similar approaches for expanding LDS outreach throughout West Africa in the short and medium terms. In 2011, some West African missions made significant strides planting new branches and groups, possibly inspired by area leadership encouraging church-planting approaches. In 2011, notable examples of rapid congregational growth occurred in Monrovia, Liberia where the number of branches increased from 11 to 16, Lome, Togo where the number of congregations increased from five to eight or nine, and Cotonou, Benin where the number of congregations increased from three to six. As of September 2011, there were no known recent instances of any other West African LDS mission opening a previously unreached city with multiple missionary companionships and establishing more than one church unit at a time. In the spring of 2011, missionaries serving in the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission reported that plans were drafted for opening Makeni, Sierra Leone with full-time missionaries to assist several groups which were recently organized in Makeni but these plans were later retracted to focus missionary manpower on preparing districts in the mission to become stakes. In 2012 and 2013, there were several instances of the Church implementing the Sunyani Model in previously unreached cities such as in Tamale, Ghana and Techiman, Ghana.

High rates of convert retention achieved in Sunyani despite strong reliance on full-time missionaries for administrative issues is a significant, unusual achievement for the LDS Church that demonstrates that convert retention rates can surpass the often low rates of convert retention in most areas of the world and reduce subsequent member inactivity issues which often accompany the deleterious effects of local members chronically depending on full-time missionaries for instruction, leadership, organization, and fellowshipping. The organization of a district, the advancement of all member groups into branches, and the replacement of

a senior missionary serving in the district presidency with a local member all indicate good long-term progress in developing self-sufficiency. Full-time missionaries encouraging local members to establish their own baptismal goals for their units may facilitate greater member-missionary involvement and less reliance on full-time missionaries for finding and retention.

Opportunities

The LDS Church has taken advantage of excellent opportunities for expanding mission outreach in Sunyani due to the high receptivity in the population, better living standards than many other cities in central/northern Ghana, several LDS materials in the most commonly spoken local languages, greater political and ethnic stability than many other areas of sub-Saharan Africa, and most locals identifying as Christian (80.9% for Sunyani and 70.8% in the Brong-Ahafo Region).[5] Progress achieved in opening and sustaining four congregations in so short a period of time suggests that surrounding communities and lesser-reached neighborhoods in Sunyani present excellent opportunities for future church planting approaches. As the capital and one of the most populous cities of the Brong-Ahafo Region, Sunyani is a suitable center for the LDS Church to base its regional missionary operations if outreach is expanded into additional nearby cities such as Berekum, Dormaa Ahenkro, Kintampo, and Wenchi. Renting apartment buildings utilized for both church services and missionary living quarters is a thrifty approach that encourages full-time missionaries to build up their assigned congregations by preparing new converts for leadership and other ecclesiastical positions.

Careful mentoring of new members and designing youth-oriented finding and fellowshipping activities may establish a sizable body of qualified priesthood and auxiliary leaders and prospective full-time missionaries. Sunyani is the most literate district in the Brong-Ahafo Region (68%), permitting the use of proselytism literature and other church materials for outreach.[6] The Book of Mormon and several church materials are available in Twi for use among local members to study and teach the gospel. Literacy programs sponsored by local literate members may provide a suitable approach to better reaching the approximately one-third of the population who are illiterate. The LDS Church benefits from most Christians in Sunyani having developed habitual church attendance; a practice which may improve church attendance for converts. Detachment from mission leadership due to remote location may encourage self-sufficiency among local members if administrative and ecclesiastical duties are gradually handed off from missionaries to local members.

Challenges

The LDS Church faces several major challenges in establishing a long-term presence in Sunyani due to limited numbers of members who can fill leadership positions, local member reliance on full-time missionaries, and resistance to LDS proselytism efforts by some Christian groups. With only a couple exceptions of Latter-day Saints relocating to Sunyani, there are no local LDS leaders who have been trained or have had past experience with church leadership positions since full-time missionaries arrived in late 2010. Although there is a small and growing number of qualified priesthood leaders, local converts have heavily depended on full-time missionaries for administrative support and ecclesiastical training due to their recent conversions and lack of experience. Local member-missionary programs continue to be underdeveloped. Full-time missionaries continue to depend on street contacting for finding new investigators. Missionaries report that it is difficult to determine whether individuals they speak to are sincerely interested in learning about the Church or simply listen to the missionaries to be polite. Many of these investigators will likely experience greater difficulty socially integrating into their branches compared to investigators found through member referral. Some Christians have responded poorly to the assignment of LDS missionaries, particularly among some Catholics in Penkwase. The prominence of the Catholic Church and its historical ties to Sunyani pose ongoing challenges for outreach due to strong cultural and religious connections with locals and the Catholic Church.

There are some recent developments that suggest that the Church in Sunyani will experience decelerating growth in the coming years. Setting yearly baptismal goals in some branches may detract from efforts to baptize prepared converts if these goals sacrifice the quality and length of pre-baptismal preparation. The Ghana Kumasi Mission has not appeared to make progress opening additional member groups once the size of branches requires missionaries to find new housing. There are several communities on the outskirts of Sunyani that have isolated members and investigators who have petitioned for the organization of a member group within their communities but no additional groups have appeared to be organized. Efforts by the Ghana Kumasi Mission to open large numbers of additional cities to missionary work and expand outreach in lesser-reached major cities such as Kumasi and Obuasi challenge efforts for the Church to continue to expand outreach in Sunyani and nearby communities through assigning additional missionaries and following the Sunyani Model. No senior missionary couple appears to be based in Sunyani anymore due to the lack of senior missionary couples in the Africa West Area, resulting in diminished resources and expertise to open additional member groups in the Sunyani area. District leadership has appeared unable to recapitulate church planting practices within their jurisdiction due to their recent training and focus on strengthening branches in the district. Techiman is the only city nearby Sunyani that has had full-time missionaries assigned.

There have been some recent member activity frustrations in some branches. Extremely few members arrive to church on time. Most branches have only a handful of members present when church meetings begin and the majority of church membership does not completely arrive until 30 minutes after the meeting began. The Fiapre Branch has struggled to increase the number of active members. These findings may prompt mission leadership a place greater need on reactivation efforts rather than on church planting. This can result in an abandonment of the Sunyani Model for the Sunyani area and diminished growth over the long term.

Comparative Growth

Historically, LDS outreach in Ghana has expanded as active members relocate to cities and villages without an LDS presence and later send requests to church leaders to organize a group or branch and assign full-time missionaries. During this process a single church unit is organized and additional units are not created until the number of active members merits the creation of additional units, which can take several years or even decades to achieve. In 2011, Sunyani appeared to be the only city in the world within the past 15 years where there were no known members prior to the arrival of full-time missionaries and where the Church simultaneously organized multiple member groups. As of mid-2011, Sunyani was the most northern city in Ghana with an LDS congregation and missionaries assigned. The organization of the Ghana Kumasi Mission in 2012 has facilitated church planting efforts in central and northern Ghana. In early 2013, the Church implemented the Sunyani Model in Tamale, Ghana where there were only a handful of known members but no member group previously organized. The Ghana Kumasi Mission assigned eight missionaries and organized two member groups, with plans to open two more. The Church has since experienced slow growth with only a small number of convert baptisms due to mission leaders originally restricting proselytism efforts to only among Christians. In mid-2013, the mission opened Techiman to missionary work. The mission assigned eight missionaries, organized two member groups, and planned to open two additional member groups before the end of the year. Large numbers of converts joined the Church in Techiman within the first two months of missionaries serving in the city.

Most missionary-minded Christian groups have appeared to maintain a presence in Sunyani for several decades longer than the LDS Church. Other outreach-focused Christian groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Seventh Day Adventists have employed more aggressive church-planting strategies than the LDS Church in Ghana and elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2013, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 16 congregations in the Sunyani area that provided church services in American Sign Language, English, and Twi.[7] Traditional Christian groups such as the Catholic Church continue to maintain a strong following in Sunyani and have many highly devoted members.

Limitations

The Church does not publish detailed data on membership figures, member activity rates, annual numbers of convert baptisms, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, and the number of members serving full-time missions on a city or administrative-division level. Consequently there are no official LDS statistics available on membership in the Sunyani area. It is unclear how many converts have been baptized in Sunyani since the establishment of the Church in 2010. Missionary reports have been extremely limited since early 2013 and it is unclear how trends in church attendance, the number of converts baptized, and efforts to expand outreach have changed during this period. Most data regarding church growth trends in Sunyani was obtained from full-time missionary reports between the years 2010 and early 2013. No local member reports were available regarding church growth and missionary trends in the area.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Sunyani appears favorable as most congregations planted in late 2010 have continued to grow in church attendance and maturity and the district and most of its branches have become more self-sufficient in meeting their administrative needs. Prospects appear most likely for one or two of the largest branches dividing to create additional member groups or branches. Finding, baptizing, and retaining youth converts who are prepared to serve full-time missions and later return to Sunyani and fill leadership positions as returned missionaries will be crucial towards establishing long-term, increasing numbers of self-sufficient leadership. The assignment of multiple missionary companionships per branch may compromise progress and efforts to instill leadership and self-sufficiency in new converts. Cities within close proximity to Sunyani may have groups established and full-time missionaries assigned in the near future, including Yamfo, Tanoso, Chira, Nsuatre, and Berekum. Communities and neighborhoods in Sunyani which may have their own LDS congregations established include Mantukwa, Odumase, and Abesem. The advancement of the district into a stake will likely take many more years to accomplish as there are not a sufficient number of congregations to organize a stake and the number of nominal members in the district are vastly short of meeting the minimum qualifications for a stake to operate.

[1] "Sunyani," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 2 August 2011. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunyani

[2] "Sunyani Municipal - Demographic Characteristics," www.ghanadistricts.com, retrieved 14 September 2011. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/districts/?r=10&_=30&sa=6213

[3] "Brong Ahafo - Nationality and Ethnicity," www.ghanadistricts.com, retrieved 14 September 2011. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/region/?r=10&sa=30

[4] "Sunyani Municipal - Demographic Characteristics," www.ghanadistricts.com, retrieved 14 September 2011. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/districts/?r=10&_=30&sa=6213

[5] "Brong Ahafo - Nationality and Ethnicity," www.ghanadistricts.com, retrieved 14 September 2011. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/region/?r=10&sa=30

[6] "Brong Ahafo - Educational Attainment and Literacy," www.ghanadistricts.com, retrieved 20 September 2011. http://www.ghanadistricts.com/region/?r=10&sa=31

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 10 September 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT