

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent LDS Growth and Missionary Developments in Burundi

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Overview

Inhabited by approximately 10.4 million people, Burundi is a small, landlocked country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Christians comprise 86% of the population and most speak Kirundi, French, or Swahili. In 2010, the LDS Church reestablished an official presence in Burundi and has since experienced steady growth.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Burundi and identifies recent church growth and missionary developments. Church growth and missionary successes are examined and opportunities and challenges for future growth are discussed. The growth of the Church in other Sub-Saharan African countries with a recent LDS establishment is compared to the Church in Burundi. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence in Burundi is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In the early 1990s, the Church organized its first branch in the capital city of Bujumbura and assigned missionaries. In 1993, there were 36 members in the country. The Church withdrew missionaries shortly thereafter due to civil war. The Church eventually closed the branch due to church administration challenges and few active priesthood holders. By 2002, there were 26 members in Burundi.

In the late 2000s, mission presidents and area leaders assessed the reestablishment of an official church presence in Burundi and beginning formal missionary activity. In late 2009, the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission President visited Burundi to investigate groups of self-proclaimed Latter-day Saints and assess conditions to determine the feasibility of reestablishing a church presence. Mission leaders increased the frequency of visits to Burundi and kept track of isolated members who relocated to Burundi from other nations, or who joined the Church when an LDS presence operated in the early 1990s. The Church also maintained regular contact with committed investigators. Area leaders visited these individuals and assessed security conditions. Organized in mid-2010, the Democratic Republic of Congo Lubumbashi Mission played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Church in Burundi as the new mission president advocated for establishing a presence as soon as possible. Mission leaders visited in August 2010 to meet with members and investigators. A stake president from the Kinshasa area also joined the expedition and provided valuable insight and vision toward opening the country to missionary activity. A special sacrament meeting service was held during the visit for the handful of members in Bujumbura. During this visit, mission leaders searched for apartments to house missionaries and signed contracts before leaving the country. Area leaders granted permission to the mission president to assign young, full-time missionaries the following month.

In September 2010, two North American senior missionary couples and six African full-time missionaries were permanently assigned to Bujumbura. The missionaries organized a group, began teaching investigators, and baptized new converts. Due to meticulous preparation and close collaboration between local members, investigators, and mission and area presidencies, 72 attended the first sacrament meeting service held that month. In October, LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Burundi for missionary work. Steady increases in church attendance, high convert retention, and local leadership development warranted the organization of the Bujumbura Branch in early January 2011. The Church organized a second branch in June 2011. By September 2011, there were nearly 200 members meeting in the two Bujumbura branches.

The number of members increased from eight in September 2010 to 39 by year-end 2010. Membership increased to 171 in 2011 and 409 in 2013. In mid-2014, a third branch was organized in Bujumbura. At the time, all three branches appeared to have approximately 60 active members.

In mid-2014, a local member reported that approximately 75% of members on church records were active in his branch and that three missionary companionships were assigned to the branch. Members estimated that 30-39 new converts had joined the church in the branch within the past year and that approximately two-thirds of converts remained active one year after baptism. In this branch, missionaries reported that members scheduled appointments with the full-time missionaries to introduce their friends to the Church. Missionaries reported that common reasons preventing members from attending church in the branch included distance to their assigned meetinghouse, inadequate finances, family opposition, misunderstanding of church doctrines, and welfare issues. Missionaries reported that church services are held in French, but translated by members into Kiswahili and Kirundi to accommodate language needs in the congregation. At the time, a sizable number of members in the branch were Congolese.

In July 2014, senior missionaries reported that 22 members in Bujumbura were preparing applications for full-time missionary service. At the time missionaries reported that a third meetinghouse would likely soon open so that each branch had its own meetinghouse.

Burundi currently pertains to the Africa Southeast Area and the Democratic Republic of the Congo Lubumbashi Mission.

Successes

The initial opening of Burundi to missionary work in 2010 stands as the quintessential model for the Church establishing an official presence and beginning formal proselytism in a previously unreached nation for five major reasons. First, mission and area leaders investigated requests from isolated members and investigators when beginning the process to establish an official church presence in Burundi. Visiting church authorities distributed church literature and provided brief lessons on doctrine and church organization. Area leaders also adequately assessed safety concerns and made appropriate recommendations for establishing the church. Second, church leaders prepared these individuals for the introduction of full-time missionaries by holding small meetings and a worship service. These meetings stressed the need to follow the Church's protocol for establishing the Church to ensure that this process occurred successfully. Third, church leaders sent multiple missionary companionships who were native to the region. All six young missionaries first assigned to Burundi were natives to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fourth, senior missionary couples effectively trained and mentored new converts to hold leadership positions, thereby instilling self-sufficiency in the fledgling group. Fifth, church leaders quickly responded to strong receptivity and growing leadership manpower by organizing a second branch within less than six months following the organization of the first branch.

The Church has achieved high convert retention and member activity rates since its reestablishment in 2010. Acceptable member activity and convert retention rates have occurred for several reasons. Local members report that recent converts regularly give talks in sacrament meetings and fill essential callings in priesthood and auxiliary organizations, thereby encouraging new members to fulfill local responsibilities, continue to study the gospel, and learn how to teach others. Missionaries and local leaders have organized weekly meetinghouse cleaning assignments to include recent converts. This intervention has not only helped to maintain meetinghouse cleanliness, but has also strengthened a sense of LDS community in individual congregations. Only Congolese members serve missions in Burundi. The Church in many areas of Sub-Saharan Africa where only African members serve as full-time missionaries has experienced higher convert retention rates due to greater emphasis on prebaptismal preparation, long-term conversion, and member-missionary involvement. Religiosity is also valued by many Burundians, which in turn has improved convert retention.

The Church in Burundi has achieved good local leadership development. Local church leaders have demonstrated a surprisingly competent level of adherence to following the Church's leadership handbooks despite nearly all of these leaders joining the Church since 2010. Although senior missionary couples have played a pivotal role in overseeing local leadership development, local leaders are able to meet many of the administrative and ecclesiastical needs of their congregations with minimal support from outsourced mission leadership personnel.

The Church in Burundi has achieved, or will soon achieve, self-sufficiency in staffing its full-time missionary needs. This stands as an unusual accomplishment for the Church in a country with as recent of an LDS establishment as Burundi. Oftentimes it takes many years for the Church to come close to even meeting half of its full-time missionary needs.

Opportunities

The Church in Burundi shares many of the favorable conditions and opportunities for growth that the Church in Benin experienced at the time when the Church announced the creation of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2011. The organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission has stood as an anomaly in the twenty-first century considering the Church has not organized a new mission in a country where no mission was previously headquartered and with as few members as Benin since the late 1990s when the Church organized its first missions in Cambodia (1998), Madagascar (1998), and Armenia (1999). The organization of the new mission directly corresponded to explosive LDS growth. At year-end 2011, the Church in Benin reported 676 members, three branches, and no districts or stakes. The Church significantly increased the number of full-time missionaries assigned and commenced an aggressive church planting initiative to organize member groups and branches in additional locations to make

church services and missionaries more accessible to the urban population of the most populous Beninese city of Cotonou. By year-end 2013, the Church in Benin more than doubled in size to 1,439 members, 11 branches, and one district. Similar opportunities exist in Burundi at present if mission leaders organize member groups that assemble in lesser-reached locations, larger numbers of full-time missionaries are assigned, and if a new mission is headquartered in Bujumbura.

Bujumbura presents excellent conditions for initiating a church-planting approach to growth due to high population densities, easy accessibility, and the population exhibiting strong receptivity to LDS outreach. The Church in Burundi has thus far utilized a church-splitting approach to growth as the organization of additional branches has only occurred once the number of active members attending church has warranted it due to the overcrowding of meetinghouse facilities. This tactic has curbed the growth of the Church due to comparatively few resources dedicated to the city and the lack of experienced church leaders to help retain and fellowship new members. Consequently the Church in Bujumbura continues to operate at only a tiny fraction of its potential as most the population does not reside within close proximity to one of the two meetinghouses in the city. The vast majority of Burundians have never heard of the LDS Church before, and few have ever seen a full-time missionary.

Groups of Burundians who have not officially joined the Church but have expressed desire to learn more about the Church and have the Church established in their communities present good opportunities for national outreach expansion. In 2009, reports surfaced that hundreds in Cibitoke Province were desiring to learn more about the Church. The mission president met with several congregations of 50 to 90 people and counseled them to remain faithful until an official church presence is established in Bujumbura and later in other areas of the country such as Cibitoke. Small groups of prospective members have also resided other areas of the country such as in refugee camps. As of mid-2014, no LDS presence operated outside of Bujumbura notwithstanding the continuous placement of full-time missionaries for nearly four years. Mission leaders visiting the most populous cities to assess conditions for missionary activity, meet with isolated members and investigators, and organize member groups when feasible will be crucial towards any progress in expanding national outreach. Cities that may be most favorable for initial LDS proselytism efforts outside Bujumbura include Gitega, Ngozi, and Rumonge. The assignment of Burundian missionaries to serve in Burundi and open these locations to missionary activity appears the most effective means of national outreach expansion due to familiarity with local language and culture, and utilizing local mission resources to expand national outreach.

Challenges

Distance from mission headquarters in Lubumbashi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo poses a significant barrier to greater mission resource allotment and national outreach expansion efforts. Since the arrival of missionaries in 2010 no additional areas of the country have opened to missionaries and all congregations operate in Bujumbura. The Church in the Africa Southeast Area has historically favored a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy as most countries in the area with an LDS presence have had only a few cities with missionaries assigned and congregations functioning despite an LDS presence operating for more than a decade. Consequently, it may take many more years or even decades until the Church approves the opening of additional cities in Burundi to missionary activity, and the organization of member groups and branches in these locations.

Rural areas continue to be totally unreached by the Church and have never received a formal LDS gospel witness. Nearly nine in ten Burundians reside in rural areas totally unreached by the Church. The 2008 census reported approximately half a million people in Mairie de Bujumbura Province - the administrative province that included urban areas in Bujumbura.[1] Approximately six percent of the national population resided in Mairie de Bujumbura Province in 2008, whereas less than 11% of the national population resided in urban areas throughout the country as of 2011.[2] Proselytism in rural areas present unique challenges to the LDS Church due to a focus on centralization in church administration. Consequently most rural areas will likely be unreached for decades to come even if successive mission and area leaders advocate for national outreach expansion, and the Church experiences rapid growth.

Burundi numbers among the poorest, least-developed countries in the world due to a lack of resources, landlocked location, and corruption. In 2013, Burundi ranked as the hungriest country in the world according to the Global Hunger Index[3] and tied with Zimbabwe as the country with the second lowest GDP per capita according to the CIA World Factbook.[4] Poverty and low living standards pose challenges for the Church to meet the welfare needs of its members and assign foreign missionaries. Additionally, the Church has historically demonstrated caution and concern in expanding missionary activity in countries where most live in destitute circumstances. Oftentimes the Church advocates for a greater focus on humanitarian and development work until greater development and prosperity occurs, operating under the premise that people cannot adequately focus on spiritual matters until their physical needs are met.

Missionaries report that some members have misconceptions about LDS teachings and doctrine. The recent conversion of most Latter-day Saints in Burundi coupled with the recent arrival of the Church in the country appear responsible for this challenge. Full-time missionaries, senior couples, and local church leaders have addressed these misunderstandings with relatively good success, although some have become inactive due to misinformation.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Burundi has experienced rapid growth of a comparable magnitude to other Sub-Saharan countries where the Church has recently established a missionary presence. In Rwanda, the Church organized its first branch in 2008 and reported

17 members by the end of the year. By year-end 2013, there were 221 members and three branches in the country. Unlike Burundi where the Church has implemented a church-splitting approach to growth, the Church in Rwanda has focused on a church-planting approach to growth which has resulted in a significant acceleration to membership growth within the past two years. In Gabon, the Church organized its first official branch in 2012. At year-end 2013, there were 19 members in the entire country. Young, proselytizing missionaries arrived in January 2014 and baptized the first 22 converts in March 2014.

The LDS Church is miniscule in comparison to other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in Burundi. These denominations have all appeared to continuously operate in the country for several decades and have all experienced rapid growth. Evangelicals claim 27% of the national population. The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Burundi has achieved rapid growth for many years and today numbers among the largest nontraditional Christian groups. In 2002, Adventists reported 155 churches (large congregations), 190 companies (small congregations), nearly 6,000 baptisms, and 75,892 members whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 320 churches, 405 companies, over 12,000 baptisms, and 141,046 members.[5] Adventists maintain a pervasive presence in the country and most the population resides in a location with an Adventist congregation. Jehovah's Witnesses experience rapid growth and maintain a widespread presence. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average 11,082 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 757 baptisms, and 242 congregations.[6] Over 100 Witness congregations operate in Bujumbura alone. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Burundi.[7]

Limitations

The Church does not publish country-by-country data for many church growth indicators such as the number of convert baptisms, the increase in children of record, the number of members serving full-time missions, and the number of full-time missionaries assigned. No data is released to the public regarding various member activity indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders. Although several reports from local members and senior missionary couples were available regarding recent church growth developments, there were no reports available from young full-time missionaries. The Church does not publish a breakdown of its membership distribution by administrative division for Burundi.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Burundi appears highly favorable within the Bujumbura area. Additional branches will likely be organized and the formation of a member district appears imminent. Members who are currently serving or who will soon serve full-time missions present good opportunities for providing additional leadership manpower in the years to come. With over 10 million people who have exhibited strong receptivity to LDS outreach and a strengthening center of strength in Bujumbura, Burundi presents excellent opportunities for the establishment of a separate mission sometime within the foreseeable future. However, past experience with other countries in the Africa Southeast Area suggest that the Church will delay the organization of a separate mission in Burundi for many more years or even decades to come.

[1] "BUJUMBURA: Administrative Division," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 12 July 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/burundi-admin.php

[2] "Burundi," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 12 July 2014. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/by.html

[3] "GHI Map," International Food Policy Research Institute, retrieved 26 July 2014. http://www.ifpri.org/tools/2013-ghi-map

[4] "Country Comparison:: GDP - Per Capita (PPP)," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 26 July 2014. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html?countryname=Burundi&countrycode=by&regior

[5] "BURUNDI UNION MISSION (2012-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 12 July 2014. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10039

[6] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[7] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," nazarene.org, retrieved 9 June 2014. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCwQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fna