

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent Church Growth and Missionary Successes in Namibia

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Overview

Namibia has a population of 2.2 million people and is located in southern Africa. English is the official language, but spoken by only 3.4% of the national population as a first language. Most the population speaks Afrikaans as a second language although native Afrikaans speakers constitute a mere 10.4% of the population. The most commonly spoken native languages pertain to the Bantu and Khoe-Kwadi language families. Black African peoples constitute nearly nine-tenths of the population. Major indigenous peoples include the Ovambo, Herero/Damara, and Nama. Christians comprise 80-90% of the population. Most Christians are Lutheran (60%). Catholics (20%) and Anglicans (10%) comprise sizable Christian minorities.[1] The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Namibia since the late 1970s/early 1980s and has experienced slow growth throughout most of its history in the country. The Church in Namibia has achieved significant progress accelerating growth during the early 2010s as evidenced by the organization of new branches, the formation of the first district, and the creation of the first branch outside the capital city, Windhoek.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Namibia. Recent church growth and missionary successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are predicted. The growth of the Church in other southern Sub-Saharan African nations is reviewed. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in Namibia are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church in Namibia began church services as early as 1973 although these meetings were privately held in members' homes. The Church assigned the first missionaries in 1978, but these missionaries appeared to only serve briefly in the country. The Church organized its first official branch in 1983 in Windhoek. Missionaries established a permanent presence in Namibia in 1990 when four young elders and one senior missionary couple were assigned to Windhoek from the South Africa Cape Town Mission.[2] The Church organized a district in 1991 that included two branches (Windhoek and Rehoboth). However, the district was discontinued in 1992 and the Rehoboth Branch was closed at approximately the same time. The Church organized a second branch in Windhoek in 2006 called the Katutura Branch. The South Africa Johannesburg Mission operated the Namibia Zone in late 2009 with 10 missionaries (four missionaries in the Windhoek branch, six missionaries serving in the Katutura Branch).

The Church in Namibia removed its full-time missionaries in mid-February 2012 due to the government refusing to extend or grant visas to foreign missionaries. Both Windhoek branches called local members to serve as branch missionaries to maintain missionary activity following the departure of full-time missionaries. The Church reassigned Namibia from the South Africa Cape Coast Mission to the newly organized Botswana Gaborone Mission (later renamed the Botswana/Namibia Mission) in July 2013.

The Church organized a member group in Swakopmund in 2012 after an LDS family contacted the mission president and requested an LDS establishment in the city. Prior to this time, some isolated Latter-day Saints who lived in the city began attending other churches due to a lack of an LDS presence in the city. The Swakopmund Group baptized the first convert in the city in 2013. The Swakopmund Group had between 20 and 40 attending church services in June 2014. Church leaders reported in mid-2014 that slightly less than half of converts baptized within the group remained active one year after baptism. All members in the group spoke either English or Afrikaans.

Membership totaled less than 100 in 1989 and 1991. Membership reached 100 in 1993, 200 in 1995, 402 in 2004, 605 in 2009, and 793 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have widely fluctuated since the Church's initial establishment but have generally ranged from 0% to 15%.

The number of branches totaled one in 1983, two in 1991, one in 1995, two in 2006, and four in early 2015. A small group of members reportedly resided in the Oshakati area during the early 2010s. However, it is unclear whether these members were organized into a member group that regularly met and held worship services or Sunday School classes.

Several notable church growth developments occurred in 2015. The Church reestablished a member district in March in Windhoek. Local Namibian members appeared to constitute the entire district presidency. The Church organized a third branch in Windhoek (Wanaheda) and created the Swakopmund Branch from the Swakopmund Group. The new district included all four branches in the country. All areas in Namibia were assigned to the new district. A map displaying the locations of current LDS congregations and ethnolinguistic peoples in Namibia can be found here.

The average number of members per congregation (members-to-units ratio) has steadily increased during periods when no new branches were organized. Generally the Church has organized new branches when the members-to-units ratio exceeds 400. The Church reports one location where a branch previously operated but where there is no current LDS presence: Rehoboth.

Local members reported that the Windhoek Branch had 120 members out of 400 on church records attending church services as of early 2013. There appeared to be approximately 250-300 active members within the Windhoek metropolitan area as of early 2015. Members in Windhoek reported that the Oshiwambo (Kwanyama), Kwangali, and peoples native to the Caprivi Strip are most receptive to the LDS gospel witness whereas the Herero have been less receptive to LDS missionary activity.

In 2014, one in 2,961 was nominally LDS in Namibia.

Successes

The reestablishment of a member district in Windhoek and the organization of two new branches in 2015 stand as the crowning LDS growth achievements in Namibia within the past two decades. Local members comprising the entire district presidency suggests improvements in the self-sufficiency of local priesthood manpower that has been sufficient in numbers and devotion to not only organize a member district, but also simultaneously organize two new branches. These developments have occurred despite no young, full-time missionaries assigned to Namibia in over three years. Member-missionary participation has appeared primarily responsible for augmenting the number of active members and increasing the number of priesthood leaders capable of serving in local leadership positions.

The organization of the Botswana/Namibia Mission constitutes a significant development for the Church in these two nations that has enormous potential to accelerate growth. The mission administers one of the smallest populations among Sub-Saharan African missions with less than five million people within the mission boundaries. To contrast, most Sub-Saharan African missions have populations of 10 million or more. The Botswana/Namibia Mission also administers one of the smallest numbers of wards of branches among missions in the region. These conditions suggest good opportunities for the Church to channel additional missionary manpower into Namibia, and improve mission president oversight and supervision of fledgling congregations under the supervision of the mission presidency.

Opportunities

Northern Namibia presents excellent opportunities to open additional locations to missionary activity and establish congregations due to large populations that have exhibited good receptivity to other missionary-focused Christian groups. Local members report that peoples native to northern Namibia who have relocated to Windhoek have exhibited the highest receptivity to LDS outreach, suggesting that these peoples residing in their native lands will likely exhibit similar levels of receptivity. The eight northern administrative regions of Namibia have no LDS presence despite the combined population of these regions constituting 64% of the national population.[3] The Oshakati area presents the greatest opportunities for growth as there are four medium-sized cities within close proximity of one another, namely Ondangwa, Ongwediva, Oshakati, and Oshikango. Reports from Namibian members also indicate that there are small numbers of isolated Latter-day Saints who reside in the Oshakati area. There may be immediate opportunities for district and mission leadership to establish a member group or small branch in Oshakati without assigning full-time missionaries. Ideally, the assignment of one senior missionary couple and eight young full-time missionaries to establish member groups in each of these four cities would present the greatest prospects for the Church to establish an official presence in northern Namibia and lay the foundation to achieve rapid, sustainable growth. Holding worship services in rented facilities or makeshift shelters in these locations appears a culturally appropriate and thrifty method to speedily establish the Church in the area.

Walvis Bay presents good opportunities for an LDS establishment due to its sizable population and close proximity to Swakopmund. Walvis Bay ties with the city of Rundu as the second most populous city in the country. Urban areas present good opportunities for the Church to reach a large population concentrated in a small geographical area. The nearby Swakopmund Branch provides church leaders a nearby location from which to coordinate initial missionary efforts in the area.

There are good opportunities to open additional branches or member groups within the Windhoek metropolitan area. The average branch currently administers more than 100,000 people within its geographical boundaries. Only two meetinghouses operate within the entire city. Consequently, the city remains marginally reached by the Church as most do not reside within close proximity of a meetinghouse. Family home evening groups and cottage meetings provide simple gospel lessons in an informal setting. These approaches also emphasize the social component of missionary work and can lead to better member-missionary participation. Identifying favorable locations to implement these church-planting tactics can yield impressive growth results, especially if district and mission leadership are proactive in organizing member groups or branches once receptive communities are identified and a small nucleus of faithful members and interested investigators is established.

Challenges

Problems obtaining foreign missionary visas constitutes the greatest current barrier for the Church to achieve greater growth in Namibia and expand national outreach. Local members have noted continued efforts to resolve complications for the Church to obtain foreign missionary visas but with no tangible success as of April 2015. These difficulties prohibit the implementation of the Church's traditional method of expanding its presence into additional cities and baptizing converts, namely the assignment of full-time missionaries and use of full-time missionaries to find, teach, baptize, and retain new converts. Although this challenge has likely improved the self-sufficiency of the Church in Namibia due to local members being unable to rely on full-time missionaries to meet local administrative and ecclesiastical needs, the lack of full-time missionaries serving in Namibia for over three years limits the Church’s resources to achieve greater growth and open additional areas of the country to proselytism. Consequently the Church's presence in Namibia remains limited to only two cities despite an official presence for 25 years.

Distance from mission headquarters appears primarily responsible for the lack of LDS growth in Namibia during the 1990s and 2000s. The South Africa Cape Town Mission focused for many years to augment the number of active members and congregations in the Cape Town area in order to organize a second stake. This goal was not achieved until 2014. Focus from the mission to advance member districts in South Africa to stakes in the 2000s, such as in East London and Port Elizabeth, consumed resources and likely contributed to the mission maintaining a minimal LDS proselytism presence in Namibia during this time. Consequently, the Church may have missed its window of opportunity to expand missionary work in Namibia and open additional cities when foreign missionary visas were more easily obtainable. A greater allocation of mission resources to Namibia in the 1990s and 2000s may have resulted in the Church in Namibia achieving some level of self-sufficiency in meeting its own missionary needs by the 2010s, thereby mitigating concerns with obtaining foreign missionary visas.

The Church appeared to postpone the organization of additional branches and the reestablishment of a member district for many years. The Church has appeared to have a sufficient number of nominal members to operate several branches and maintain a member district since the late 2000s. However, problems with convert retention, member inactivity, and few priesthood holders capable of staffing leadership positions likely delayed the organization of new branches and the formation of a district.

Namibia has one of the world's most unequal income distributions despite its rich mineral wealth and relatively small population. Although the GDP per capita was $8,200 in 2013 (one of the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa), 40% of the population aged 15-24 was unemployed in 2012. Approximately one-third of the population lives below the poverty line and more than half of the population lives on less than $2 a day.[4] These economic conditions pose challenges for local members to be financially self-sufficient and maintain stability in employment. The Church in Namibia will likely experience challenges for many years to achieve financial self-sufficiency due to these economic and societal characteristics.

The Church has not translated LDS materials into indigenous languages. Most Namibians speak a Bantu or Khoe-Kwadi language as a first language and many appear to have limited proficiency in Afrikaans and English. These languages are traditionally spoken in northern Namibia where the majority of the population resides. The translation of basic missionary and gospel study materials into additional languages appears warranted for effective church administration, missionary work, and testimony development, particularly when the Church begins missionary activity in northern areas of the country. Languages that appear to have the greatest need of translations of LDS materials and scriptures include Herero, Kwangali, Kwanyama, and Nama.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Namibia has historically experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth trends in the region. Namibia and Lesotho are the only nations on the southern mainland of the African continent where the Church reports less than one thousand members. Some nations in the region have experienced rapid growth within the past decade such as Botswana and Angola. The Church in Botswana grew from three congregations (two wards, one branch), 1,110 members, and an official presence in two cities in 2003 to eight congregations (six wards, two branches), 3,021 members, and an official presence in six cities in 2013. The Church organized its first stake in Botswana in 2012. The Church in Angola grew from one branch, 596 members, and an official presence in one city in 2003 to eight congregations branches, 1,436 members, and an official presence in three cities in 2013. The Church organized its first member district in Angola in 2011. Other nearby nations have reported moderate or modest growth such as Lesotho and South Africa. The Church in Lesotho grew from one branch, 499 members, and an official presence in one city in 2003 to three branches, 940 members, and an official presence in two cities in 2013. The Church in South Africa grew from 103 congregations (56 wards, 47 branches) and 38,299 members in 2003

to 154 congregations (87 wards, 67 branches) and 59,385 members in 2013.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a widespread presence in Namibia that is significantly larger and more widespread than the size of the LDS Church in the country. Evangelicals maintain a widespread presence and claim 12.2% of the national population.[5] The ethnolinguistic groups with the highest percentage of Evangelicals included the Chokwe (39%), Luchazi (35%), Dhimba (25%), Lui Luyana (18%), Ndonga Ambo (18%), Afrikaner (18%), Oshiwambo Kwanyama (17%), and Xun Khwe Kxoe (15%). The ethnolinguistic groups with the lowest percentage of Evangelicals include the Kung-Ekoka (0.2%), Ngangela Nyemba (0.4%), and the Mbalanhu (0.5%).[6] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in Namibia. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 2,208 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 43 congregations, and 105 baptisms.[7] Witnesses hold worship services in 27 cities and towns. Provided with the number of congregations that extend specialized language outreach in parentheses, Witnesses maintain congregations or groups that conduct worship services in nine languages including English (16), Afrikaans (12), Kwanyama (8), Herero (4), Portuguese (4), Kwangali (3), Nama (3), Ndonga (2), French (1), Silozi (1), and South African Sign Language (1). Witnesses have translated their official website, jw.org, into all nine of these languages. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has reported slow growth within the past decade. In 2004, Adventists reported 15,187 members, 59 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 123 companies (small or recently-established congregations) whereas in 2014 Adventists reported 18,949 members, 97 churches, and 33 companies. Adventists have generally baptized 300 to 800 new converts a year since 2004.[8] Adventists translate printed materials into Afrikaans and English. The Church of the Nazarene operates a presence in approximately two dozen cities or towns.[9] In 2014, Nazarenes reported 3,820 full members, 552 fellowship members, 404 conversions, 113 baptisms, an average weekly worship of 2,562 people, 48 organized churches (large or well-established congregations), and seven churches not yet organized (small or recently-established congregations). Nazarenes have recently reported increasing numbers of members attending worship services although no new congregations have been recently organized.[10]

Limitations

Several high-quality reports from senior missionary couples, returned missionaries, and local members were available during the writing of this case study. However, the Church does not publish data pertaining to the number of active members, sacrament meeting attendance, or the number of members who hold temple recommends. The Church does not release country-by-country information to the public regarding the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the number of convert baptisms.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Namibia appears positive for the foreseeable future. Although it is unclear whether the Church will be able to resolve its problems obtaining foreign missionary visas in the near future, there have been several notable church growth developments within the past year indicating improved self-sufficiency of the Church. The Church may organize additional branches in the Windhoek area and establish member groups or official branches in the Oshakati area and in Walvis Bay. The opening of member groups or branches in additional cities appears most likely once active members relocate to cities where no LDS presence operates and these members petition district and mission leaders to hold church services in their location. The organization of additional congregations in the Windhoek area appears most likely to occur as a result of increasing numbers of active members necessitating the division of larger congregations.

[1] "Namibia," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 6 April 2015. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222079

[2] "Namibia," Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, page 379

[3] "Namibia," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 7 April 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/Namibia.html

[4] "Namibia," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 7 April 2015. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wa.html

[5] "Namibia," Operation World, retrieved 7 April 2015. http://www.operationworld.org/nami

[6] "Country: Namibia," Joshua Project, retrieved 7 April 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/WA

[7] "2014 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[8] "Namibia Conference (2012-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 7 April 2015. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2616056

[9] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 7 April 2015. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=WA&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[10] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2004-2014," nazarene.org, retrieved 24 February 2015. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&sqi=2&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F