

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

>

Recent Church Growth and Missionary Successes in Cameroon

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: October 1st, 2015

Overview

Cameroon is located in Central Africa and supports a population of 23.1 million. English and French are the official languages. Several indigenous African languages are commonly spoken such as Bamun, Bulu, Duala, Ewondo, Adamawa Fulfulde, Kom, Lamnso', and Medumba. Christians and followers of indigenous religious each comprise 40% of the population. Muslims constitute the remaining 20% of the population. The LDS Church has experienced unprecedented growth in the two most populous cities within the past decade as evidenced by the organization of many new congregations in Douala and Yaoundé, accelerated membership growth, the establishment of the first member district, and the allocation of additional mission resources.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Cameroon. Recent church growth and missionary successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. LDS growth trends in neighboring Central African nations are reviewed. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Cameroon is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

//

LDS Background

The Church in Cameroon organized its first branch in the early 1990s in Yaoundé. The Church organized the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission in 1992 to administer Cameroon and adjacent countries; however, the mission was relocated to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire one year later. A member group began functioning in Douala during the mid-1990s and the member group became a branch in 2004. The Church assigned Cameroon to the newly organized Africa West Area in 1998, but reassigned the country to the Africa Southeast area in the mid-2000s. Missions that have administered Cameroon have included the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission (1993-2005), Ghana Cape Coast Mission (2005-2008?), the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission (2008?-2014), and the Republic of the Congo Brazzaville Mission (2014-present). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles dedicated Cameroon for missionary work in Yaoundé in 2009.

The Church in Cameroon reported less than 100 members in 1993. Church membership totaled 200 in 1995, 194 in 1999, 208 in 2003, 492 in 2006, 1,003 in 2010, and 1,498 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have generally averaged between 10-30% within the past decade. The Church organized its first member district in Yaoundé in 2012. As of mid-2015, the Church reported a presence in two cities: Yaoundé (7 branches) and Douala (4 branches).

Yaoundé

The number of branches in Yaoundé increased from one in the early 1990s to two in 2006, three in 2009, four in 2010, five in 2014, and seven in 2015. The first English-speaking branch was organized in 2015 (Bastos 2nd). The Church organized a district in Yaoundé in 2012. Most of the missionaries serving in Yaoundé during early 2015 were from French-speaking African nations such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Madagascar. Senior missionaries noted that the Church has purchased land to build a district center one day. Senior missionaries reported diligent efforts to assist the Yaoundé Cameroon District to become a stake in the near future.

Douala

The number of branches in Douala increased from one in 2004 to two in 2011 and four in 2015. The Douala Branch divided in mid-2015 to organize two additional branches (New Bell and Village). Senior missionaries reported that church attendance for the first sacrament meetings in each of the branches following the branch division was 67 for the New Bell Branch, 41 for the Douala Branch, and 19 for the Village Branch. Missionaries noted a significant need to focus on reactivating less-active and inactive members in the Village Branch. Senior missionaries indicated that the Bonaberri Branch had outgrown its facilities and that the organization of another branch in the area would be needed in the near future.

Successes

Significant progress has occurred with the Church opening additional congregations in Yaoundé and Douala. The organization of new congregations in each of these cities has improved the saturation of LDS missionary outreach in these urban locations where millions reside. Consequently, many people who previous had no contact with the Church due to distance to the nearest meetinghouse or the lack of LDS missionaries in their communities are more easily accessed today than a decade earlier. The average branch in Yaoundé and Douala initially administered approximately two million people in 2005 whereas the average branch in Yaoundé and Douala included 382,000 inhabitants and 688,000 inhabitants, respectively, in mid-2015. The establishment of new branches has only been possible through the retention of male members to serve in branch presidencies and increases in the number of active members. The organization of a branch that specifically administers English speakers in 2015 stands as a major accomplishment to effectively meeting language needs despite comparatively few members in the Yaoundé area.

The Church has achieved commensurate membership and congregational growth rates. This suggests that member activity and convert retention rates have remained constant despite larger increases in the number of converts joining the Church. The number of branches in Cameroon increased from two in 2005 to 11 in 2015 (a 450% increase) whereas the number of members increased from 278 in 2004 to 1,498 in 2014 (a 439% increase). Increases in the number of active members within the past decade has necessitated the organization of additional branches to accommodate members and to avoid overcrowding in branches that have outgrown their facilities.

The organization of a member district in Yaoundé in 2012 signals that the Church in Cameroon has a sufficient number of active priesthood leadership to staff both branch callings and administrative positions required by a district. The Church appears focused on preparing the Yaoundé Cameroon District to become a stake in the near future as the district currently meets the minimum criteria for the number of congregations required to support a stake. However, the district has yet to meet many other requirements to operate as a stake such as at least 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders and 1,900 members within the boundaries of the district.

The division of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission in 2014 to organize a separate mission to administer the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea has channeled additional mission resources into Cameroon. Senior missionary couples note that the current mission president has the goal for the Church to divide the Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission in the near future to establish a separate mission in Cameroon. The downsized geographical area of the mission permits greater mission president oversight, mission resource allotment, and increased vision to grow the Church in Cameroon.

Opportunities

Cameroon has experienced political stability and widespread religious freedom for over two decades. Many other Sub-Saharan African nations have not experienced stability in government and society for as long as Cameroon, yet some of these countries have a more widespread LDS presence and sizable numbers of non-African, full-time missionaries assigned. The worldwide number of members serving full-time missions mushroomed in the early 2010s from 59,000 in 2012 to 84,000 in early January 2015.[1] This has resulted in an unprecedented opportunity to channel surplus missionary manpower into underserviced countries such as Cameroon. There have not appeared to be any restrictions or limitations on the Church's proselytism activities in Cameroon or the number of foreign missionary visas granted to the Church. These conditions present excellent opportunities for opening additional cities to proselytism, augmenting the size of the full-time missionary force, and establishing a nationwide presence due to few safety concerns for full-time missionaries and the population exhibiting good receptivity to LDS outreach. The recent organization of the Republic of the Congo Brazzaville Mission also suggests greater resource availability and mission president oversight for missionary activity in Cameroon to fuel future national outreach expansion.

The opening of additional meetinghouse has good potential for growth. Senior missionaries note that many branches share the same meetinghouses. The comparatively tiny size of the Church in Yaoundé and Douala indicates that many members likely travel long distances to reach the nearest meetinghouse. Some branches geographically service areas that are distant from their assigned meetinghouse. A single meetinghouse to house each branch can substantially improve member activity rates, augment the number of converts baptized, improve the accessibility of the Church, and strengthen a sense of LDS community for individual congregations. Rented facilities appear a thrifty and culturally-appropriate method to adequately meet this need.

There are good opportunities for the Church to organize additional branches or member groups in Douala and Yaoundé. A church-planting approach to growth has excellent potential to rapidly accelerate growth in a more efficient manner than a church-splitting approach to growth. The Church in Cameroon has traditionally relied on increasing numbers of active members

and burgeoning church attendance in branches to overwhelm the size of meetinghouse facilities in order to organize additional branches. This reactionary approach limits growth and inextricably ties the growth of the Church to the success of currently operating congregations rather than looking to lesser-reached or unreached locations for growth. Mission and branch leaders can implement a church planting approach by holding cottage meetings in members' homes that present a simple gospel lesson and provide socialization opportunities for members, investigators, and missionaries in various neighborhoods. Senior missionaries and local church leaders can look for a rented facility to hold a basic worship service in areas where cottage meetings have detected the greatest receptivity and interest among the local population. The Church has implemented a church-planting approach to growth in many major cities in West Africa such as Kumasi, Ghana and this method has yielded impressive results within short periods of time. Similar successes appear likely to be achieved in Cameroon if mission and area leaders maintain the adequate vision and strategic planning to methodologically expand the Church's presence in the emerging centers of strength in Yaoundé and Douala.

The establishment of a separate mission headquartered in Cameroon will be essential for the Church to open additional cities and towns to proselytism. The Church in Cameroon has made modest progress reaching the national population as only 22% of the population resides in cities where a branch operates. According to 2005 government statistical data, there are at least 56 cities in Cameroon with 20,000 or more inhabitants without an LDS presence.[2] These cities present the greatest opportunities for the Church to maximize the largest number of people reached with the smallest number of mission resources. The Church has recently experienced excellent results establishing missions where there are few members or branches within a country such as the organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2011. Progress accelerating national outreach expansion in countries where missions have been headquartered for the first time appears rooted in the organization of missions coinciding with greater mission president oversight within the affected area, the allocation of larger numbers of full-time missionaries, and reduced administrative burden on mission leaders.

There are good opportunities for the Church to organize a member district in Douala and advance the Yaoundé Cameroon District into a stake within the near future. The Church in Douala has a sufficient number of branches to merit the establishment of a district although it may lack the needed number of active members to simultaneously staff branch and district callings. Focus from mission leaders to train and prepare local leadership to undertake district responsibilities has good potential to strengthen the Church in Douala and examine additional opportunities for growth. Focus from mission and district leadership in Yaoundé for the Church in the city to meet the outstanding requirements to establish a stake has good potential to improve the self-sufficiency of the Church in Cameroon.

Challenges

The Church's presence in Cameroon remains limited to only Douala and Yaoundé. The lack of progress expanding national outreach and assigning larger numbers of full-time missionaries appears largely the byproduct of the Africa Southeast Area implementing a conservative interpretation of the "centers of strength" policy. The Africa Southeast Area has numbered among the most reluctant administrative areas within the worldwide Church to open unreached locations to missionary activity. A conservative interpretation of the centers of strength has resulted in the Church intentionally restricting its operations to only a handful of predetermined locations with the goal to develop a self-sustaining and self-sufficient core of church leadership and members. Unfortunately this policy has had many negative consequences when growth in centers of strength fall vastly short of expectations and require significantly more time to reach desired outcomes. Ultimately many areas remain unreached for years or decades notwithstanding no restrictions on religious freedom, large populations receptive to Christian proselytism who have yet to receive the Latter-day Saint gospel witness, and no challenges obtaining additional numbers of foreign missionary visas. Delays in opening additional areas of Cameroon may result in previously receptive individuals becoming disciplined into other proselytism-focused Christian groups. In addition to a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy, the Church in the Africa Southeast Area has experienced chronic shortages in missionary manpower and resources despite hundreds of millions of people who have exhibited good receptivity to LDS proselytism efforts. Global imbalances in mission resource allocation have further contributed to difficulties for the Church in Cameroon to achieve greater progress expanding missionary activity to additional cities.

Only small numbers of Cameroonians have served or are currently serving full-time missions. This has resulted in the Church in Cameroon heavily depending on foreign missionaries to staff its ranks. Larger numbers of local members serving missions will coincide with enhanced self-sufficiency in meeting missionary needs and the long-term strength and expansion of local leadership manpower. Methods that can be implemented to help augment the number of local members serving missions include full-time missionaries pairing up with local members for a day or an evening, assigning a mission-aged member to serve a "mini-mission" with a full-time missionary for a missionary transfer period, and holding missionary preparation classes offered though the Church Education System that are accessible and engaging for youth and young adults.

There are few gospel study and missionary resources available in the most commonly spoken indigenous African languages. Fang is the only indigenous African language native to Cameroon with an LDS material translated (the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith). The translation of basic proselytism and gospel study materials into the most commonly spoken indigenous languages such as Bamun, Bulu, Duala, Ewondo, Adamawa Fulfulde, Kom, Lamnso', and Medumba may be warranted to improve gospel scholarship, testimony development, and the effectiveness of proselytism efforts.

Some of the most populous unreached cities such as Kousseri and Maroua are located in areas of the country where many, if not most, the population adheres to Islam. Traditionally Muslim ethnic groups often exhibit strong ties to Islam and demonstrate low receptivity to Christian proselytism. Consequently the Church may experience slow growth in some of these locations due to lower receptivity. Additionally, the Church has yet to develop teaching approaches tailored to those with a Muslim background.

As the application of traditional LDS teaching approaches assume investigators have an awareness and understanding of basic Judeo-Christian doctrines, a lack of specialized outreach materials may contribute to lackluster growth in some locations with predominantly Muslim populations.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced rapid growth in some nearby Central African nations. The Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) has consistently achieved the most rapid growth in the region. The Church in the DR Congo has reported annual membership growth rates of 10% or higher since 2009 and has typically organized 10 or more congregations a year since the late 2000s. There were 42,700 members, 12 stakes, and four districts in the DR Congo as of mid-2015 whereas there were only 15,960 members, four stakes, and three districts a decade earlier. LDS growth trends have fluctuated in the Republic of the Congo within the past two decades from rapid growth to essentially very slow or stagnant growth. However, the Church in the Republic of the Congo nonetheless has grown to two stakes, 6,000 members, and 17 congregations within less than 25 years. The Church has achieved stagnant growth in the Central African Republic due to no official missionary presence in the nation and only one branch that operates in the capital city, Bangui. The Church recently assigned its first missionaries to Gabon within the past couple years and has reported many convert baptisms in the sole branch that operates in the capital city, Libreville.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups maintain a widespread presence in Cameroon that completely dwarfs the size of the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim approximately nine percent of the population and have reported modest growth in recent years.[3] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a nationwide presence, but have experienced moderate growth in recent years. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 37,319 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 329 congregations, and 1,228 baptisms. Witnesses appear to maintain congregations in approximately 100 cities and towns nationwide. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a pervasive presence in Cameroon. However, Adventists have reported decreasing numbers of members and congregations in recent years. In 2003, Adventists reported 912 churches, 531 companies, and 118,941 members whereas in 2013 Adventists reported 835 churches, 493 companies, and 84,310 members.[4] Adventists generally baptize between 6,000 and 9,000 new converts a year. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Cameroon.

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 young full-time missionaries and senior missionary couples were available regarding recent church growth developments, there were no reports available from local members and church leaders. The Church does not publish a breakdown of its membership distribution by administrative division for Cameroon. No data is released pertaining to the number and locations of member groups. It is unclear whether many Latter-day Saints reside outside of Douala or Yaoundé or if member groups operate in any locations outside of these cities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Cameroon to perpetuate recent church growth and missionary successes appears positive for the foreseeable future. The organization of a member district in Douala appears likely in the near future and additional branches will likely be organized in Yaoundé and Douala in the next couple years. The establishment of a separate mission headquartered in Cameroon will be a significant catalyst to accelerating growth both within the most populous cities and in currently unreached areas of the country. The Yaoundé Cameroon District may mature into a stake by 2020. The Church will likely continue to depend on a church-splitting approach to growth due to reluctance from the Africa Southeast Area to implement church-planting strategies out of concern of managing growth with relatively few resources available.

[1] Lloyd, R. Scott. "LDS Church announces 11 new missions, 2015 mission president assignments," Deseret News, 9 January 2015. http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865619186/Creation-of-11-new-missions-indicates-the-work-continues-apace.html

[2] "Cameroon," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 14 March 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/Cameroon.html

[3] "Cameroon," Operation World, retrieved 14 March 2015. http://www.operationworld.org/came

[4] "Cameroon Union Mission (2013-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 14 March 2015. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2590657