

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS Outreach in West African Cities Inhabited by At Least 100,000 People

Author: Matt Martinich, M.A.

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Overview

Urban areas present some of the greatest opportunities for LDS growth due to high population densities, accessibility, and higher living standards. The Church in West Africa has experienced some of the most robust “real growth” in recent memory among the Church’s administrative areas as evidenced by rapid membership growth and congregational growth. The Church in West Africa has targeted the most populous cities in proselytism efforts for many years. As of 2015, the Church operated official congregations (wards or branches) in approximately 80 West African cities that supported populations of at least 100,000. Although significant progress has occurred in establishing LDS congregations in many of most populous cities in the region, there remain over 100 West African cities unreached by the Church that support populations of at least 100,000 in countries where an LDS presence has been officially established.

This case study examines the Church’s progress establishing official congregations in the most populous cities of Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, Benin, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Liberia. Changes in area policies that have encouraged national outreach expansion and a more adaptive interpretation of the centers of strength policy are discussed. Successes opening branches in the most populous unreached cities are identified. Opportunities and challenges for the establishment of the Church in currently unreached cities inhabited by 100,000 or more people are analyzed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

NOTE: Only nations with an official LDS presence were examined in this case study. Population figures for cities were retrieved from www.citypopulation.de. However, no recent estimates are available for cities in Nigeria inhabited by less than 300,000 people. Cities with at least 100,000 in Nigeria and other nations without recent city population estimates are identified through examining areal imagery to assess the geographic size of urban areas. Updated population figures for administrative divisions of local government areas were also utilized to estimate city population when available.

LDS Background

Nigeria

The Church in Nigeria maintains official congregations in 50 of the 149 cities inhabited by 100,000 or more people. Most of the 50 cities with an LDS presence are located in southeastern Nigeria. Cities inhabited by at least 100,000 people where official LDS congregations have been most recently organized include Ikorodu (since 2009), Yenagoa (since 2009), Orlu (since 2012), Sango (since 2013), Badagry (since 2014), Sapele (since 2014), Ihembosi (since 2014), Makurdi (since 2015), and Otukpo (since 2015). Approximately 100 cities inhabited by 100,000 people have no official LDS presence. Two cities, Kano and Maiduguri, support populations of more than one million but have no official LDS congregations. These cities are located in the traditional Muslim north. Five missions administer Nigeria, including the Nigeria Benin City Mission, Nigeria Calabar Mission, Nigeria Enugu Mission, Nigeria Lagos Mission, and Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission. A sixth Nigerian mission was announced in early 2016 with headquarters in Owerri.

Ghana

All 13 cities in Ghana with at least 100,000 inhabitants have at least one official ward or branch. The Church most recently

established official congregations in Tamale (2014) and Techiman (2014). Four missions administer Ghana, namely the Ghana Accra Mission, the Ghana Accra West Mission, the Ghana Cape Coast Mission, and the Ghana Kumasi Mission.

Cote d'Ivoire

The Church in Cote d'Ivoire maintains official congregations in 10 of the 12 cities inhabited by 100,000 or more people, namely Abidjan (since 1988), Bouake (1989-2005, since 2015), Yamoussoukro (since the early 1990s), Anyama (since 2003), Divo (since 2006), San-Pedro (since 2006), Gagnoa (since 2013), Daloa (since 2014), Abengourou (since 2015), and Man (since 2015). The two unreached cities inhabited by at least 100,000 people, Ferkéssédougou and Korhogo, are located in the predominantly Muslim north. Two missions administer Cote d'Ivoire – the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission and the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan West Mission.

Benin

The Church operates an official congregation in three cities inhabited by at least 100,000 people, namely Cotonou (since 2003), Abomey-Calavi (since 2014), and Porto Novo (since 2014). Four additional cities support populations of over 100,000 but have no official LDS presence, namely Parakou, Godomey, Bohicon, and Djougou. The Benin Cotonou Mission administers Benin.

Sierra Leone

The Church maintains official congregations in four of the five cities in Sierra Leone inhabited by 100,000 or more people, namely Freetown (since 1988), Bo (since 1990, Kenema (since 2004), and Makeni (since 2013). Koidu remains the only city without an official congregation. The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission administers Sierra Leone.

Togo

The Church has maintained an official presence in Lomé, the only Togolese city with an LDS presence, since 1999. The two other cities in Togo inhabited by at least 100,000 people, Kara and Sokodé, have no official LDS presence. The entire country pertains to the Benin Cotonou Mission.

Liberia

The Church operates approximately two dozen branches in Monrovia – the only city in Liberia with at least 100,000 inhabitants. The Church has operated official congregations in Monrovia since 1988. The Liberia Monrovia Mission administers Liberia.

A map displaying the location of cities inhabited by at least 100,000 people in Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Liberia can be found here.

Rethinking the Centers of Strength Policy

The Church in West Africa has implemented a more liberal interpretation of the centers of strength policy in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria within the past six or seven years. The centers of strength policy has guided the expansion of worldwide LDS missionary activity since approximately 1993. The central tenet of this policy centers on the concentration of mission resources into a handful of select locations where the majority of LDS membership resides in order to strengthen the Church to the point that it becomes self-sufficient. Once this goal is achieved, the Church then concentrates on establishing additional centers of strength within a country. This policy has discouraged the proselytism of remote or rural communities due to distance from mission headquarters and smaller target populations for missionaries to proselyte. Additionally, this policy has posited that additional cities do not open to missionary activity until certain benchmarks for growth have been met in cities where LDS congregations have been already established (e.g. the organization of stakes). As a result, the expansion of the Church and its nationwide growth relies on the success of the Church in a handful of previously selected cities at the expense of delaying outreach to perhaps more receptive, unreached populations. Slow or stagnant growth has accompanied the implementation of this policy in most countries of the world with an LDS presence. Centers of strength have typically never become adequately self-sufficient or large to prompt mission and area leaders to redistribute mission resources to enable national outreach expansion. This results in other cities, provinces, and regions of countries remaining unreached despite many of these locations presenting good prospects for missionary activity. The successful establishment of centers of strength has often continued to postpone the expansion of the Church into additional areas. This has occurred primarily due to focus from mission leaders to better permeate a city with mission outreach and take advantage of easily accessible, receptive populations. The Church in West Africa employed a traditional interpretation of the centers of strength policy during the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, slow progress occurred in most areas with the establishment of the Church in previously unreached cities and towns.

A more adaptive, effective implementation of the centers of strength policy in West Africa has been in place since approximately 2010. Although the goal of this policy continues to be the establishment of self-sufficient, resource-laden "centers of strength,"

mission and area leaders have focused on the systematic opening of previously unreached cities to proselytism. This has included both cities with known Latter-day Saints and cities where there have been no known Latter-day Saints. In contrast to the more conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy, the more liberal interpretation of the centers of strength policy currently employed in the Africa West Area does not delay the opening of additional cities to proselytism based upon the growth and status of the Church in locations where congregations currently operate. Newly organized congregations have often assembled in a new meetinghouse quickly secured from leasing rented spaces instead of traveling longer distances to a meetinghouse shared by another congregation. Meetinghouses have also doubled as missionary housing. Additional branches or member groups have been organized in cities where one or more congregations operate despite previously operating congregations not reaching self-sufficiency. This has generally been done to reduce travel times for members and investigations. As a result, the Church has saturated cities with LDS outreach within short periods of time regardless of the progress attained in other locations or congregations. Rapid membership and congregational growth rates have coincided with these policy changes due to more locations where official congregations operate and formal proselytism is conducted.

Successes

Since 2010, the greatest success expanding LDS outreach into the most populous, unreached cities has occurred in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. The Church in Ghana has established a ward or branch in all 13 cities populated by at least 100,000 people and operates at least four congregations in all but one of these cities. Rapid growth has occurred in Cote d'Ivoire as the Church has organized official branches in six additional cities inhabited by at least 100,000 people since 2006. The Church in both Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana has implemented effective church planting tactics in which multiple member groups are organized upon the initial establishment of the Church, or additional branches are organized shortly after the creation of the first branch in a city. As a result, greater growth has been spurred and greater outreach capabilities have been established.

The Church in West Africa has significantly increased the number of missions within the past decade. There were seven missions in the region in early 2005, whereas there were 13 missions in early 2015. Additional missions headquartered in the region have channeled mission resources to open previously unreached cities to missionary activity and saturate lesser-reached cities where LDS congregations have been already established. International church leaders appear optimistic about future increases in the number of full-time missionaries serving in West Africa. The Church has continued to organize new missions in the area (such as the Nigeria Owerri Mission in 2016) and is currently constructing a new missionary training center (MTC) in Accra, Ghana capable of housing 500 missionaries. Slated for completion in mid-2017, the new MTC will have five times the capacity as the current Ghana MTC that was dedicated in 2002.[1]

Opportunities

With the exception of Nigeria, few barriers curtail the establishment of an LDS presence in all remaining large or medium-sized cities (e.g. 100,000 or more inhabitants) in West Africa where no LDS presence currently operates. The Church in Sierra Leone appears to have adequate local leadership manpower in neighboring cities, such as Bo and Kenema, to establish a member group or branch in Koidu – the last unreached city in Sierra Leone inhabited by 100,000 people. The Church in Cote d'Ivoire systematically opened its first branches in 13 previously unreached cities in 2015 alone. This unprecedented progress expanding outreach, and the establishment of a second mission in the country in 2014, suggest that the Church may be able to establish member groups or branches in Korhogo and Ferkéssédougou – the two remaining unreached Ivorian cities inhabited by approximately 100,000 people or more. The Benin Cotonou Mission services the smallest number of stakes and districts of any mission in West Africa as there was only one stake (Togo) and one district (Benin) in the mission as of year-end 2015. It appears feasible for mission leaders to open the remaining six unreached cities inhabited by 100,000 or more people within the mission to missionaries and establish member groups or branches within the foreseeable future. Widespread religious freedom, high receptivity to LDS outreach, the small administrative burden of the mission, the high likelihood of the Cotonou Benin District becoming a stake in mid-2016, and the relatively close proximity of two of these six cities to mission headquarters in Cotonou all preset favorable conditions for national outreach expansion in both Benin and Togo.

Most cities unreached by the Church in Nigeria outside of the homogenously Muslim north present good opportunities for the establishment of branches or member groups. Christians appear to constitute the majority or a large minority in approximately 74 of the 99 unreached cities in Nigeria inhabited by approximately 100,000 people or more. Most of these cities with sizable numbers of Christians are clustered in the cultural region of southwestern Nigeria known as Yorubaland (34) and in the densely populated Anambra and Imo States (13). Plans to create the Church's sixth mission in Nigeria in 2016 with headquarters in Owerri, Imo State has good potential to channel more mission resources into Anambra and Imo States to establish member groups and branches in cities such as Ahiara, Alor, Agulu, Ekwulobia, Enugwu Ukwu, Igbo Ukwu, Ihiala, Ihitte/Uboma, Nkpor, Nkwerre, Nnewi, Okigwi, and Umuchu. The Nigeria Lagos Mission also appears able to make greater inroads to establish member groups or branches in many of the nearly three dozen large or medium-sized cities in Yorubaland. The implementation of the strategies utilized by mission leaders in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana appear to have good potential to systematically open many of these cities to the Church and accelerate growth.

There appear good opportunities for the Church to organize additional missions in West Africa to orchestrate the expansion of the Church into previously unreached cities inhabited by 100,000 or more people. MTC leadership reported that nearly 2,900 missionaries were trained in the Ghana MTC during the two-year period comprising 2014 and 2015. The countries with the largest number of missionaries trained included Nigeria (707), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (573), Ghana (482), the United States (301), Cote d'Ivoire (197), and Madagascar (80). With thousands of native African missionaries trained in the Ghana MTC each year, prospects appear favorable for the organization of additional missions due to the large number of full-time missionaries serving from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire. Locations that

appear most favorable for the organization of new missions include Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire; Abuja, Ibadan, and Uyo, Nigeria; Bo, Sierra Leone; and Lomé, Togo.

There are good opportunities to target the most populous unreached cities in West Africa with social media proselytism efforts. Social media websites such as Facebook permit the targeting of specific cities, demographic groups, and other personal characteristics with advertisements for particular websites. Use of social media proselytism can be a thrifty, efficient method to find new investigators in cities where mission leaders endeavor to establish a congregation and assign missionaries. This method may be especially effective to expand outreach in Nigeria where there are scores of unreached cities inhabited with 100,000 or more people, including many in predominantly Muslim areas where traditional LDS proselytism approaches may not be culturally appropriate or unsafe due to religious violence.

Challenges

Vision to aggressively expand missionary activity into the most populous, previously unreached cities has not been widespread throughout the Africa West Area. The Church continues to operate official congregations in only one city in Togo (Lomé), three cities in Liberia (Monrovia, Harbel, and Kakata), and three cities in Benin (Cotonou, Porto Novo, and Abomey-Calavi). A more conservative approach to the centers of strength model has appeared to be implemented in these three nations due to recent focus on the establishment of stakes in the most populous city of each nation. Although focus on building center of strengths in the metropolitan areas of Cotonou, Benin; Monrovia, Liberia, and Lomé, Togo has yielded rapid growth since 2010, extremely slow LDS outreach expansion has occurred outside of these major cities. Delays establishing the Church in additional cities within these three nations may result in missed opportunities for growth. Past experience has shown that many of the greatest opportunities for LDS growth have been time sensitive. Over time, religious freedom conditions, political stability, economic conditions, and receptivity to the LDS gospel message can significant change. This can result in missed opportunities for growth if conditions become less favorable or LDS mission resources become more limited in the region.

The Church has opened only a handful of additional cities to proselytism in Nigeria since 2010 despite approximately 100 unreached cities inhabited by 100,000 or more people as of early 2016. The sheer population of Nigeria, estimated to number 182 million,[2] presents a daunting task for the Church to adequately proselyte with only six missions. Political instability, security and safety concerns for full-time missionaries, some of the most populous peoples exhibiting strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam, and religious violence pose significant barriers for the Church in Nigeria to expand outreach. Language barriers have also stunted growth in some areas of the country. Returned missionaries in many Nigerian missions report that English continues to be the primary language for church services and proselytism despite many exhibiting a limited proficiency in this language. As a result, the expansion of the Church has likely been negatively affected due to some locations experiencing convert retention and member inactivity problems that have been partially attributed to language barriers.

Language barriers also present challenges in some of the most populous unreached cities in West Africa. The Church has translated LDS materials into only a handful of indigenous languages in the region. Most of these languages are spoken in areas where an LDS presence has operated for at least two decades. Many languages spoken by over one million speakers have no translation LDS scriptures or materials, including Dan (western Cote d'Ivoire), Ebira (central Nigeria), Jula (northern Cote d'Ivoire), Kanuri (northern Nigeria), and Tiv (east-central Nigeria). These and many other languages are commonly spoken native languages in some of the most populous cities in West Africa where no LDS presence operates.

It may take the Church many years or decades to establish an LDS presence in some large or medium-sized cities in West Africa. Long distance from the nearest LDS mission and homogenously Muslim populations present the greatest difficulty for the Church to establish a presence in many of the most populous cities in northern Nigeria, including Kano where there are over four million inhabitants in the metropolitan area. Medium-sized and small cities ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants in predominantly Christian areas of West African nations will likely take precedence over more populous cities in Muslim areas due to easier accessibility to mission headquarters and populations likely exhibiting higher receptivity to the LDS gospel witness.

Limitations

The Church does not publish an official statement on the centers of strength policy although this policy has been referenced by church leaders when discussing church growth, including Elder Dallin H. Oaks[3] and President Dieter F. Uchtdorf.[4] No official information from the Africa West Area presidency was available during the writing of this case study in regards to recent focus to aggressively open previously unreached areas to the Church. Information regarding the operation of member groups was unavailable. Some cities that do not have an official ward or branch may have a member group operating. The Church does not publish its plans to open branches or assign missionaries to previously unreached cities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to continue to establish congregations and assign missionaries to additional cities in West Africa appears favorable. The Church may organize its first official branch in Godomey, Benin; Korhogo, Cote d'Ivoire; Koidu, Sierra Leone; and many large or medium-sized cities in southern Nigeria within the next five years. Progress organizing official congregations in most of the currently unreached cities in the area with 100,000 or more inhabitants will require aggressive efforts from mission leaders to open branches and assign missionaries to these locations. Additional missions will likely need to be organized in Nigeria in order to accomplish this feat. The Church may delay the establishment of the Church in large or

medium-sized cities in predominantly Muslim areas in favor of opening smaller cities and towns in predominantly Christian areas.

[1] Stahle, Shaun D. “First 54 missionaries enter first training center in Africa,” LDS Church News, 25 May 2002. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/41860/First-54-missionaries-enter-first-training-center-in-Africa.html

[2] “Nigeria,” CIA World Factbook, retrieved 18 January 2016. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html

[3] Oaks, Dallin H. "Give Thanks in All Things," General Conference, April 2003. https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2003/04/give-thanks-in-all-things

[4] Gorski, Eric. "Global Mormon growth brings challenges," Associated Press, 1 February 2008. http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2008/02/01/global_mormon_growth_brings_challenges