

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent LDS Growth Developments in Mali

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Overview

Inhabited by 17.5 million people, Mali is a landlocked country in West Africa whose population is predominantly Muslim (94.8%) with small numbers of Christians (2.4%) and followers of indigenous beliefs (2.0%). French is the official language and four indigenous languages are spoken by more than one million people, including Bambara, Fulani languages, Dogon languages, and Soninke.[1] Muslims comprise approximately 95% or more of the population of two of these ethnolinguistic groups (Soninke and Fulani).

Several significant LDS growth developments have recently occurred in Mali such as government registration, the organization of the first official branch, and plans to assign full-time missionaries. This case study reviews the Church's history in administrating Mali. Recent LDS growth developments in Mali are summarized. Translations of basic proselytism materials in indigenous languages are identified. Opportunities for expanding an official LDS presence and achieving growth are explored. Challenges for growth are discussed. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Mali is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment in Mali is predicted.

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LDS Background

Foreign members relocated to Bamako temporarily for employment purposes and began holding sacrament meetings in 1981. Several Malian members joined the Church in Mali and Canada during the 1980s. In the early 1990s, the first Malian full-time missionary served a mission in French-speaking Canada. By 1993, there was only one known Latter-day Saint in Mali due to foreign members leaving the country and Malian members pursuing education overseas.[2]

In 1998, the newly organized Africa West Area included Mali within its jurisdiction. In 2011, the Church organized the Africa West Area Branch to service Mali and nine additional countries within the Africa West Area that were unassigned to missions. Another Malian member served a full-time mission from 2011 to 2013 in the Arizona Phoenix Mission. In 2013, a Malian Latter-day Saint named Yeah Samake from Ouélessébougou ran in the presidential election but only received 0.56% of the vote.[3] At year-end 2013, the Church reported 10 members in Mali. Yeah Samake has been assigned by the Malian government to serve as the ambassador to India since 2015.

Several Malian members learned about the Church and traveled to nearby nations such as Ghana to be baptized during the mid-2010s. A member group began to function in the Bamako area sometime during this period. Increasing numbers of prospective members began to attend church services and meetings in 2016. Senior missionaries serving in Ghana reported that there were approximately 30 prospective members in the country as of September 2016. The Africa West Area presidency made more diligent efforts in early 2017 to prepare for the establishment of an official LDS presence in Mali.

LDS apostle Elder David A. Bednar visited Latter-day Saints and prospective members in May 2017 in Bamako and Mountougoula. At the time the Church reported a member group that included 17 official members who worshipped on Sundays in a renovated chicken coop. There were approximately 250 people who met with Elder Bednar during a meeting at the makeshift LDS meetinghouse.[4] Another article describing the same event reported approximately 260 people in attendance at the meeting with Elder Bednar – of whom only 13 were members.[5]

The Area President, Elder Terence Vinson, visited Mali three times between January 2017 and July 2017 to prepare for the organization of an official branch and the assignment of full-time missionaries. His initial visit in early 2017 was reportedly the first visit by an area or mission leader to Mali. Church leaders reported 18 official members who resided in Mali at the time that the Bamako Branch was organized on July 9th, 2017. However, there were more than 90 who attended the meeting to organize the branch including 38 adults, four youth, and more than 50 children.[6] The first branch presidency included three members and local members reported that the first branch president was not a Malian native. A member group was also simultaneously organized in Mountougoula called the Farako Group. Church meetings have appeared to have been primarily conducted in French although most members and investigators primarily speak Bambara. Furthermore, an area extending approximately 50 miles (80 kilometers) north, east, and south of Bamako was included within the boundaries of the Bamako Branch and assigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission. As of late July 2017, the remainder of Mali continued to be administered by the Africa West Area Branch. There were 39 members and investigators (18 adults, 21 children) who attended church services in the Farako Group on July 23rd. The Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission president visited members and investigators in Mali in early August 2017. A member's son was baptized on August 20th, 2017. This appeared to be the first known baptism in Mali.

In 2017, the Church listed a handful of basic proselytism materials translated into indigenous languages spoken in Mali. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in three indigenous languages, namely Bambara, Fula and Futa (two Fulani languages spoken in West Africa), and Moore. However, the Bambara translation of Gospel Principles is currently unavailable to order.

Local members reported in August 2017 that there were plans underway to prepare for the assignment of full-time missionaries. Local members indicate that full-time missionaries will initially serve only in Bamako, Mountougoula, and Ouélessébougou. It is suspected that additional cities will also open to proselytism in the foreseeable future. Local members predict that Bla, Koutiala,San, and Sikasso appear the most likely to open to missionary work because these cities reportedly have larger Christian populations than other Malian cities. However, no members appear to currently reside in Bla, Koutiala,San, and Sikasso.

Successes

The Africa West Area presidency has made unprecedented progress with the establishment of the Church in Mali. The first visit by a member of the area presidency, registration of the Church with the government, the first visit by an apostle, and the organization of the first official branch occurred within less than six months. Rarely has the Church so quickly mobilized itself in a previously unreached country. These developments are even more impressive considering that the Church has never assigned a senior missionary couple to Mali and that no senior missionary couple appears to reside in the country at present. Thus, all of these efforts have been orchestrated by the area presidency and local Malian members. Elder Bednar's visit to Mali less than two months prior to the organization of the first branch was also an important milestone that is often achieved many years after the first branch is created. This visit likely helped raised the profile of the Church among prospective members and accelerated the process for the Church to be officially established, especially considering that reports from missionaries in West Africa indicate that Elder Bednar oversees the approval process to create new wards and branches.

The Church in Mali simultaneously organized two congregations when the first branch was created in Bamako. This decision provides greater outreach among members and investigators in the country without waiting for one congregation to grow sufficiently large to divide it to create additional congregations. The Farako Group operates in a rural community – a rarity among the Church in most African countries as nearly all congregations function in urban areas. Growth in Farako has been impressive despite extremely limited materials available in the Bambara language and low literacy rates. The number of members in the country has also appeared to nearly double within the past three and a half years even though church membership appears to be less than 20.

The high degree of devotion exhibited by the handful of Malians who have joined the LDS Church stands as the greatest long-term achievement of the Church in Mali. Without these stalwart members and genuinely interested prospective members, it is unlikely that the Church would have established an official presence in Mali. Malian members who reside in Mali have exhibited strong dedication to the Church for many years of waiting for the Church to be established. Malian members have remained faithful to the Church for many years and decades notwithstanding little ecclesiastical support due to isolation from the Africa West Area headquarters in Accra, Ghana and the country never having been assigned to a full-time mission until 2017. This has been demonstrated by one of the first Malian converts translating LDS materials into Bambara and another Malian convert who previously served as mayor of Ouélessébougou and later ran as a presidential candidate.[7] Moreover, at least two Malians have served full-time missions within the past three decades despite only a handful of Malian Latter-day Saints worldwide.

Local members have been particularly proactive sharing the gospel with others within the past year as evidenced by an audience of more than 250 who met with Elder Bednar in May 2017. Members reported in July 2017 that there are at least one dozen individuals just in the Farako Group who are ready to be interviewed for baptism once the full-time missionaries arrive. Local members have also recently prepared audio translations of LDS materials in the Bambara language. Also, many prospective members are former Muslims indicating success in regards to the Church's efforts to reach non-Christians.

Opportunities

The Malian government protects religious freedom and there have been no recent instances of societal abuse of religious freedom in government-controlled areas; a rarity among Muslim-majority nations considering Muslims account for over nine-tenths of the population. Religious harmony in society appears pervasive and on all levels of community and government as evidenced by members of differing religious groups frequently being part of the same family and members of one religious group attending the religious ceremonies of another religious group. [8] Mali has prided itself in its longstanding tradition of interreligious harmony. These conditions suggest good proselytism conditions for the LDS Church as there are no restrictions on religious freedom and several other nontraditional Christian groups freely operate in the country. Furthermore, there do not appear to be any legal obstacles for the Church to expand into additional areas of the country.

There are good opportunities to significantly increase the Church's full-time missionary presence in Mali. French is the official language and is spoken by many Malians, simplifying initial missionary efforts. The Church has significant French-speaking missionary manpower in Sub-Saharan Africa due to many Ivorian and Congolese members serving full-time missions. Care should be taken for the Church to not assign more than a couple missionary companionships per branch or member group in order to avoid member reliance on full-time missionaries to meet member and local leadership responsibilities. Delays in the Church assigning larger numbers of foreign missionaries may result in the Church missing the window of opportunity to expand its presence in Mali at a time when the government and society respect religious freedom and permit Christian groups to openly proselyte and assemble in government-controlled areas. Past experience has illustrated that these conditions do not always remain constant or continue to improve, resulting in the Church missing the time-sensitive window of opportunity to establish an official presence when government policies and societal attitudes were more tolerant of foreign-based, outreach-oriented Christian groups. Many other predominantly Muslim countries do not provide minority religious groups with the right to conduct their operations, specifically pertaining to Muslims changing their religious affiliation and Christian groups openly engaging in proselytism efforts. The influence of Islam on society may restrict full-time missionaries' finding efforts to member referrals of passive proselytism activities in order to avoid openly proselytizing Muslims to respect cultural norms. Nevertheless, these conditions present rare opportunities for the Church to establish a foothold in a secular state that is predominantly Muslim.

Bamako is inhabited by more than three million people[9] and presents many good opportunities for future growth. High population density in urban areas require fewer congregations to service the city in comparison to rural areas. Also, the large number of inhabitants presents many opportunities to find, teach, baptize, and retain new converts. Moreover, relatively easy access by airplane from other major cities in West Africa allows for greater availability of LDS mission resources and leadership to oversee church activities. The large population of Bamako may include as many as 100,000 Christians; a subset of the population who may exhibit higher receptivity to LDS outreach compared to their Muslim counterparts. The greatest successes in baptizing large numbers of converts and achieving high convert retention will require full-time missionaries to regularly open additional member groups in locations distant from the Bamako Branch meetinghouse. The Church in West Africa has experienced impressive results from following a church-planting approach to outreach expansion in newly opened cities to missionary work such as in Sunyani, Ghana and Techiman, Ghana. Continued involvement from local members in missionary efforts will be vital towards instilling self-sufficiency in the Church in Mali and achieving good convert retention and member activity rates.

There are some ethnolinguistic peoples who are predominantly followers of indigenous religions and have sizable numbers of Christians, including several subgroups of the Dogon. Many of these groups have small populations and reside in rural areas along the border with Burkina Faso. Missionary efforts among the Dogon and other peoples with sizable numbers of Christians may experience greater success than among the most populous ethnic groups in the country. For example, other proselytizing Christian faiths have reported higher receptivity and greater growth among these peoples in comparison to the most populous ethnolinguistic peoples because these peoples typically exhibit strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam.

Prospects for opening additional areas of the country to missionary work will become more likely once church units in Bamako and Mountougoula develop greater self-sufficiency and experience regular increases in the number of members and investigators attending church services. The central geographic location of Bamako in the southwestern region of the country provides good opportunities for national outreach expansion in government controlled areas. Ouélessébougou appears the most likely city to have a member group organized as the city is within the geographical boundaries of the Bamako Branch. Bla, Koutiala, San, and Sikasso appear likely cities to have missionaries assigned and member groups organized in the medium term based upon predictions from local members.

Challenges

Low literacy rates and a lack of translations of LDS materials into indigenous languages poses challenges for growth. Only 39% of the national population is literate according to the most recent estimates. Illiteracy poses a significant challenge for personal testimony development, gospel study, and administrative and leadership duties. Moreover, the Church has only translated two LDS materials into Bambara and one of these materials, Gospel Principles, is not currently available to order. Translations of LDS materials into Bambara and other indigenous languages will be needed to adequately proselyte individuals who exhibit low fluency in French.

International church leadership has delayed the establishment of an official LDS presence in Mali for many decades for reasons that are not entirely clear. There have continued to be no known convert baptisms that have occurred in Mali. Local members report that convert baptisms will most likely be delayed until the arrival of full-time missionaries. The centers of strength policy has guided mission and area leaders to not only delay or avoid the opening of unreached cities and provinces in nations with an LDS presence, but has often discouraged the opening of countries that have had no previous LDS presence. Members in some areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, including Mali, have reported that their requests to mission and area leaders to establish an official

church presence in their country have been denied due to concerns regarding the proper administration of the Church in remote locations, apostasy worries, church leaders' unfamiliarity with local culture and customs, a lack of awareness on the procedure to officially register the Church with the government, historically limited numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the region, and threats of safety or political instability. One of the greatest challenges the Church has faced in Sub-Saharan Africa has been comparatively few mission resources dedicated to countries with large populations that are strongly receptive to LDS outreach. Until the worldwide surge in the full-time missionary force in the early 2010s, many African missions struggled to sufficiently staff their ranks to assign a single missionary companionship to each ward or branch. Although the Church has since established an official presence and appears committed to providing long-term outreach in Mali with at least a couple full-time missionary companionships, the Church may have missed some previous opportunities to make greater inroads in Mali especially given the unique cultural conditions of a predominantly Muslim country with widespread religious freedom in government controlled areas. Moreover, the Church may also postpone the assignment of larger numbers of full-time missionaries and the opening of additional cities to proselytism in favor of strengthening emerging centers of strength in Bamako and Mountougoula.

Historical political instability and the persecution of Christians in the eastern half of the country incurred by the recent Islamic insurgency and the Tuareg rebellion may indicate safety concerns for mission and area leaders to maintain a full-time missionary force Mali. Conflict between the homogenously Muslim Tuareg people and the federal government has flared up periodically over the past two decades, with Tuareg militias most recently seeking an independent state comprising the northeastern half of the country. Tuareg rebels captured most major cities and the northern two-thirds of the country by early 2012. The conflict became so severe that the military overthrew the president in the 2012 coup d'état. Despite this instability, civilian rule was quickly reestablished and the government liberated most areas previously occupied by Tuareg rebel groups. Furthermore, the central government and rebel forces signed a peace accord in 2015. However, ongoing tensions between Tuareg rebel groups and the central government pose concerns for whether additional conflict and political instability will resurface in the foreseeable future. Additionally, these conditions suggest unfavorable prospects for LDS missionary activity in the northeastern half of the country due to persistent conflict between the federal government and the Tuareg people, and the persecution of Christians in this region of the country by radical Islamist groups. The Church may elect to only assign French-speaking African missionaries to Mali due to greater familiarity with local culture and a reduced safety risk from militia groups in comparison to their white North American counterparts.

The population may exhibit low receptivity to LDS outreach in the medium and long term due to most Malians adhering to Islam. The Church has previously taken extreme care in other countries to ensure that formerly Muslim Malians have a solid understanding of LDS teachings and are aware of the potential safety concerns that may result from denouncing Islam and becoming Christian. This has generally required approval directly from the mission president for Malians who have joined the Church abroad. Many Malians belong to a family that practices polygamy. Those enjoined to a polygamous marriage must divorce all but one spouse in order to be eligible for baptism; a significant challenge that prevents all but the most devout polygamous converts from joining the Church. Currently missionary tactics and teaching approaches are tailored to those with a Christian background. These skills and approaches may yield few results with formal proselytism efforts among Malians as the Church has not developed teaching and missionary approaches tailored to those with a Muslim or animist background.

Comparative Growth

The Church has also recently established an official presence in two other West African countries during the past 18 months. The first branch in Senegal opened in May 2016 and the country was assigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan West Mission in January 2017. Also, Elder Bednar dedicated Senegal for missionary work when he became the first apostle to visit Senegal in May 2017. During this visit to West Africa, Elder Bednar also met with church leaders in Guinea. The first branch in Guinea opened less than a month later in June 2017 and the branch was assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission. Senior missionaries also indicated in mid-2017 that there are plans to organize the first branch in another West African country that is currently unreached by the Church. However, it is unclear which country this may be from information obtained from this source. Likely possibilities include Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso.

Several missionary-focused Christian groups operate in Mali, although these groups have experienced limited growth. Evangelicals are the largest outreach-oriented Christian group and claim a mere 0.7% of the national population. Evangelicals report challenges with allocating mission resources to Mali and accelerating growth.[10] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a limited presence and reports slow growth. In 2016, Adventists reported 1,740 members, five churches (larger or well-established congregations), 21 companies (small congregations), and 47 baptisms during the year.[11] The number of Adventists in Mali has increased by less than 400 and the number of congregations has increased only by one during the past decade.[12] Jehovah's Witnesses experience very slow growth and have a minimal presence. In 2016, Witnesses reported an average of 284 publishers (active members who engage in regular proselytism), seven congregations, and 12 baptisms.[13] Congregations in Mali reported on the Witness online meeting locator as of mid-2017 operated in Bamako (5), Kayes (1), Kita (1) and Sikasso (1) and held worship services in French, American Sign Language, and Bambara.[14] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Mali.

Limitations

The Church has historically not published membership figures for Mali on a yearly basis. It is unclear how membership growth trends have fluctuated within the past couple decades. There are no official membership statistics on country of origin or language usage for languages not within the 10 most commonly spoken languages in the Church. There are no reliable estimates on the number of Malian Latter-day Saints worldwide. Furthermore, the Church does not record or report the former religious affiliation of new converts.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future growth in Mali appears favorable. Local members have shared the gospel to the point that there are hundreds of interested individuals who may join the Church in the immediate future. Area and mission resources have also quickly mobilized to organize two congregations and have made preparations to assign full-time missionaries within just the past few months. The maintenance of adequate prebaptismal standards for new converts and post-baptism mentoring and fellowshipping will be essential to establish a solid core of active members and future leaders who can grow the Church in the coming years and decades. Additional branches or member groups may be organized within Bamako, Mountougoula, and Ouélessébougou within the next couple years. The Church may one day organize a separate mission headquartered in Mali to not only supervise missionary activity within Mali but also within neighboring nations such as Burkina Faso and Niger. However, it appears more likely that missions headquartered in Cote d'Ivoire will continue to administer missionary efforts and church activity in Mali for many years to come. The translation of the Book of Mormon and additional basic gospel study and missionary materials into the most commonly spoken indigenous languages such as Bambara appears likely within the next two decades.

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