

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent LDS Growth Developments in Guinea

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Overview

Inhabited by 12.1 million people, Guinea is a country located in West Africa supporting a population that is 87% Muslim, 9% Christian, and 4% followers of indigenous religions. Conakry is the capital of Guinea and had an estimated population of 2.3 million people as of January 2017.[1] French is the official language and there are two indigenous African languages spoken by more than one million people (Eastern Maninkakan and Pular).

Several significant LDS growth developments have recently occurred in Guinea. Notable examples include the first visit to the country by an LDS apostle, the organization of the first branch, and the assignment of the first full-time missionaries. This case study reviews the Church's history in Guinea. Recent LDS growth developments in Guinea 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 Guinea is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment in Guinea is predicted.

LDS Background

In 1998, the newly organized Africa West Area included Guinea within its jurisdiction. In 2011, the Church organized the Africa West Area Branch to service Guinea and nine additional countries within the Africa West Area that were unassigned to missions. The Church reported 14 members in Guinea as of year-end 2013. The first Guinean to serve a full-time mission initially joined the Church in Thailand and began his missionary service in 2015.

LDS apostle Elder David A. Bednar visited a couple local church leaders in Guinea during his trip to West Africa in May 2017.[2] At the time a member group appeared to operate in Conakry. The Africa West Area president, Elder Terence M. Vinson, visited members in Conakry on June 18th, 2017 and organized the Conakry Branch[3] with approximately 30 in attendance. There were three members in the branch presidency when the branch was organized. Additionally, the new branch was assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission. However, only Conakry and immediately surrounding communities were included within the boundaries of the branch and the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission. All other areas of Guinea continued to be assigned to the Africa West Area Branch. Missionaries serving in Sierra Leone reported in July 2017 that the first young full-time missionaries were assigned to the Conakry Branch during the month.

The Church listed a handful of basic proselytism materials into indigenous languages spoken in Guinea as of 2017. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in three indigenous languages, namely Mandinka (related to Eastern Maninkakan) and Fula and Futa (two Fulani languages spoken in the Guinea area).

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Successes

The establishment of an official LDS presence in Guinea has rapidly occurred. This success is even more impressive considering that few Guineans who have joined the Church abroad and that there appeared to be little to no coordinated efforts

by the area presidency to organize a branch in Guinea prior to 2017. The organization of the first branch implies that local priesthood holders demonstrate adequate leadership skills, familiarity with LDS teachings and church administration, and devotion to the Church to warrant these administrative and ecclesiastical responsibilities. Moreover, the assignment of the Conakry area to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission immediately following the creation of the new branch, and the arrival of full-time missionaries one month later numbers among one of the most speedy responses by mission and area leaders to begin formal missionary activity in a country where there was no previous official presence. Guinean members appear to have been proactive in regards to member-missionary activity as there were at least 30 people who were in attendance during the organization of the Conakry Branch.

Opportunities

Conakry presents many good opportunities for growth as a branch has already been established, full-time missionaries have recently been assigned, and there are 2.3 million people who reside within the boundaries of the newly organized Conakry Branch. There do not appear to be any significant barriers that prevent proselytism activity, augmentation of the size of the full-time missionary force, or the organization of additional member groups or branches within the city. The greatest successes in baptizing large numbers of converts and achieving high convert retention will require full-time missionaries regularly opening additional member groups in locations distant from where the Conakry Branch currently assembles. 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. Involvement from local members in missionary efforts will be vital towards instilling self-sufficiency in the Church in Guinea and to achieve higher convert retention and member activity rates. The government and society uphold religious freedom and the Christian minority in Conakry does not experience any major persecution or restrictions on religious expression and practice, implying that full-time missionaries may be permitted to openly proselyte. Moreover, Conakry's good accessibility by airplane presents good opportunities for church growth as Freetown is located within 130 kilometers of Conakry. Thus, there does not appear to be any significant travel challenges for mission leadership to regularly visit.

Two cities in Sierra Leone (Kenema and Makeni) are within 100 kilometers of the Guinean border and have an LDS presence. These cities provide opportunities for mission leadership to begin initial missionary efforts in nearby cities in Guinea such as Gueckedou and Kissidougou. Missionary efforts in Conakry, Nzérékoré, or other cities in southern areas of the country nearby the Sierra Leonean and Liberian borders appear likely to experience missionary success as these areas support the highest percentages of Christians in the country.[4]

There are several major ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to southeastern Guinea along the Liberian and Sierra Leonean border that have a large or sizable Christian minority. Christians are estimated to account for 42% of Guinea Kpelle,[5] 33% of Kissi,[6] and 16% of Toma.[7] Targeting locations where these ethnolinguistic groups reside may yield greater LDS growth than targeting areas where ethnolinguistic groups with few Christians reside.

The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission has not had a French language proselytism program. However, there are sizable numbers of French-speaking missionary manpower in West Africa present opportunities for assigning French-speaking missionaries. Furthermore, the Church in Sierra Leone also appears to have a small number of native French-speaking African members currently serving full-time missions in the country. As a result, these missionaries appear the most likely to assist with the development of a French language program in the mission in order to adequate meet language needs in Guinea.

Challenges

The Church may have missed opportunities to find and convert previously receptive individuals who were shepherded into other proselytism-focused Christian faiths prior to the establishment of an official LDS presence in Guinea. 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 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, regional church leaders' unfamiliarity with local culture and customs, a lack of awareness on the procedure to officially register the Church with the government, 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 highly receptive to LDS outreach. Until the worldwide surge in the full-time missionary force in the early 2010s, many missions struggled to sufficiently staff their ranks in order to assign missionaries to currently operating wards and branches. The establishment of an official branch, the assignment of the Conakry area to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission, and the arrival of the first young full-time missionaries all signal that the Church is now committed to maintain a long-term presence in Guinea. However, historical delays in establishment a church presence may result in challenges to achieve greater growth than if the Church were established in Guinea years or decades earlier. Widespread religious freedom is a rarity in a nation with as high of a percentage of Muslims as Guinea. Thus, the Church may have missed some previous opportunities to make greater inroads in Guinea especially given the unique cultural and religious freedom conditions.

Guinea has historically experienced challenges with political instability, pervasive corruption, and disease. Military leaders successively served as the country's president between 1984 and 2010. In 2008, a military coup overthrew the government and a year later a failed assassination attempt on the new president prompted his flight to exile. Although a transitional government succeeded in Guinea's first free and fair democratic elections in 2010, a suspected attack from the military occurred on the

president's residence in 2011. An Ebola outbreak that began in 2014 killed thousands. These historical challenges may prompt mission and area leaders to cautiously expand LDS outreach in the country within the years and decades ahead.

Legislation and government policies surrounding religious groups in Guinea appear stricter than many other West African nations. Although there have been no recent reports of the government denying the registration of religious groups and no indication that the registration process is particularly difficult or time consuming, the government has the right to shut down unregistered religious groups and expel foreign religious leaders.[8] Some locations in Guinea have experienced diminished religious freedom for non-Muslims. Government officials in one homogeneously Muslim city in northern Guinea reportedly prohibited the celebration of non-Islamic holidays and the construction of a Christian Church.[9] Missionary-focused Christian groups report very few converts among staunchly Muslim ethnic groups such as the Fulani (Pular) and Maninkakan and many of these converts experience intense ostracism and persecution from their families and communities.

Language use in Guinea presents some challenges for an LDS establishment. Mission leaders in Liberia and Sierra Leone may experience challenges orchestrating initial visits to Guinea and communicate with local members and government officials as English is commonly spoken in Liberia and Sierra Leone whereas French is the official language of Guinea. The Church has translated only a couple basic proselytism and gospel study materials into major languages predominantly spoken by Muslims. Ethnolinguistic groups with sizable Christian populations have no translations of LDS materials in their native language such as the Guinea Kpelle, Kissi, and Toma.

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 approximately 250 Latter-day Saints and prospective members in Mali. The first branch in Mali opened in July 2017 and the branch was assigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission. Also a member group opened in July 2017 in a nearby rural community called Mountougoula. Full-time missionaries arrived in Mali to proselyte in late July 2017. 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 provided information obtained from this source. Likely possibilities include Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups have established a presence in Guinea but experience slow growth. Evangelicals claim 0.7% of the Guinean population and indicate that the country remains largely unreached.[10] Most denominations have a tiny presence limited to major cities. In 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 810 active members, 20 congregations, and 44 baptisms.[11] Unlike most countries, Witnesses do not publish information on congregation locations, times, and languages for Guinea.[12] The Seventh Day Adventist Church has reported more rapid growth than Witnesses although growth continues to be slow. Adventists reported two churches, 32 companies, and 1,927 members in 2016. Adventists generally baptize between 50 and 100 converts per year.[13] The Church of the Nazarene reports 10 congregations in Guinea.[14]

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership figures for Guinea. It is unclear how many members reside in the country. There are no official membership statistics on country of origin or language use for languages not within the top most commonly spoken languages in the Church. There are no reliable estimates on the number of Guinean Latter-day Saints worldwide. The Church does not specify which Fulani and Mandinka sublanguages have translations of LDS materials.

Future Prospects

Prospects for future growth in Guinea appear favorable as the Church has already organized a Panerai Replica branch, assigned the branch to a mission, and has stationed full-time missionaries in Conakry. Strong member participation in missionary efforts, the organization of member groups in additional areas of Conakry distant from the current branch meetinghouse, and the opening of additional cities to proselytism, especially cities in the interior south where Christians are more prominent in comparison to other areas of the country, will likely be needed in order for the Church in Guinea to achieve significant growth. Moreover, the maintenance of adequate prebaptismal standards and post-baptism mentoring and fellowship will also be critical for the Church in Guinea to become self-sufficient in its leadership needs. Past experience in other countries may indicate that the Church will limit its activities to the Conakry area for many years to come until this city becomes a center of strength that can help provide needed resources to assist the expansion of the Church into additional areas of the country one day.

[1] "MAJOR AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] "Elder David A. Bednar: Latter-day Saint Apostle Makes First Vision to Three African Countries," Ghana Mormon Newsroom, 27 May 2017. http://www.mormonnewsroom.com.gh/articles/elder-david-a-bednar-first-latter-day-saint-apostle-to-visit-three-african-countries

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[4] "Guinea," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208156

[5] "Kpelle, Guinea in Guinea," Joshua Project, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=12829&rog3=GV

[6] "Kissi in Guinea," Joshua Project, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=12722&rog3=GV

[7] "Toma in Guinea," Joshua Project, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15545&rog3=GV

[8] "Guinea," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208156

[9] "Guinea," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208156

[10] "Guinea," Operation World, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/guia

[11] "2016 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[12] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 29 July 2017. https://apps.jw.org/E_SRCHMTGMAPS

[13] "Guinea Mission Station (2013-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 29 July 2017. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=3237317

[14] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 29 July 2017. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=GV&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=
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