

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS National Outreach Expansion in Sierra Leone

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Overview

Sierra Leone is a West African country inhabited by 6.2 million people. Muslims constitute 60% of the population. Followers of indigenous beliefs comprise 30% of the population, whereas Christians comprise the remaining 10% of the population. An English-based Creole language best replica watches called Krio is spoken by 95% of the population as a language for interethnic communication. The LDS Church has maintained an official presence in Sierra Leone since 1988 when the first branch was organized in Goderich, Freetown. Although slow national outreach expansion occurred for the Church during the 1990s and 2000s, the Church has experienced significant progress in regards to the opening of additional areas to the Church since 2013.

This case study reviews the history of the Church's national outreach expansion efforts in Sierra Leone. Information about the most recent expansion of the Church into previously unreached cities during 2017 is provided. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for continued growth and the opening of previously unreached areas of Sierra Leone to LDS proselytism are examined. The expansion of the Church in other West African nations is reviewed, and the growth and status of other nontraditional Christian denominations in Sierra Leone is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church organized its first branch in Sierra Leone in Goderich in mid-1988. The Church organized its first branches in Freetown and Bo in 1989 and 1990, respectively. However, the Church did not organize official branches in additional cities or towns until 2003 when a branch was created in Kenema. The first branch was created in Grafton in 2005. There were five cities in Sierra Leone with official congregations by 2005. The Church organized a separate mission headquartered in Sierra Leone in 2007 from a division of the Ghana Cape Coast Mission. At the time of its organization, the new Sierra Leone Freetown Mission administered Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The Church organized a separate mission headquartered in Liberia – the Liberia Monrovia Mission – in 2013. After this change, the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission only administered Sierra Leone. The Church began to experience a new period of national outreach expansion with the opening of the first branches in Makeni and Waterloo in 2013. However, all young, full-time missionaries were evacuated from Sierra Leone in August 2014 due to the Ebola epidemic. No full-time, proselytizing missionaries served in Sierra Leone between August 2014 and February 2016 due to this crisis. Twenty-two Young, full-time native African missionaries were transferred from missions in Ghana and Nigeria to reopen Sierra Leone to formal proselytism efforts in February 2016.

Significant expansion of the Church into previously unreached areas has occurred since the return of young, proselytizing missionaries. The Church has organized its first branches in five additional cities and towns since this time in Lungi (2016), Koidu (2017), Moyamba (2017), Mogbwemo (2017), Moriba Town (2017), and Mosenesie Junction (2017). The first full-time missionaries to serve in Koidu in August 2017 reported that there were approximately 50 people who attended church meetings before the official organization of the Koidu Branch. The first branches in Moyamba and Sierra Rutile (e.g. Mogbwemo, Moriba Town, and Mosenesie Junction) were organized in a single month during September 2017. Additionally, missionaries reported in mid-2017 that a branch may be organized and missionaries assigned to Kailahun before the end of 2017. Missionaries reported

that there were 161 missionaries assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission as of September 2017, and that approximately 60% of missionaries in the mission were Black Africans.

The Moyamba Branch was organized on September 3rd, 2017 with approximately 90 people in attendance. Of these 90 individuals, approximately 12 were baptized members of the Church. Mission leadership reported that the remainder of attendees regularly attended church services under the Moyamba Group before the group became a branch, and that these prospective members have patiently waited to be taught and baptized. The mission assigned two missionary companionships to Moyamba to teach and prepare prospective members for baptism. Missionaries reported that a local radio station permitted the Church to hold services in a rented building.

The Sierra Rutile area constitutes several small cities and large towns nearby the Sierra Rutile Mine. The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission met with “three gatherings” of members and prospective members in February 2017. However, at the time the Church did not appear to have any organized member groups in the area. Members in the area appeared to be organized into three separate member groups sometime shortly thereafter. All three of these member groups became branches on September 17th, 2017. Both the Mogbwemo Branch and the Mosenesie Junction Branch were organized with approximately 50 in attendance at each meeting, whereas there were 118 people who attended the creation of the Moriba Town Branch. Two companionships of full-time missionaries were assigned to the three branches to help teach and prepare prospective members to be baptized. Mission leaders reported that “branch missionaries” in Moriba Town have helped teach others about the Church before the arrival of missionaries. However, these “branch missionaries” were not baptized members themselves, but instead were prospective members who shared the LDS gospel message with others. Mission leadership indicated that upon arrival of full-time missionaries to the area, the “branch missionaries” would be taught and baptized first in order for these individuals to help to prepare others for church membership.

The number of cities and towns with an official ward or branch increased from three in 1990 to five in 2005, seven in 2013, and 13 in 2017.

Successes

The Church in Sierra Leone has more than doubled the number of cities and towns with an official LDS presence during the past four years from seven to 13. This is a significant accomplish considering it took a quarter of a century for the Church in Sierra Leone to report a church presence in at least seven cities. Mission leadership and full-time missionaries have appeared to collaborate well with isolated members who have petitioned church leaders to establish an official LDS presence in their communities. All instances of the Church opening additional cities to proselytism and the organization of member groups have appeared to follow efforts from Latter-day Saints and prospective members to establish the Church. Thus, the Church in Sierra Leone has appeared to exhibit a good ability for local members to self-organize and encourage the expansion of the Church into previously unreached areas.

The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission has aggressively opened new areas to proselytism during recent years. Many other mission in Sub-Saharan Africa have postponed the establishment of the Church into previously unreached locations due to concerns with a lack of resources, remote location, and emphasis on the establishment of centers of strength in a handful of preselected locations. Although the onset of the Ebola epidemic delayed the expansion of the Church into some locations where mission leadership had previously intended to assign missionaries such as Moyamba, mission leaders has quickly acted within a short period of time since full-time missionaries have been reassigned to the country. This national outreach expansion has good potential to accelerate growth for the Church as a whole in Sierra Leone given opportunities to proselyte hundreds of thousands of previously unreached people in newly opened cities and towns.

Rapid growth in areas with a previously established LDS presence has not appeared to significantly detract resources from the opening of new areas to proselytism. The Church in Sierra Leone has approximately tripled the number of branches it operates in most cities where an LDS presence has operated since the mid-2000s or earlier. Senior missionaries indicate that several additional districts may become stakes within the next year due to this rapid growth and good improvements in leadership development and sustainability. The Ebola crisis appeared to help local leaders become more self-reliant in regards to meeting local leadership needs as foreign missionaries and church leaders were evacuated from the country.

Opportunities

There remain dozens of additional cities and towns that appear favorable for the assignment of additional missionaries. Full-time missionaries indicate that there are plans to organize a branch and assign missionaries to Kailahun in the immediate future. However, there remain many other locations that likely have small numbers of Latter-day Saints and populations receptive to future proselytism. Notable examples include Daru, Kabala, Lunsar, Port Loko, Pujehun, Tongo, and Tumbu. Exploratory trips to these cities by mission leadership may yield significant results in regards to finding locations with isolated groups of Latter-day Saints and identifying cities that appear to be receptive to future outreach. Efforts that examine opportunities in the most populous unreached cities appear most likely to be successful as these locations likely have isolated numbers of Latter-day Saints who have moved to these cities over the years, and a sizable target population for full-time missionaries to proselyte. Given the lack of large cities in Sierra Leone, it appears feasible for the Church in establish an official ward or branch in every city in the country inhabited by at least 10,000 people within the next five years.

The organization of a second mission in Sierra Leone appears highly likely given significant increases in the number of full-time

missionaries assigned to the country, rapid membership and congregational growth, and the expansion of the Church into previously unreached areas. The Church in Sub-Saharan African oftentimes organizes its second mission in a country once the number of congregations reaches between 70 and 100. Bo appears the most likely location for the organization of a second mission in Sierra Leone given its central location in southern Sierra Leone and the recent proliferation of congregations in Bo, Kenema, and Sierra Rutile. The recent completion of a new missionary training center (MTC) in Accra, Ghana more than triples the capacity for housing newly called missionaries. Thus, this facility may help provided the needed infrastructure to help train larger numbers of newly called missionaries to serve in Sierra Leone.

Challenges

The Church in Sierra Leone has historically struggled with leadership development problems, convert attrition, and low member activity rates. For example, the Church in Sierra Leone did not organize its first stake until 2012 when there were 11,664 members and 27 congregations nationwide. As stakes outside of the United States require a minimum of 1,900 members to operate, the Church in Sierra Leone could have operated as many as five stakes by the year 2012 if there were higher member activity rates and better self-sufficiency in local leadership. Although many of these challenges have improved in recent years as attested by the number of congregations substantially increasing from a mere 23 in 2010 to 65 in September 2017, and the organization of a second stake in the country in 2017, there continue to be challenges with convert retention and member inactivity. The Ebola crisis appeared to help strengthen the self-sufficiency of local leadership as the Church in Sierra Leone had to operate with minimal assistance from mission leadership and foreign church leadership. However, it is unclear whether the significant augmentation of the size of the full-time missionary force in Sierra Leone may result in full-time missionaries and mission leadership stepping in to assume responsibilities that should be undertaken by local leaders and members.

Although the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Sierra Leone has significantly increased since their return in February 2017, the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission may become easily overwhelmed with administrative responsibilities. Significant increases in the number of congregations and the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the mission require more time and oversight by mission leadership to ensure proper administration in the Church. Moreover, portions of Guinea around the capital of Conakry were also recently assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission following the creation of the Conakry Branch in June 2017. Thus, mission leadership may require more significant amounts of time to oversee church operations in Guinea and the assignment of full-time missionaries in Conakry.

The Church has not yet translated LDS scriptures or basic proselytism materials into the most commonly spoken indigenous languages such as Krio, Mende, or Temne. These and other indigenous languages in Sierra Leone have few individuals who are literate in these languages and may require audio translations to be effective in proselytism and gospel study. Nonetheless the translation of even a handful of church materials such as Gospel Principles and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet into these languages could improve testimony development and finding efforts.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Sierra Leone has experienced some of the most rapid national outreach expansion among West African countries with less than 20,000 Latter-day Saints on church records. The Church in Liberia has not opened new branches or member groups in any additional cities since branches were organized in Harbel and Kakata in 2008. The Church in Togo has recently opened member groups in a couple cities outside of Lomé, but has yet to organized official branches in more than one city in the country. The Church in Benin reports official congregations in four different cities and has slowly opened additional cities to proselytism.

Other missionary-focused groups report similar growth trends as the LDS Church and many have comparable numbers of members and congregations. Evangelicals report a limited presence in Sierra Leone and claim 3.9% of the national population.[1] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintained a presence in Sierra Leone for several decades prior to the arrival of the LDS Church. Adventists have achieved steady membership growth and rapid congregational growth within the past 15 years as the number of total congregations increased from 57 in 1997 (51 churches [large congregations], 6 companies [small congregations]) to 129 in 2012 (52 churches, 77 companies). Adventists reported 9,294 members, 50 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 101 companies (small or recently established congregations) in 2016.[2] No indigenous languages spoken in Sierra Leone appear to have translations of Adventist materials. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in Sierra Leone but have reported slow membership and congregational growth in recent years. In 2012, Witnesses reported 2,030 active members, 97 convert baptisms, and 35 congregations in 2012,[3] whereas Witnesses reported an average of 2,071 active members, 125 convert baptisms, and 39 congregations in 2016.[4] Witnesses reported 32 congregations nationwide in September 2017 that met in the Freetown metropolitan area (15), Bo (4), Kenema (2), Buedu (1), Dia (1), Foadu (1), Kabala (1), Kailahun (1), Kangama (1), Koindu (1), Lungi (1), Sarma (1), Sondokolo Bendu (1), and Waterloo (1). Most of these congregations conducted worship services in Krio and Kisi.[5] Witnesses publish proselytism materials into six indigenous languages including Eastern Maninkakan, Kisi, Krio, Mende, Pular (Fulani), and Susu.[6] In 2016, the Church of the Nazarene reported 1,028 full members, an average of 1,772 attending weekly worship, and 68 congregations (two organized churches [established congregations], and 66 unorganized churches [recently planted congregations]).[7]

Limitations

The Church does not publish the number or location of member groups. As a result, it is unclear whether the Church in Sierra

Leone operates member groups in additional cities. Information regarding national outreach expansion trends during the past several years was obtained from full-time missionaries. No reports were available from local members who reside in cities recently opened to the Church. Furthermore, the Church does not publish information in regards to member activity or convert retention rates.

Future Prospects

Significant increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission, the recent rapid expansion of the Church into previously unreached cities and towns, and a population that has been receptive to LDS teachings suggest that prospects for ongoing rapid growth and national outreach expansion appear favorable. Larger numbers of native members who serve full-time missions will be the most efficient and effective method for the Church to make greater strides in national outreach expansion in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, greater involvement of local church leaders in this process will also be important for the Church to establish a more widespread presence and expand into rural communities where the Church lacks an official presence. A second mission appears highly likely to be organized in Sierra Leone before the year 2020 given rapid growth rates and good opportunities for expansion.

[1] "Sierra Leone," Operation World, retrieved 25 September 2017. http://www.operationworld.org/country/sier/owtext.html

[2] "Sierra Leone Mission (1945-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 25 September 2017. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=3286173

[3] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[4] “2016 Service Year Report of Jehovah’s Witnesses Worldwide,” jw.org, retrieved 25 September 2017. https://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2017-yearbook/jehovahs-witnesses-service-report-2016/

[5] “Find a Meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 25 September 2017. https://apps.jw.org/E_SRCHMTGMAPS

[6] "Publications," jw.org, retrieved 16 November 2013. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=sus

[7] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2006-2016," nazarene.org, retrieved 25 September 2017. http://www.nazarene.org/sites/default/files/docs/GenSec/Statistics/2016AnnualStatistical.pdf