

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Guinea

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Inhabited by 11.2 million people, Guinea is a country located in West Africa supporting a population that is 85% Muslim, 8% Christian, and 7% followers of indigenous religions. Conakry is the capital of Guinea and had an estimated population of 1.82 million people as of October 2013.[1] French is the official language and there are two indigenous African languages spoken by more than one million people (Eastern Maninkakan and Pular). As of late 2013, the LDS Church had not established a presence in Guinea notwithstanding sufficient religious freedom permitting the operation of other proselytism-focused Christian groups , a large target population, and abundant French-speaking African missionary manpower.

This case study reviews the Church's history of administrating Guinea and identifies translations of basic proselytism materials in indigenous languages spoken within the country. Opportunities for establishing an official LDS presence and achieving growth are explored. Recommendations for how to most effectively establish an initial church presence are provided. Challenges for establishing a church presence and achieving growth are discussed. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Guinea is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and the 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. No more than 20 Latter-day Saints appear to reside in Guinea at present. Guinea has never appeared to be assigned to a mission.

In 2013, the Church listed a handful of basic proselytism materials into indigenous languages spoken in Guinea. 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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Opportunities

The close proximity of Guinea to countries with LDS missions presents good opportunities for establishing an initial presence in Guinea. The Church organized its first mission in Sierra Leone in 2007 and its first mission in Liberia in 2013. Within the past five years, the Church in both countries has significantly increased in the numbers of full-time missionaries assigned. Currently mission leaders have a relatively small administrative burden as the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission includes only one stake and three districts whereas the Liberia Monrovia Mission includes only two districts and two mission branches. These conditions suggest that either the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission or the Liberia Monrovia Mission could feasibly begin initial missionary efforts in Guinea once the Church obtains registration with the government. Mission headquarters in Freetown, Sierra Leone are within 130 kilometers of Conakry, suggesting no significant travel time challenges for mission leadership in Sierra Leone to investigate conditions. 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. In Liberia, the Church maintains no presence in cities nearby the Guinean border. However, the large city of Nzérékoré is within 20 kilometers of the Liberian border and ranks as the second most populous metropolitan area in the country. Missionary efforts in Conakry, Nzérékoré, or other cities in southern areas of

the country nearby the Sierra Leonean and Liberian borders appear most likely to experience success as these areas support the highest percentages of Christians in the country.[2] Although neither the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission or the Liberia Monrovia Mission have a French language proselytism program at present, sizable numbers of French-speaking missionary manpower in West Africa present opportunities for assigning French-speaking missionaries to either mission if warranted in order to begin missionary activity in Guinea.

Conakry is the fifth most populous metropolitan area in Sub-Saharan Africa without an LDS ward or branch operating. Prospects for establishing an LDS presence in Conakry appear favorable for many reasons including a high population density requiring fewer congregations to service the city in comparison to rural areas, the large number of inhabitants, relatively easy access by airplane from other major cities in West Africa, and the recent expansion of LDS missionary activity into other major cities in predominantly Muslim areas of West Africa such as in Tamale, Ghana. The large population of Conakry includes perhaps several hundred thousand Christians who can be targeted for initial missionary efforts and who will likely exhibit higher receptivity than their Muslim counterparts.

With the number of members serving full-time missions worldwide increasing by the tens of thousands in 2013 alone, the Church has an unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of additional countries to missionary work such as Guinea. The allotment of even two or three missionary companionships to Conakry would make virtually no noticeable impact on taking away resources from other areas of the world but could generate a long-term pay off for the Church in terms of establishing a permanent LDS presence through finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining native converts. 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 could not only serve in the country but may openly proselyte. Religious groups have not experienced difficulties registering with the government in order to formally operate in the country,[3] suggesting that the Church could easily obtain government registration when desired.

The argument made by some that delays in establishing an LDS presence in Guinea is attributed to no Christian majority and low levels of economic development are unsubstantiated. Other West African nations with an LDS presence exhibit similar societal conditions as in Guinea (no Christian majority and low levels of economic development) and report some of the most rapid LDS growth in the world. In Benin, the population is 43% Christian, 24% Muslim, 17% Vodoun (Voodoo), and 16% followers of other religions yet the LDS Church has experienced significant growth within the past five years as demonstrated by the number of members and branches quintupling. The level of economic development is comparable in both Benin and Guinea ($1,700 GDP per capita in Benin versus $1,100 GDP per capita in Guinea). In Cote d'Ivoire, the population is 39% Muslim, 33% Christian, 12% followers of indigenous religious, and 16% unaffiliated with a religious group. The GDP per capita in Cote d'Ivoire is $1,800. The Church in Cote d'Ivoire has experienced rapid membership and congregational growth since its initial establishment in the late 1980s. In Sierra Leone, the population is 60% Muslim, 10% Christian, and 30% followers of other religions. The GDP per capital in Sierra Leone is $1,400. Currently Sierra Leone has one of the highest percentages of nominal Latter-day Saints of any Sub-Saharan African nation. In Togo, the population is 29% Christian, 20% Muslim, and 51% followers of indigenous religions. The GDP per capita in Togo is $1,100. The Church in Togo has experienced dynamic growth trends similar to the Church in Benin as within the past five years the number of members has tripled, the number of congregations increased from two to 12, and the Church formed its first district and stake during this period. According to the most recent available estimates, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line is comparable for Guinea, Benin, and Cote d'Ivoire (40-50%) and significantly higher in Sierra Leone (70%). There does appear to be a more visible Muslim presence in Conakry than compared to the largest cities in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Togo but government officials generally uphold religious freedom in all five countries.

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,[4] 33% of Kissi,[5] and 16% of Toma.[6] Targeting locations where these ethnolinguistic groups reside may yield greater LDS growth than targeting areas where ethnolinguistic groups with few Christians reside.

Recommendations

The establishment of the Church in Guinea will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members and investigators who reside in Conakry or major cities in southeastern Guinea such as Nzérékoré. Isolated members and investigators petitioning church leaders to hold church services and assign missionaries will be key for mission and area leaders to determine the need and urgency of registering the Church with the government and assigning missionaries. Mission and area leaders may also begin investigatory efforts on their own without appeals from members or investigators due to the good opportunities for missionary work and church growth. Church leaders can organize a member group if there are several members who indicate that they will attend church weekly and if one of these members holds the priesthood and meets worthiness standards. Based on past experience, the Church generally permits the organization of a member group and even branches in countries where official government registration or recognition has not been obtained.

The assignment of one or two senior missionary couples to Conakry or Nzérékoré to prepare the groundwork for the arrival of full-time, proselytizing young missionaries appears the most practical course of action to establish an LDS presence in Guinea. This has been the pattern for the Church to establish a presence in countless other nations and has generally yielded good results. Senior missionaries can begin meeting with members and investigators in Conakry and the Nzérékoré area, facilitate efforts to register the Church with the government, and help conduct church services for member groups. The Church may assign Guinea to a mission at this time. Senior missionaries can also search for missionary housing, investigate opportunities

for humanitarian and development projects, and begin baptizing the first converts within the country if approved by area leaders.

Full-time missionaries may be assigned to Guinea once government registration is obtained and when this action is approved by area and international church leadership. 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 initial member group begins functioning. 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.

Challenges

Reluctance from mission and area leadership to expand missionary activity into countries that have previously had no LDS presence presents the greatest barrier to the establishment of the Church 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.

Guinea has recently experienced political instability and suffers from pervasive corruption. 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. These conditions may dissuade mission and area leaders from commencing missionary activity in Guinea due to perceived safety concerns until the current political situation stabilizes.

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.[7] These conditions may pose challenges for the Church to establish an initial presence if there are no active Latter-day Saints within the country to provide the impetus for the Church to request registration. These conditions may require the Church to obtain government registration prior to organizing any member groups or branches and engaging in proselytism.

The initial establishment of the Church may yield little growth. The Church may experience self-sufficiency problems as the handful of Guinean members have thus far appeared unable to self-organize and establish a presence in Conakry or other major cities. To contrast, converts who joined the Church abroad and returned back to their home country played a central role in the initial establishment of the Church in many other Sub-Saharan African countries, even with very limited to no involvement from young, proselytizing missionaries and senior missionary couples. Coordination between mission leaders in West Africa and the Africa West Area Presidency will be vital towards identifying members and leaders who can help prepare for the organization member groups and branches in Guinea. Other missionary-focused Christian groups report slow growth and modest receptivity, suggesting that the LDS Church may experience similar results.

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.[8] 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

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.[9] Most denominations have a tiny presence limited to major cities. In 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 749 active members, 18 congregations, and 30 baptisms.[10] Unlike most countries, Witnesses do not publish information on congregation locations, times, and languages for Guinea.[11] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reported two churches, 25 companies, and 1,576 members in 2012. Adventists generally baptize between 50 and 200 converts per year.[12] The Church of the Nazarene reports 10 congregations in Guinea.[13]

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership figures for Guinea. It is unclear how many members reside in the country. The Church does not publish the locations of member groups on its online meetinghouse locator. It is unclear whether a member group once functioned or currently functions in Conakry. 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. There are no details available on whether mission or area leaders have petitioned or planned to open Guinea to missionary work. The Church does not publish information on its plans to open additional countries to missionary work until after these plans are finalized and carried out. The Church does not specify which Fulani and Mandinka sublanguages have translations of LDS materials.

Future Prospects

Rapid increases in the number of mission resources allocated to missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the ongoing surge in the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide, recent outreach expansion efforts of the Church into predominantly Muslim areas of West Africa, and religious freedom upheld by the government in most locations indicate favorable conditions for the Church to obtain government registration and establish an official missionary presence in Guinea. However, the Church has not opened any additional West African countries to missionary activity in approximately a decade due to focus on expanding outreach in countries with a current LDS presence, historically limited amounts of mission resources dedicated to the region, and emphasis on the centers of strength policy. Recent political instability and corruption present significant barriers that may dissuade mission and area leaders from seriously considering the establishment of an LDS presence. Although conditions may not yield large numbers of convert baptisms initially, delays in establishing an LDS presence in Guinea may result in the Church missing its window of opportunity to obtain government registration and baptize and retain converts if religious freedom conditions deteriorate and receptivity declines.

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

[2] "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

[3] "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

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

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

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

[7] "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

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

[10] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org

[11] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E

[12] "Guinea Mission Station (2002-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2269891

[13] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene. org, retrieved 20 December 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=GV&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=