Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Sao Tome and Principe

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Overview

Supporting a population of approximately 180,000, Sao Tome and Principe numbers among the five island nations in Africa without an LDS presence. Conditions for establishing an LDS presence have appeared favorable for years due to LDS materials available in Portuguese, no restrictions on religious freedom, and a homogenous Christian population tolerant of proselytizing faiths.

This case study explores the opportunities, challenges, and future prospects of establishing an LDS presence in Sao Tome and Principe. A comparative growth section identifies other island nations in Africa without an LDS presence and highlights the status of other missionary-focused religious groups that operate in Sao Tome and Principe. Limitations to this case study are examined and the outlook for beginning LDS outreach is discussed.

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LDS Background

Sao Tome and Principe has appeared to pertain to the Mozambique Maputo Mission since 2005. In early 2013, the country did not have any reported groups or dependent units operating. At the time neither the Mozambique Maputo Mission Branch nor the Mozambique Maputo Angola Mission Branch included Sao Tome and Principe within their boundaries. Sao Tome and Principe pertains to the Africa Southeast Area.

Opportunities

Sao Tome and Principe presents one of the greatest opportunities for initiating LDS outreach among currently unreached island nations in Sub-Saharan Africa due to its robust record of government and societal preservation of religious freedom and homogenous Christian population. To operate in the country, a religious group must send a letter to the Ministry of Justice and Parliamentary Affairs requesting authorization. Once authorization is granted, the religious group must register its name and charter at the national registrar's office. The government has not rejected any past requests from religious groups desiring authorization and unregistered groups report meeting without opposition.[1] There do not appear to be any restrictions on foreign missionaries serving in the country.

There are many interesting historical and demographic similarities between Sao Tome and Principe and Cape Verde that may suggest that the Church can duplicate its rapid growth achieved in Cape Verde if an official church presence and formal proselytism activities commence in Sao Tome and Principe. Both Sao Tome and Principe and Cape Verde are island nations that have comparatively small populations of less than 600,000 inhabitants. Both countries were uninhabited prior to Portuguese discovery and colonization. Black African slaves were brought to staff plantations and the descendents of these slaves comprise the majority of the population of both countries today. Both countries experienced independence movements in the 1950s and became independent from Portugal in 1975. Both countries did not hold free, multi-party democratic elections until the early 1990s and neither country has had recent reports of religious freedom restrictions or abuses. Mainland African and Portuguese influences have created unique cultural characteristics in both countries. Portuguese-based Creoles are widely spoken in both countries. Approximately 85% of the population in both countries is Catholic whereas the remainder of the population is predominantly Protestant. Nontraditional Christian groups have reported similar successes in gaining converts in both countries. The stability of the government constitutes one of the most poignant differences as Cape Verde is regarded as one of the most stable democratic nations in Africa whereas Sao Tome and Principe has experienced political instability that has

included two failed coup attempts and frequent changes in presidential leadership. Additional notable differences between the two countries include economic development (Sao Tome and Principe has half the GDP per capita of Cape Verde) and corruption (Sao Tome and Principe experiences significantly higher corruption than Cape Verde). The initial establishment of the Church in Cape Verde generated explosive growth within the first five years of proselytism as 2,000 converts were baptized and 13 branches were organized. Today the Church in Cape Verde has a self-sufficient full-time missionary force, a mission, one stake, and two districts and nominal membership that accounts for two percent of the population. Similar results in Sao Tome and Principe may occur if missionary activity occurs due to these previously identified similarities. No previous LDS outreach extended to Sao Tome and Principe appears rooted in the remote location of the islands from locations with Portuguese-speaking missions and a lack of converts from Sao Tome and Principe in Portugal and other countries with sizable Sao Tomean populations.

The growth and strength of the Church in Cape Verde offers valuable resources to establish an LDS presence in Sao Tome and Principe due to sizable numbers of Portuguese-speaking Africans and similarities in culture. At present the Church in Angola and Mozambique is unable to staff its own missionary needs and appears unable to allocate resources to open additional areas within their own countries. The assignment of Cape Verdean missionaries to Sao Tome and Principe would instill regional self-sufficiency in the Church and may be more effective than assigning North American missionaries unfamiliar with local culture and language. Widespread use of Portuguese in Sao Tome and Principe facilitates missionary activity due to the large body of translations of LDS scriptures and materials available and sizable numbers of Portuguese-speaking missionaries from Brazil and Cape Verde. Small numbers of Sao Tomean individuals living in Cape Verde, Portugal, and other countries with an LDS presence offer opportunities to teach and baptize individuals that can help establish a church presence in Sao Tome and Principe among friends and family; the pattern of incidental, uncoordinated outreach expansion that has frequently accompanied the opening of additional countries to missionary work around the world. However, this method for introducing the Church to Sao Tome and Principe has been unsuccessful thus far as demonstrated by no church presence in the country at present. There may be small numbers of Latter-day Saints who reside in Sao Tome and Principe who either are natives that joined the Church elsewhere and returned home or are foreigners temporarily living in the country for employment purposes. Locating, reactivating, and mentoring these individuals to help provide local leadership will be crucial towards establishing a permanent church presence. Most of the population resides within or nearby the capital city of Sao Tome. The high population density of Sao Tome allows missionaries to reach the majority of the population with few resources and congregations.

Sao Tome and Principe will likely be assigned to the Angola Luanda Mission; a new mission to be organized in July 2013. The creation of the new mission may allow for additional resources and attention for initiating outreach Sao Tome and Principe if assigned to the new mission. The recent surge in the worldwide full-time missionary force offers excellent opportunities to capitalize of surplus manpower in opening Sao Tome and Principe to missionary work. The recent expansion of the international airport in Sao Tome by 300 meters[2] may permit greater access by mission leaders to investigate prospects for establishing a church presence and assigning missionaries.

Challenges

Small population, long distance from mission headquarters, limited missionary manpower allocated to Portuguese-speaking Africa, a lack of Sao Tomean converts worldwide, and the relatively recent establishment of the Church in Angola and Mozambique have contributed to a lack of an LDS presence in Sao Tome and Principe today. The tiny presence of the Church in Angola, the remote location of the islands from mission headquarters in Luanda, and the relatively small size of the population continue to pose barriers to establishing a church presence in Sao Tome and Principe at present. Area and mission leaders face the difficult decision of whether to open a small, remote island nation to missionary work or large, unreached cities in countries that already have a church presence that are significantly more easier to access where isolated members and investigators request the assignment of missionaries and formal establishment of the Church.

The recent discovery of oil offshore and the country's small size make it vulnerable to increased corruption and degradation of societal norms in harmony with LDS teachings. The timeframe for reaching the population is sensitive and additional delays to opening the country to missionary activity may result in missed opportunities when conditions are most favorable if Western secularism and materialism degrade traditional values of family and organized religion. The volatile national government may pose challenges for the Church in the coming years and decades if legislature is passed that restricts religious freedom.

Comparative Growth

Sao Tome and Principe is one of the five island nations in Africa without a known LDS presence, the others being Comoros, Equatorial Guinea (Bioko Island), Mayotte (overseas department of France), and Seychelles. Religious freedom restrictions do not appear to have prevented the establishment of the Church Sao Tome and Principe, Equatorial Guinea, or Seychelles. Societal and government restrictions on religious freedom prevent LDS outreach in Comoros.

Nearly all worldwide outreach-oriented faiths have a presence in Sao Tome and Principe. Evangelicals constitute approximately five percent of the population.[3] Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses report a widespread presence. In 2012, Witnesses reported over 600 members and 10 congregations. A map of Witness congregation locations can be found here. In 2011, Adventists reported 4,152 members, nine churches,[4] and 14 companies. Adventists have quadrupled membership within the past decade.[5] The Church of the Nazarene reports six congregations.[6] The Baha'i Faith has maintained a presence since the 1980s.[7]

Limitations

The Church does not publish any official membership statistics for Sao Tome and Principe and it is unclear how many members may reside in the country. It is unclear how church growth trends will behave in the country due to extremely few Sao Tomeans joining the Church worldwide and no previous outreach extended. The Church does not publish information on the country of origin of its worldwide of country-by-country membership. Consequently, it is unclear how many Sao Tomeans have joined the Church worldwide.

Future Prospects

Widespread religious freedom, good receptivity to nontraditional faiths, a Portuguese-speaking population, and the recent opening of the Angola Luanda Mission predict good prospects for church growth if a church presence is established in Sao Tome and Principe. Remote location, small population, and greater immediate needs for missionaries in Angola may delay the establishment of the Church for many years to come if mission and area leaders are not proactive in visiting the islands and preparing for the arrival of full-time missionaries. Coordination with the Cape Verde Praia and Portugal Lisbon Missions present good opportunities for locating any isolated members in Sao Tome and Principe and Sao Tomean converts who have joined the Church abroad. The assignment of a senior missionary couple to Sao Tome may be the most effective method for establishing the Church in Sao Tome and Principe while conditions for growth remain favorable.

[1] "Sao Tome And Principe," International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, retrieved 4 March 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192749

[2] "Can Africa's Sao Tome and Principe be the next Cape Verde?," centreforaviation.com, 8 December 2011. http://centreforaviation.com/analysis/can-africas-so-tome-principe-be-the-next-cape-verde-64236

[3] "Sao Tome and Principe," Joshua Project, retrieved 4 March 2013. http://joshuaproject.net/countries.php?rog3=TP

[4] "Sao Tome and Principe Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 4 March 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=STPM

[5] "Sao Tome and Principe Mission (2011-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 4 March 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10388

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," Church of the Nazarene, retrieved 4 March 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=TP&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[7] "The Baha'i Community of Sao Tome and Principe," www.bahai.org, retrieved 4 March 2013. http://www.bahai.org/worldwide-community/national-communities/sao-tome-and-principe