


# Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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**Prospective LDS Outreach in The Gambia**

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**Overview**

Inhabited by 1.93 million people, the Gambia is a small West African country almost entirely surrounded by Senegal that is 90% Muslim, 8% Christian, and 2% followers of indigenous beliefs. English is the official language and no indigenous African languages are spoken by more than one million people. The primary ethnolinguistic groups include the Mandinka (42%), Fula (18%), Wolof (16%), Jola (10%), and Serahuli (9%).[1] Muslims constitute 95% or more of the population of four of these ethnolinguistic groups (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, and Serahuli). As of mid-2014, the LDS Church has not established a presence in the Gambia notwithstanding greater political stability than in most Sub-Saharan African countries where there is an LDS presence, sufficient religious freedom for missionary-focused Christian groups to operate without restrictions, and small numbers of Gambians joining the Church in Western Europe.

This case study reviews the Church's history in administrating the Gambia and identifies translations of basic proselytism materials available in indigenous languages spoken in 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 the Gambia is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment in the Gambia is predicted.

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**LDS Background**

In 1998, the newly organized Africa West Area included the Gambia within its jurisdiction. In 2011, the Church organized the Africa West Area Branch to service the Gambia and nine additional countries within the Africa West Area that were unassigned to missions. The Gambia has never appeared to be assigned to a mission. In 2013, the Church reported 19 members in the Gambia.

In 2014, the Church listed a handful of basic proselytism materials into indigenous languages spoken in the Gambia. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in four indigenous languages, namely Fula and Futa (two Fulani languages spoken in West Africa), Mandinka, and Wolof.

**Opportunities**

The Gambian government protects religious freedom and there have been no recent instances of societal abuse of religious freedom; a rarity among Muslim-majority nations considering Muslims account for nine-tenths of the Gambian population. Religious harmony in society appears pervasive and on all levels of community and government. Although the country's president is Muslim, he has recently delivered religious messages both to Christians on Christmas and to Muslims at major Muslim feasts. There do not appear to be any legal challenges for the Church to enter the country as religious groups are not required to register with the government, although faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGO) must meet the same registration and licensing requirements as non-faith-based NGOs.[2] 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.

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 the Gambia. English is the official language and is spoken by many Gambians, simplifying initial missionary efforts. The Church has abundant English-speaking missionary manpower both within West Africa and worldwide. The allotment of even two or three missionary companionships to the greater Banjul area would make virtually no noticeable impact on taking away resources from West Africa or 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. Delays in the Church obtaining government registration and assigning foreign missionaries may result in the Church missing its window of opportunity to enter the Gambia at a time when the government and society respect religious freedom and permit Christian groups to openly proselyte and assemble. Past experience has shown that these conditions do not always remain the same or continue to improve, resulting in the Church having no feasible prospects to enter some nations where the Church could have once established a presence when government policies and society 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 prompt future LDS mission leaders to avoid openly proselytizing Muslims to respect cultural norms, but these conditions nonetheless present rare opportunities for the Church to establish a foothold in a secular state that is predominantly Muslim.

The greater Banjul area presents the greatest opportunities for LDS growth and missionary activity in the Gambia. The metropolitan area consists of the local government areas of Banjul (pop: 31,301) and Kanifeng (382,096), and adjacent areas of Brikama where perhaps a couple hundred thousand additional people reside. The total population of the urban agglomeration may number as many as 600,000 and numbers among the most populous metropolitan areas in West Africa without an LDS ward or branch operating. Prospects for establishing an LDS presence in the Banjul area 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. Gambian Christians are predominantly Roman Catholic and concentrated in the Banjul area. There may be as many as 100,000 Christians in the metropolitan area that can be targeted by initial missionary efforts. Gambian Christians will likely exhibit higher receptivity to LDS outreach than their Muslim counterparts due to greater theological similarities with Latter-day Saints.

Small numbers of Gambian Latter-day Saints worldwide present some of the greatest opportunities for establishing an initial LDS presence. The Church has more readily opened congregations and assigned missionaries to previously unreached nations when there are small numbers of dedicated members who reside in a major city that petition mission or area leaders to hold church services and establish an official LDS presence. Although it is unclear whether there are sufficient numbers of Gambian Latter-day Saints currently residing in the Gambia, missionaries serving in Western Europe have regularly taught Gambian investigators and a handful of Gambians have joined the Church abroad. Africa West Area leaders coordinating with mission leaders in Western Europe to identify those who may have returned to the Gambia and contact these individuals can improve the prospects of establishing a church presence despite remote location, more challenging proselytism conditions than West African nations with a current LDS presence due to a strong Muslim majority, and the Church's centers of strength policy dissuading the establishment of the Church in locations with few or no known Latter-day Saints.

The argument made by some that delays in establishing an LDS presence in the Gambia is attributed to no Christian majority and low levels of economic development is unsubstantiated. Other West African nations with an LDS presence exhibit similar societal conditions as in the Gambia (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 the Gambia ($1,600 GDP per capita in Benin versus $2,000 GDP per capita in the Gambia). 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. However, the prominence of Islam in the Banjul area suggests that the Church may experience lower levels of receptivity than compared to other major cities in West Africa with an LDS presence.

The Jola are the only major ethnolinguistic group native to the Gambia that are not homogenously Muslim as the Jola are 78% Muslim, 9% followers of other religions, 7% Christian, and 6% followers of indigenous religions.[3] This ethnolinguistic group presents some of the greatest opportunities for future LDS outreach due to greater religious plurality and other missionary-focused Christian groups reporting proselytism and church growth successes among the Jola.

**Recommendations**

The establishment of the Church in the Gambia will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members and investigators who reside in the greater Banjul area. Isolated members and investigators petitioning church leaders to hold church services and to assign missionaries will be key for mission and area leaders to determine the

need and urgency for registering the Church with the government as an NGO 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 afforded by the government upholding religious freedom and the large target population in Banjul. Church leaders may 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 the greater Banjul area 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 the Gambia. Senior missionaries who originate from English-speaking countries such as the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria present some of the greatest opportunities for successfully establishing the Church in the Gambia. Assigning senior missionaries prior to young proselytizing elders has been the pattern for the Church when establishing a presence in countless other nations and this approach has generally yielded good results. Senior missionaries can begin meeting with members and investigators, facilitate efforts to register the Church with the government, and help conduct church services for member groups. The Church may assign the Gambia to a mission at this time. The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission appears the most likely mission to administer the Gambia as it is the closest English-speaking mission to the Gambia and has a relatively small administrative burden since the mission only services Sierra Leone at present. Senior missionaries may 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 the Gambia 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 to regularly open additional member groups in locations distant from where the initial member group functions. 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 the Ghanaian cities of Sunyani, Tamale, and Techiman. Involvement from local members in missionary efforts will be vital towards instilling self-sufficiency in the Church in the Gambia and achieving 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 the Gambia. The centers of strength policy has prompted many 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, church leaders' unfamiliarity with local culture and customs, a lack of awareness on the procedure to officially register the Church with the government, safety concerns, 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. Distance to the nearest LDS mission also poses challenges for mission and area leaders to begin formal missionary efforts and establish a congregation in the greater Banjul area. No neighboring countries in continental Africa have an LDS presence, including Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali.

The population may exhibit low receptivity to LDS outreach due to most Gambians adhering to Islam. Many ethnolinguistic groups that previously adhered to animism have become increasingly Islamicized over the past several decades. Current missionary tactics and teaching approaches are tailored to those with a Christian background. These skills and approaches may yield few results among these ethnolinguistic groups as the Church has not developed teaching and missionary approaches tailored to those with a Muslim or animist background.

The Church in the Gambia may experience self-sufficiency problems as the small number of Gambian members have thus far appeared unable to self-organize and establish a presence in the Banjul area. To contrast, converts who joined the Church abroad and returned back to their home country have played a central role in the initial establishment of the Church in many other Sub-Saharan African countries despite very limited or no involvement from young, proselytizing missionaries and senior missionary couples. Coordination between Western European missions and the Africa West Area Presidency will be vital towards identifying members and leaders who can help prepare for the organization of a member group or official branch in the Banjul area.

**Comparative Growth**

Several missionary-focused Christian groups operate in the Gambia, although these groups have experienced limited growth. Evangelicals are the largest outreach-oriented Christian group and claim a mere 0.8% of the national population. Evangelicals report slow growth and challenges with growing membership and making inroads among Muslim peoples.[4] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a modest presence in the Gambia that is larger than many other missionary-focused groups that operate within the country. In 2013, Adventists reported 294 members, five churches,[5] and possibly as many as seven

companies (small congregations). Adventists have experienced slow but steady growth over the past decade as generally 20 to 90 baptisms occur each year but there has been a net increase of only one congregation during this period.[6] Jehovah's Witnesses experience very slow growth and have a minimal presence. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 204 publishers (active members who engage in regular proselytism), four congregations, and four baptisms.[7] All four Witness congregations operate in the greater Banjul metropolitan area and hold church services in either English, French, or Twi.[8] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in the Gambia.

**Limitations**

The Church does not publish membership figures for the Gambia on a yearly basis. It is unclear how many members currently 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 the greater Banjul metropolitan area. There are no official membership statistics on country of origin or language usage for languages not among the 10 most commonly spoken languages in the Church. There are no reliable estimates on the number of Gambian Latter-day Saints worldwide. There are no details available on whether mission or area leaders have petitioned or planned to open the Gambia to missionary work. The Church does not publish information on its plans to open additional countries to missionary work until these plans are finalized and implemented.

**Future Prospects**

The outlook for the Church to establish an official missionary presence in the Gambia appears bleak within the foreseeable future due to more aggressive efforts by mission and area leaders in the Africa West Area to expand outreach within countries that have already had an LDS presence established. The likelihood of the Church organizing an official branch in the Gambia will hinge on greater numbers of foreigners and Gambian converts relocating to the Banjul area, the area presidency organizing a group, and the group experiencing increasing church attendance and leadership development in order for a branch to begin functioning. The Church will likely submit an application for government registration once area leaders determine that the assignment of full-time missionaries is more feasible. The ongoing emphasis on the centers of strength policy in regards to opening additional countries to missionary work, the perception that little to no LDS growth will occur in predominately Muslim countries, and few Gambians who have joined the Church to date may delay outreach for many years or decades to come notwithstanding the Gambia presenting some of the greatest religious freedom granted to proselytizing Christians among Muslim majority nations worldwide.


[1] "Gambia, The," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 13 May 2014. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ga.html

[2] "Gambia, The," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, 13 May 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208152

[3] "Jola-Fonyi in Gambia," Joshua Project, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/11568/GA

[4] "The Gambia," Operation World, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/country/gamb/owtext.html

[5] "Gambia Mission Station," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=GBMS

[6] "Gambia Mission Station (1982-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10168

[7] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[8] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT