

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Mali

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Overview

Inhabited by 16.5 million people, Mali is a landlocked country in West Africa whose population is predominantly Muslim (94.8%) with small numbers of Christians (2.4%) and followers of omega seamaster aqua terra replica indigenous beliefs (2.0%). French is the official language and four indigenous languages are spoken by more than one million people, including Bambara (7.62 million), Fulani languages (1.55 million), Dogon languages (1.18 million), and Soninke (1.05 million).[1] Muslims comprise approximately 95% or more of the population of two of these ethnolinguistic groups (Soninke and Fulani). As of mid-2014, the LDS Church had not established an official presence in Mali notwithstanding a handful of members residing in the country since the early 1980s, the government upholding religious freedom for Christians in government-controlled areas of the country notwithstanding Muslims constituting a strong majority, sufficient religious freedom for missionary-focused Christian groups to operate without restrictions, and generally good political stability in southern areas of the country within the past several decades.

This case study reviews the Church's history in administrating Mali 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 Mali is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment in Mali is predicted.

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LDS Background

Foreign members relocated to Bamako temporarily for employment purposes and began holding sacrament meetings in 1981. Several Malian members joined the Church in Mali and Canada during the 1980s. In the early 1990s, the first Malian full-time missionary served a mission in French-speaking Canada. By 1993, there was only one known Latter-day Saint in Mali due to foreign members leaving the country and Malian members pursuing education overseas.[2]

In 1998, the newly organized Africa West Area included Mali within its jurisdiction. In 2011, the Church organized the Africa West Area Branch to service Mali and nine additional countries within the Africa West Area that were unassigned to missions. Another Malian member served a full-time mission from 2011 to 2013 in the Arizona Phoenix Mission. In 2013, a Malian Latter-day Saint named Yeah Samake ran in the presidential election but only received 0.56% of the vote.[3] At year-end 2013, the Church reported 10 members in Mali. Mali has never appeared to be assigned to a mission.

In 2014, the Church listed a handful of basic proselytism materials translated into indigenous languages spoken in Mali. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in three indigenous languages, namely Bambara, Fula and Futa (two Fulani languages spoken in West Africa), and Moore.
https://www.aaafinewatches.me/

Successes

The high degree of devotion exhibited by the handful of Malians who have joined the LDS Church stands as the crowning achievement of the Church in Mali. At least two Malians have served full-time missions within the past three decades despite

only a handful of Malian Latter-day Saints worldwide. Malian members who reside in Mali have exhibited strong dedication to the Church. This has been demonstrated by one of the first Malian converts translating LDS materials into Bambara and another Malian convert who previously served as mayor of Ouélessébougou exhibiting the audacity to publicly identify as a Latter-day Saint while running in the national presidential election.[4] Multiple Malian members have petitioned LDS leaders for the establishment of an official church presence in Mali and the assignment of full-time missionaries. Malian members have remained faithful to the Church for many years and decades notwithstanding little ecclesiastical support due to isolation from the Africa West Area headquarters in Accra, Ghana and the country never having been assigned to a full-time mission.

Opportunities

The Malian government protects religious freedom and there have been no recent instances of societal abuse of religious freedom in government-controlled areas; a rarity among Muslim-majority nations considering Muslims account for over nine-tenths of the population. Religious harmony in society appears pervasive and on all levels of community and government as evidenced by members of differing religious groups frequently being part of the same family and members of one religious group attending the religious ceremonies of another religious group. Mali has prided itself in its longstanding tradition of interreligious harmony.[5] There do not appear to be any legal challenges for the Church to enter the country. The registration process has been described as simple and routine. There have been no recent reports of the government denying registration to a religious group applying for registration and there are no penalties for a religious group failing to register.[6] 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.

The handful of Malian members who reside in the country are an important resource for establishing the Church. Member-missionary efforts have the highest potential for long-term growth and convert retention success. Some of these members may prove instrumental in the development of teaching approaches and resources for reaching those with a Muslim background as some of these members were previously Muslim prior to joining the Church.

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 Mali. French is the official language and is spoken by many Malians, simplifying initial missionary efforts. The Church has significant French-speaking missionary manpower in Sub-Saharan Africa due to many Ivorian and Congolese members serving full-time missions. The allotment of even two or three missionary companionships to the Bamako 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 the window of opportunity to enter Mali at a time when the government and society respect religious freedom and permit Christian groups to openly proselyte and assemble in government-controlled areas. Past experience has illustrated that these conditions do not always remain constant or continue to improve, resulting in the Church missing the time-sensitive window of opportunity to establish an official presence when government policies and societal attitudes 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 would likely 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.

Inhabited by nearly 2.8 million people,[7] Bamako is the third most populous metropolitan area in Sub-Saharan Africa without an LDS ward or branch operating. Prospects for establishing an LDS presence in Bamako 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 Bamako may include as many as 100,000 Christians; a subset of the population that can be targeted for initial missionary efforts and who may exhibit higher receptivity to LDS outreach compared to their Muslim counterparts.

There are some ethnolinguistic peoples who are predominantly followers of indigenous religions and have sizable numbers of Christians, including several subgroups of the Dogon. Many of these groups have small populations and reside in rural areas along the border with Burkina Faso. Missionary efforts among these peoples may experience greater success than among the most populous ethnic groups in the country due to other proselytizing Christian faiths reporting higher receptivity and greater growth than among the most populous ethnolinguistic peoples.

The argument made by some that delays in establishing an LDS presence in Mali 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 Mali (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 Mali ($1,600 GDP per capita in Benin versus $1,100 GDP per capita in Mali). 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 (0.21%) 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 first stake during this period. However, the prominence of Islam in the Bamako metropolitan area suggests that the Church may experience lower levels of receptivity in Mali than compared to other major cities in West African nations with an LDS presence.

Recommendations

The establishment of the Church in Mali will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members and investigators who reside in Bamako. Isolated members and investigators continuing to petition church leaders to hold church services and to 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 in government-controlled areas of the country with high population densities and good accessibility from other major cities in West Africa. If no group currently operates in Bamako, area 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 Bamako to prepare the groundwork for the arrival of full-time, proselytizing young missionaries appears the most practical course of action to establish an official LDS presence in Mali. 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 the Bamako area, facilitate efforts to register the Church with the government, and to help conduct church services for a member group. The Church may assign Mali to a mission at this time. French-speaking missions appear most likely to have Mali added to their jurisdiction such as one of the Ivorian missions or the Benin Cotonou Mission. 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 Bamako 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 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 Mali and achieving good convert retention and member activity rates.

Prospects for opening additional areas of the country to missionary work will become more likely once church units in Bamako develop greater self sufficiency and experience regular increases in the number of members and investigators attending church services. The central geographic location of Bamako in the southwestern region of the country provides good opportunities for national outreach expansion in government controlled areas. Cities that appear most likely to have an LDS presence established include Ouélessébougou, Sikasso, and Kayes.

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 Mali. 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, including Mali, 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, historically limited numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the region, 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 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 poses challenges for mission and area leaders to begin formal missionary efforts and establish a congregation in Bamako. Cote d'Ivoire is the only neighboring country with an LDS presence but there is no LDS presence within the northern half of the country.

Political instability and the persecution of Christians in the eastern half of the country incurred by Islamic insurgency and the Tuareg rebellion poses considerable safety concerns for mission and area leaders to assign full-time missionaries to Mali. Conflict between the homogenously Muslim Tuareg people and the federal government has flared up periodically over the past two decades, with Tuareg militias most recently seeking an independent state comprising the northeastern half of the country.

Tuareg rebels captured most major cities and the northern two-thirds of the country by early 2012. The conflict became so severe that the military overthrew the president in the 2012 coup d'état. Although civilian rule was quickly reestablished and the government has since liberated most areas previously occupied by Tuareg rebel groups, these recent events pose concerns for whether additional conflict and political instability will resurface in the foreseeable future. These conditions suggest unfavorable prospects for LDS missionary activity in the northeastern half of the country due to persistent conflict between the federal government and the Tuareg people, and the persecution of Christians in this region of the country by radical Islamist groups. Additionally, the scope of the conflict recently affecting government administration in Bamako suggests that the Church may be hesitant to assign any full-time missionaries or senior couples to the country until peace is established and sustained for several years. The Church may elect to only assign French-speaking African missionaries to Mali once the decision is made to open the country to missionary work due to greater familiarity with local culture and black African missionaries presenting as less of a target for persecution and crime than their white North American counterparts.

The population may exhibit low receptivity to LDS outreach due to most Malians adhering to Islam. The Church has taken extreme care to ensure that formerly Muslim Malians have a solid understanding of LDS teachings and are aware of the potential safety concerns that may result from denouncing Islam and becoming Christian. This has generally required approval directly from the mission president for Malians who have joined the Church abroad. Many Malians belong to a family that practices polygamy. Those enjoined to a polygamous marriage must divorce all but one spouse in order to be eligible for baptism; a significant challenge that prevents all but the most devout converts from joining the Church. Currently missionary tactics and teaching approaches are tailored to those with a Christian background. These skills and approaches may yield few results with formal proselytism efforts among Malians as the Church has not developed teaching and missionary approaches tailored to those with a Muslim or animist background.

Comparative Growth

Several missionary-focused Christian groups operate in Mali, although these groups have experienced limited growth. Evangelicals are the largest outreach-oriented Christian group and claim a mere 0.7% of the national population. Evangelicals report challenges with allocating mission resources to Mali and accelerating growth.[8] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a limited presence in Mali. In 2013, Adventists reported 1,602 members, four churches,[9] and possibly as many as 22 companies (small congregations). Adventists have experienced slow growth over the past decade as generally less than 100 baptisms occur annually and stagnant congregational growth has persisted throughout this period.[10] Jehovah's Witnesses experience very slow growth and have a minimal presence. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 275 publishers (active members who engage in regular proselytism), seven congregations, and 15 baptisms.[11] Congregations in Mali reported on the Witness online meeting locator operate in Bamako (3), Kayes (1), and Sikasso (1) and these congregations hold worship services in French, American Sign Language, and Bambara.[12] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Mali.

Limitations

The Church has historically not published membership figures for Mali on a yearly basis. It is unclear how membership growth trends have fluctuated within the past couple decades. The Church does not publish the locations of member groups on its online meetinghouse locator. It is unclear whether a member group currently functions in the Bamako metropolitan area. There are no official membership statistics on country of origin or language usage for languages not within the 10 most commonly spoken languages in the Church. There are no reliable estimates on the number of Malian Latter-day Saints worldwide. There are no details available on whether mission or area leaders have petitioned or planned to open Mali 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.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the establishment of an official LDS presence in Mali is mixed. The government sufficiently upholds religious freedom to permit foreign Christian groups to operate without restrictions and foreign religious groups regularly register with the government without challenges. The Church has successfully baptized and retained a handful of devote Malian converts over the past several decades and has experienced a massive surge in the number of members serving full-time missions within the past couple years. However, a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy by area and international church leaders that has discouraged the opening of additional countries to missionary work in West Africa, recent political instability and safety concerns, and the prominence of Islam in society predict serious barriers for the Church to register with the government, assign senior missionaries, organize an official branch, and open the country to formal proselytism efforts with young, foreign missionaries. Continued political stability, Malian members continuing to petition area leaders for an official LDS establishment in Bamako, greater interest by area leaders to open unreached nations to missionary work, and larger numbers of mission resources allocated to the Africa West Area will be key towards the Church establishing an official presence in Mali within the foreseeable future.

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