



# Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## Prospective LDS Outreach in Equatorial Guinea

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### Overview

Inhabited by approximately 722,000 people, Equatorial Guinea is a small country in Central Africa that includes a rectangular-shaped, continental portion called Río Muni and two small islands (Annobón and Bioko). Christians account for 93% of the population, whereas other religious groups account for the remaining seven percent of the population. Catholics comprise more than 90% of Christians. Spanish is the official language and spoken by most of the population. As of mid-2014, the LDS Church has never had a presence in Equatorial Guinea despite a predominantly Christian population, two large population centers (Bata and Malabo), significant Spanish-speaking resources worldwide, and the government and society upholding sufficient religious freedom to permit the operation of nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups.<sup>[1]</sup>

This case study reviews the history of the Church's administration of Equatorial Guinea and instances when there have been Latter-day Saints known to reside 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 Equatorial Guinea is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment in Equatorial Guinea are predicted.

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### LDS Background

In 1980, there was one known Latter-day Saint who resided in Equatorial Guinea that was previously baptized in Spain.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1992, Equatorial Guinea was assigned to the Cameroon Yaounde Mission (relocated to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire and renamed the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission in 1993). In 1998, the Africa West Area was created and included Equatorial Guinea. In 2003, the Church transferred the country to the Africa Southeast Area and no longer assigned it to a mission. Sometime in the late 2000s, the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission began administering Equatorial Guinea. A handful of foreign members appeared to live in Malabo around this time, although it is unclear whether a member group ever operated or not.

By year-end 2013, the Church reported two known members in the country. In 2014, the Church reassigned Equatorial Guinea to the newly created Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission.<sup>[3]</sup>

### Opportunities

The Equatoguinean government upholds religious freedom. There have been no recent instances of societal abuse of religious freedom. Religious groups may engage in proselytism, and operate schools and churches without restrictions or interference from the government.<sup>[4]</sup> These conditions present good opportunities for an LDS Church establishment notwithstanding the authoritarian regime that has remained in control of the government since 1979 and has limited political freedoms over the past several decades.

With the number of members serving full-time missions worldwide increasing by the tens of thousands in the early 2010s, the Church has an unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of additional countries to missionary work such as Equatorial Guinea. Unlike most African countries with no LDS presence, Equatorial Guinea is assigned to a mission, thereby improving the prospects of mission leaders to take a proactive stance to open the country to proselytism. Spanish is the official language and is spoken by most Equatoguineans, simplifying initial

missionary efforts. The Church's abundant Spanish-speaking missionary manpower is second only to English in terms of the number of Latter-day Saint speakers and the number of missions that proselyte in this language. The allotment of even two or three missionary companionships each to Malabo and Bata would make virtually no noticeable impact on diminishing resources from other areas of the world, and may 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 Equatorial Guinea 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

Malabo and Bata present the greatest opportunities for LDS growth and missionary activity in Equatorial Guinea. Located on Bioko, Malabo is the national capital and likely has over 150,000 inhabitants. Bata is located in Río Muni and is most populous city in the country, with likely at least 200,000 inhabitants. Opportunities for growth appear favorable in either city due to high population densities requiring fewer congregations to effectively reach the population than the number of congregations required to reach rural populations, the large number of inhabitants in either location, Christians constituting the vast majority of the population, relatively easy access by airplane from other major cities in the region, and the recent opening of Gabon to missionary work in January 2014.

The handful of Equatoguinean Latter-day Saints who have joined the Church throughout the world 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 Equatoguinean Latter-day Saints currently residing in Equatorial Guinea, missionaries serving in Western Europe have occasionally taught Equatoguinean investigators and a handful of Equatoguineans have joined the Church abroad. Africa Southeast Area leaders coordinating with mission leaders in Western Europe to identify those members who may have returned to Equatorial Guinea and contacting these individuals can improve the prospects of establishing a church presence despite the Church's centers of strength policy dissuading the establishment of the Church in locations with few or no known Latter-day Saints.

The Fang constitute the largest ethnolinguistic group in Equatorial Guinea and also present some of the most favorable opportunities for LDS outreach. Approximately 86% of the Equatoguinean population is Fang and the vast majority of Fang are Roman Catholic.<sup>[5]</sup> Most Fang are bilingual in Spanish, thereby simplifying initial proselytism efforts as there are virtually no Fang-speaking members serving full-time missions. Notwithstanding no LDS presence in traditionally Fang-speaking areas of Central Africa until the establishment of the Libreville Branch in neighboring Gabon in 2012, the Church has translated one proselytism material into Fang: The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

## Recommendations

The establishment of the Church in Equatorial Guinea will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members and investigators who reside in Malabo or Bata. 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 the Church to begin the registration process and assign 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, sizable populations in Malabo and Bata, and greater mission resources channeled into the region as a result of the recent creation of the Republic of Congo Brazzaville. Mission. 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 a senior missionary couple to Malabo or Bata 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 Equatorial Guinea. Spanish-speaking senior missionaries present some of the greatest opportunities for successfully establishing the Church in Equatorial Guinea. 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. Due to local laws governing religious activity, the Church may be required to have the first senior missionaries primarily concentrate on humanitarian and development work as the Church has yet to become registered with the government. As the Church develops a relationship with the government and performs humanitarian work, senior missionaries may also begin searching for missionary housing and begin baptizing the first converts within the country if approved by mission and area leaders.

Full-time missionaries may be assigned to Equatorial 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 to regularly open additional member groups in locations distant from where the initial member group functions. The Church has experienced impressive results from following a church-planting approach to outreach expansion in newly opened cities to missionary work in the Africa West Area such as in

the Ghanaian cities of Sunyani, Tamale, and Techiman. However, this pattern has yet to be implemented more consistently in the Africa Southeast Area. Involvement from local members in missionary efforts will be vital towards instilling self-sufficiency in the Church in Equatorial Guinea, 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 Equatorial Guinea. 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 mission headquarters in Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo also poses challenges for mission leaders to begin formal missionary efforts and establish a congregation in Malabo or Bata. The Church maintains a minimal presence in surrounding nations due to the relatively recent establishment of the Church in these nations, a lack of mission resources available, and mission and area leader emphasis on building centers of strength in a handful of the most populous cities. The Church operates official branches in only two cities each in Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo, and in only one city in Gabon. The Church has never maintained a presence in Sao Tome and Principe.

Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency comprise some of the greatest challenges to establishing an LDS presence in Equatorial Guinea. Although the country is a nominal democracy, international observers have expressed that periodic elections have been flawed. Transparency International ranks Equatorial Guinea among the most corrupt countries in the world.<sup>[6]</sup> Freedom House compares Equatorial Guinea to North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Sudan as among "the worst of the worst" countries for political rights and civil liberties.<sup>[7]</sup> Human trafficking of women and children for forced labor and sexual exploitation is a serious problem. The US State Department asserts that the government "does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so....[In 2012,] the government neither identified a single victim of human trafficking nor made any efforts to provide victims of trafficking with protective services, despite the mandate to do so in its 2004 anti-trafficking law."<sup>[8]</sup> Consequently Equatorial Guinea is both a source and a destination for human trafficking. The government officially promotes the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, although this preferential treatment has not appeared to noticeably diminish the religious freedom of other religious groups.<sup>[9]</sup> The process for religious groups to submit an application and register with the government has taken years from some religious groups to complete due to government inefficiency.<sup>[10]</sup> This may pose challenges for the LDS Church to complete this process in a timely manner. Additionally, it is unclear whether government policy and legislation will permit senior missionaries to reside in the country to perform humanitarian and development work, and simultaneously lay the groundwork to begin formal missionary activity. If the government does not permit senior missionaries to serve in the country, share the gospel with others, and hold church services on at least an invitation basis, there will likely be no feasible prospects of a permanent LDS establishment in the country unless native Equatoguinean members spearhead this process.

The Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission has a large administrative burden as the mission services six countries, including Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Congo, and Sao Tome and Principe. The Church has assigned missionaries to three of these nations (Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo), has had an official presence but no full-time missionaries assigned in one nation (Central African Republic), and has no known presence in two of these nations (Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe). Altogether the mission has 35.7 million people within its geographical boundaries, only two percent of the mission's population reside in Equatorial Guinea. Consequently the opening of Equatorial Guinea to missionary work will likely take less precedence over the expansion of missionary activity into countries like Cameroon, where there are over 23 million people but less than 1,400 members and only two cities with an LDS presence. These conditions implicate that mission and area leaders may delay more proactive efforts to open Equatorial Guinea until additional missions are organized in the region as mission resource allocation has been minimal.

The Church in Equatorial Guinea may experience self-sufficiency problems as the small number of Equatoguinean members have thus far appeared unable to self-organize and establish a presence in Malabo or Bata. 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 Southeast Area Presidency will be vital towards identifying members and leaders who can help prepare for the organization of member groups or official branches in Malabo and Bata.

## Comparative Growth

Several missionary-focused Christian groups maintain a presence in Equatorial Guinea. Evangelicals report a smaller presence than in most predominantly Christian, Sub-Saharan African countries. Only 4.4% of the population is estimated to be evangelical.<sup>[11]</sup> The Seventh Day Adventist Church has maintained its Equatorial Guinea Mission since 1986 and has experienced slow but steady growth. In 2013, Adventists reported 1,749 members and 18 churches (large congregations).<sup>[12]</sup> In

2012, Adventists reported seven companies (small congregations) which also appeared to operate in 2013. Adventists have baptized an average of 133 new members a year since 1998.<sup>[13]</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a limited presence in the country but are well established in the major population centers. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 1,442 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 13 congregations, and 148 baptisms.<sup>[14]</sup> In mid-2014, Witnesses reported eight congregations in Bata, six congregations in Malabo, and one congregation each in Ebebiyín and Mongomo. The Church of the Nazarene reports no members or congregations in Equatorial Guinea.

## Limitations

The Church does not publish membership figures for Equatorial Guinea 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 Malabo or Bata. 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 Equatoguinean Latter-day Saints worldwide. There are no details available on whether mission or area leaders have petitioned or planned to open Equatorial Guinea 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 presence in Equatorial Guinea and begin formal proselytism efforts appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The creation of the Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission has good potential to augment the number of full-time missionaries and mission resources into the region, which may result in mission leaders more seriously considering the opening of Equatorial Guinea to missionary activity. However, the number of Equatoguinean converts has remained too few for these members to self-organize in Equatorial Guinea and spearhead the registration of the Church with approval from mission and area presidencies. Additionally, Equatorial Guinea's poor reputation regarding human rights, corruption, and preferential treatment of traditional religious groups may dissuade mission and area leaders from considering the opening of Equatorial Guinea to the Church for many more years to come. Even if the Church assigns a senior missionary couple to Malabo or Bata to lay the groundwork to establish an LDS presence, there may be difficulties with government policies and legislation which require religious groups to register in order to operate in the country as this process has taken years for some groups to complete. On the other hand, failure to pursue government registration at present may result in the Church missing its window of opportunity if religious freedom conditions deteriorate and become too challenging for the Church to enter the country.



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