



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS Outreach Expansion in Benin

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Overview

Inhabited by 10.2 million people, Benin is a small West African country that is predominantly Christian (42.8%), Muslim (24.4%), and Vodoun [Voodoo] (17.3%). French is the official language and several indigenous African languages are commonly spoken, including Fon, Hausa, Gbe languages, Yoruba, Baatonum, Aja, Gun, and Fulani (Fulfulde) languages. Although the LDS Church has maintained a presence in Benin since 1998, the Church's presence has been restricted to only the Cotonou area until 2014 when the mission opened Porto Novo to missionary work. Currently excellent opportunities exist for the Church in Benin to expand its operations to additional locations due to the population exhibiting high receptivity to LDS outreach, the allocation of sizable amounts of mission resources to the recently organized Benin Cotonou Mission, the large number of cities nearby Cotonou and Porto Novo currently without an LDS presence, and mission leaders consistently engaging in church planting tactics to achieve rapid growth since the late 2000s.

This case study reviews the history of the Church's national outreach expansion efforts in Benin and identifies recent outreach expansion successes. An overview of the "Sunyani Model" for opening previously unreached cities in West Africa to missionary work is provided. Opportunities and challenges for opening additional areas of the country to missionaries are analyzed. Trends in outreach expansion and church growth in Benin are compared to other West African countries with an LDS presence. A synopsis of the growth and size of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Benin is provided. Limitations to data utilized in this case study are identified and the outlook for church growth and national outreach expansion is predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1998, a French-speaking senior couple orchestrated the establishment of the first member group in Cotonou and coordinated the baptism of the first converts. In 2005, the Church organized its first official branch called the Cotonou Branch from the former member group. The number of branches in the Cotonou-Calavi-Kokokodji urban agglomeration increased to three in 2008, six in 2012, 10 in 2013, and 12 in mid-2014. This proliferation of congregations coincided with the organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2011 as Benin was previously assigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission (1998-2005; 2008-2011), the Ghana Accra Mission (2007-2008), and the Ghana Cape Coast Mission (2005-2007). The Church organized its first official branches in Kokokodji (Cococodji) in 2013 and in Calavi in 2014.

In May 2014, the Benin Cotonou Mission organized a member group in Porto Novo and assigned missionaries. In June, missionaries reported that the member group generally had between 10 and 20 people attending church services. In August, the member group became an official branch under the direct supervision of the Benin Cotonou Mission.

Successes

The opening of lesser-reached and unreached urban areas within the greater Cotonou urban conurbation constitutes the greatest achievement in the Church expanding its outreach in Benin. Mission leaders have implemented a church-planting approach to more rapidly reach areas distant from the nearest meetinghouse by organizing member groups that assemble in rented facilities. The establishment of a member group in the Kokokodji area in May 2013 constitutes the crowning success in recent church-planting efforts within Benin as the member group reached 100 members and investigators attending church services by the time the member group became a branch just two months later in July 2013. Although not all efforts to establish member groups have as quickly generated as impressive results, mission leaders have consistently implemented this approach

to growth in the greater Cotonou area.

The opening of Porto Novo to missionary work and the establishment of a member group constitutes the only progress that the Church has made in opening additional cities to missionary work outside of the Cotonou area. As only 13% of the national population resides in the Cotonou metropolitan area, establishing an LDS presence in Porto Novo is a major step towards the Church becoming more accessible to the Beninese population. Missionaries reported that many investigators and members began attending church services once the member group began officially operating, indicating that the population has been responsive to LDS missionary efforts. Although missionaries have thus far only served in Porto Novo for a matter of months, reports indicate that several priesthood leaders appear qualified and willing to serve in leadership positions.

The "Sunyani Model" for Opening Cities to Missionary Work

The implementation of the so-called "Sunyani Model" of opening previously unreached cities to proselytism provides many opportunities for achieving rapid growth and establishing additional centers of strength outside of Cotonou. The Sunyani Model was pioneered in the Ghana Cape Coast Mission in 2010 when mission and area leaders coordinated the opening of Sunyani, Ghana to missionary activity. Unlike efforts to open previously unreached cities, Sunyani had no known Latter-day Saints prior to the assignment of full-time missionaries. Additionally, mission leadership simultaneously organized three member groups in order to immediately saturate the city with LDS outreach. Each of the three meetinghouses doubled as living quarters for a single full-time missionary companionship, thereby ensuring that congregations started from scratch and did not become oversaturated with multiple missionary companionships. The implementation of this church-planting model culminated in the Church in Sunyani becoming its own district with four branches just two years later in 2012.

The Africa West Area and several missions have implemented the Sunyani Model within many large and medium-sized cities that have recently opened to missionary work. In Ghana, the Church implemented the model in Tamale and Techiman. In Tamale, the Church assigned the first missionaries in early 2013 and opened multiple member groups. By mid-2014, there were two branches in Tamale. In Techiman, the Church assigned the first missionaries in mid-2013 and organized two or three member groups. By mid-2014, there were four branches in Techiman. The Church implemented the Sunyani Model in Cote d'Ivoire within several cities, including most notably in Daloa where the Church simultaneously organized six branches on a single day notwithstanding no branches previously functioning in this city.

Opportunities for National Outreach Expansion in Benin

Benin has experienced political stability and widespread religious freedom for over two decades. Many other Sub-Saharan African nations have not experienced the degree of stability in government and society for as long as Benin, yet some of these countries have a more widespread LDS presence and sizable numbers of non-African, full-time missionaries assigned. There have not appeared to be any restrictions or limitations on the Church's proselytism activities in Benin and the number of foreign missionary visas granted to the Church. These conditions present excellent opportunities for opening additional cities to proselytism, augmenting the size of the full-time missionary force, and establishing a nationwide presence due to few safety concerns for full-time missionaries and the population exhibiting strong receptivity to LDS outreach. Additionally, the Church has scarcely scratched the surface in reaching the national population as only 15% of the population resides in cities where a branch operates. According to 2002 government statistical data, there are at least 23 cities in Benin with 25,000 or more inhabitants.^[1] These cities present the best opportunities for reaching as many people as possible with the fewest mission outreach centers.

The advancement of the Cotonou Benin District into a stake has enormous potential to instigate rapid national outreach expansion in Benin. In recent years, the Benin Cotonou Mission has concentrated many of its mission resources on preparing local leadership and membership for the responsibilities of stakes in Lome, Togo and Cotonou, Benin. In late 2013, these efforts were successful in Lome as the district became a stake with eight wards and four branches. Although the establishment of a stake in Togo has freed some mission resources previously allocated to address deficiencies that prevented the establishment of a stake, sizable amounts of mission resources remain dedicated to preparing the Church in Benin for a stake to be organized in Cotonou one day.

In urban and suburban areas within the greater Cotonou agglomeration, mission leaders benefit from close proximity to mission headquarters permitting easy access to these minimally-reached or yet-to-be-reached populations. These populations are located on the outskirts of the city and have yet to receive concentrated mission outreach. Some of these locations already fall within the boundaries of the Cotonou Benin District, including Godomey, Hévié, and Pahou, whereas others are outside the boundaries of the district but may be incorporated if desired by mission and area leaders, including Agblangandan and Ekpe. The establishment of a member group in each of these population centers has good potential to perpetuate rapid congregational growth experienced in other urban areas within the Cotonou urban agglomeration, such as in Calavi and Kokokodji. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach by the most populous cities in Benin can be found [here](#).

Mission leaders using the Benin Cotonou Mission Branch as the vehicle for locating and keeping track of isolated members residing outside of Cotonou and Porto Novo stands as the most feasible and standardized method to identify the most suitable cities to open for proselytism. The Church in Porto Novo remains in its infancy stages the first branch was organized in August 2014. Implementing the Sunyani Model in the greater Porto Novo area has good potential to immediately saturate the city with LDS outreach and achieve similar results to other locations in West Africa where this paradigm has been implemented. The

establishment of three or four member groups that assemble in their own separate meetinghouse facility that doubles as missionary living quarters appears an effective method to reach the city. The establishment of separate member groups in nearby population centers on the outskirts of the city such as in Adjara and Akpro-Misserette may also be effective in duplicating the Sunyani Model in the greater Porto Novo area.

Cities without a nearby LDS presence also present good immediate opportunities for assigning missionaries and organizing member groups. Located in central Benin, Parakou is the fourth most populous city in the country and has a predominantly Muslim and Catholic population. The establishment of two or three member groups may be effective when the first missionaries are assigned to the city. The Bohicon/Abomey conurbation has a combined population of at least 200,000. Missionaries could open a couple member groups in each city. Ouidah is the most populous city within as close proximity to Cotonou and Porto Novo with a population likely nearing 100,000. The establishment of a couple member groups in this city may also yield good results.

Challenges

Only small numbers of Beninese serve full-time missions resulting in the mission heavily depending on foreign missionaries to staff its ranks. With the vast majority of church membership joining the Church within the past two years, it is expected that few members serve missions due to the comparatively small size of total church membership and the Church requiring prospective full-time missionaries to wait at least one year prior to beginning missionary service. Methods that can be implemented to help augment the number of Beninese members serving missions include full-time missionaries pairing up with local members for a day or an evening, assigning a mission-aged member to serve a "mini-mission" with a full-time missionary for a missionary transfer period, and holding missionary preparation classes offered through the Church Education System that are accessible and engaging for youth and young adults.

Until July 2014 when a new mission president arrived, the Church had had only one mission president preside over the Benin Cotonou Mission since its organization. Consequently it is unclear whether his successors will implement similar growth strategies as aggressively and tactfully as the first mission president did during his service. There is a risk of rapid growth coming to a dramatic halt if the new mission president reverses outreach expansion vision in order to organize ward-size branches so that a stake can be organized in Cotonou. Past experience in other West Africa countries has shown that continuing to open additional congregations without consolidating smaller ones is often the most appropriate and effective course of action to prepare districts to become stakes, and to maintain steady congregational and active membership growth.

The Church's centers of strength policy has deterred national outreach expansion in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many countries have had an LDS presence for over two decades, yet have official ward and branches operating in only two or three cities. This finding may indicate that the Church will delay the opening of additional cities to missionary work in order for a larger center of strength to be established in Cotonou.

There are few gospel study and missionary resources available in the most commonly spoken indigenous African languages. Translations of the Book of Mormon and multiple gospel study and missionary materials are available in Yoruba, whereas translations of The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the old edition of Gospel Principles are available in Hausa, and only one translation (The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith) is available in Fon. No LDS materials have been translated into Gbe languages, Baatonum, Aja, or Gun. The translation of basic proselytism and gospel study materials may be warranted to improve gospel scholarship, testimony development, and the effectiveness of proselytism efforts.

Several of the most populous unreached cities are located in areas of the country where many, if not most, the population adheres to Islam. Traditionally Muslim ethnic groups often exhibit strong ties to Islam and demonstrate low receptivity to Christian proselytism. Consequently the Church may experience slow growth in some of these locations due to lower receptivity. Additionally, the Church has yet to develop teaching approaches tailored to those with a Muslim background. As the application of traditional LDS teaching approaches assume investigators have an awareness of basic Judeo-Christian doctrines, a lack of specialized outreach materials may contribute to lackluster growth in some locations with predominantly Muslim populations.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced rapid national outreach expansion in two other West African countries within the past five years. In Cote d'Ivoire, the number of cities with an official ward or branch more than doubled from seven at the beginning of 2012 to 16 in April 2014. The most rapid expansion has occurred in central and southwestern Cote d'Ivoire where the number of cities with a branch tripled from three to nine and the number of branches quadrupled from seven to 28 during this two-year period. The opening of so many previously unreached cities coupled with the simultaneous organization of multiple branches in several of these cities points to a significant change in how mission and area leaders have interpreted and implemented the Church's centers of strength policy. Thus far these reformed church growth tactics have yielded impressive and unprecedented growth in Cote d'Ivoire. In Ghana, the number of cities with an official ward or branch increased from 54 at year-end 2010 to approximately 75 by July 2014. The Church in Ghana has experienced some of the most rapid national outreach expansion in the world since 2010. No other country has appeared to have as many wards, branches, and groups organized in locations that previously had no reported LDS presence during this period. The implementation of the Sunyani Model in several previously unreached cities, the increase in the number of missions in Ghana from one to four within the past decade, and good sociopolitical conditions for missionary activity have all contributed to rapid growth in Ghana. The Church in other West African

nations has experienced little to no national outreach expansion within the past four years. During this period, the Church organized only a handful of new congregations in previously unreached cities in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and organized no new congregations in previously unreached cities in Liberia and Togo.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups maintain a significantly more nationwide presence in Benin compared to the LDS Church, although these groups have experienced slower growth than Latter-day Saints within the past four or five years. Evangelicals claim approximately eight percent of the population and have reported modest growth in recent years.^[2] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a nationwide presence but have experienced moderate growth in recent years. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 10,872 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 170 congregations, and 579 baptisms. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a smaller presence in Benin compared to many other West African countries and has experienced modest growth. In 2002, Adventists reported 12 churches, 49 companies, and 2,351 members, whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 16 churches, 43 companies, and 5,834 members.^[3] In 2013, Adventists reported 18 churches and 5,940 members.^[4] Adventists generally baptize between 200 and 500 new converts a year.^[5] The Church of the Nazarene reports a pervasive presence in Benin with over 1,000 congregations nationwide.^[6]

Limitations

The Church does not publish country-by-country data for many church growth indicators such as the number of convert baptisms, the increase in children of record, the number of members serving full-time missions, and the number of full-time missionaries assigned. No data is released to the public regarding various member activity indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders. Although several reports from young full-time missionaries and senior missionary couples were available regarding recent church growth developments, there were no reports available from local members and church leaders. The Church does not publish a breakdown of its membership distribution by administrative division for Benin. No data is released pertaining to the number and locations of member groups. It is unclear whether many Latter-day Saints reside outside of Cotonou and Porto Novo, and if member groups operate in any additional locations.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Benin to open additional cities to missionary activity and organize congregations in these locations appears favorable within the foreseeable future due to steady increases in the number of missionaries assigned to the Benin Cotonou Mission, recent focus by mission leaders to expand outreach in Cotonou and Porto Novo, favorable societal and political conditions for missionary work, the population exhibiting high receptivity to LDS outreach, and the Africa West Area promoting more adaptable and proactive methods for establishing centers of strength. Cities within close proximity to Cotonou and Porto Novo appear most likely to open to missionary work and have member groups organized within the foreseeable future, including Abomey/Bohicon, Godomey, and Ouidah. Time will tell whether successive mission presidents will continue to implement the successful church growth and missionary tactics responsible for recent progress, or if these policies will be reversed or changed to promote a more conservative centers of strength model that advocates for congregation-splitting and delaying national outreach expansion. Reliance on foreign missionary manpower remains an ongoing concern, especially if Beninese member do not serve missions in increasing numbers within the coming months and years ahead.

[1] "Benin," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/Benin-Cities.html), retrieved 11 August 2014.

[2] "Benin," Operation World, retrieved 11 August 2014. <http://www.operationworld.org/beni>

[3] "Benin Mission (1989-Present)," [adventiststatistics.org](http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2435091), retrieved 6 August 2014.

[4] "Benin Mission," [www.adventistyearbook.org](http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=BENM), retrieved 6 August 2014.

[5] "Benin Mission (1989-Present)," [adventiststatistics.org](http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2435091), retrieved 6 August 2014.

[6] "Nazarene Church Data Search," [nazarene.org](http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=BN&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=), retrieved 1 August 2013.