



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Niger

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Overview

Inhabited by 17.5 million people, Niger is a landlocked West African country. The population is approximately 98% Muslim and 2% followers of indigenous beliefs and Christianity.^[1] French is the official language and two indigenous languages are spoken by more than one million people, namely Hausa (5.46 million) and Zarma (2.35 million).^[2] As of mid-2014, the LDS Church reported no presence in Niger notwithstanding the government consistently upholding religious freedom for non-Muslim groups, no recent reports of societal abuses of religious freedom that targeted Christians,^[3] several nontraditional Christian groups freely operating in the country, and the presence on a handful of isolated Latter-day Saints.

This case study reviews the history of the Church administering Niger 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 LDS presence are provided. Challenges for establishing a church presence and achieving growth are discussed. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Niger is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for an LDS establishment in Niger is predicted.

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LDS Background

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

In 2014, the Church had translations of Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith available in Hausa and two Fulani languages (Fula and Futa), although it was unclear whether the Fulani languages with LDS translations number among the Fulani languages traditionally spoken in Niger.

Opportunities

The Nigerien government and constitution protect religious freedom and there have been no recent instances of societal abuse of religious freedom targeting Christians; a rarity among Muslim-majority nations considering Muslims account 98% of the population. The government has taken an active role in sponsoring events that promote religious tolerance and a Muslim-Christian interfaith forum functions in all administrative regions of the country. The handful of recent instances of societal abuse of religious freedom have been limited to conflict between different Muslim groups.^[4] There do not appear to be any restrictions on Muslims converting from Islam to Christianity or the proselytism of Christian groups. The Church does not appear to have any legal challenges to enter the country. All religious groups must register with the Ministry of the Interior. To register, a religious group submits legal documents and the Ministry of the Interior vets the religious group's leaders.^[5] 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 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 due to

familiarity with local culture and the strong likelihood that current Nigerien Latter-day Saints previously adhered to Islam.

With the number of members serving full-time missions worldwide increasing by the tens of thousands in 2013 alone, the Church has the unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of additional countries to missionary work such as Niger. French is the official language and is spoken by many Nigeriens, 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 Niamey 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 Niger at a time when the government and society generally respect religious freedom and permit Christian groups to openly proselyte and assemble. 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 religious minority 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.

Inhabited by 1.14 million people,^[6] Niamey numbers among the nine metropolitan areas in Sub-Saharan Africa with one million or more inhabitants without an LDS ward or branch operating. Prospects for establishing an LDS presence in Niamey 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 such as Cotonou, 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 Niamey appears to include tens of thousands of 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.

Some ethnic minority groups have sizable Christian minorities and may be more favorable for LDS proselytism efforts than staunchly Muslim peoples. The Gourma are the only indigenous ethnolinguistic group in Niger with a sizable Christian minority as an estimated 30% of the Gourma are Christian.^[7] Missionary efforts among the Gourma may experience greater success than among other ethnolinguistic groups in the country due to a higher percentage of Christians and greater missionary successes experienced by other proselytizing Christian faiths, such as evangelicals who claim seven percent of the Gourma population.^[8] Two nonnative ethnolinguistic groups have more than 50,000 people and sizable numbers of Christians, including the Mossi (20% Christian) and Yoruba (20% Christian),^[9] and also present good opportunities for missionary activity.

The argument made by some that delays in establishing an LDS presence in Niger 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 Niger (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 Niger (\$1,600 GDP per capita in Benin versus \$800 GDP per capita in Niger). 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 Niamey metropolitan area suggests that the Church may experience lower levels of receptivity than compared to other major cities in West Africa with an LDS presence.

Recommendations

The establishment of the Church in Niger will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members and investigators who reside in Niamey. 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 areas with high population densities and good accessibility from other major cities in West Africa. If no group currently operates in Niamey, 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 Niamey 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 Niger. 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 Niamey area, facilitate efforts to register the Church with the government, and help conduct church services for a member group. The Church may assign Niger to a mission at this time. French-speaking missions appear most likely to have Niger 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 to baptize the first converts within the country pending approval by area leaders.

Full-time missionaries may be assigned to Niamey 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 regularly opening 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 Niger, 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 Niamey develop greater self sufficiency and experience regular increases in the number of members and investigators attending church services. Cities that appear most likely to have an LDS presence established include Zinder and Maradi.

Challenges

Reluctance from mission and area leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa to expand missionary activity into countries that have previously had no LDS presence presents the greatest barrier to the establishment of the Church in Niger. 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 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, 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. Many African missions struggled to sufficiently staff their ranks to assign a single missionary companionship to each ward or branch until the worldwide surge in the full-time missionary force in the early 2010s. Distance to the nearest LDS mission poses challenges for mission and area leaders to begin formal missionary efforts and establish a congregation in Niamey. Benin and Nigeria are the only neighboring countries with an LDS presence but neither of these countries have an LDS presence near the Nigerien border.

Niger presents less favorable opportunities for LDS growth compared to most West African countries where there is no LDS presence due to fewer known Latter-day Saints, lower living standards, and a higher percentage of Muslims in the population. When Africa West Area leaders and mission presidents determine to open additional countries to missionary work, nations with larger numbers of Latter-day Saints and higher percentages of non-Muslims appear more likely to open such as Guinea-Bissau (45 Latter-day Saints at year-end 2013, 50% non-Muslim) and the Gambia (19 Latter-day Saints at year-end 2013, 10% non-Muslim). Niger numbers among the poorest nations in the world, presenting challenges for missionary activity and achieving self-sufficiency in local church administration. Only Mauritania has a higher percentage of Muslims in the population than Niger among West African nations without an LDS presence. Consequently Niger may number among the last currently unreached West African nations to have an LDS presence established.

The population may exhibit low receptivity to LDS outreach as the population is homogenously Muslim. Christians comprise less than 0.2% of the population for all 11 ethnolinguistic groups in Niger with 200,000 or more people.^[10] The Church has taken extreme care to ensure that formerly Muslim individuals in other West African nations without a current LDS presence 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 these individuals to join the Church abroad. Many Nigeriens 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. Current missionary tactics and teaching approaches are tailored to those with a Christian background. These skills and tactics may yield few results in formal proselytism efforts among Nigeriens as the Church has not developed teaching and missionary approaches tailored to those with a Muslim 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 0.1% of the national population. Evangelicals report challenges with allocating mission resources to Niger and providing specialized outreach.^[11] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has maintained a minimal presence in Niger since as early as 1986. In 2013, Adventists reported 239 members, two churches, and seven companies.^[12] Adventists have experienced slow growth over the past decade as generally between 10 and 40 baptisms have occurred annually and no increase in the number of congregations has occurred since 2004.^[13]

Jehovah's Witnesses experience very slow growth and have a minimal presence. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 288 publishers (active members who engage in regular proselytism), seven congregations, and nine baptisms.^[14] In mid-2014, the Jehovah's Witnesses online meeting locator reported congregations in Niamey (4) and Dosso (1), and indicated that all worship services were held in French.^[15] The Church of the Nazarene maintains a minimal presence in Niger that appears limited to a single congregation located in Gaya.^[16]

Limitations

The Church has historically not published membership figures for Niger 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. [Best Replica Watches](#) It is unclear whether a member group currently functions in the Niamey 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 Nigerien Latter-day Saints worldwide. There are no details available on whether mission or area leaders have petitioned or planned to open Niger 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 carried out.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the establishment of an official LDS presence in Niger is mixed. The government sufficiently upholds religious freedom to permit foreign Christian groups to operate without restrictions and there do not appear to be any challenges for the Church to obtain government registration. The Church has appeared to baptize a handful of Nigerien 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 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, Nigerien members petitioning area leaders for an official LDS establishment in Niamey, greater interest by area leaders to open additional countries 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 the country.

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[10] "Country: Niger," Joshua Project, retrieved 18 August 2014. <http://joshuaproject.net/countries/NG>

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[13] "Niger Mission Station (2000-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 18 August 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2443876

[14] "2014 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 12 April 2014. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/>

[15] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 18 August 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrtZGT

[16] "Church of the Nazarene," nazarene.org, retrieved 18 August 2014. <http://app.nazarene.org/FindChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=NG&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=>

