

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS Growth in Malawi

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Overview

Malawi is inhabited by 17.4 million people and landlocked in southern Africa. Most the population speaks English and Chichewa. Approximately a dozen indigenous African languages are spoken. Christians comprise 83% of the population. Muslims are a sizable religious minority and constitute 13% of the population. The LDS Church has experienced rapid membership growth within the past five years as evidenced by the number of members doubling within this period. However, the Church has extended extremely limited outreach that is restricted to only three cities notwithstanding full-time missionaries serving in Malawi for over 15 years.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Malawi. Recent church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are explored. The growth of the Church in nearby Sub-Saharan African nations is compared to the growth of the Church in Malawi. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in Malawi are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

Small numbers of foreign Latter-day Saints began residing in Malawi during the early 1990s. The Church submitted paperwork to obtain official government recognition in 1991 but this registration was not obtained until 1995. The first convert baptisms occurred in July 1992. The Church assigned Malawi to the Zimbabwe Harare Mission and stationed a senior missionary couple. The first young, full-time missionaries arrived in 1999 and resided in Blantyre. Missionaries also visited the small village of Sitima on a weekly basis.[1] Seminary and institute began in 2002. In July 2011, the Church reassigned Malawi to the newly organized Zambia Lusaka Mission.

The Church reported 181 members in 1999. Church-reported membership for Malawi reached 377 in 2002, 540 in 2005, 798 in 2009, and 1,653 in 2013. Annual membership growth rates have exceeded 10% for all but three years since the Church began reporting official membership statistics in 1999. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 15.9% and 25.0% between 2010 and 2013.

The Church in Malawi has organized and discontinued several branches since its establishment. Both of the first two branches created by the Church were eventually discontinued. The Church organized a branch in Lilongwe sometime during the 1990s but discontinued it in 2002. The Sitima Branch was organized in May 1999 but was discontinued in 2008. The Church organized its first branch in Blantyre in July 2000. Three additional branches have since been organized in Blantyre including the Blantyre 2nd (2005), Ndirande (2011), and Zingwangwa (2011) Branches. The Church reestablished a branch in Lilongwe during the fall of 2007. Three additional branches have since been organized in Lilongwe including the Kauma 1st (2010), Kauma 2nd (2013), and Kalambo (2013) Branches. In 2011, the Church established a member group in Liwonde. This group included some of the members from the former Sitima Branch. The number of branches in Malawi totaled two in 1999, three in 2000, two in 2002, three in 2005, four in 2007, three in 2008, six in 2011, and eight in 2013. Mission leaders in late 2014 reported preliminary plans to organize additional branches in Blantyre and Lilongwe within the near future and to organize branches in the Lilongwe area into its own district.

The Zimbabwe Harare Mission and the Zambia Lusaka Mission have implemented a conservative interpretation of the "centers of strength" policy. This has been evident in the assignment of missionaries to only Blantyre and Lilongwe despite a proselytism

presence for over 15 years. Church leaders have had high ambitions for future growth in these two cities. In 2005, the Church completed a building in Blantyre designed to serve as a future stake center[2] although all branches in Blantyre directly reported to the mission until the creation of the Blantyre Malawi District in 2011. The Church has identified several small groups of self-referred investigators who have requested baptism and the establishment of the Church in their communities. None of these individuals had been baptized as of late 2014. Missionaries reported that the large geographical area of the Zambia Lusaka Mission and lack of self-sufficiency in local LDS leadership have prevented the establishment of member groups in additional locations such as Kasungu and Mzuzu.

There have been recent efforts to strengthen local membership and improve the self-sufficiency of missionary work in Malawi. In October 2014, mission leaders reported that there were seven members in Lilongwe who were preparing paperwork to begin full-time missionary service. Missionaries reported that the acquisition of passports took a year to accomplish.

Successes

The Church in Malawi has experienced rapid membership growth within the past five years as evidenced by the number of members doubling during this period. The rate of membership growth for the Church in Malawi since 2009 has ranked among the most rapid for countries within the Africa Southeast Area. Missionaries and local members have been successful in finding, teaching, and baptizing increasing numbers of new converts. Many of these converts have been retained as evidenced by the number of branches in Malawi increasing from three in 2009 to eight in 2013. Mission leaders have been cognizant of the need to augment the number of local members serving full-time missions and have been successful in preparing many mission-aged members for full-time missionary service. These successes have occurred despite distance from mission headquarters, limited missionary manpower, and the implementation of a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy.

The Church has established two centers of strength in Malawi in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe. These two church centers each had four branches as of late 2014. The most rapid LDS growth has occurred in Lilongwe where the Church grew from one branch in 2007 to four branches in 2013. Progress has also appeared to occur in strengthening local priesthood leadership as evidenced by the Church organizing the four Blantyre branches into its own district in 2011.

The creation of the Zambia Lusaka Mission has augmented the number of mission resources allocated to Malawi since 2011. The organization of a separate mission to service Zambia and Malawi has provided greater supervision, support, and resources to the Church in both countries. Larger numbers of full-time missionaries have been assigned to Malawi since the organization of the Zambia Lusaka Mission, thereby providing the needed manpower to properly staff current proselytism areas as well as further saturating Blantyre and Lilongwe with additional missionary companionships.

Opportunities

The Church has good opportunities to significantly increase the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Malawi. The worldwide number of members serving full-time missions mushroomed in the early 2010s from 59,000 in 2012 to nearly 85,000 in early January 2015.[3] This has resulted in an unprecedented opportunity to channel surplus missionary manpower into underserviced countries such as Malawi. There do not appear to be any challenges for the Church in Malawi to obtain larger numbers of foreign missionary visas. Widespread religious freedom and a predominantly Christian population may encourage international LDS leadership to assign larger numbers of full-time missionaries to Malawi. Additionally, missionaries have consistently reported that Malawians have exhibited good receptivity to LDS outreach. This indicates that greater growth will likely occur once additional resources are allocated to the country.

Malawi numbers among the most favorable countries for the Church to organize a new mission due to the size of its population, recent missionary successes, and distance from mission headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia. Malawi currently ranks as the twenty-eighth most populous country in the world without its own LDS mission. Malawi is also the country with the ninth most Latter-day Saints without its own mission. Other countries with similarly-sized populations have a significantly larger LDS missionary forces such as Chile where the Church operates 10 missions. The establishment of a separate mission to service Malawi presents excellent opportunities for mission leaders to further strengthen the evolving LDS centers in Blantyre and Lilongwe, identify favorable cities to open to missionary activity, improve supervision of full-time missionary efforts, and enhance administrative support to mission branches and districts.

There are good opportunities for the Church to open additional cities to missionary work. Locations where prospective members have petition mission leaders for baptism and the formal establishment of the Church present the greatest opportunities for growth. The most populous cities also present excellent conditions for proselytism. Malawi has at least 11 cities with populations of 20,000 or more inhabitants where there are no LDS branches or member groups.[4] Missionary efforts that target the most populous unreached cities can maximize limited mission resources due to high population densities and easier accessibility than smaller cities or rural areas. Additionally, missionary efforts in the most populous cities can also establish additional centers of strength. Cities that appear most favorable for missionary activity and the establishment of member groups include Mzuzu, Kasungu, and Zomba. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach for cities in Malawi with 20,000 or more inhabitants can be found here.

Challenges

The Church in Malawi only operates in three cities notwithstanding a proselytizing presence for over 15 years. One of the three cities (Liwonde) continues to have no permanent full-time missionary companionship assigned. Consequently only 10% of the Malawian population resides in locations where full-time missionaries serve or where LDS congregations operate. The lack of progress expanding national outreach and assigning larger numbers of full-time missionaries appears largely the byproduct of the Africa Southeast Area implementing a conservative interpretation of the "centers of strength" policy. The Africa Southeast Area has numbered among the most reluctant administrative areas within the worldwide Church to open unreached locations to missionary activity. A conservative interpretation of the centers of strength has resulted in the Church intentionally restricting its operations to only a handful of predetermined locations with the goal to develop a self-sustaining and self-sufficient core of church leadership and members. Unfortunately this policy has had many negative consequences when growth in centers of strength fall vastly short of expectations and require significantly more time to reach desired outcomes. Ultimately many areas remain unreached for years or decades notwithstanding no restrictions on religious freedom, large populations receptive to Christian proselytism who have yet to receive the Latter-day Saint gospel witness, and no challenges obtaining additional numbers of foreign missionary visas. Delays in opening additional areas of Malawi may result in previously receptive individuals becoming disciplined into other proselytism-focused Christian groups. In addition to a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy, the Church in the Africa Southeast Area has experienced chronic shortages in missionary manpower and resources despite hundreds of millions of people who have exhibited good receptivity to LDS proselytism efforts. Global imbalances in mission resource allocation have further contributed to difficulties for the Church in Malawi to achieve greater progress expanding missionary activity to additional cities.

The Church has experienced some challenges with local leadership development and inactivity. The Church discontinued its first two branches it originally organized in Malawi due to problems with mission leadership properly administrating these branches, few active members, and remote location. A lack of mission resources available during the 1990s and 2000s also appeared responsible for the closure of branches in Lilongwe and Sitima. The Church in Blantyre and Lilongwe has had problems at times with members becoming inactive due to being offended by another member.

Malawi has one of the lowest percentages of people who reside in urban areas. In 2011, only an estimated 16% of the national population resided in urban areas.[5] The Church in the Africa Southeast Area has avoided rural proselytism efforts with only a few exceptions. Rural outreach will be necessary for the Church to make significant headway in reaching the over 17 million people who reside in Malawi. The development of cost-effective and efficient strategies to place full-time missionaries in rural areas will be warranted to reach these populations. These strategies may include designating some missionary companionships as "traveling missionaries" to visit unreached areas to assess conditions and receptivity for more regular missionary contact, a single missionary companionship servicing large numbers of villages, and the development of effective member-missionary programs.

The Church in Malawi has experienced challenges securing adequate meetinghouse facilities for its congregations. There are few buildings available for the Church to rent that have adequate space to function as meetinghouses. Consequently many branches quickly outgrow rented facilities. Church-built meetinghouses in Malawi and neighboring countries have also posed problems due to Western-styled designs. These meetinghouses ostentatiously stand out in their communities and convey a sense that the LDS Church is wealthy and incompatible with Malawian culture and society.

The Church has yet to translate a sizable number of church materials into Chichewa (Nyanja). As of late 2014, the Church had translated only two materials: Gospel Principles (old edition) and the 13 Articles of Faith. General Conference addresses and LDS scriptures have yet to be translated into Chichewa notwithstanding Chichewa speakers numbering seven million in Malawi and the use of the language in Malawi national de facto language.[6] A lack of translated materials poses challenges for individuals with limited proficiency in English to study the gospel and develop a testimony. Missionaries indicate that the majority of current members speak English, although there are many who only speak Chichewa. Branches have accommodated language needs by conducting church services in English and permitting local members to translate into Chichewa.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced slow growth in most nations that neighbor Malawi notwithstanding these countries supporting large populations, exhibiting strong receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups, and experiencing widespread religious freedom. In Zambia, the Church has generally experienced slow growth since a permanent presence was established in the early 1990s. The Church in Zambia has experienced incommensurate membership and congregational growth within the past decade as membership increased by 156% whereas the number of congregations increased by 20%. In 2013, the Church in Zambia reported 12 branches, 2,758 members, and an official presence in four cities. In Tanzania, the Church has experienced slow growth since the initial establishment of the Church in the early 1990s. In 2013, the Church in Tanzania reported six branches, 1,263 members, and an official presence in three cities. In Mozambique, the Church has experienced some periods of rapid growth since the establishment of the Church in the mid-1990s but has also experienced some periods of slow growth. In 2013, the Church in Mozambique reported 20 branches, 6,900 members, and an official presence in nine cities.

The LDS Church is the smallest missionary-focused Christian group in Malawi among proselytizing Christian denominations with a worldwide presence. Other missionary-oriented groups operate a widespread or pervasive presence in Malawi. Evangelicals claim 19.6% of the population and report slow but steady growth.[7] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a pervasive presence in Malawi. Witnesses have experienced steady membership and congregational growth within recent years. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 80,175 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 2,675 baptisms, and 1,356 congregations.[8] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a pervasive presence in Malawi and experienced slow but steady growth. In 2003, Adventists reported 1,204 churches (larger or well-established congregations), 1,454 companies (small

or recently-established congregations), 24,649 baptisms, and 233,860 members. In 2013, Adventists reported 1,365 churches, 1,677 companies, 27,916 baptisms, and 429,292 members.[9] The Church of the Nazarene maintains a widespread presence and experiences steady growth. In 2013, Nazarenes in Malawi reported 28,205 full members, 2,627 associate members, an average weekly worship of 9,564, 255 organized churches (large or well-established congregations), and 187 churches not yet organized (small or recently-established congregations).[10]

Limitations

Although many young full-time missionary and senior missionary couple reports were available regarding the Church in Malawi at present, no local member or church leader reports were available. The Church does not publish official statistics on the number of converts baptized per country or mission. Consequently it is unclear how many converts join the Church a year in Malawi and how these trends have changed over the years. The Church in Malawi does not publish membership figures by administrative province or city. There are no official statistics that provide the number of members who reside in locations without a branch. The Church does not publish the location, names, and number of member groups. Information regarding the number of member groups that operate in Malawi is unavailable to the public. The Church does not annually publish data on the number of missionaries serving per country or the number of missionaries assigned per country or mission. No official statistics on member activity or convert retention rates are available to the public.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Malawi appears favorable. The Church has maintained rapid membership growth rates and has regularly organized new branches in Blantyre and Lilongwe. However, prospects appear poor for the Church to open a sizable number of additional cities to missionary work within the foreseeable future due to a lack of mission resources available in the region and a historical emphasis from Africa Southeast Area leadership to follow a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy. Consequently growth will likely be limited to continued expansion and saturation of Blantyre and Lilongwe with full-time missionaries and the organization of additional branches. The organization of a member district in Lilongwe appears imminent. The translation of additional church materials and LDS scriptures into Chichewa may be forthcoming as larger numbers of Malawians with limited proficiency in English continue to join the Church. The Church may organize a separate mission headquartered within Malawi within the foreseeable future.

[1] "Enduring - Baptized after 14 years," LDS Church News, 18 November http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/38907/Enduring-----Baptized-after-14-years.html

[2] "Meetinghouse in Malawi," LDS Church News, 20 August 2005. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/47721/Meetinghouse-in-Malawi.html

[3] Lloyd, R. Scott. "LDS Church announces 11 new missions, 2015 mission president assignments," Deseret News, 9 January 2015. http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865619186/Creation-of-11-new-missions-indicates-the-work-continues-apace.html

[4] "Malawi," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 14 January 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/Malawi.html

[5] "Malawi," CIA World Factbook, retrieved December 15, 2014. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mi.html

[6] "Chichewa," ethnologue.com, retrieved 13 December 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/nya

[7] "Malawi," Operation World, retrieved December 13, 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/mala

[8] "2013 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," jw.org.

[9] "Malawi Union Mission (2003-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 13 December 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2526468

[10] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," nazarene.org, retrieved 18 October 2014. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDwQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnazarene.org%2Ff