



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS Growth in the Northern DR Congo

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Overview

Landlocked in Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DR Congo, is inhabited by 77.4 million people. Most the population speaks French, Kongo, Lingala, Congo Swahili, or Tshiluba (Luba-Kasai) as a first or second language. There are approximately 210 indigenous ethnolinguistic groups.^[1] Approximately three-quarters of the population adheres to Christianity and most Christians are Roman Catholic. Muslims are a sizable religious minority and constitute 10% of the population. Followers of indigenous religions constitute the remainder of the population. The LDS Church has experienced rapid growth in nearly all cities where LDS congregations have been established. No official LDS congregations have operated in the northern DR Congo until the organization of the Kisangani Branch in March 2015. The Church has excellent opportunities for growth in the northern DR Congo that have yet to be realized.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in the northern DR Congo. Recent church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are explored. The growth of the Church in other locations in the DR Congo is reviewed. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups that operate in the DR Congo are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Northern DR Congo Background

The four provinces that comprise the northern DR Congo (Équateur, Maniema, North Kivu, and Orientale) had a combined population of 21.1 million as of 2007.^[2] There may be as many as 25 million people who reside in these four provinces as of mid-2014 based on national population growth trends between 2007 and 2014. City population data from 2004 indicates that there were six cities within the region with at least 100,000 inhabitants including Mbandaka, Goma, Bunia, Butembo, Isiro, and Gemena.^[3] French, Lingala, and Congo Swahili are the most commonly spoken regional languages that are used for interethnic communication. Major ethnolinguistic groups native to the northern DR Congo include Bangala (3.5 million second-language speakers), Ngbaka (1.01 million speakers), Nande (903,000 speakers), Lugbara (903,000 speakers), Alur (750,000 speakers), Zande (730,000 speakers), Lendu (750,000 speakers), Mangbetu (620,000 speakers), Komo (400,000 speakers), Mongo-Nkundu (400,000 speakers), Mbandja (352,000 speakers), Kinyarwanda (250,000 speakers), Northern Ngbandi (250,000 speakers), Budza (226,000 speakers), Ngando (220,000 speakers), Logo (210,000 speakers), Bwa (200,000 speakers), and Hunde (200,000 speakers).^[4] Most indigenous languages spoken in the northern DR Congo pertain to the Bantu language family (i.e. Lingala, Nande, Zande) although many pertain to the Nilo-Saharan language family (i.e. Alur, Lendu). Christian constitute a strong majority among nearly all ethnolinguistic groups native to the area.

Significant political strife and unrest has occurred within the northern DR Congo during the past several decades. The Northern DR Congo was heavily affected by the First and Second Congo Wars during in the 1990s and 2000s. These wars were the deadliest conflicts worldwide since World War II and millions perished. In the Second Congo War, the northern DR Congo was divided between the central government and five warring factions. The region has experienced a reduction in conflict within the past decade. The M23 Rebellion occurred in North Kivu Province during the early 2010s as militants fought with government forces. This conflict ended in late 2013. The Ituri Conflict has persisted since 1999 between the Lendu and Hema peoples in the Ituri region. However, the intensity of fighting between militias and government forces has substantially subsided within recent years.

LDS Background

The Democratic Republic of the Congo Mission (formerly the Zaire Kinshasa Mission) has administered the northern DR Congo since its organization in 1987 until present-day with the exception of a four-year period from 2010 to 2014 when the northeastern portion of the DR Congo was assigned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Lubumbashi Mission. The Democratic Republic of the Congo Lubumbashi Mission organized the first group in the northern DR Congo in Kisangani - the fifth most populous city in the DR Congo and the most populous city in the northern DR Congo with 683,000 inhabitants as of 2004.^[5] This group appeared to begin meeting sometime in the early 2010s.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo Mission President and additional mission personnel conducted their first visit to the region in August 2014 following the realignment of the mission with the Democratic Republic of the Congo Lubumbashi Mission. The leaders visited the Kisangani Group to meet members and investigators to interview dozens of individuals requesting baptism. The mission divided the group of investigators into three smaller groups to be taught in the French, Lingala, and Swahili languages. Baptismal preparation occurred for two days and culminated in a total of 32 converts being baptized in a single weekend.

The mission assigned the first young, proselytizing missionaries to Kisangani in early 2015. In March 2015, the mission organized the Kisangani Branch from the member group that previously operated in the city. The branch reports directly to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission.

Successes

The recent organization of the first official LDS branch in Kisangani stands as the greatest success the Church has experienced in the northern DR Congo. The organization of the branch was made possible due to the successive efforts of mission presidents to organize a member group to administer isolated members in the city, teach and prepare investigators for baptism, and submit the needed paperwork to the area presidency for approval to establish the branch. Diligent member-missionary efforts from isolated members in the city have also played a critical role in the establishment of the Church. Recent visits by mission leaders have conducted teaching and training in three different languages (Congo Swahili, French, and Lingala) to administer local needs. The vision and determination by mission presidents to establish the Church in the city stands as a major accomplishment due to Kisangani's remote location (850 miles [1,370 kilometers] from Lubumbashi, 700 miles [1,100 kilometers] from Kinshasa, 480 miles [770 kilometers] from Kananga [closest city in the DR Congo Kinshasa Mission to Kisangani], and 380 miles [600 kilometers] from Uvira [closest city in the DR Congo Lubumbashi Mission to Kisangani]), large population, prominence in the northern DR Congo, and recent history of political instability.

Opportunities

The Church in the DR Congo has maintained one of the most self-sufficient full-time missionary forces in Sub-Saharan Africa. The number of local members who serve full-time missions has appeared to exceed the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the DR Congo for many years. Consequently, the Church in the DR Congo has played a significant role in the development of a more regionally self-sufficient full-time missionary force in Sub-Saharan Africa as the Church has not only adequately staffed its two Congolese missions from local Congolese members but has utilized Congolese full-time missionaries to expand missionary work in other nations such as Burundi. These conditions suggest that Congolese full-time missionaries can be utilized in the assignment of full-time missionaries to the northern DR Congo, especially considering sizable numbers of these missionaries speak Congo Swahili, French, or Lingala as first or second languages.

There appear good opportunities for the Church to conduct church planting efforts in Kisangani due to its large population and the recent establishment of a branch. Only one branch administers the entire city population of nearly 700,000. The establishment of member groups throughout the city may be an effective strategy to accelerate growth and reduce travel times for members and investigators. Similar church growth tactics have been implemented in West Africa with impressive results. The assignment of a senior missionary couple to orchestrate these efforts appears needed to provide adequate administrative supervision and support to fledgling congregations that are almost entirely comprised of new converts.

The northern DR Congo includes one of the largest predominantly Christian populations in Sub-Saharan Africa who have been unreached by the LDS gospel witness. There are as many as 25 million people who reside in the northern DR Congo and no LDS branch operated in the region until March 2015. Conditions for assigning additional full-time missionaries to Kisangani and exploring opportunities for the opening of member groups or branches in additional cities in the region appear favorable due to abundant numbers of Congolese serving full-time missions, a return to political stability in many areas, a predominantly Christian target population, the reduced geographic size of the DR Congo Kinshasa Mission in 2014, and no recent reports of governmental or societal abuses of religious freedom in the northern DR Congo.^[6] The DR Congo Kinshasa Mission has numbered among the geographically largest missions in the worldwide Church and has historically administered multiple countries in addition to the DR Congo. A smaller geographic area covered by the mission suggests that the mission may explore additional opportunities to expand missionary activity into previously unreached locations. Currently unreached cities that appear most favorable for mission leadership to visit and explore opportunities for establishing member groups and assigning full-time missionaries include Mbandaka, Goma, Butembo, Isiro, Gemena, and Lisala. A map displaying ethnolinguistic groups native to the northern DR Congo and major cities within the region can be found [here](#).

The enormous population of the northern DR Congo combined with distance from mission headquarters in Kinshasa suggest that the establishment of a separate mission to administer this area of the country is greatly needed. The organization of a

separate mission would provide additional mission resources allocated to the region and offer greater mission president oversight. Kisangani is the city that appears most likely to headquarter a future mission to administer this region of the country. The Church frequently established new missions in recently opened areas to missionary work during the 1980s and 1990s such as in Kenya, Liberia, and Nigeria (Ilorin and Jos), but has avoided the organization of new missions in recently opened countries or administrative divisions for many years. Past experience has shown that the establishment of additional missions has correlated with more rapid church growth and national outreach expansion. Consequently, similar results may occur in the northern DR Congo if mission planners take the initiative to establish a separate mission within the near future.

Challenges

The Church operates official congregations (wards or branches) in only 16 cities within the entire DR Congo notwithstanding a proselytizing presence for nearly 30 years and a national population of 77.4 million. Consequently only one-fifth of the Congolese population resides in locations where there is an official LDS presence. 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 as a finite number of missionary resources are consistently allocated to the Church's centers of strength instead of exploring opportunities for national outreach expansion. This has ultimately resulted in many areas remaining 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 increasing numbers of Congolese serving full-time missions. Delays in opening additional areas of the DR Congo may result in previously receptive individuals becoming disciplined into other proselytism-focused Christian groups or missed opportunities to establish an LDS presence during periods of political stability.

Remote location from mission headquarters has deterred greater outreach expansion in the region. Most areas of the northern DR Congo are located between 500 and 1,000 miles (800-1,600 kilometers) away from mission headquarters in Kinshasa. The Church in the DR Congo has slowly expanded missionary activity into previously unreached locations due to a focus on building centers of strength and challenges for mission leadership to visit cities without an LDS presence and complete the process to approve the organization of new branches in previously unreached cities. Consequently, there has been extremely little attention given to other major unreached cities and towns, including those with members and sizable numbers of investigators desiring church membership. The Congolese population has exhibited high receptivity in virtually all locations where LDS outreach has been extended although mission outreach continues to operate at only a fraction of its potential.

Most of the population in the northern DR Congo resides in rural areas. 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 tens of millions Congolese who reside in the northern DR Congo. 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. However, prospects for rural proselytism in the northern DR Congo appear extremely unlikely until an LDS presence is established in most major and medium-sized cities within the region.

Low living standards and recent political conflict may discourage the assignment of full-time missionaries and the expansion of the Church into additional cities outside of Kisangani. The DR Congo ranks among the world's poorest nations despite abundant natural resources due to corruption, political instability, and a lack of foreign investment. Mission leaders serving in Congolese missions report that specific criteria must be met to mitigate safety concerns prior to the assignment of full-time missionaries to additional cities. Housing has constituted one of the most challenging issues to address due to a lack of adequate facilities in many areas of the country. Infectious disease and low living standards pose challenges for assigning full-time missionaries to some locations. The Ituri conflict between the Lendu and Hema peoples has persisted for over 15 years although this conflict has been limited to the Ituri region in the extreme northeastern DR Congo.

The Church in the DR Congo 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. Although there have been no reports regarding this challenge in Kisangani, the Church has experienced challenges finding facilities with sufficient space to house congregations throughout the country. Consequently many branches quickly outgrow rented facilities. Church-built meetinghouses in the DR Congo and neighboring countries have also posed problems due to Western-styled designs despite being constructed by local labor. These meetinghouses ostentatiously stand out in their communities and convey a sense that the LDS Church is wealthy and incompatible with Congolese culture and society.

There is a need for the Church to translate materials and scriptures into additional languages indigenous to the northern DR Congo. The Church has yet to make greater progress translating materials into two of the three most commonly spoken second languages used for government, education, and interethnic communication in the region: Lingala and Congo Swahili. The Church has only translated the Book of Mormon and a small number of gospel study and missionary materials into Lingala despite tens of thousands of Lingala-speaking members in the Kinshasa area. Only one LDS material has been translated into Congo Swahili: the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet. Three LDS materials have been translated into

Kinyarwanda: Gospel Principles (old edition), the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, and the 13 Articles of Faith. No LDS materials have been translated into Bangala, Ngbaka, Nande, Lugbara, Alur, Zande, Lendu, Mangbetu, Komo, Mongo-Nkundu, Mbandja, Northern Ngbandi, Budza, Ngando, Logo, Bwa, or Hunde. Initial proselytism efforts will likely experience few challenges in the most populous cities due to many individuals speaking French, Lingala, or Congo Swahili as a second language. However, a lack of LDS materials and scriptures in Lingala and Congo Swahili presents serious challenges for gospel scholarship and testimony development among investigators and members who do not speak French. No LDS materials translated into the many indigenous languages spoken in the northern DR Congo poses challenges for the Church to reach millions of Congolese who exhibit limited proficiency in commonly spoken regional languages.

Comparative Growth

The Church in the DR Congo has experienced its greatest growth in the Kinshasa metropolitan area, the Lubumbashi metropolitan area, and major cities located within the central region of the country. The Church in Kinshasa operates seven stakes, 65 congregations, and one mission. The first congregations were organized in Kinshasa in 1986. The Church announced a temple for Kinshasa in 2011 that is currently in the planning stages. The Church in Lubumbashi operates three stakes, 24 congregations, and one mission. The first congregations were organized in Lubumbashi in 1988. The Church in the central DR Congo has established congregations within six cities during the past two decades (Gandajika, Kananga, Luputa, Lusuku, Mbuji-Mayi, and Mwene-Ditu). The number of congregations has increased prolifically in the central DR Congo from three in 2000 to 34 in 2014. There are currently three districts and one stake in the region. The Church has experienced rapid growth in most cities in the southern DR Congo where an LDS presence has been established such as Kasumbalesa, Kolwezi, and Likasi. The Church has established its first congregations in several areas of the country within the past five years such as Matadi and Uvira where no nearby LDS congregations operated. However, the vast majority of the DR Congo remains unreached by the Church as no LDS congregations operate within the southeast near the Tanzanian border, central areas of the country between Mbuji-Mayi and Kisangani, southern areas of the country between Kolwezi and Lusuku, and western areas of the country outside of Kinshasa and Matadi.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups with an international presence maintain a widespread presence in North Kivu Province. However, most of these groups report few members and congregations elsewhere in the northern DR Congo. Evangelicals constitute a sizable minority among essentially all ethnolinguistic groups native to the northern DR Congo.^[7] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in North Kivu Province but report a limited or minimal presence elsewhere in the northern DR Congo. Witnesses operate congregations in as many as 74 locations in the northern DR Congo - the vast majority of which are cities, towns, and villages in North Kivu Province. Witnesses translate proselytism materials and their official website jw.org into 12 languages indigenous to the northern DR Congo including Alur, Congo Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Mongo-Nkundu, Ngbaka, Nande, Lugbara, Zande, Lendu, Northern Ngbandi, Budza, and Hunde. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence in many areas of the northern DR Congo and has experienced moderate to rapid growth. Most Adventists reside in North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces. In 2008, Adventists reported 880 churches (larger or well-established congregations), 605 companies (small or recently-established congregations), 6,927 baptisms, and 126,063 members. In 2013, Adventists reported 1,007 churches, 608 companies, 10,921 baptisms, and 156,597 members.^[8] Adventists translate materials into many languages indigenous to the northern DR Congo including Alur, Bangala, Congo Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Mongo-Nkundu, and Nande. The Church of the Nazarene reports a widespread presence in North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces. However, Nazarenes maintain few, if any, congregations in other areas of the northern DR Congo.

Limitations

Although mission president and senior missionary couple reports were available regarding the Church in the DR Congo 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 the DR Congo and how these trends have changed over the years. The Church in the DR Congo 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 the DR Congo 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 the Church to expand its missionary operations and experience steady church growth in the northern DR Congo appears favorable within the foreseeable future. Prospects for the organization of additional branches within Kisangani appear excellent within the near future as long as the branch steadily baptizes new converts, maintains good convert retention rates, and advances active male members to the Melchizedek Priesthood. The opening of member groups or branches in additional cities within the northern DR Congo appears unlikely for many more years due to distance from mission headquarters and the lack of an LDS presence in the region. A separate mission headquartered in Kisangani appears the most efficient solution to expand missionary work in the northern DR Congo. However, this scenario appears extremely unlikely due to the Church's recent emphasis on organizing new missions in emerging areas of strength rather than newly opened mission fields.

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