Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS Outreach Expansion in Cameroon

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Overview

Cameroon is located in Central Africa and supports a population of 23.1 million. English and French are the official languages. Several indigenous African languages are commonly spoken such as Bamun, Bulu, Duala, Ewondo, Adamawa Fulfulde, Kom, Lamnso', and Medumba. Christians and followers of indigenous religious each comprise 40% of the population. Muslims constitute the remaining 20% of the population. Although the LDS Church has maintained a presence in Cameroon since the early 1990s, congregations have only operated in two cities: Douala and Yaoundé. The Church in Cameroon currently experiences excellent opportunities to open additional locations in the country to missionary work and further saturate the two most populous cities due to the population exhibiting high receptivity to LDS outreach.

This case study reviews the history of the Church's national outreach expansion efforts in Cameroon 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 Cameroon are compared to other Central African countries with an LDS presence. The growth and size of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in Cameroon is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for church growth and national outreach expansion is predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church in Cameroon organized its first branch in the early 1990s in Yaoundé. The Church organized the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission in 1992 to administer Cameroon and adjacent countries; however, the mission was relocated to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire one year later. A member group began functioning in Douala during the mid-1990s and the member group became a branch in 2004. The Church assigned Cameroon to the newly organized Africa West Area in 1998 but reassigned the country to the Africa Southeast area in the mid 2000s. Missions that have administered Cameroon have included the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission (1993-2005), Ghana Cape Coast Mission (2005-2008?), the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission (2008?-2014), and the Republic of the Congo Brazzaville Mission (2014-present).

The Church in Cameroon reported less than 100 members in 1993. Church membership totaled 200 in 1995, 194 in 1999, 208 in 2003, 492 in 2006, 1,003 in 2010, and 1,498 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have generally averaged between 10-30% within the past decade. The number of branches increased from one in 1993 to two in 2004, three in 2006, four in 2009, five in 2010, six in 2011, and seven in 2014. The Church organized its first member district in Yaoundé in 2012.

As of early 2015, the Church reported branches in two cities: Yaoundé (5 branches) and Douala (2 branches). At the time senior missionaries reported diligent efforts to assist the Yaoundé Cameroon District to become a stake in the near future.

Successes

Both Cameroonian metropolitan areas that support populations of one million or more inhabitants have an LDS presence. The Church has also experienced some progress extending more penetrating outreach in both of these cities within the past decade as evidenced by the number of branches increasing from one to five in Yaoundé and from one to two in Douala. Reducing travel times and increasing numbers of active members have appeared primarily responsible for mission leaders organizing additional congregations.

The "Sunyani Model" for Opening Cities to Missionary Work

Implementation of the so-called "Sunyani Model" to open previously unreached cities to proselytism provides many opportunities to achieve rapid growth and establish additional centers of strength in Cameroon. The Sunyani Model was pioneered in the Ghana Cape Coast Mission when mission and area leaders opened Sunyani, Ghana to missionary activity in 2010. Sunyani is inhabited by approximately 80,000 people and is the administrative capital of the Brong-Ahafo Region. 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. The Church has traditionally organized only one congregation when it has opened a previously unreached city to missionary work. Each member group received its own meetinghouse that doubled as the living quarters for one full-time missionary companionship. This strategy significantly accelerated LDS growth in Sunyani compared to other newly opened cities to proselytism as the operation of multiple meetinghouses permitted greater saturation of the city by LDS missionaries. This approach also increased the proximity of the Church to target populations and made efficient use of the Church's financial resources through consolidating meetinghouse and missionary living quarter space into the same buildings. This nontraditional approach to opening a city to missionary work has yielded significant results as evidenced by the Church in Sunyani organizing its first member district in 2012 and the operation of five branches within the Sunyani area as of early 2015. The Church has since implemented the Sunyani Model in other cities within West Africa and the model has yielded impressive results such as in Daloa, Cote d'Ivoire and Tamale and Techiman, Ghana.

Opportunities for National Outreach Expansion in Cameroon

Cameroon has experienced political stability and widespread religious freedom for over two decades. Many other Sub-Saharan African nations have not experienced stability in government and society for as long as Cameroon, yet some of these countries have a more widespread LDS presence and sizable numbers of non-African, full-time missionaries assigned. The worldwide number of members serving full-time missions mushroomed in the early 2010s from 59,000 in 2012 to 84,000 in early January 2015.[1] This has resulted in an unprecedented opportunity to channel surplus missionary manpower into underserviced countries such as Cameroon. There have not appeared to be any restrictions or limitations on the Church's proselytism activities in Cameroon or 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 good receptivity to LDS outreach. The recent organization of the Republic of the Congo Brazzaville Mission also suggests greater resource availability and mission president oversight for missionary activity in Cameroon.

The establishment of a separate mission headquartered in Cameroon will be essential for the Church to open additional locations to proselytism. The Church has made modest progress reaching the national population as only 22% of the population resides in cities where a branch operates. According to 2005 government statistical data, there are at least 56 cities in Cameroon with 20,000 or more inhabitants without an LDS presence.[2] These cities present the greatest opportunities for the Church to maximize the largest number of people reached with the smallest number of mission resources. The Church has frequently reassigned Cameroon from mission to mission due to distance from established centers of LDS growth and the number of members and branches being insufficient to merit the creation of a separate mission. The Church has recently experienced excellent results establishing missions where there are few members or branches within a country such as the organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2011. Progress accelerating national outreach expansion in countries where missions have been headquartered for the first time appears rooted in the organization of missions coinciding with greater mission president oversight within the affected area, the allocation of larger numbers of full-time missionaries, and reduced administrative burden on mission leaders.

The advancement of the Yaoundé Cameroon District into a stake has enormous potential to instigate rapid national outreach expansion. In recent years, mission leaders have concentrated mission resources on the organization of additional congregations in Yaoundé and the strengthening of local membership in order to lay the groundwork for a stake to operate one day. Past experience with the Church in other countries has demonstrated that the organization of the Church's first stake in a nation strongly correlates with the opening of additional cities to missionary activity thereafter. This phenomenon has largely occurred due to the redistribution of mission resources from member and leaders support to exploring opportunities for the Church to establish congregations in previously unreached areas.

The utilization of the Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission Branch by mission leaders as the vehicle to locate and keep track of isolated members who live outside of Douala and Yaoundé stands as the most feasible and standardized method to identify the most suitable cities to open for proselytism. Application of the Sunyani model when cities open to proselytism may yield comparable results to locations in West Africa where this approach has been implemented. Cities that appear favorable to open to missionary activity and establish multiple member groups during initial proselytism efforts include Bamenda and Bafoussam.

Challenges

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 Cameroon 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 Cameroon to achieve greater progress expanding missionary activity to additional cities.

Only small numbers of Cameroonians have served or are currently serving full-time missions. This has resulted in the Church in Cameroon heavily depending on foreign missionaries to staff its ranks. Larger numbers of local members serving missions will coincide with enhanced self-sufficiency in meeting missionary needs and the long-term strength and expansion of local leadership manpower. Methods that can be implemented to help augment the number of local 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 though the Church Education System that are accessible and engaging for youth and young adults.

There are few gospel study and missionary resources available in the most commonly spoken indigenous African languages. Fang is the only indigenous African language native to Cameroon with an LDS material translated (the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith). The translation of basic proselytism and gospel study materials into the most commonly spoken indigenous languages such as Bamun, Bulu, Duala, Ewondo, Adamawa Fulfulde, Kom, Lamnso', and Medumba may be warranted to improve gospel scholarship, testimony development, and the effectiveness of proselytism efforts.

Some of the most populous unreached cities such as Kousseri and Maroua 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 and understanding 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 sluggish national outreach expansion in nearly all Central African nations. The Church maintains a presence in only one city in four countries including Burundi, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Rwanda. The Church maintains an official presence in two cities in the Republic of the Congo and three cities in Angola. The Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo operates the most widespread presence among Central African countries as evidenced by 147 congregations operating in 16 cities as of March 2015. No LDS presence operates in Chad, Equatorial Guinea, or Sao Tome and Principe.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups maintain a widespread presence in Cameroon that completely dwarfs the size of the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim approximately nine percent of the population and have reported modest growth in recent years.[3] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a nationwide presence but have experienced moderate growth in recent years. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 37,319 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 329 congregations, and 1,228 baptisms. Witnesses appear to maintain congregations in approximately 100 cities and towns nationwide. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a pervasive presence in Cameroon. However, Adventists have reported decreasing numbers of members and congregations in recent years. In 2003, Adventists reported 912 churches, 531 companies, and 118,941 members whereas in 2013 Adventists reported 835 churches, 493 companies, and 84,310 members.[4] Adventists generally baptize between 6,000 and 9,000 new converts a year. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Cameroon.

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 Cameroon. No data is released pertaining to the number and locations of member groups. It is unclear whether many Latter-day Saints reside outside of Douala or Yaoundé or if member groups operate in any locations outside of these cities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Cameroon to open additional cities to missionary activity and organize congregations in these locations appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The recent organization of the Republic of the Congo Brazzaville Mission may result in increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to the Cameroon. However, no progress opening additional cities to proselytism will likely occur until the Yaoundé Cameroon District becomes a stake and a member district is organized for branches in Douala. Favorable societal and political conditions for missionary work and the population exhibiting good receptivity to LDS outreach present opportunities for national outreach expansion. The Church in Cameroon would greatly benefit from the establishment of a separate mission headquartered in Yaoundé or Douala. The most populous unreached cities and cities within close proximity to Douala and Yaoundé appear most likely to open to missionary work and have member groups organized within the foreseeable future such as Bafoussam, Bamenda, Buéa, Kumba, and Mbalmayo. Reliance on foreign missionary manpower to staff missionary needs in Cameroon remains an ongoing concern, especially if Cameroonian members do not serve missions in increasing numbers within the coming months and years ahead.

[1] 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

[2] "Cameroon," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 14 March 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/Cameroon.html

[3] "Cameroon," Operation World, retrieved 14 March 2015. http://www.operationworld.org/came

[4] "Cameroon Union Mission (2013-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 14 March 2015. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2590657