



Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Opportunities for LDS Growth in Southwestern Nigeria

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Overview

There were over 35 million people who resided in the seven southwestern Nigerian states of Lagos (10.7 million), Oyo (6.6 million), Ogun (4.4 million), Ondo (4.0 million), Osun (4.0 million), Ekiti (2.8 million), and Kwara (2.7 million) as of 2011. [\[1\]](#) The Yoruba people constitute the largest ethnoreligious group in the region. Christians and Muslims each comprise approximately 50% of the population in the region. The LDS Church has maintained a presence in southwestern Nigeria since as early as 1980, but reports official congregations (wards or branches) in only 20% of large and medium-sized cities in the region.

This case study examines opportunities for the Church to expand into additional cities within southwestern Nigeria. The history of the Church in the region is summarized. Recent successes expanding outreach are examined. Opportunities and challenges for the Church to achieve growth and open congregations in additional cities are analyzed. Opportunities for LDS national outreach expansion in other regions of Nigeria are reviewed and the growth and size of other missionary-focused Christian groups in the region are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church organized its first mission in West Africa in Lagos in 1980 and later renamed the mission to the Nigeria Lagos Mission in 1985. The Church organized a second mission headquartered in southwestern Nigeria in 1992, the Nigeria Ilorin Mission, but discontinued the mission the following year. In 2002, the Church reestablished a second mission headquartered in southwestern Nigeria – the Nigeria Ibadan Mission. The Nigeria Ibadan Mission was relocated to eastern Lagos and renamed the Nigeria Lagos East Mission 2007; however, the mission was ultimately consolidated with the original Nigeria Lagos Mission in 2009. Three missions administered the seven southwestern Nigerian states in late 2015, namely the Nigeria Lagos Mission, the Nigeria Enugu Mission, and the Nigeria Benin City Mission, although most of the region was serviced by the Nigeria Lagos Mission.

In 1997, the Church organized its first stake in southwestern Nigeria in Lagos. Additional stakes organized in the region include Lagos Agege (2005), Lagos Yaba (2011), Abeokuta (2014), Ibadan (2014), Lagos Egbeda (2015), and Lagos Festac (2015). Two districts currently operate in the region in Ijebu-Ode (1993) and Ile-Ife (1999). The number stakes increased from one in 1997 to two in 2005, three in 2011, and seven in 2015.

There were 23 cities or towns with an official LDS congregation in southwestern Nigeria as of late 2015. Provided with the number of cities or towns with an official LDS congregation, the Church reported official congregations (wards or branches) in Ogun (12), Osun (4), Lagos (3), Ondo (2), Kwara (1), and Oyo (1) States. The Church established its first ward or branch in five of these 23 cities – Ago-Iwoye, Badagry, Ibafo, Ijebu-Ife, and Kugba – between year-end 2013 and year-end 2015. A map displaying large and medium-sized cities in southwestern Nigeria and the status of LDS outreach can be found [here](#).

The indigenous population in northwestern Nigeria is predominantly Yoruba. However, sizable numbers of other prominent Nigerian ethnic peoples have relocated to the region within the past several decades. The Church translated the entire Book of Mormon into Yoruba in 2007. The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and other church materials into additional Nigerian languages, such as Efik and Igbo.

Successes

Within the past decade, the Church made progress expanding outreach into additional locations within southwestern Nigeria through organizing official congregations in previously unreached cities and establishing member groups under district branches and mission branches. In the 2000s and early 2010s, the Church organized its first congregations in six additional locations (Ikorodu, Ilesa, Ilewo-Orile, Ipetumodu, Odeda, and Sagamu); two of which (Ilewo-Orile and Odeda) were the first small cities and towns in the region to have an official LDS unit operating. Five additional cities have had the first LDS congregation organized within the past two years. This acceleration in outreach expansion constitutes a significant church growth development as the Church had previously experienced slow national outreach expansion and stagnant congregational growth outside of Lagos during the 2000s and early 2010s. National outreach expansion has occurred in several Nigerian states in the region primarily on the outskirts of the most populous cities such as Lagos and Ife. The opening of branches outside of metropolitan areas in large to medium-sized cities constitutes a significant advancement in reaching Yoruba populations that exhibit little to no fluency in English. In the late 2000s, the Church organized "district branches" in two of the four districts within the region (Ijebu-Ode and Ile-Ife). These district branches appear to service members who assemble in member groups or who are unassigned to a particular group or branch. Mission leaders organizing district branches signals efforts to effectively administer isolated members and engage in outreach expansion through the establishment of additional member groups or the facilitation of member groups to become branches. The Nigeria Lagos Mission Branch services members residing in areas outside the boundaries of stakes and districts and provides the administrative support and resources to organize member groups in additional locations when warranted.

The advancement of districts into stakes signals good progress with establishing self-sufficient local church leadership and augmenting the number of active members. It took over 20 years for districts in Abeokuta and Ibadan to advance into stakes notwithstanding a sufficient number of congregations to become stakes and a large target population for proselytism. Growth has accelerated in the past couple years as the Church has established new congregations in these stakes since they were organized in 2014. The creation of stakes permits greater mission resources to be channeled into opening additional cities to missionary activity. Districts operate under the jurisdictions of missions and therefore consume a significant amount of mission resources to administer district membership. The preparation of districts to become stakes typically requires greater mission resources than districts not preparing to become stakes. This is due to mission and district leadership focus on the district reaching all of the statistical requirements to become a stake such as the number of congregations and a sufficient number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders.

The significant number of Nigerian members serving full-time missions provides good opportunities for growth in southwestern Nigeria. Only black African members typically serve in the five Nigerian missions due to security concerns. A self-sufficient full-time missionary force reduces reliance on the international church for the Church in Nigeria to meet its missionary needs.

Opportunities

Scores of cities in southwestern Nigeria present excellent opportunities for the establishment of LDS congregations and the assignment of full-time missionaries. There are five large cities that support populations of at least 250,000 without LDS congregations, including Ado Ekiti, Ikare, Ogbomosho, Oyo, and Iwo. Implementation of the Sunyani Model for church planting may result in rapid growth in these cities. This model advocates for the assignment of multiple full-time missionary companionships to a single city and the simultaneous organization of several member groups. Missionary housing doubles as a meetinghouse for newly organized member groups until congregations outgrow these facilities. The Church has utilized this effective approach in several major cities in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana within the past five years.

Scores of medium-sized cities remain unreached by the Church. Most of these cities are concentrated in Ogun (22), Ekiti (14), and Osun (11) States. Visits from mission, stake, or district leaders to these cities to meet with isolated members and hold special fireside meetings that provide a simple introduction to the Church appears a thrifty and efficient approach to assess receptivity in these cities. Mission leaders can later identify which cities appear most favorable to submit requests to the area presidency in order to organize member groups and assign full-time missionaries.

Rural areas also present good opportunities for growth. The Church has organized wards or branches in several small cities or villages. The recently organized Kugba Branch operates in a village not found on most detailed maps of the area. Prospects appear good for the Church to organize member groups and branches in rural areas through member-missionary efforts as rural environments appear unfeasible for the Church to target with full-time missionaries at this time due to lower population densities, remote location, and limited full-time missionary manpower in Nigeria.

Translation of the Doctrine and Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price into Yoruba presents good opportunities for encouraging testimony development and gospel scholarship among Yoruba-speaking members in southwestern Nigeria. There are approximately 37 million Yoruba speakers in Nigeria.^[2] The organization of Yoruba-speaking wards and branches in Lagos may be effective to provide Yoruba-specific outreach among those who exhibit limited proficiency in English.

Challenges

A lack of LDS mission resources in southwestern Nigeria constitutes the greatest challenge for the Church to capitalize on good opportunities for growth. Only one mission is headquartered in the region despite a target population of 35 million people. To contrast, the Church in most countries in the Americas operates one mission per 3-5 million people. The Church would need to

organize seven missions in southwestern Nigeria to match the same level of outreach it extends in most Latin American countries or the United States. On a national level, the Church in Nigeria would need to operate between 36 and 60 missions to have an average of 3-5 million people per mission, whereas there are currently only five missions in the entire country that each serve, on average, 36 million people. Historically slow LDS growth trends in the region in comparison to other areas of Nigeria and increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Nigeria depending on larger numbers of African members serving full-time missions appears primarily responsible for the lack of LDS missionary manpower in southwestern Nigeria. Other regions of Nigeria have experienced more rapid growth within the past two decades than southwestern Nigeria. For example, significant growth has occurred in Akwa Ibom State as the Church claims approximately one percent of the state population and operates six stakes and four districts despite a state population of approximately four million.^[3] Focus on establishing centers of strength in Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta have appeared to take precedence over the opening of previously unreached cities to missionary work due to the miniscule size of the full-time missionary force and comparatively few Latter-day Saints in the region.

Previous efforts by the Church to organize missions in southwestern Nigeria outside of Lagos have been unsuccessful. The Nigeria Ilorin Mission operated for only one year in the early 1990s and the Nigeria Ibadan Mission operated for only five years in the 2000s. Slow growth, limited availability of full-time missionary manpower, and concerns regarding proselytizing areas with sizable numbers of Muslims appear attributed to the intermittent operation of missions headquartered outside of Lagos. Past struggles to maintain missions in other cities in southwestern Nigeria may dissuade area and international church leadership from organizing missions outside of Lagos in favor of creating additional missions headquartered within Lagos.

Rapid growth in Lagos poses challenges for the Church to expand its operations into additional locations. There are 16.8 million people who reside in the Lagos metropolitan area^[4] and only 39 congregations. The average ward or branch includes over 430,000 people within its geographical boundaries. The entire missionary force in the Nigeria Lagos Mission is entirely inadequate to sufficiently proselyte this enormous urban population. The Church would have to operate 168 congregations if the average congregation included 100,000 people within its geographical boundaries – over four times the number of LDS congregations in the metropolitan area at present. As a result, mission leaders will likely be more inclined to further saturate Lagos with larger numbers of full-time missionaries to take advantage of good opportunities to reach millions within close proximity of mission headquarters in densely populated, urban areas.

There are significant safety concerns that must be mitigated by mission leaders to proselyte in Nigeria. Mission leaders in the Nigeria Lagos Mission have reported previous incidents in which missionaries have been persecuted and threatened. Kidnappings, assassinations, and discrimination pose safety concerns to ordinary members and full-time missionaries. The Church has had full-time missionaries kidnapped before in Nigeria and must carefully assess safety and societal conditions before opening new locations to missionary work. Political instability in Nigeria as a whole has reduced economic development and exacerbated corruption.

Poverty is a major challenge for growth and missionary work. Recent estimates indicate 62% of Nigeria's 182 million people live in extreme poverty.^[5] Illiteracy is a major problem as 40% of the national population is illiterate.^[6] These conditions pose barriers for the Church in Nigeria to become self-sufficient in meeting its own financial needs. The Church must also maintain a delicate balance in meeting the spiritual and temporal needs of tens of millions who live in destitute conditions.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Nigeria has established a more widespread presence and claims a higher percentage of the population in other regions of the country. In the southeast, the Church has achieved the greatest growth as 17 of the 33 Nigerian stakes operate in the five states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Imo, and Rivers. Some stakes in the southeast operate in small cities and rural areas such as in Abia and Akwa Ibom States. The Church has also reported significant growth in Edo state. The administrative capital of Edo State, Benin City supports six LDS stakes – more than any other city in the country notwithstanding a metropolitan population of 1.46 million.^[7]

Evangelicals number among the largest Christian denominations in southwestern Nigeria and claim 37% of the Yoruba population.^[8] Jehovah's Witnesses have achieved rapid growth within the past several decades and maintain a widespread presence in southwestern Nigeria in over hundred cities and towns. Witnesses appear to operate over 500 congregations in the Lagos metropolitan area. Witnesses reported approximately 200 congregations in Ibadan and dozens of congregations in the majority of the most populous cities in the region. Most congregations hold worship services in English or Yoruba. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reports a more widespread presence in all seven states in southwestern Nigeria than the LDS Church. In 2014, Adventists reported 29 churches and 6,621 members in Ekiti State, 23 churches and 1,954 members in Kwara State, 60 churches and 11,097 members in Lagos State, 21 churches and 6,775 members in Ogun State, 17 churches and 1,743 members in Ondo State, 27 churches and 4,268 members in Osun State, and 32 churches and 3,428 members in Oyo State.^[9] The Church of the Nazarene reports a smaller presence in Nigeria than the LDS Church and operates congregations in only a handful of locations nationwide.

Limitations

Few reports from local members and returned missionaries were available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish the location of its member groups. Consequently, it is unclear whether the Church operates member groups in

additional cities in southwestern Nigeria where no official wards or branches operate. The Church does not publish state-by-state membership, convert baptismal, or missionary statistics for Nigeria. Member activity and convert retention rates are not available to the public.

Future Prospects

Recent accelerated growth within the past five years suggests the Church in southwestern Nigeria has entered a new era of rapid growth. The organization of a second mission headquartered in Ibadan or Lagos appears necessary in order for the Church to open larger numbers of previously unreached cities on a more widespread scale. The Church may organize additional districts from the division of currently operating districts such as in Ilesha, Osogbo, and Sagamu once additional branches are organized in these cities. The greatest growth will likely continue to occur in Lagos as the number of stakes has increased from two to five within the past five years and the average ward or branch in the city services over 400,000 people within its geographical boundaries. Church-planting tactics appear effective to open the most populous unreached cities of Ado Ekiti, Ikare, Ogbomosho, Oyo, and Iwo due to the large urban population and good opportunities to simultaneously organize multiple member groups in each of these cities. A temple appears likely to be announced for Lagos within the foreseeable future due to five stakes in a single metropolitan area and distance from the Aba Nigeria Temple.

[1] "Nigeria: Provinces and Cities," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/Nigeria-Cities.html), retrieved 23 November 2015.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/Nigeria-Cities.html>

[2] <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>

[3] "NIGERIA: Administrative Division," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/php/nigeria-admin.php), retrieved 12 January 2013.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/php/nigeria-admin.php>

[4] "Major Agglomerations of the World," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html), retrieved 28 November 2015.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html>

[5] "Nigeria," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 28 November 2015.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>

[6] "Nigeria," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 28 November 2015.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>

[7] "Major Agglomerations of the World," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html), retrieved 28 November 2015.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html>

[8] "Yoruba, Oyo in Nigeria," Joshua Project, retrieved 28 November 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16057/NI

[9] "Western Nigeria Union Conference (2013-Present)," [www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2784264), retrieved 28 November 2015.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2784264