



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among Black Townships in South Africa

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Overview

Constituting 79% of the population,[\[1\]](#) Black Africans (African natives) constitute a large majority in South Africa whereas other ethnicities such as Whites (descendents of European settlers), Coloreds (mixed European and black African ancestry), Indians, and East Asians constitute small minorities. The National Party came into power in 1948 and segregated Whites and other racial groups under a policy called Apartheid which lasted until 1994 when multi-racial elections were held. During the Apartheid era, non-Whites resided in urban areas called townships located on the peripheries of White-populated cities and towns. Although Apartheid era policies governing the segregation of races have been officially discontinued by political and civil leaders for two decades, many Black Africans continue to reside in densely populated township areas where there are more limited employment and educational opportunities and lower living standards than in other urban areas.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church operating in traditionally Black African and Colored township areas. Past growth and missionary successes are described and opportunities and challenges for future growth in these locations are examined. The growth of the Church in other types of urban areas is reviewed and the growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Black African townships is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth is predicted.

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LDS Background

The 1978 revelation extending priesthood and temple blessing to Black African members opened up black communities which had previously received no concentrated LDS missionary outreach and had no wards or branches operating. Initial missionary efforts concentrated on large township areas nearby major metropolitan areas where there were sizable numbers of white South African members such as in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. Branches were established among Black African townships in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng Provinces, such as in Soweto and Kwa-Mashu. National membership and congregational growth rates substantially increased following the commencement of LDS outreach among Black Africans and Coloreds. Membership increased from 1,261 in 1935 to 6,091 in 1975 whereas membership increased to 13,100 in 1985, 24,000 in 1995, 42,569 in 2005, and 59,807 in 2012 whereas the number of congregations increased from 60 in 1987 to 86 in 1995, 100 in 2000, 119 in 2005, 147 in 2010, and 155 in 2013. Accelerated growth occurred primarily due to missionary efforts among Black Africans and Coloreds and the expansion of missionary work into many township areas where these ethnicities comprise the majority of the population.

In 2002, approximately 33 of the 103 (32%) wards and branches in South Africa appeared to primarily service members residing in townships and urban areas predominantly populated by Black Africans and Coloreds. In late 2013, approximately 60 of the 155 (39%) wards and branches in South Africa appeared to primarily service members residing in townships and urban areas predominantly populated by Black Africans and Coloreds.

Successes

The Church has established congregations and meetinghouses in the most populous Black African and Colored townships and urban areas. Rapid progress occurred in opening many of these locations to missionaries during the 1980s and 1990s, with many newly establishing branches quickly maturing into wards. Today many stakes in South Africa have significant numbers of members who live in traditionally Black African and Colored townships or urban areas such as stakes in Bloemfontein, Cape

Town, Durban, East London, and Soweto. The Church doubled the number of congregations it operated in urban areas predominantly populated by Black Africans and Coloreds between the early 2000s and early 2010s due to efforts by church leaders to improve the accessibility of the Church to target populations and these populations exhibiting good receptivity to LDS outreach. The percentage of congregations that operate in Black and Colored Townships also increased during the past decade, indicating more rapid active membership growth and national outreach expansion in these locations. Currently many of the highest baptizing wards and branches in South Africa service locations predominantly populated by Black Africans and Coloreds, and these congregations often experience steady increases in church attendance.

The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and gospel study and proselytism materials into several indigenous languages including Afrikaans, Setswana, Xhosa, and Zulu. All LDS scriptures are available in Afrikaans. These translations provide valuable study aids to members who speak these languages and have limited proficiency in English.

Opportunities

There remain scores of unreached or lesser-reached black townships that appear favorable for the assignment of missionaries and the organizing of member groups or branches.

With over 1.2 million inhabitants, Soweto is 98.5% Black African and currently pertains to the city of Johannesburg. Soweto has historically numbered among the most populous Black townships in South Africa. The LDS Church has established three meetinghouses in Soweto located in the communities of Dobsonville, Pimville, and Protea Glen that service four wards (Dobsonville, Pimville, Protea Glen, and Soweto). Most communities in Soweto remain distant from LDS meetinghouses and receive minimal outreach such as Chiawelo, Devland, Diepkloof, Eldorado Park, Emdeni, Molapo, Moletsane, Orlando East, Phiri, and Thulani. Missionary reports indicate that each of these four wards likely have hundreds of less-active and inactive members and that many members reside in areas distant from their assigned meetinghouse. Organizing family home evening (FHE) groups and cottage meetings in some of these communities presents a thrifty and practical method of assessing whether church leaders should organize member groups or branches in some of these locations. FHE groups and cottage meetings present a basic gospel lesson in a casual format where members, investigators, and full-time missionaries can interact and socialize. Consistently holding these types of meetings in lesser-reached areas of Soweto may result in strengthening the sense of LDS community and culminate in the organization of additional wards and branches. These type of church-planting interventions have proven successful in many areas of Sub-Saharan Africa in improving the penetration of LDS outreach, accelerating active membership growth, and reactivating individuals and families.

The Johannesburg and Pretoria conurbation provides some of the most practical opportunities for opening additional townships to formal missionary activity. The Church has sizable amounts of mission resources in this metropolitan area that boasts the largest number of LDS members, congregations, and stakes within South Africa. Most townships are easily accessible due to close proximity to mission headquarters. Within the past three decades, the Church has steadily opened additional township areas to missionary work and has established member groups or branches. Examples of townships or predominantly Black African urban areas where church leaders organized a member group or branch for the first time within the past five years include Birch Acres, Cosmo City, Hammanskraal, and Orange Farm. Urban areas that appear to be predominantly Black African where prospects appear most favorable for future church planting and missionary efforts include Brits, Bronkhorstspuit, Delmas, Ekangala, Heidelberg, Klipgat, Letlhabile, Nigel, Olievenhoutbos, and Westonaria. A map of the Johannesburg/Pretoria conurbation displaying the status of LDS outreach in locations with predominantly Black African and Colored populations can be found [here](#).

The organization of a second mission based in the Johannesburg/Pretoria area deserves serious consideration by area and international church leaders. The Johannesburg/Pretoria conurbation includes 8.55 million people and many urban areas within the Johannesburg and Pretoria metropolitan areas remain poorly reached or unreached due to inadequate mission resources. Recent full-time missionary reports indicate that the large administrative burden placed on the current mission presidency has appeared to limit the quality and frequency of supervision and training for missionaries. Consequently some locations have engaged in quick-baptism tactics with little accountability for convert retention. The current South Africa Johannesburg Mission not only includes the entire Johannesburg/Pretoria area but also the entire Limpopo Province where over five million people reside. Current opportunities for growth throughout the mission remain only partially realized due to limited mission resources and few administrative personnel.

Most other major metropolitan areas and large cities also possess good opportunities for organizing congregations that specifically meet in townships predominantly inhabited by Black Africans. In Cape Town, the Church operates only a handful of meetinghouses within the Cape Flats area where many predominantly Black or Colored townships and communities are located. Locations in the Cape Town metropolitan area predominantly inhabited by Black Africans or Coloreds that appear favorable for the organization of member groups or branches include Atlantis, Blue Downs, Delft, Grassy Park, Mandela Park, Nyanga, and Philippi. In Durban, the Church operates approximately half a dozen meetinghouses in Black and Colored townships and communities. However, vast areas remain minimally reached or unreached such as Folweni, Inanda, KwaNdengezi, Ntuzuma, and Umlazi. In Port Elizabeth, the Church has established a few congregations in predominantly Black African and Colored communities but the densely populated iBhayi area remains poorly reached. In Bloemfontein, two of the Church's three wards in the metropolitan area are based within predominantly Black African communities although many areas remain minimally reached such as in northern, central, and eastern areas of Mangaung. In Secunda, only one branch operates within the city proper where 44,000 people reside yet no LDS outreach occurs in the neighboring township of Embalenhle where nearly 119,000 people reside.^[2]

The Church has translated the entire Book of Mormon into Setswana, Xhosa, and Zulu but has yet to translate other LDS scriptures into these languages. Sizable numbers of members and investigators who are native speakers and are literate in these languages could benefit from translations of these scriptures. The Church likely has a sufficient number of qualified members who could provide translation assistance once the Church decides to translate remaining LDS scriptures into these languages.

Challenges

The Church in South Africa has experienced slow membership and congregational growth rates within the past few years notwithstanding Black Africans comprising a strong majority of the population. Annual membership growth rates were less than five percent for 2011 and 2012 and annual congregational growth rates were less than three percent between 2011 and 2013. Incommensurate membership and congregational growth has occurred since 2010 due to convert retention and member activity problems as the average number of members per ward or branch increased from 352 at year-end 2009 to 393 at year-end 2012. To contrast, the average number of members per ward or branch stayed constant at approximately 350 between 2002 and 2009 due to commensurate membership and congregational growth rates.

Returned missionaries have reported leadership development problems in many areas predominantly inhabited by Black Africans. Inadequate numbers of local church leaders in many township areas appears attributed to rushed prebaptismal preparation, poor fellowship from local members due to a disconnect between full-time missionaries and local leadership, and substandard post-baptismal fellowship and convert retention efforts. Foreign missionaries constitute a significant portion of the full-time missionary force and mission leaders have encouraged quick-baptismal tactics that have resulted in modest convert retention and member activity rates. Some township areas continue to have only branches operating notwithstanding these branches pertaining to stakes for several decades. Little real growth has occurred in many of these township areas due to poor convert retention rates resulting in small, inconsistent increases in the number of active members in these congregations. Church leaders in some stakes have taken a church splitting versus a church planting approach to growth, resulting in many congregations failing to gain enough active members to divide. This has resulted in limited outreach expansion for many years notwithstanding the Black African population exhibiting good levels of receptivity.

A lack of LDS meetinghouses and no branches or wards that specifically meet within black townships has created challenges for Black and Colored members to travel to their assigned meetinghouse. Transportation costs and distances have prevented many members and investigators from developing habitual church attendance. The Church has cautioned full-time missionaries from finding and teaching investigators who reside in locations distant from church meetinghouses due to these transportation challenges, including in township areas where an LDS meetinghouse already operates such as in Soweto.^[3] This has resulted in diminished growth as the Church restricts its proselytism efforts to locations nearby LDS meetinghouses whereas vast urban areas remain largely untouched by formal proselytism efforts. A lack of vision in expanding missionary outreach and organizing congregations in these unreached urban areas can result in missing opportunities to baptize converts, train leadership, and establish additional congregations when conditions remain favorable for expanding and prior to other proselytizing groups shepherding individuals and families receptive to Christian proselytism.

Crime and poverty pose safety concerns for assigning full-time missionaries and establishing self-reliant congregations. In 2006, two sister missionaries were assaulted in the South Africa Durban Mission^[4] and the Church subsequently withdrew all sister missionaries from the country due to safety concerns. No sister missionaries have appeared to serve in South Africa since this incident occurred. Young elder full-time missionaries report that safety concerns limit the time and location of proselytism activities in many locations. Low living standards and poverty pose challenges for the Church to develop self-sustaining congregations and leadership in many townships due to a lack of employment opportunities, limited financial self-sufficiency for individual congregations and some stakes, and welfare needs outweighing spiritual ones.

Many Black African townships in major metropolitan have differing concentrations of indigenous ethnolinguistic groups. The Johannesburg/Pretoria conurbation exhibits significant ethnic diversity between townships. In Rabie Ridge, for example, the two most commonly spoken first languages are Sepedi [North Sotho] (32%) and Zulu (16%).^[5] In Orange Farm, the two most commonly spoken languages are Zulu (45%) and Sesotho (29%).^[6] These conditions pose challenges for the Church to adequately meet language needs and assimilate members of differing ethnicities into the same congregations. Challenges are especially apparent when attempting to plant new member groups and branches when there are few administrative and ecclesiastical resources available to accommodate diverse language and ethnic conditions.

There are several major indigenous languages with no translations of LDS scriptures or materials. Translations of some basic gospel study and missionary materials are available in Sesotho, siSwati, and Sepedi (North Sotho) but translations of the Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures are not available in any of these languages. The Church has not translated materials or scriptures into Ndebele,^[7] Tsonga,^[8] and Venda^[9] notwithstanding each of these languages spoken by more than half a million people and the South African government granting statutory national language status to all three of these languages. Translations of basic proselytism and gospel study materials is warranted to improve gospel comprehension among native speakers of these languages and to make greater inroads in expanding outreach into black townships with sizable numbers of speakers of these languages.

The Church has appeared to conduct most, if not all, of its formal proselytism efforts in English instead of indigenous African languages. A lack of language-specific outreach with full-time missionaries who speak and teach in these languages poses challenges for effectively reaching the Black African population to facilitate understanding the gospel message and developing a

testimony. It is unclear whether many congregations predominantly comprised of Black Africans and Coloreds hold church services in English, in indigenous languages such as Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, siSwati, Sepedi, or Sesotho, or in a combination of two or more languages depending on member needs and leadership resources. Congregations that hold church services in indigenous African languages will likely be required for greater growth to occur and to kindle a sense of LDS community.

Comparative Growth

The Church in South Africa has the second most members on church records among countries in Africa but has experienced some of the slowest annual membership growth rate and congregational growth rates in the region. Other Sub-Saharan African countries with the largest church memberships report higher annual membership growth rates, better convert retention and member activity rates, and more rapid congregational growth. With the largest church membership of any country in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Church in Nigeria has approximately 110,000 members and has maintained annual membership growth rates of five percent or higher every year since the establishment of the Church in the late 1970s. The Church in Nigeria has experienced commensurate membership and congregational growth rates throughout the duration of its presence in the country. In 2013, the number of congregations increased by over 30 in Nigeria alone. The Church in Ghana has the third largest membership with over 52,000 members in 2012. Rapid congregational growth has occurred most years within the past five years as many years have 15 or more new congregations organized. The Church has reported more rapid membership growth rates in countries nearby South Africa such as Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and Swaziland although congregational growth rates have been slow in these countries due to a limited LDS presence and memberships in each of these countries totaling less than 3,000.

Other missionary-focused groups have experienced significantly greater growth in traditionally Black African townships than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses report a pervasive presence in traditionally Black African townships and in late 2013 reported 62 congregations in Soweto, 21 congregations in Katlehong, 19 congregations in Soshanguve, 13 in Umlazi, 10 congregations in Orange Farm, nine congregations each in Hammanskraal and Khayelitsha, eight congregations in Mamelodi, and seven congregations each in Kwa-Mashu, Mdantsane, and Sebokeng.^[10] To contrast, the LDS Church maintains only one to three congregations in each of these townships with the exception of Soweto. Evangelicals, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and the Church of the Nazarene all appear to maintain a widespread presence and to achieve steady growth in Black and Colored communities.

Limitations

The Church does not publish statistical data on the demographics of membership for South Africa. It is unclear what percentage of South African membership is Black African. The Church does not publish a breakdown of language usage for worldwide membership with the exception of the 10 most commonly spoken languages. There are no reliable data on the number members who are native speakers of Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, siSwati, Ndebele, Tsonga, or Venda. Ascertaining which congregations primarily operate in Black and Colored townships had several challenges due to the geographic boundaries of some of these congregations encompassing both township and non-township urban areas, and some of these congregations assembling in a meetinghouse outside of their geographical boundaries. The Church does not publish official data on member activity and convert retention rates. No data on the official language programs for each mission with approval for formal proselytism efforts are available. Limited reports from mission and area leadership did not provide sufficient data to assess language usage by full-time missionaries. The Church does not publish the number of missionaries assigned to each country or mission, or the number of missionaries serving from each country. The Church does not publish information on the location, name, and number of member groups by country or for the Church as a whole.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Black African and Colored townships and urban areas in South Africa appears mixed for the foreseeable future. These populations continue to exhibit strong receptivity to LDS outreach and church leaders have concentrated greater amounts of missions resources into the three South African missions, but local leadership development problems, convert retention and member inactivity challenges due to quick-baptism tactics, limited language-specific outreach extended, and high crime rates and low levels of economic development pose significant barriers to achieving greater growth. The organization of a second mission in the Johannesburg/Pretoria conurbation has enormous potential to improve mission accountability for new converts and usher in a new era of outreach expansion efforts in Black African and Colored townships and urban areas. Long-term success in establishing the Church among these townships and urban areas will require stronger member-missionary participation, more aggressive church planting efforts, and greater local leadership development and self-sufficiency.

- [1] "South Africa," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 24 January 2014.
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- [4] "Missionaries are assaulted," LDS Church News, 8 July 2006.
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- [5] <http://census2011.adrianfrith.com/place/798008>
- [6] <http://census2011.adrianfrith.com/place/798034>
- [7] "Ndebele," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com/language/nbl), retrieved 23 January 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/nbl>
- [8] "Tsonga," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tso), retrieved 23 January 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tso>
- [9] "Venda," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ven), retrieved 23 January 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ven>
- [10] "Congregation Meeting Search," 21 October 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrtZGT?