People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among the Tigray People of East Africa

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Overview

Closely related to the Amharic and Tigre peoples, the Tigray, or Tigrinya, traditionally populate Eritrea and northern Ethiopia and number over eight million worldwide.[1] Tigray history indicates that the Tigray people descended from the Axumite Empire - an empire that existed in Biblical times which was founded by Menelik, son of the King of Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba. The Tigrigna language is the native language of the Tigray. Tigrigna is a Semitic language that originated from the ancient Ge'ez language; the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Tigrigna speakers number over 4.3 million in Ethiopia and 2.5 million in Eritrea.[2] The Tigray number among the few African peoples who converted to Christianity prior to European colonialism.[3] The vast majority of Tigray adhere to Oriental Orthodox Christian denominations such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Eritrean Orthodox Church.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church among the Tigray people and identifies opportunities and challenges for future outreach and growth. LDS outreach efforts among other East African peoples is summarized followed by a brief synopsis of the growth of other proselytizing Christian groups who operate among the Tigray. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

As of mid-2013, there have been no concentrated efforts by the LDS Church to proselyte the Tigray within their homelands or abroad. No LDS congregations operate in the Tigray homelands. Missionaries have reported contacting and teaching Tigray in several countries including the United Kingdom, Norway, and Italy. A handful of Eritrean coverts have joined the Church in the United States and in Europe. In Poland, one Eritrean convert joined the Church in 1991 and has since served in various local leadership positions in Poland.[4]

Opportunities

The conversion of several Tigray individuals to the LDS Church presents some opportunities for implementing ethnic-specific outreach. Mission, stake, ward, and branch leaders can identify Tigray members within their jurisdiction and coordinate with full-time and ward or branch missionaries in the finding, teaching, and baptism of Tigray investigators. Once there are multiple active Tigray members in a ward or branch, a Tigrigna-speaking Sunday School class can be organized to facilitate gospel comprehension and testimony development and establish a sense of LDS community. The use of social media in proselytism and foster a sense of LDS community has potential to unify the handful of Tigray LDS converts on a worldwide scale. Internet technologies help bridge distance and time between individuals around the world and can serve as the medium for helping new converts communicate with one another and share their conversion experiences. This format may help converts reconcile how their conversion from Oriental Orthodoxy affects their sense of national identity and offer encouragement and advice on living LDS teachings and respecting cultural customs and norms.

The Church has maintained an official presence in Ethiopia for two decades and appears to face no legal barriers that prevent the assignment of full-time missionaries and the operation of the Church in the Tigray Region. Current mission infrastructure in the Uganda Kampala Mission appears too strained to initiate missionary activity in the Tigray Region at present considering the mission administers Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, and Djibouti. Prospects appear likely that a separate mission based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia may be organized within the next couple years due to high growth potential in the

region and the enormous administrative burden on the Uganda Kampala Mission. The organization of a mission based in Ethiopia will significantly improve the chance that mission leaders expand missionary activity into the Tigray Region but any future outreach will more than likely hinge on requests from isolated members and investigators to receive full-time missionaries and have member groups established for holding sacrament meeting services.

The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides needed manpower to implement Tigray-specific outreach in locations with sizable populations of Tigray people. No other time in the Church's history has there ever been such a massive surplus in missionary manpower. Opportunities for establishing mission programs that service Tigray populations outside of their homelands appear most favorable in Italy but the relatively small number of Tigray in the country suggest that no specialized outreach will occur unless sizable numbers of Tigray join the Church and converts experience problems communicating in Italian with non-Tigray members.

Challenges

The strong ethnoreligious ties of the Tigray people to Oriental Orthodox Christianity pose the greatest barrier to prospective LDS outreach. Most Tigray have maintained an over millennium-long legacy in their families and communities of following Oriental Orthodoxy. The long duration of the establishment of the early Christian Church in Eritrea and Ethiopia just a few centuries following Christ's ministry combined with resistance to convert to Islam for over a millennium have reduced receptivity to recently arrived nontraditional Christian denominations. The church is the central feature of communities and each community has its own patron saint. The infusion of culture, religion, and language to Oriental Orthodoxy among the Tigray suggest that the LDS Church would experience moderate to low levels of receptivity to prospective outreach extended. Success in finding and teaching investigators, testimony development in investigators and new converts, and long-term retention and self-sufficiency in local members administering the church in their area may require the development of specialized teaching and proselytism approaches that are respectful to local traditions and customs and that are tailored to the religious background of Oriental Orthodox Christians.

The Church has not established a presence in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia or in Eritrea and has an extremely small missionary presence in Ethiopia. Currently the Uganda Kampala Mission services Ethiopia whereas Eritrea is not assigned to a mission and is administered directly by the Africa Southeast Area Presidency. There is no indication that mission and area leaders are considering the opening of missionary activity in the Tigray homelands any time within the foreseeable future due to distance from established church centers, extremely few resources, and no known requests from isolated members or investigators to receive missionary lessons and have member groups established.

The Eritrean government has had a poor record of upholding religious freedom,[5] making any official LDS establishment in Eritrea insurmountable at present. The government only recognizes four officially registered groups (the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea). The law requires religious groups to register with the government or to cease activities. Strict legislation is in place regarding the operation of registered religious groups including limitations of foreign financing, religious visas, and constructing houses of worship.[6] These conditions therefore prohibit any overt LDS missionary activity efforts, including the assignment of humanitarian senior missionary couples. Religious restrictions are so severe that it is likely that no LDS worship services could be held in Eritrea with the possible exception of individuals and families worshipping within the privacy of their own homes.

There are no LDS materials translated into Tigrigna. The translation of at least a handful of proselytism materials into Tigrigna could make significant progress in providing at least some type of LDS outreach. Translations of basic proselytism materials provides full-time missionaries with resources for reaching and proselytizing Tigray people in locations with a church presence among those Tigray who are literate in their native language and have limited fluency in other languages with translations of church materials. However, the implementation of Tigrigna translations of church materials will likely have limited success in Eritrea and Ethiopia considering less than 10% of Tigrigna speakers are literate in their first language and less than 30% are literate in a second language.[7]

Comparative Growth

The Church in East Africa remains in its infancy stages and has consequently extended formal outreach to only a few major ethnolinguistic groups such as the Amharic. Full-time missionaries assigned to Ethiopia only teach in the English and Amharic languages and have achieved little command of the Amharic language due to few learning resources, a lack of native members serving missions within their homeland, and foreign missionaries frequently transferring back to Uganda or Rwanda where Amharic is not commonly spoken. The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and a small number of church materials into Amharic. Somalis number among the most prominent ethnolinguistic groups in the region and have received virtually no LDS outreach in East Africa or abroad. The Church has translated a couple basic proselytism materials into Somali and Afar notwithstanding to formal proselytism efforts among these ethnolinguistic groups.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report an extremely small presence among the Tigray but have established a few congregations within the Tigray homelands. Evangelicals claim the largest following among nontraditional Christian groups and report that 3.5% of Tigray are evangelical in Eritrea[8] and 0.30% of Tigray are evangelical in Ethiopia.[9] Jehovah's Witnesses report Tigrigna-speaking congregations and groups in several countries including Ethiopia (three congregations), Germany (one congregation), Italy (one congregation), Norway (one congregation), the United States (two groups), Australia

(one group), Canada (one group), and Sweden (one group). Witnesses maintain a presence in the Tigray homelands in both Eritrea and Ethiopia but do not have an official presence in Eritrea where there are fewer than 500 members. Witnesses translate several proselytism materials into Tigrigna.[10] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports three churches and approximately 500 members in Eritrea[11] and two churches and approximately 350 members in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia.[12] Adventists report extremely few baptisms year to year in these two locations. Some Adventist materials are printed in Tigrigna.[13]

Limitations

The Church does not publish any statistical data on language usage among church membership for languages not within the top 10 languages spoken by church membership. It is unclear how many Tigray have joined the Church worldwide and if any isolated members reside in the Tigray homeland. No reports were available from Tigray Latter-day Saints. The Church does not publish membership statistics for Eritrea.

Future Prospects

Severe government restrictions on religious freedom in Eritrea that render any prospective LDS establishment within the foreseeable future impossible, an extremely limited LDS presence in Ethiopia that extends no outreach in the Tigray homelands, no proselytism materials translated into Tigrigna, and no specialized missionary approaches tailored to the religious background and needs of Oriental Orthodox Christians predict a bleak outlook for future LDS growth. The greatest opportunity to reach the Tigray is currently in locations outside of their homeland such as in Western Europe, North America, and Australia. However, a lack of language-specific outreach among immigrant groups in all these areas of the world with the exception of the United States suggest that the Church will likely make few inroads in establishing an LDS Tigray community any time soon. The use of social media in connecting the handful of Tigray converts worldwide has potential to establish some sense of LDS community among the Tigray and encourage outreach expansion into Tigray homelands in northern Ethiopia if greater amounts of resources are channeled into Ethiopia and mission leaders exhibit interest in expanding outreach into this region.

[1] "Tigrai, Tigrinya," www.joshuaproject.net, retrieved 21 June 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/peoples.php?peo3=15481

[2] "Tigrigna," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 21 June 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tir

[3] "Tigray," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 21 June 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Costa-Rica-to-Georgia/Tigray.html

[4] Scott, Taylor. "LDS Church in Poland has had long, hard journey," Deseret News, 13 September 2010, p. 3. http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700064997/LDS-Church-in-Poland-has-had-long-hard-journey.html?pg=3

[5] "Eritrea," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 29 July 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208146

[6] "Eritrea," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 29 July 2013. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208146

[7] "Tigrigna," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 21 June 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tir

[8] "Tigrai, Tigrignya of Eritrea," Joshua Project, retrieved 30 July 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15481&rog3=ER

[9] "Tigrai, Tigrinya of Ethiopia," Joshua Project, retrieved 30 July 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php

[10] http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=ti

[11] "Eritrea Mission Field," www.adventistdirectory.org, retrieved 29 July 2013. http://www.adventistdirectory.org/ViewAdmField.aspx?AdmFieldID=ERMF

[12] "Tigray Attached Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 29 July 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/ViewAdmField.aspx?AdmFieldID=TGAM

[13] " 148th Annual Statistical Report-2010"