

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Ijaw of Nigeria

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Overview

The Ijaw, also known as the Ijo or Izon, are a collection of black African peoples native to the coastline areas of the Nigerian states of Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. Bayelsa comprises the heart of the Ijaw homelands and is located on the Niger River Delta. There are approximately 17.7 million Ijaw in Nigeria[1] although the estimated number of speakers of Ijaw languages is considerably less (1.77 million).[2] The Ijaw people traditionally speak 10 Ijoid languages that pertain to the Atlantic-Congo language family.[3] The most commonly spoken Ijoid languages include Izon, Kalabari, and Kirike. The Ijaw are homogenously Christian and most adhere to Protestantism. Many Ijaw possess cultural similarities with the nearby Igbo people. The LDS Church maintains an official presence in three cities on the outskirts of the Ijaw homeland (Port Harcourt, Bonny, and Yenagoa) and has experienced rapid growth in two of these locations (Port Harcourt and Yenagoa). No specialized LDS outreach has appeared to have been extended among the Ijaw as of early 2015.

This case study reviews the history of the Church's administration of the Ijaw homelands. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church among other major peoples in Nigeria is reviewed and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Ijaw is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

LDS outreach has only been extended within cities on the outskirts of the Ijaw homeland. The Church has maintained a presence in Port Harcourt since the early to mid-1980s. The Church organized its first stake in Port Harcourt in 1990. Two additional stakes were organized in 2003 and 2011. Rapid congregational growth has occurred in Port Harcourt as evidenced by the number of congregations increasing from 11 in early 2003 to 34 in early 2015. The Church appeared to organize the Bonny Branch sometime in the 2000s.

The Church organized its first branch in the city of Yenagoa in 2009. The Yenagoa Branch was the first LDS congregation to operate in Bayelsa State. The number of branches in the city reached four by year-end 2012. The Church organized the four branches into the Yenagoa Nigeria District in late 2013.

The Church has not translated LDS materials or scriptures into any Ijoid languages. A map displaying the Ijaw homelands and LDS congregations within or nearby the homelands can be found here.

Successes

The Church has operated congregations in multiple cities within or nearby the Ijaw homelands, with some locations maintaining an LDS presence for as long as 30 years. The Church has experienced rapid growth in some of these locations as evidenced by steady congregational growth. LDS congregations in Yenagoa have extended outreach within the heart of the Ijaw homeland since 2009, albeit missionary efforts have appeared to only occur in English.

Opportunities

The Ijaw people are homogenously Christian and their homelands have had no recent instances of societal or government abuses of religious freedom. Other missionary-focused groups appear to experience no restrictions on proselytism activities. Conditions appear favorable for utilizing traditional LDS teaching approaches as these approaches have been tailored for individuals with a Christian background. The Ijaw number among the most populous Nigerian peoples who do not receive specialized outreach, suggesting ample opportunities for missionary activity and growth due to a sizable target population.

The massive surge in the number of members serving full-time missions during the 2010s provides the unprecedented opportunity for mission leadership to mobilize surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of multiple proselytism areas within the Ijaw homelands. The number of members serving full-time missions increased by the tens of thousands from 58,000 in late 2012 to nearly 90,000 in late 2014 and has since stabilized in the 80,000s. A net increase of members serving full-time missionaries totaling 25,000 represents a 45% increase in the size of the worldwide missionary force that has occurred within a matter of less than three years. Reports from mission leadership throughout Sub-Saharan Africa note that local members have served full-time missions in larger numbers during this surge. These conditions suggests excellent opportunities for international leadership to assign larger numbers of missionaries to serve in Nigeria and open previously unreached areas to missionary work.

The establishment of the Church in locations where Ijaw constitute the majority of the population will begin with visits from mission and area leaders to assess conditions and meet with any members or investigators who reside in the most easily accessible cities from Port Harcourt and Yenagoa. Isolated members and investigators petitioning church leaders to hold church services and assign missionaries will be key for mission and area leaders to determine the need and urgency of establishing the Church in the region. There are likely many cities and towns where Latter-day Saints have relocated, but without nearby congregations. Mission and area leaders may also begin investigatory efforts on their own without appeals from members or investigators due to the good opportunities for missionary work and church growth. Mission leaders can organize a member group in locations where there are several members who indicate that they will attend church weekly and if one of these members holds the priesthood and meets worthiness standards. Cities that appear most favorable for the Church to establish member groups or branches and assign missionaries include Amassoma, Sagbama, and small cities and towns along the Forcados and Nun Rivers and their tributaries.

The greatest successes in baptizing large numbers of converts and achieving high convert retention will require full-time missionaries to regularly open additional member groups in locations distant from where an initial member group begins functioning. The Church in West Africa has experienced impressive results from following a church-planting approach to outreach expansion in newly opened cities to missionary work such as in Sunyani, Ghana; Techiman, Ghana; and Daloa, Cote d'Ivoire. Involvement from local members in missionary efforts will be vital towards instilling self-sufficiency in the Church within the Ijaw homeland and achieving good convert retention and member activity rates.

The Ijaw homelands are primarily administered by the Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission. One mission administering an entire ethnolinguistic people presents good opportunities for mission leaders to extend uniform outreach and collaborate with local church leaders. The Church has historically struggled to effectively proselyte ethnolinguistic peoples divided between multiple missions.

Many Ijaw speak English as a second language, especially in the most populous cities of Port Harcourt in Yenagoa. The utilization of English translations of church materials and scriptures may adequately meet local needs among English-speaking Ijaw. Sizable numbers of bilingual speakers of Ijoid languages suggest that integration with other Nigerian peoples who reside in the Ijaw homeland may be appropriate.

Humanitarian and development projects appear a meaningful and effective methods to establish an initial LDS presence due to low living standards. Latter-day Saints could employ strategies for economic self-reliance among the Ijaw similar to past and current development projects implemented in other areas of Sub-Saharan Africa such as teaching efficient agricultural techniques, organizing garden projects, holding employment and neonatal resuscitation workshops, conducting clean water projects, and providing small business loans or resources to jumpstart local entrepreneurs. The Church has accomplished noticeable success through poultry and plantation projects in Sub-Saharan Africa where individuals receive a "starter kit" of recently hatched chicks or farming supplies that if properly managed can turn into a self-sufficient business.

Challenges

The limited LDS presence in the Ijaw homeland appears primarily attributed to the centers of strength policy. With only a few exceptions, the Church in Nigeria has avoided the opening of previously unreached cities to missionary work where there is no nearby ward or branch. This has been motivated by challenges for church administration across large geographical areas where there are few mature members capable of adequately meeting local leadership needs. The Church has struggled to adequately take advantage of good opportunities to further saturate currently reached cities and towns with larger numbers of mission resources, let alone expand missionary activity into additional locations. Additionally, the Church generally only assigns native Africans to serve in Nigeria due to non-African missionaries presenting greater safety concerns for kidnapping and violence. This has resulted in a limited body of missionary manpower at the disposal of international church leadership to assign to Nigerian missions. These conditions, combined with an emphasis to assign the majority of mission resources to the Church's centers of strength in Nigeria, have dissuaded national outreach expansion into previously unreached administrative states within the past 15 years. The Church has only opened one Nigerian state (Bayelsa) to missionary activity and opened its first branch in the state during this period. The Church has also historically demonstrated little to no progress expanding outreach in

Nigerian states where there is a minimal LDS presence. This has been demonstrated by stagnant national outreach expansion in many minimally-reached Nigerian states within the past 15 years such as in Bauchi, Ebonyi, Jos, Kaduna, Kwara, Ondo, and Oyo.

The Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission has a large number of stakes and districts within its jurisdiction. There were seven stakes and five districts in the mission as of early 2015, with several stakes likely to divide within the near future due to rapid congregational growth. The Ijaw homelands are located within some of the least populated areas of the mission. There are at least 16 million people who reside within the boundaries of Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission yet there are less than two million who reside in Bayelsa State where most of the population is Ijaw and speaks Ijoid languages. Consequently prospects for the expansion of the Church into the Ijaw homeland appears mixed due to larger target populations elsewhere in the mission, limited resources to administer a large population within the mission boundaries, and the Ijaw homeland presenting greater challenges to access from mission headquarters compared to other areas located within the Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission.

Many areas of the Ijaw homelands are difficult to access. The Ijaw homelands are located in the Niger River Delta. There are few roads in the area and most use rivers for transportation. Oil exploitation in the river delta has resulted in past political instability and environmental degradation. These conditions may discourage mission leaders from exploring opportunities to expand missionary work in the region.

The Church has yet to translate LDS materials or scriptures in Ijoid languages. Izon is the language that appears to have the greatest need to have LDS materials translated. No translations of materials or scriptures into Izon may pose challenges for the Church to convey a sense that its teachings and organization is compatible with Ijaw culture and society. This may especially become problematic considering the Church has translated the Book of Mormon and small numbers of gospel study and church materials into other indigenous Nigerian languages. Consequently, the Church may be viewed as more compatible with other Nigerian peoples such as the Efik, Igbo, and Yoruba.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Nigeria has experienced steady to rapid growth among multiple ethnolinguistic groups with populations of at least one million and a sizable numbers of Christians. The Church operates five stakes, two districts, and 73 wards and branches within the Yoruba homelands. Steady growth has occurred in the Yoruba homelands within the past two decades. The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and a small number of gospel study and missionary materials into Yoruba. The Church operates five stakes, five districts, and 91 wards and branches within the Igbo homeland. Within the past decade, rapid congregational growth has occurred in virtually all predominantly Igbo areas of Nigeria. Igbo translations of all LDS scriptures have been available since 2007[4] and a small number of gospel study and proselytism materials are available. The Church operates six stakes, six districts, and 117 wards and branches among Efik peoples in Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State. Rapid growth has occurred among Efik peoples as the number of congregations in the region increased from approximately 60 in 2002 to 117 in early 2015. Currently 0.75% of the Efik population in Akwa Ibom State appears to be LDS. Translations of LDS scriptures and materials into Efik are limited to select passages of the Book of Mormon and a handful of gospel study and missionary resources. The Church operates five stakes within the Edo homelands although there are no translations of LDS materials or scriptures into the Edo language. The Church reports one district in the homelands of the Berom people. Stagnant LDS growth has occurred within the Berom homelands and no LDS materials have been translated into Berom. Additional peoples or people clusters in Nigeria with sizable numbers of Christians, populations of one million or more, and no LDS presence include the Tiv, Ebira, and Igala. The Church has translated General Conference sessions into Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo for many years.

Multiple missionary-focused Christian groups with an international presence maintain a presence among the Ijaw. Evangelicals number among the largest religious groups and claim 30-35% of the Ijaw population.[5] Jehovah's Witnesses have extended specialized outreach among the Ijaw and operate 30 congregations that conduct worship services in Ijoid languages. Witnesses have translated their official website, jw.org, into Izon.[6] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence among the Ijaw. Adventists do not print materials into Izon or other Ijaw languages. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in the Ijaw homelands.

Limitations

No reports were available regarding the ethnic composition of LDS congregations within the Ijaw homelands. Consequently it is unclear whether many Ijaw have joined the Church in cities such as Port Harcourt and Yenagoa. The Church does not publish the number of members by language usage for languages not among the 10 most commonly spoken languages among its worldwide membership. The Church does not publish the number or location of its member groups. Consequently it is unclear whether any member groups operate in the Ijaw homelands. Limited information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists among the Ijaw.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to experience growth among the Ijaw people appears favorable within the next decade. The Church has established multiple centers of strength on the outskirts of the Ijaw homelands and these locations present good opportunities for missionary work among the Ijaw in the English language. Prospects appear favorable for the Church to divide

the Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission and organize a separate mission headquartered in Aba. A division of the mission would significantly improve prospects for the Church to expand outreach within the Ijaw homelands due to a smaller geographic area and greater resources available to administer a small target population. Prospects for Ijaw-specific outreach appear poor within the foreseeable future as there does not appear to be a need for specialized outreach in cities where LDS congregations currently operate. However, translations of basic church materials into Izon and missionary activity conducted in Izon will be warranted once the Church establishes a presence in the Ijaw homeland outside of major cities.

[1] "Nigeria," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 26 March 2015. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html

[2] "Izon," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 26 March 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ijc

[3] "Ijoid," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 26 March 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/ijoid-0

[4] retrieved 4 November 2013. store.lds.org

[5] "Country: Nigeria," Joshua Project, retrieved 26 March 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/NI

[6] jw.org, retrieved 3 April 2015. http://www.jw.org/ijc/