



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Acholi of East Africa

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Overview

The Acholi are a Nilo-Saharan ethnolinguistic group native to a region of northern Uganda and extreme southern South Sudan known as "Acholiland." The Acholi have experienced significant loss, displacement, and conflict as a result of political instability, war in the region, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency.^[1] There were an estimated 1.2 million Acholi speakers worldwide as of 2002.^[2] More recent estimates place the number of Acholi at approximately two million with the majority residing in Uganda.^[3] The vast majority of Acholi are Christian and adhere to Roman Catholicism or Protestantism.^[4] The LDS Church has maintained a minimal presence in the Acholi homelands since 2008 and has reported moderate growth.

This case study reviews the history of the Church among the Acholi people. Church growth and missionary successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. LDS growth trends among other major ethnolinguistic groups in Uganda are briefly reviewed. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Acholi 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 branch in the Acholi homelands in Gulu in 2008. The first young, proselytizing missionaries were assigned to the Gulu Branch in 2009. The Church began operating a member group in Kitgum sometime during the early 2010s. The Church organized a second branch (Bar Dege) in Gulu in 2013.

There were approximately 170 active members in the Gulu Branch in 2011. Missionaries reported that the branch had approximately 150 recent converts at the time. Missionaries noted that sacrament meeting attendance averaged around 110 for the Gulu Branch and 70 for the Bar Dege Branch. Leadership for both branches appeared to be primarily staffed by Acholi members as of early 2015. Members in the Kitgum Group reported approximately 30 attended sacrament meetings in May 2015.

Reports from full-time missionaries noted that many, if not most, members in the two Gulu branches were Acholi and spoke the Acholi language. Local church leadership frequently used Acholi when teaching and conversing with members and investigators. Senior missionary couples in 2015 reported conducting self-reliance trainings for members in Gulu and Lira.

A map displaying the location of LDS congregations and the boundaries of the Acholi homelands can be found [here](#).

Successes

The establishment of branches in Gulu and the assignment of full-time missionaries constitutes the greatest LDS growth success among the Acholi. The Uganda Kampala Mission has consistently assigned missionaries to Gulu and missionaries have reported strong receptivity to LDS outreach among the Acholi. Senior missionaries have been regularly assigned to Gulu since the organization of the Gulu Branch and have provided valuable assistance in leadership development and administrative supervision.

The Church has established a small but strong community among the Acholi. Active membership growth necessitated the organization of a second branch in 2013. The two Gulu branches have appeared to exhibit good self-sufficiency among local members despite recent converts comprising the bulk of LDS membership. The organization of the Kitgum Group appeared only possible through member-led efforts to establish the Church in this city. The Church has achieved this progress notwithstanding an LDS presence in the Acholi homelands for less than a decade and no LDS materials translated into the Acholi language.

The Church has made some efforts to reduce travel time to branches in the Acholi homelands. Both of the Gulu branches meet in their own meetinghouse. The operation of two meetinghouses in Gulu permits the Church to extend outreach from two locations within the city.

Opportunities

There are no government or societal restrictions on religious freedom. Political stability has been reestablished within the Acholi homelands of Uganda for many years. These conditions indicate excellent opportunities for the Church to significantly augment its resources allocated to northern Uganda, further saturate emerging LDS centers of strength, and open additional locations to proselytism.

The Church has extended minimal outreach among the Acholi. There are only two official branches and one member group in the Acholi homelands where millions reside. Prospects appear favorable for the Church to organize small branches or member groups in additional locations in Gulu distant from current branch meetinghouses. A church planting approach has tremendous potential for the Church to achieve rapid growth, improve convert retention and member activity rates, and accelerate the expansion of the Church in the region. Gulu has a population of over 150,000^[5] and likely has a sufficient population and LDS membership to currently support two or three additional branches or member groups.

There are good opportunities for the Church to assign missionaries to additional cities and organize member groups or branches in these locations. Kitgum presents good prospects for the Church to assign full-time missionaries and organize a branch as the member group in the city appears close to meeting the minimal criteria to operate as a branch. The most populous unreached cities in the Acholi homelands are primarily located in the Kitgum area and include Abim, Kalongo, Kitgum Matidi, Pader, Palabek, and Patongo. Mission leaders visiting these cities, keeping track of isolated members and investigators, holding cottage meetings, and laying the groundwork for member groups to be organized and the assignment of full-time missionaries will be essential for the Church to experience steady outreach expansion. Mission leaders delegating some of these tasks to local church leaders appears an efficient and effective approach to harness the strength and enthusiasm of these members.

Challenges

The Church in Uganda has experienced some of the most significant challenges with convert attrition and member inactivity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Convert retention and member activity problems have been evidenced by incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates. The growth of LDS membership has significantly outpaced the rate of new congregations organized. Net increases in the number of congregations is a strong indicator of increasing numbers of active members as increasing numbers of active members are required to organize additional congregations and staff leadership positions. The average number of members per congregation in Uganda has risen from 271 in 2004 to 510 in 2014 - an 88% increase in one decade. Quick-baptism tactics and a congregation-splitting approach to growth appear responsible for lagging congregational growth. LDS meetinghouses remain challenging for many members and investigators to access due to long distances and high transportation costs.

The Uganda Kampala Mission ranked as the mission with the fourth largest population as of early 2015. There are over 150 million people within the six countries serviced by the mission including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. Although the mission has comparatively few wards and branches within its boundaries, mission leadership appears overburdened by the complex task of simultaneously supervising missionary activity and local church leaders in so many nations where the Church has a burgeoning presence.

The Acholi have experienced some of the greatest violence and conflict among major ethnolinguistic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of the atrocities committed by the LRA such as the abduction of children and their forced conscription as soldiers, mass murders, mutilations, and sexual violence have scared individuals, families, and communities. These conditions require sensitivity by full-time missionaries and mission leadership. Other Christian groups have established a pervasive presence among the Acholi and have provided aid and support to afflicted communities. The LDS Church may therefore struggle to adequately understand and respond to these unique needs and present the Latter-day Saint gospel message in such a manner as to convey its relevance and importance to the Acholi people.

Poverty and low living standards pose significant challenges for LDS growth. Many are unemployed. A significant number of Acholi live below the poverty line. Although the Church has sought to alleviate economic hardship and the temporal needs of members and nonmembers alike, conditions remain challenging for individuals to become self-sufficient. Local leadership development frequently experiences challenges in locations where similar levels of poverty and low living standards exist. The Church among the Acholi will likely be financially dependent on the international Church due to these conditions for many years or decades to come.

There are no realistic opportunities for LDS outreach in the Acholi homelands of South Sudan. The Church maintains no missionary presence in South Sudan and recently discontinued its only branch. Political instability, war, and extremely low living standards have delayed the assignment of full-time missionaries to South Sudan for many years. The Acholi in South Sudan populate areas near the Ugandan border distant from Juba. Thus, the Church would likely take decades to reach the Acholi in South Sudan following the introduction of full-time missionaries.

No LDS materials have been translated into Acholi. The use of English LDS materials and scriptures has limited utility as many Acholi exhibit limited proficiency in English. A lack of LDS materials translated into Acholi may pose challenges for the Church to convey a sense that it is compatible with Acholi culture and society. Other proselytism-focused groups that maintain a presence among the Acholi have translated materials into Acholi. Thus, some Acholi may exhibit reduced interest to the LDS Church as a result of language barriers.

Comparative Growth

The Church has extended outreach among one other Nilo-Saharan people: the Lango. The Church organized its first branches among the Lango in the city of Lira, Uganda in 2011. A second branch in Lira was created in 2012. The Church has experienced significant growth among the Lango. Missionaries in 2014 reported that one branch in Lira had approximately a dozen young adults serving full-time missions and that both branches in Lira properly operated without assistance from full-time missionaries. The Church has experienced the greatest growth in Uganda among the Bantu peoples of the central and southern portions of the country such as the Baganda and Basoga. Luganda (Ganda) is the only indigenous Ugandan language with translations of LDS materials albeit these translations are limited to only two materials: Gospel Principles (old edition) and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a more widespread presence among the Acholi than the LDS Church. Evangelicals report a pervasive presence among the Acholi. Evangelicals claim 35% of the Acholi population in Uganda and 15% of the Acholi population in South Sudan.^[6] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence among the Acholi and translates printed materials into Acholi.^[7] Adventists have reported rapid growth in northern Uganda within the past decade. Adventists reported 5,586 members, 474 baptisms, 39 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 111 companies (small or recently-established congregations) in 2004 and 16,538 members, 2,050 baptisms, 67 churches, and 173 companies in 2014.^[8] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a small presence among the Acholi. Witnesses report eight Acholi-speaking congregations in northern Uganda located in Gulu (2), Lira (2), Apii, Bweyale, Kitgum, and Kyoga.^[9] Witness have translated their official website, jw.org, into Acholi.^[10] The Church of the Nazarene reports few, if any, members or congregations in the Acholi homelands.

Limitations

Several reports were obtained from senior missionary couples, young full-time missionaries, and local members. However, the Church does not publish country-by-country statistics regarding the number of convert baptisms, the number of members serving full-time missions, or the number of full-time missionaries assigned. Data collected by the Church regarding member activity and convert retention rates is not released to the public. There are no numerical estimates available regarding the number of Acholi who have joined the Church worldwide.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Acholi appears positive. Additional branches may be organized in Gulu and Kitgum within the near future. The establishment of a district appears likely once there are at least three branches in Gulu. However, opportunities for growth among the Acholi will likely be only partially realized by the Church due to the enormous size of the Uganda Kampala Mission and reliance on foreign, full-time missionaries to establish congregations in additional cities. The Church may organize a separate mission one day to administer northern Uganda due to opportunities for growth, significant cultural and societal differences with central and southern Uganda, and the large population of Uganda (35.9 million). However, past experience in other Sub-Saharan African nations suggests that a separate mission to administer northern Uganda will become more likely once there are multiple districts or stakes in the area and when the international size of the current Uganda Kampala Mission is reduced. The Church may determine to translate basic proselytism and gospel study materials into Acholi once there are a sufficient number of members in need of these materials to promote gospel study and testimony development.

- [1] "Acholi - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 18 May 2015. <http://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Acholi-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>
- [2] "Acholi," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 16 May 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ach>
- [3] "Acholi," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 16 May 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ach>
- [4] "Acholi," Joshua Project, retrieved 16 May 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10149
- [5] "Uganda," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 19 May 2015. <http://www.citypopulation.de/Uganda-Cities.html>
- [6] "Language: Acholi," Joshua Project, retrieved 19 May 2015. <http://joshuaproject.net/languages/ach>
- [7] "2014 Annual Statistical Report," <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2014.pdf>
- [8] "Northern Uganda Field (2012-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 18 May 2015. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2646371
- [9] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 18 May 2015. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_YBBXHC
- [10] <http://www.jw.org/ach/>