



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Igbo of Nigeria

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Overview

Native to southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo, or Ibo, are the third most populous ethnolinguistic people in the country and number approximately 33 million.^[1] Nigerian states, entirely or partially within the Igbo homelands, include Abia, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and Rivers. The most recent estimate for the number of native Igbo speakers is 18 million.^[2] Igbo is one of only three languages native to Nigeria that has provincial status as Igbo is the de facto provincial language of southeastern Nigeria^[3] and spoken by many as a language for interethnic communication. Eight additional languages pertain to the Igbo branch of the Benue-Congo language family^[4] and are primarily spoken in Ebonyi and Rivers States. The Igbo are homogenously Christian (98.7%) and primarily adhere to Protestant, Anglican, and Independent denominations.^[5] The LDS Church has maintained a presence in the Igbo homelands since the late 1970s/early 1980s.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church's administration of the Igbo 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 Igbo is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

Self-identified groups of prospective Latter-day Saints in Nigeria began to hold worship services and request baptism as early as the 1960s. Although most of these members appeared to pertain to the Efik and Ibibio ethnolinguistic groups, many also appeared to be Igbo. Visa delays and political conflict delayed the arrival of full-time missionaries until the late 1970s.^[6] The Church organized the first branches in the Igbo homelands during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first converts in Aba joined the Church in 1981 and the Church organized a district in Aba in 1984.^[7] The Church organized its first mission headquartered in the Igbo homelands in 1988 – the same year the Church created its first stake in Nigeria in Aba. There was one stake and one district (Owerri) that operated in the Igbo homelands in 1988.^[8] The Church reported 300 Melchizedek Priesthood holders, sacrament meeting attendance percentages between 44-75%, and 2,300 members in the new stake.^[9]

Stake and district growth has accelerated in the Igbo homelands within the past decade. Additional stakes have been organized since the creation of the original Aba Nigeria Stake in 1998, including stakes in Owerri (1998), Aba Ogbor Hill (2006), Enugu (2014), Umuahia (1996-2005, 2014 [returned to district status from 2005-2014, stake reestablished in 2014]), Abak (2015), Okpuala Ngwa (2015), and Aba Nigeria South (2015). The number of stakes totaled one in 1988 and two in 1996, three in 1998, two in 2005, three in 2006, five in 2014, and seven in 2015. The Church currently operates four districts in the Igbo homelands headquartered in Onitsha (1988), Ikot Ekpene (2009), Mbaise (2010), and Asaga Ohafia (2014). There are two stakes (Port Harcourt East [2011] and Port Harcourt West [2003]) and two districts (Abakaliki [2014] and Okrika [2009]) headquartered outside of the Igbo homelands that include at least one congregation within the Igbo homelands. The Abak Nigeria Stake and Ikot Ekpene Nigeria District primarily administers Efik/Ibibio populations.

The Church in Nigeria operates its only temple in the country within the Igbo homeland. The Aba Nigeria Temple was announced in 2000 and dedicated in 2005. The first Nigerian native to serve as the temple president began his service in 2013 and appeared to be of Igbo descent.^[10]

Local members in Nigeria and returned missionaries who have served missions in Nigeria report that the Igbo constitute the

majority of members in many locations outside of the Igbo homelands. One member in the Asaba Nigeria District reported that Igbo members constituted the majority of his branch in mid-2015. Members in Lagos and Asaba have also reported that the Igbo constitute the majority or a sizable minority in their congregations.

Many LDS materials and all LDS scriptures are available in Igbo. The Church translated The Book of Mormon in its entirety in 2000.^[11] The Church published translations of all LDS scriptures (e.g. The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price) into Igbo in 2007.^[12] Additional Igbo translations include both recent church proclamations (i.e. The Living Christ, The Family: A Proclamation to the World), General Conference Addresses, support and administrative materials for various priesthood and auxiliary organizations,^[13] the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith Pamphlet, and Gospel Fundamentals.^[14]

A map displaying the Igbo homelands and LDS congregations within these homelands can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Church headquarters one temple, seven stakes, and four districts within the Igbo homelands. Rapid growth has occurred within the past decade as evidenced by the number of stakes in the region increasing from two to seven and the current operation of four districts – three of which having been organized within the past six years. Receptivity to LDS doctrines and missionary activity has appeared high in many predominately Igbo areas. Growth among the Igbo has played an important role in the establishment of the Church in many cities outside of the Igbo homelands such as Lagos. Self-sufficiency in church administration appears good in many areas of Nigeria, whether in the Igbo homelands or not, due to the strength and devotion of many Igbo members.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures into Igbo. Few African languages have had the entire Book of Mormon, let alone the Doctrine and Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price, translated. Igbo translations of the scriptures provide good opportunities for gospel scholarship and testimony development among investigators and members as they read and study the scriptures.

The Church has established a presence in several rural areas of the Igbo homelands where there are high population densities. The Okpuala Ngwa Nigeria Stake services towns and villages in central Abia State where there are no traditional urban areas. The Mbaise Nigeria District also administers rural communities in eastern Imo State. Sizable portions of additional organizational units, such as the Owerri Nigeria Stake, include several branches that service rural communities. The establishment of the Church in these rural areas has been a rarity for the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa due to reluctance from mission and area leadership to oversee congregations in often more difficult and more remote locations compared to urban areas. Significant growth has nonetheless occurred in these locations, suggesting good potential for growth if the proper vision, resources, and leadership oversight is maintained.

Opportunities

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 Igbo 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 mid-70,000s. Reports from mission leadership throughout Sub-Saharan Africa note that local members have served full-time missions in larger numbers during this surge. Leadership at the Ghana Missionary Training Center reported that 707 Nigerian members underwent training for full-time missionary service during 2014 and 2015. Sizable numbers of Nigerian natives serving missions, as well as thousands of African natives serving from other African nations, suggest excellent opportunities for international leadership to assign larger numbers of missionaries to serve in Nigeria and open previously unreached areas to missionary work.

Many, if not most, Igbo reside in cities, towns, and villages outside the geographical boundaries of stakes and districts. Many local government areas (LGAs) in the Igbo homelands have densely populated rural areas, presenting good prospects for the Church to reach large populations with fewer mission resources. Anambra State has many rural areas with significant rural populations. Some locations appear so densely populated that these areas may be better described as low-density urban communities. Mission leaders identifying isolated members in these communities, holding cottage meetings or special firesides to present a simple lesson on the Church, and organizing member groups if feasible provide good opportunities for national outreach expansion. Currently unreached areas that appear most favorable to target include central and southern Anambra State, Owerri State outside of the Owerri Nigeria Stake, southern Abia State outside of the Aba metropolitan area, and western Akwa Ibom State.

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 to function. 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 achieving good convert retention and member activity rates as additional cities and towns open to proselytism. Cities without an LDS presence in the Igbo homelands that appear most favorable to target with church-planting tactics include Abiriba, Ihiagwa, Nnewi, and Okigwe.

Many Igbo speak English as a second language, especially in the most populous cities of Aba, Onitsha, Owerri, and Port Harcourt. The utilization of English translations of church materials may adequately meet local needs among English-speaking Igbo. Sizable numbers of bilingual Igbo speakers suggest that the Igbo appear well suited to integrate with other Nigerian peoples who exhibit proficiency in English.

Humanitarian and development projects appear a meaningful and effective method to expand an LDS presence due to low living standards. Latter-day Saints could employ strategies for economic self-reliance among the Igbo 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 successes 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

Two of the three current missions that administer portions of the Igbo homelands have large administrative burdens, resulting in reduced capacity to extend specialized outreach among the Igbo. The Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission administered nine stakes and four districts as of late 2015 – a large number of organizational units for a single mission in West Africa to service, especially considering several stakes appear likely to divide within the near future due to rapid congregational growth. The Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission also includes 16 million people who reside within the boundaries – a significant target population for a predominantly Christian demographic. Although the Nigeria Enugu Mission administers a mere two stakes and three districts, more than 100 million people live within the mission boundaries. As a result, the Nigeria Enugu Mission has limited capacity and resources to extend Igbo-specific outreach as only one stake and one district in the mission are headquartered in the Igbo homelands and the Igbo constitute a tiny minority in the overall population that resides within the mission boundaries. The future Nigeria Owerri Mission has good potential to improve the Church's efforts to target the Igbo people, but only within Abia and Imo States – the only states within the new mission's boundaries.

Security concerns have created challenges for the Church in Nigeria. The Aba Nigeria Temple closed temporary in 2009 due to violence in the area^[15] and did not reopen for one year. Four Nigerian missionaries serving in Emohua, Nigeria were abducted and held hostage for five days in February 2007. Their captors likely kidnapped the missionaries believing they had a connection with the oil industry. Local Nigerian members were instrumental in their release, which was done peacefully and with no ransom paid.^[16] These safety concerns within or nearby the Igbo homelands pose challenges for assigning more missionaries to the area, opening unreached locations to the Church, and engaging in traditional LDS proselytism approaches.

Several Nigerian missions currently administer the Igbo homelands. The administration of a single ethnolinguistic group by multiple missions can result in inconsistent mission outreach. Missions may significantly differ by policies and vision regarding ethnolinguistic-specific outreach, proselytism programs in specific languages, and the expansion of missionary activity into previously unreached areas. Although the administration of the Igbo homelands by a single mission appears wholly inadequate due to the size and population of the Igbo homelands, a lack of communication between mission presidents has been shown in other areas of the world to pose difficulties in extending specialized outreach among a particular ethnolinguistic group.

Although all LDS scriptures are available in Igbo, many basic LDS materials have yet to be translated. Igbo translations of manuals or short instructional books such as Gospel Principles, Preach My Gospel, Our Heritage, and Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple remain unavailable. Additionally, booklets accompanying the missionary lessons have not been translated into Igbo. The translation of these and additional gospel study and missionary materials appears needed to foster testimony development, member-missionary participation, and gospel scholarship among Igbo speakers.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Nigeria has experienced steady to rapid growth among multiple ethnolinguistic groups that have populations of at least one million and a sizable numbers of Christians. The Church operates seven stakes, three districts, and approximately 80 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 eight stakes, five districts, and approximately 120 wards and branches among Efik/Ibibio peoples in Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State. Rapid growth has occurred among Efik/Ibibio 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 six 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. The Church organized its first branches in the Tiv homeland in 2015. In late 2015, the Church reported two branches in the Tiv homelands in two cities: Makurdi and Otukpo. Additional peoples or people clusters in Nigeria with sizable numbers of Christians, populations of one million or more, and no LDS presence include the Ebira and Igala. The Church has translated General Conference sessions into Yoruba, Igbo, and Efik for many years.

Multiple missionary-focused Christian groups with an international presence maintain a widespread presence among the Igbo.

Evangelicals number among the largest religious groups and claim 37% of the Igbo population.^[17] Jehovah's Witnesses have extended specialized outreach among the Igbo throughout Nigeria and operate over 500 congregations that conduct worship services in the Igbo language.^[18] Witnesses have translated their official website, jw.org, into Igbo.^[19] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence among the Igbo. Adventists reported nearly 86,000 members, 419 churches ^[20] (large or well-established congregations), and 291 companies (small or recently-established congregations) within the Igbo homelands during 2014. Adventists print church publications into Igbo.^[21] The Church of the Nazarene appears to maintain a minimal presence among the Igbo, if any presence at all. Nazarenes in Nigeria primarily operate in the Lagos area and in Akwa Ibom among the Efik people.^[22]

Limitations

Few reports were available regarding the ethnic composition of LDS congregations within the Igbo homelands. 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 Igbo homelands. No official information was available regarding current member activity or convert retention rates within the Igbo homelands.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to experience growth among the Igbo appears favorable within the next decade. The Church has established multiple centers of strength within the Igbo homelands (e.g. Aba and Enugu) and has reported good success and progress expanding into rural communities (e.g. Okpuala Ngwa). Additional stakes and districts appear likely to be organized within the near future. The organization of a mission headquartered within the heart of the Igbo homelands in 2016 (the Nigeria Owerri Mission) has tremendous potential to expand outreach and further saturate urban areas. Prospects appear favorable for the Church to open additional areas to missionary work and establish congregations, particularly in densely populated rural areas in Imo and Abia States. Translations of additional LDS materials into Igbo appear favorable within the foreseeable future, but will strongly depend on a need for monolingual Igbo speakers to utilize these materials.

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