

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Efik-Ibibio of Nigeria

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Overview

Native to extreme southeastern Nigeria, the Efik-Ibibio constitute a collection of related peoples that number nearly nine million.[1] Provided with population estimates, the most populous Efik-Ibibio peoples include the Ibibio (5.61 million), Anaang (2.56 million), and Efik (635,000). Each of these Efik-Ibibio subgroups speak their respective languages, namely Ibibio, Anaang, and Efik. Historically, the Efik language has been utilized as a language for religious services, business, media, and the market among Ibibio-Efik peoples and other ethnolinguistic groups native to Cross River State.[2] The Efik-Ibibio homelands include Akwa Ibom state and extreme southern Cross Rivers state. The most recent estimates indicate Efik-Ibibio peoples are 99% Christian.[3] The LDS Church has maintained a presence in the Efik-Ibibio homelands since the late 1970s. No other ethnolinguistic group in Nigeria has experienced as rapid LDS growth as the Efik-Ibibio.

This case study reviews the history of the Church's administration of the Efik-Ibibio 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 Efik-Ibibio 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 holding worship services and requesting baptism as early as the 1960s. Most of these members appeared to pertain to the Efik and Ibibio ethnolinguistic groups.[4] Visa delays and political conflict delayed the arrival of full-time missionaries until the late 1970s.[5] The Church in Africa organized its first branch to service black Africans within the Efik-Ibibio homelands. The Aboh Branch was created on November 21st, 1978 in the village of Ikot Eyo.[6] The Church reported four districts headquartered in the Efik-Ibibio homelands by May 1988 located in Calabar, Etinan, Ikot Ekong, and Uyo.[7] At the time, there were only three districts (Benin City, Owerri, and Lagos) and one stake (Aba) that operated in Nigeria outside of the Efik-Ibibio homelands.[8] Nigerian missions headquartered in Lagos, Aba, and Port Harcourt administered the Efik-Ibibio homelands during the 1980s and 1990s. The Church organized the Uyo Nigeria Mission from a division of the Nigeria Port Harcourt Mission in 2002.[9] Later relocated to Calabar and renamed the Nigeria Calabar Mission, the mission has administered the entire homelands of the Efik-Ibibio people for the past 14 years.

Steady stake and district growth has occurred in the Efik-Ibibio homelands within the past two decades. The Church currently operates eight stakes in the Efik-Ibibio homelands headquartered in Eket (1996), Etinan (1996), Ikot Akpaden (1999), Nsit Ubium (1999), Uyo (2001), Calabar (2002), Abak (2015), and Calabar South (2015). The number of stakes totaled two in 1996, four in 1999, six in 2002, and eight in 2015. The Church currently operates five districts in the Efik-Ibibio homelands headquartered in Akamkpa (1998), Ibiono (2008), Ikot Ekpene (2009), Oron (2009), and Ibesikpo (2010). The population within the geographical boundaries of all of these stakes and districts primarily consists of Anaang, Efik, or Ibibio speakers. The Aba Nigeria Ogbor Hill Stake includes one branch located in the Efik-Ibibio homelands in Ikot Akpan Anwa. There were 135 congregations within the Efik-Ibibio homeland as of early 2016. A returned missionary who served in the Nigeria Calabar Mission between 2013 and 2015 reported that most wards and branches had between 40 and 100 active members. The Church in Nigeria reported 22 Efik-speaking congregations and 18 Ibibio-speaking congregations as of early 2016. Of these 40 congregations, 38 operated in the Nigeria Calabar Mission within the Efik-Ibibio homelands.[10]

The Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Efik in 1983.[11] The Efik translation of select passages of the Book of Mormon is available online in a .pdf format.[12] Many General Conference addresses have been translated into

Efik.[13] The monthly First Presidency message has been translated into Efik for many years.[14] Additional Efik translations include a family guidebook, hymns and children songs, The Gospel of Jesus Christ study book to accompany the missionary lessons, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith Pamphlet, and Gospel Fundamentals (old edition).[15]

A map displaying the Efik-Ibibio homeland and LDS congregations within these homelands can be found here.

Successes

The Church reports a widespread presence in many areas of the Efik-Ibibio homelands. Approximately 20% of the geographical area within the Efik-Ibibio homeland is located within the boundaries of stakes or districts. Most of the congregations in the area operate in densely populated rural communities. No other area on the Afro-Eurasian landmass has as many congregations concentrated in rural communities as the Efik-Ibibio homelands. LDS membership appears to account for approximately one percent of the population in Akwa Ibom State. Some local government areas (LGAs) predominantly inhabited by the Efik-Ibibio may be as high as 3% LDS such as Nsit Ubium. There are scores of small towns and villages with their own LDS unit. Some wards and branches in Nsit Ubium, Onna, and Etinan LGAs appear to operate in villages where only a few thousand people reside. 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 administer 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 in additional rural areas of Nigeria if the proper vision, resources, and leadership oversight is maintained.

Local leadership development and the self-sufficiency of congregations has been a major accomplishment for the Church among the Efik-Ibibio. Three stakes are headquartered in rural communities. To contrast, no other stakes in Africa, Asia, or Europe solely operate and service rural areas. The growth of the Church among the Efik-Ibibio likely played a significant role in the decision by the Church to construct its sole Nigerian temple within close proximity of the Efik-Ibibio homelands. Additionally, the Church in Nigeria operates 40 congregations that conduct worship services in the Efik or Ibibio languages.

The Church has translated select passages of the Book of Mormon and a handful of gospel study materials into Efik. The speedy translation of the Book of Mormon into Efik within less than five years after the organization of the first branch in the Efik-Ibibio homelands is a significant accomplishment. The translation of monthly First Presidency messages and General Conference addresses provides gospel study material for Efik speakers who exhibit limited proficiency in English.

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 Efik-Ibibio 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. The net increase of members serving full-time missionaries totals 17,000 – a 28% increase in the size of the worldwide missionary force in less than five 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.

Most Efik-Ibibio reside in cities, towns, and villages outside the geographical boundaries of stakes and districts under the jurisdiction of the Nigeria Calabar Mission Branch. Most of these unreached populations live within close proximity to stakes and districts. As a result, there appear excellent opportunities for the Church to open member groups or branches in previously unreached or lesser-reached communities. There are at least seven local government areas (LGAs) in the Efik-Ibibio homelands where no LDS congregation operates. Most of these LGAs consist of densely populated rural areas, presenting good prospects for the Church to reach large populations with comparatively few mission resources. 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. Unreached LGAs that appear most favorable to target include Etim Ekpo, Ikot Abasi, Ini, Obot Akara, Ukanafun, and Uruan as approximately 100,000 or more people reside in each of these LGAs.

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 achieving good convert retention and member activity rates as additional cities and towns open to proselytism. Arochukwu appears the most favorable unreached city within or nearby the Efik-Ibibio homelands for mission leaders to implement a church-planting approach.

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

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

English language use for church meetings and formal proselytism efforts in most locations within the Efik-Ibibio homelands constitutes the greatest barrier to LDS growth. Several reports from recently returned full-time missionaries in the Nigeria Calabar Mission note most Efik-Ibibio exhibit little to no proficiency in English. As a result, full-time missionaries must rely on local members to translate the missionary lessons into Efik-Ibibio languages. Returned missionaries report many Efik-Ibibio converts become inactive shortly after baptism due to their limited proficiency in English and problems with gospel comprehension and social integration among English-speaking members in their congregation. It is unclear why the Church continues to use the English language for church services and missionary work in many congregations within the Efik-Ibibio homelands as the Church has a well-established leadership base of Efik speakers and has translated a handful of church materials into the Efik language. Holding church services in the Efik language, particularly in additional congregations in rural areas that are designated as English speaking, appears greatly needed in order to improve convert retention rates, accelerate growth, and expand outreach into additional locations.

Security concerns have created challenges for the Church in Nigeria. The Aba Nigeria Temple closed temporary in 2009 due to violence in the area[16] 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.[17] These safety concerns within or nearby the Efik-Ibibio homelands pose challenges for assigning more missionaries to the area, opening unreached locations to the Church, and engaging in traditional LDS proselytism approaches.

The Nigeria Calabar Mission administers one of the largest number of stakes and districts among missions in Sub-Saharan Africa. Currently eight stakes and five districts pertain to the mission. The large administrative burden of the mission poses challenges for mission leaders to maintain current proselytism areas, let alone open additional ones in previously unreached areas. The organization of a second mission to administer the Efik-Ibibio appears needed due to steady growth in the region. Uyo appears the most likely candidate to headquarter a second mission in the region within the foreseeable future due to its large city population and central location in Akwa Ibom State.

Most LDS materials have yet to be translated into Efik. The Church has yet to translate the entire Book of Mormon and remaining LDS scriptures. Efik translations for manuals or short instructional books such as Gospel Principles, Preach My Gospel, Our Heritage, and Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple remain unavailable. Additionally, all but one booklet accompanying the missionary lessons have not been translated into Efik. The translation of these and additional gospel study and missionary materials appears needed to foster testimony development and gospel scholarship among Efik speakers.

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 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 one temple, seven stakes, four districts, and approximately 100 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 and a small number of gospel study and proselytism materials have also been translated. 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 Efik-Ibibio. Evangelicals number among the largest religious groups and claim 33-34% of the Efik-Ibibio population.[18] Jehovah's Witnesses have extended specialized outreach among the Efik-Ibibio throughout Nigeria and operate over 400 congregations that conduct worship services in the Efik language.[19] Witnesses have translated their official website, jw.org, into Efik.[20] The Seventh Day Adventist Church has reported slow growth and maintains a modest presence among the Efik-Ibibio. Adventists reported 5,317 members, 20 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 72 companies (small or recently-established congregations) within the Efik-Ibibio homelands during in 2014.[21] Adventists print church publications in Efik.[22] The Church of the Nazarene maintains a modest presence among the Efik-Ibibio. Nazarenes report 39

Efik-speaking congregations that primarily operate in Akwa Ibom State.[23]

Limitations

The Church does not publish the number of members by language use 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 Efik-Ibibio homelands. No information was available regarding statistics such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of members serving full-time missions, convert retention rates, the number of temple recommend holders, or the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the Nigeria Calabar Mission.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to experience growth among the Efik-Ibibio appears favorable within the next decade. Additional stakes and districts appear likely to be organized within the near future, particularly in Akwa Ibom State where five of the six stakes appear large enough to divide. Prospects appear favorable for the Church to divide the Nigeria Calabar Mission and organize a separate mission headquartered in Uyo. A division of the mission would significantly improve prospects for the Church to expand outreach within the Efik-Ibibio homelands due to a smaller geographic area and greater resources available to administer a smaller target population. Translations of additional LDS materials into Efik, and the use of the Efik language in church meetings and proselytism on a more widespread scale, appears greatly needed. However, it is unclear whether the Church will adopt Efik as an official language for proselytism and church administration in the Nigeria Calabar Mission due to insistence from mission and area leaders to use English for official church business and formal proselytism efforts.

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