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Centers of Strength Policy: LDS Growth Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview of the Centers of Strength Policy

The "centers of strength" or "building from centers of strength" policy is a policy in the LDS Church that has guided the expansion and allocation of mission resources for at least the past two decades. The primary principle of this policy centers on a greater allotment of mission resources to areas with larger numbers of church members rather than in locations with few or no members. The goal of the policy in most countries focuses on the allocation of missionary resources to select locations to augment active membership by baptizing and retaining new converts, strengthening current active membership, training local leadership, and reactivating inactive or less-active members. Once church leaders determine that a critical mass of active membership has been sufficiently stable and self-sufficient for a particular city or area, outreach expansion may occur into previously unreached locations with the aim to establish additional centers of strength. Although it appears counterintuitive to assign the vast majority of missionary manpower to locations with comparatively large LDS populations, the logic in this philosophy converges on assigning missionaries to locations where there are a sufficient number of ordinary members to provide teaching referrals, local leadership support, and investigator and new convert fellowship.

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Centers of Strength Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Several church leaders have made statements regarding the centers of strength policy in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1994, Elder James O. Mason of the Seventy noted in a General Conference address regarding missionary activity in Sub-Saharan Africa that "efforts are focused to create centers of strength. The goal is to establish deep pools of leadership that will become the foundation for future Church expansion."^[1] In 2008, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf noted, "in some parts of Africa, we could baptize full villages...We could immediately explode our membership. We're going slowly to have sufficient leadership."^[2]

The Church has implemented the centers of strength policy in few areas of the world as stringently as in Sub-Saharan Africa. This has been evident by extremely limited national outreach in most countries despite an LDS presence for many years or decades. Of the 49 countries and territories in Sub-Saharan Africa, 34 have at least one official LDS branch functioning. Of these 34 countries, nine have wards or branches functioning in only one city (Benin, Burundi, Central African Republic, Djibouti, Gabon, Namibia, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Togo) and five have wards or branches functioning in only two cities (Cameroon, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, and the Republic of the Congo). In other words, the Church operates in only one or two cities per country among 14 of the 34 countries (41%) of Sub-Saharan Africa with an LDS presence. The Church in only nine countries (Cape Verde, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe) has officially reported congregations operating in over ten cities, towns, and villages and the Church in all nine of these countries has had a presence for at least 20 years. In contrast, the Church has had a presence for at least 20 years in only two of the nine countries that currently have a ward or branch in only one city (the Central African Republic and Namibia) and four of the six countries that currently have a ward or branch in two cities (Cameroon, Lesotho, Mauritius, and the Republic of the Congo). Eleven of the 34 Sub-Saharan African countries have wards and branches in more than two but less than ten cities including Cote d'Ivoire (nine), Mozambique (seven), Botswana (six), Reunion (five), Zambia (five), Ethiopia (four), Sierra Leone (four), Swaziland (four), Angola (three), Liberia (three), and Tanzania (three). At least 14 of the 34 reached countries have at least one dependent unit operating in a city, town, or village without a ward or branch.

The extremely limited presence of the Church in many of these countries has not been attributed to low receptivity or restrictions on religious freedom. Rather, extremely few mission resources assigned to these countries and emphasis from mission and area leaders to focus on building the Church in select locations has been the primary reason for a lack of national outreach expansion. Local leadership development problems has also contributed to delays in national outreach expansion as church

leaders place greater priority on rectifying these challenges before opening additional areas to proselytism. The Church has often focused on increasing the number of full-time missionaries assigned to a country in proportion to the number of local members serving full-time missions from each country.

Reasons for the Centers of Strength Policy in Africa

The Church in Sub-Saharan Africa has consistently implemented a centers of strength policy for national outreach expansion, concentration of missionary resources, and church growth for several reasons.

First, the Church has limited mission resources allocated to Sub-Saharan Africa. The Church has relied on only increasing the number of non-African missionaries assigned to missions in the region as the number of native African members serving missions has increased. This approach of commensurately increasing North America missionary manpower as African missionary manpower increases has fostered greater self-sufficiency for the Church in some areas but at the expense of delaying the opening of countless productive areas to proselytism efforts. Most cities have never had an LDS witness and consequently the Church has been unable to gain converts to send on missions from these locations. There has been hesitancy for mission leaders to assign nonnative missionaries to previously unreached cities and towns, especially if church leaders know little about safety and political issues in these unreached locations.

Second, the Church has experienced high receptivity in the few areas that currently have wards and branches established. Mission and area leaders have delegitimized the opening of additional cities to the Church as many already reached areas are underserved and have yielded only a small fraction of potential growth that can be harnessed. Consequently the Church has built up centers of strength in one or two major cities in nearly half of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in which it reports an official presence. For example, the Church in Togo continues to operate in only the capital and most populous city of Lome yet has experienced rapid growth as the number of branches has increased from one in 2005 to eleven in early 2013. In Sierra Leone, the number of cities with a ward or branch increased from two to four within the past decade and the number of congregations increased from 17 to 28. In Nigeria, the Church has a pervasive presence in Benin City where approximately 40 wards operate yet only one branch operates in the vast suburban and rural areas surrounding the city. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Church has rapidly opened additional units in all major cities with stakes and districts at present yet has established only a handful of new congregations in previously unreached cities within the past decade.

Third, Sub-Saharan Africa has presented mission and area leaders with unique challenges due to poverty, poorly developed transportation systems, political unrest and civil war, corruption, and the syncretism of indigenous religions and Christianity and Islam. Church leaders have cautiously expanded to new areas after carefully evaluating safety conditions in order to mitigate risk of the injury or kidnapping of full-time missionaries. The Church only assigns black African missionaries to serve in some countries due to safety concerns for non-black African missionaries such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, and Burundi. Some senior missionaries undergo special training for how to behave if they are kidnapped due to pervasive crime, corruption, and political instability in some countries. Poorly developed transportation and country infrastructure has made many areas difficult to access from mission headquarters resulting in deterrence or refusal to visit some locations with isolated members petitioning church leaders for the establishment of an official group or branch. Church leaders must weigh the option of organizing new units in locations where contact with mission and area leadership may be limited and where infrequent and possibly inconsistent administrative support would likely be provided. The Church has had concerns in maintaining doctrinal purity and avoiding apostasy in these situations. For example, the Church has had isolated members and self-affiliated members in many areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo but the Church has often taken years or even decades to formally establish a church presence in these locations due to limited contact, distance from established outreach centers, and concerns for maintaining doctrinal purity and proper church administration. The high degree of syncretism between indigenous African religions and Christian and Islam raises concern for church leaders who must ensure that LDS teachings remain pure and unadulterated from traditional beliefs. Many Sub-Saharan African countries report some of the most severe and pervasive poverty and corruption in the world. Corruption has infiltrated the Church in a few locations within the past decade creating a major setback for leadership development and church growth. The Church focuses on meeting basic humanitarian needs before meeting spiritual needs, resulting in diminished proselytism and outreach expansion efforts in areas where many live in deep poverty.

Comparative Growth

The Church has reported a more pervasive presence in nearly all other world regions in which it has a presence in most countries. For example, in Eastern Europe the Church has a limited presence in most countries but has established congregations in most cities with over 100,000 with the exception of Russia and Poland. LDS national outreach expansion efforts in Eastern European countries occurred rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s but have slowed dramatically since the early 2000s. In Latin America, most countries have had only a handful of new cities opened to missionary work for the first time within the past five years due to low member activity and convert retention rates in locations that are already reached by the Church. Mission resources in these locations have often been channeled into relatively fruitless reactivation efforts that are mostly or entirely headed by full-time missionaries. The Church has followed a centers of strength policy in most countries worldwide but church leaders have more readily opened previously unreached or lesser-reached cities to missionary work than in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa due to greater amounts of mission resources available, higher living standards, and greater political and societal stability. However, the Church in only a handful of countries has experienced rapid national outreach expansion such as Papua New Guinea and Ghana. The Church in these countries has been exceptions to the norm because of significant increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned. In Papua New Guinea, the vast majority of the population resides in rural areas. This has resulted in church leaders more readily focusing on establishing larger numbers

of centers of strength than in other countries in order to reduce travel times due to the lack of urbanized space.

Other nontraditional, proselytism-focused Christian groups do not implement a centers of strength approach and consequently report a significantly more widespread presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists report an official church presence in all but a few Sub-Saharan African countries. These denominations maintain at least one congregation in most administrative divisions in countries where these denominations operate. Witnesses and Adventists have had a longer presence in Sub-Saharan Africa than the LDS Church and also are more aggressive in expanding outreach. Consequently both denominations report several Sub-Saharan African countries that rank within the ten countries that have the most Adventists and Witnesses such as Zambia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Nigeria. On the other hand, the LDS Church does not report a single Sub-Saharan African country within the top ten countries with the most Latter-day Saints.

Limitations

The Church publishes little information referring to the centers of strength policy despite its widespread implementation since the early 1990s. Data is scant on how mission and area leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa determine when to begin expanding outreach as opposed to building up centers of strength in two or three selected cities. The Church does not publish data on the number of dependent units worldwide or by country. Consequently it is difficult to assess how many of these units currently operate in each Sub-Saharan African country today and how they affect national outreach expansion trends and the implementation of the centers of strength policy. Limited data from former and current mission presidents and area leaders make it difficult to precisely assess why outreach expansion efforts are delayed for particular countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Future Prospects

Massive increases in the worldwide full-time missionary force that began in early 2013, improved awareness and interest by mission and area leaders to open additional locations to missionary work in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the creation of five new missions in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2013 suggest that the Church will take greater interest in expanding missionary work into additional cities, towns, and villages within the foreseeable future but in a coordinated and methodological manner. Recent successes establishing member groups and creating small branches in lesser-reached major cities will likely take the forefront of outreach expansion efforts for the near future due to easy access, a local leadership base, good receptivity, and high population densities in these locations. More aggressive outreach expansion efforts will be required for the Church to make more significant headway reaching Sub-Saharan African populations which number are among the most receptive to LDS teaching but also among the least reached in the world.

[1] Mason, James O. "The Kingdom Progresses in Africa," General Conference, October 1994.
<https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1994/10/the-kingdom-progresses-in-africa>

[2] Gorski, Eric. "Global Mormon growth brings challenges," Associated Press, 1 February 2008.
http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2008/02/01/global_mormon_growth_brings_challenges