

Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

>

Rethinking Centers of Strength: The Case of Cote d'Ivoire

Author: Matt Martinich

Originally Posted: July 28th, 2014

Updated: September 18th, 2015

Overview

The West African country of Cote d'Ivoire has experienced some of the most impressive LDS growth trends within the past decade in the worldwide Church. Since 2012, the LDS Church has reported accelerated congregational growth and national outreach expansion. Number of cities with an official ward or branch more than doubled from seven at the beginning of 2012 to 25 in August 2015. The most rapid expansion has occurred in central and southwestern Cote d'Ivoire where the number of cities with an official congregation (ward or branch) tripled from three to 14 and the number of wards and branches quadruped from seven to 33 during this three-and-a-half year period. These developments stand in stark contrast to the preceding decade from year-end 2001 to year-end 2011 when the number of cities with a ward or branch increased from three to seven and the number of congregations increased from 18 to 42. Rapid growth necessitated the organization of a second Ivorian mission in 2014. The opening of so many previously unreached cities coupled with the simultaneous organization of multiple branches in several of these cities points to a significant change in how mission and area leaders have interpreted and implemented the Church's "Centers of Strength" policy. Thus far these reformed church growth tactics have yielded impressive and unprecedented growth in Cote d'Ivoire.

//

This case study reviews the traditional interpretation of the centers of strength policy and its implementation in Cote d'Ivoire since the establishment of an LDS presence. Opportunities for continued national outreach expansion and church growth in Cote d'Ivoire are evaluated. Challenges to future LDS outreach expansion and the centers of strength policy are examined. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

NOTE: There are no recent government figures for city and town populations. Only population estimates are available, and the accuracy of some of these figures appears questionable.

Traditional Interpretation of the Centers of Strength Policy

The "centers of strength" or "building from centers of strength" policy is a policy that has guided the expansion and allocation of mission resources for at least the past two decades within the LDS Church. The philosophy 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 aims to allocate the bulk of missionary resources into select locations in order 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 members has become 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 approach converges on assigning missionaries to locations where there are a sufficient number and activity level of ordinary members providing teaching referrals, local leadership support, and investigator and new convert fellowship.

The centers of strength policy has often restricted outreach efforts to just a handful of the most populous cities in many nations and has contributed to a slowdown in international LDS membership and congregational growth rates within the past two decades. The Church in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, has operated an official branch for approximately two decades or more in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Mauritius, Namibia, the Republic of the Congo, and Tanzania

yet the Church currently reports an official presence in three or fewer cities in each of these nations. At times returned missionaries have reported that mission and area leaders discourage the opening of previously unreached cities under the premise of the centers of strength policy. Justification for delaying outreach expansion has centered on church leaders voicing a greater need to build up the Church in locations already reached by the Church until they become completely self-sufficient before exploring opportunities elsewhere. Unfortunately this logic has had catastrophic results worldwide as many congregations never become adequately self-sufficient, large numbers of missionaries assigned to a single unit can erode the independence of membership and leadership to administer the congregation, and populations in unreached areas generally become less receptive to missionary work as they remain untouched for years and even decades.

Centers of Strength Policy in Cote d'Ivoire: 1988-2003

Although the Church had organized branches in three cities (Abidjan, Bouake, and Yamoussoukro) within less than five years following the arrival of full-time missionaries to Cote d'Ivoire, no additional cities opened for missionary activity or had branches organized for the next decade due to mission and area leaders following a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy. In 2003 - 13 years following the organization of the first branch - there were only three cities where an official ward or branch operated, namely Abidjan, Bouake, and Yamoussoukro. Essentially all missionary and church growth efforts between the late 1980s and early 2000s concentrated on establishing a center of strength in Abidjan due to its large population, good accessibility, and growing LDS membership, and desire by mission and area leaders to establish a center of strength in the country. These efforts yielded good results as evidenced by 13 wards and two stakes operating within Abidjan by 2000; only 12 years following the organization of the first branch and the arrival of the first missionaries to the city. Stagnant growth appeared to occur in Yamoussoukro during this period as evidenced by only one branch operating in Yamoussoukro during the 1990s and early 2000s. Bouake appeared to experience some church growth success in the early 2000s as at least two branches operated and missionaries were assigned. This progress was short-lived however as by the mid-2000s branches in Bouake had closed and missionaries were removed due to the onset of the Ivorian civil war.

Ivorian missionaries and missionaries serving from other French-speaking African nations appeared to constitute the majority of missionaries assigned to the country during this period. Young elder missionaries serving from North America and Europe appeared to serve in small numbers during most years during this period until all non-Ivorian missionaries were evacuated in 2004.

By year-end 2003, the Church operated official congregations in Abidjan (21), Bouake (2-3), Yamoussoukro (1).

Centers of Strength Policy in Cote d'Ivoire: 2004-2011

The strengthening of the Church in Abidjan combined with increasing numbers of Ivorian members serving missions resulted in the Church gradually opening its first branches in several additional cities between 2004 and 2011, and organizing additional branches in Yamoussoukro in an effort to create a second center of strength in the country. The process of opening branches in several previously unreached cities and examining opportunities for the establishment of additional centers of strength once a self-sufficient center of strength was established is consistent with a traditional implementation of the centers of strength policy in most nations. Cities where the Church organized its first branch during this period included Grand-Bassam (2004), Divo (2006), San-Pedro (2006), Ahoutoue (2009), and Bingerville (2009). Three of these five cities (Ahoutoue, Bingerville, and Grand-Bassam) are located within close proximity to Abidjan, whereas two of these cities (Divo and San-Pedro) are located in areas of the country where there were no nearby cities with an LDS presence. Consistent with a traditional interpretation of the centers of strength policy, only one branch was organized in each of these locations. Growth in active membership ultimately resulted in the creation of a second branch in San-Pedro (2009) and Grand-Bassam (2010) due to a congregation-splitting approach to growth.

In the late 2000s, the Church organized three new branches in Yamoussoukro (N'Zuessy 1st - 2006, Kokrenou - 2008, and N'Zuessy 2nd - 2009). The organization of three new branches in Yamoussoukro following 14 years of only one branch functioning in the city indicates that additional congregations were most likely organized due to a combination of church leaders focusing on organizing small branches in lesser-reached areas of the city to reduce travel times and spur growth, and steady increases in active membership. Growth in active membership, the number of congregations, and the size and strength of local church leadership culminated in the creation of the Yamoussoukro Cote d'Ivoire District in 2009 - the first district to be organized outside of Abidjan.

Ivorian missionaries and missionaries serving from other French-speaking African nations constituted the vast majority of missionaries assigned to the country during this period. Young elder missionaries from North America and Europe served in small numbers only between 2008 and 2010 due to political instability and safety concerns.

By year-end 2011, the Church operated official congregations in Abidjan (30), Yamoussoukro (4), Grand-Bassam (2), San-Pedro (2), Ahoutoue (1), and Bingerville (1).

LDS Growth Trends: 2012-mid 2015

Prolific national outreach expansion and rapid membership and congregational growth have characterized LDS growth trends in

Cote d'Ivoire from early 2012 to present. These achievements were made possible by mission and area leaders more aggressively opening congregations in previously unreached areas of the country, and further saturating Abidjan and previously reached cities with additional congregations. This process occurred through both organizing new congregations from scratch (church planting) and splitting large congregations to organize more manageably-sized congregations (church splitting). These changes in church growth tactics reflect a revised interpretation of the centers of strength policy, such that encourages the steady opening of previously unreached cities to missionary work and the organization of multiple member groups within more populous urban areas. The opening of multiple member groups in previously unreached cities follows a church-planting approach to growth pioneered in Eastern Europe during the 1990s and revisited in Sunyani, Ghana in 2010. Although this new interpretation of the centers of strength model radically differs from its previous interpretation, the object of church growth tactics remains centered on establishing additional centers of strength but through an integrative church planting and church splitting approach. Cities were opened to missionary work throughout the southern half of the country and many were concentrated in the southwest. Church planting efforts were evident in the organization of the first branch in 18 previously unreached cities, namely Bouafle (2012), Meagui (2012), Bonoua (2013), Aboisso (2013), Gagnoa (2013), Ouragahio (2013), Daloa (2014), Adzope (2014), Soubre (2014), Bouake (2015), Issia (2015), Abengourou (2015), Bondoukou (2015), Akoupé (2015), Duekoue (2015), Azaguié (2015), Lakota (2015), and Sassandra (2015).

Seven of the 18 cities where the Church organized its first branch during this period have since had additional branches organized. The Church simultaneously organized multiple branches in two cities where no previous ward or branch operated, such as in Daloa and Gagnoa where six branches and two branches were initially organized, respectively. Mission leaders continued to engage in church planting approaches in some of these locations following the organization of the first branch or branches, such as in Bouafle where the number of branches increased from one to three and in Gagnoa where the number of branches increased from two to three within less than one year following the organization of the first branch or branches in either location. Additional cities where the first LDS branch has been organized since 2012 and where new branches have since been created include Abengourou (two new branches organized), Aboisso (one new branch), Adzope (one new branch), Meagui (one new branch), and Soubre (one new branch).

An integrative church planting and church splitting approach appeared to be implemented in some cities where the Church previously operated branches prior to 2012. In San-Pedro, the Church has organized three additional branches since 2013 thereby increasing the number of branches in the city from two to five. In Divo, the Church organized two new branches in 2013 possibly due to a combination of previously organizing member groups and splitting the original Divo Branch.

The division of wards with large numbers of active members appeared to be the driving force behind rapid congregational growth in Abidjan since 2012 as the number of congregations increased from 30 to 69. Unprecedented growth in some wards has necessitated the division of a single ward into three separate units within less than 18 months. In some extreme cases, the Church has undergone a one-to-three ward division within less than 18 months since the most recent ward division. Church planting efforts have appeared to be utilized in the creation of some of these new wards due to the proliferation of as many congregations within so short a period of time.

The Church made significant headway in augmenting the size and maturity of local priesthood leadership within cities that have had a more recent LDS establishment. In early 2014, growth in active membership and the increasing strength, maturity, and size of local church leadership permitted the Church to organize its first districts in Gagnoa and San-Pedro,

Only Ivorian and French-speaking African missionaries appeared to serve in the country during this period. Reports indicate that significant increases in the number of Ivorian members serving missions occurred resulting in the Church in Cote d'Ivoire becoming more than self-sufficient in meeting its full-time missionary needs. In April 2014, the Church announced that the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission would divide to create a second mission headquartered in Abidjan called the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan West Mission.

By August 2015, the Church operated official congregations in Abidjan (69), Daloa (6), San-Pedro (5), Yamoussoukro (4), Bouafle (3), Abengourou (3), Divo (3), Gagnoa (3), Aboisso (2), Adzope (2), Grand-Bassam (2), Meagui (2), Soubre (2), Ahoutoue (1), Akoupé (1), Azaguié (1), Bingerville (1), Bondoukou (1), Bonoua (1), Bouake (1), Duekoue (1), Issia (1), Lakota (1), Ouragahio (1), and Sassandra (1).

A map displaying the location of LDS congregations in Cote d'Ivoire can be found here.

Opportunities for Additional Outreach Expansion

With the recent proliferation of cities with an LDS presence and accelerating membership and congregational growth, there appear many opportunities to perpetuate these growth trends through church leaders continuing to implement the recent interpretation of the centers of strength policy. The most populous unreached cities present some of the greatest opportunities for growth due to high population densities that maximize the number of people reached by LDS missionary efforts and easier accessibility than many smaller cities and rural communities.

This section identifies several of the most populous unreached cities that appear favorable for the establishment of an LDS presence and church planting efforts.

Agborville

Prospects appear highly favorable for the Church to organize congregations and assign missionaries to Agborville due to close proximity to Abidjan, a sizable urban population possibly exceeding 100,000, and the opening of the first branch in the nearby city of Adzope in early 2014. The Abé are the traditional ethnolinguistic group in the area and primarily follow Christianity and indigenous beliefs. Other missionary-focused groups report a presence in Agborville and appear to experience steady growth. In 2014, Jehovah's Witnesses operated two congregations in the city.[1]

Dabou

Located a short distance west of Abidjan, Dabou presents excellent prospects for future LDS outreach due to a population likely exceeding 70,000 people and close proximity to mission headquarters. The Adioukrou people traditionally reside in the Dabou area and are 90% Christian.[2] These conditions suggest that the Church may organize a couple member groups simultaneously to maximize outreach and spur growth. Other missionary-focused groups operate in the city and operate multiple congregations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses who operated two congregations in 2014.[3]

Dimbokro

Located east of Yamoussoukro, Dimbokro likely has a population exceeding 70,000 people. The Baoulé people traditionally reside in the area and are 55% Christian, 34% Muslim, and 11% followers of indigenous religions.[4] Prospects may be favorable for organizing a single member group and a couple full-time missionary companionships, especially if there are any known Latter-day Saints that hold the Melchizedek Priesthood who reside in the city. Other missionary-focused groups operate in Dimbokro and have multiple congregations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses who operated two congregations in 2014.[5]

Sinfra

Nearly equidistant from Daloa, Gagnoa, and Yamousskro, Sinfra presents excellent opportunities for a future LDS presence due to recent successes with church planting tactics in nearby cities, a population likely exceeding 60,000 people, and easy accessibility from nearby cities with an LDS presence. Other missionary-focused groups maintain a presence, such as Jehovah's Witnesses who operated one congregation in 2014.[6]

Other Unreached Places

Notwithstanding recent rapid growth and an official LDS presence maintained for over 25 years, the Church has barely scratched the surface of its potential in Cote d'Ivoire. Many smaller cities unreached by the Church that were not identified previously in this case study present good opportunities for growth such as Korhogo, Man, Oume, and Sinfra. Only one-third of the national population resides in locations where wards and branches currently operate, indicating a significant need to reach the remaining two-thirds of the Ivorian population. A map displaying the location of most of the cities, towns, and villages in the country where there is no LDS presence can be found here.

Challenges

Future mission and area leadership reversing recent interpretations of the centers of strength policy for the Church in Cote d'Ivoire poses the greatest challenge for future growth in the country. Past experience in many areas of the world illustrates that the successful and efficient policies implemented by one mission president or area presidency can be totally reversed by the next group of church leaders, especially pertaining to maintaining reasonably high convert baptismal standards and the opening of additional cities to missionary work. Recent success throughout the Africa West Area with mission leaders implementing church planting strategies may persuade future mission and area leaders to continue the implementation and refinement of these approaches. However, instances when church planting efforts have been unsuccessful may dissuade future leaders from continuing these generally efficient approaches and result in a return to a church-splitting and more conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy.

The Church in Cote d'Ivoire has yet to reach the predominantly Muslim north where even the most populous cities such as Korhogo have never had an LDS presence established. Recent experiences by mission presidents and full-time missionaries serving in predominantly Muslim areas of northern Ghana suggest that moderate to slow growth may occur in these locations due to lower receptivity. It is unclear whether the Church in Cote d'Ivoire has implemented restrictions on teaching Muslims. Additionally, the Church does not have any resources developed to teach LDS doctrines and gospel principles to the understanding of those with a Muslim background. The development of these resources will likely improve receptivity and prospects for future growth if church leaders determine that such specialized resources are feasible and appropriate.

Limitations

Reports from missionaries currently serving or who have recently served in Cote d'Ivoire were unavailable during the writing of

this case study due to extremely few African missionaries maintaining websites, blogs, or social media sites. Several reports were utilized from local church members or leaders. No confirmation was available regarding the process of opening member groups in previously unreached cities or whether full-time missionaries participated in this process. The Church in Cote d'Ivoire does not publish the number of member groups or the locations where member groups operate. It is unclear how many member groups currently function in the country.

Future Prospects

The outlook for continued growth in Cote d'Ivoire remains highly favorable, namely the ongoing rapid proliferation of new congregations and the establishment of congregations in additional cities and towns. The organization of a second mission in 2014 has appeared to play a direct role in the proliferation of LDS congregations in previously unreached cities. This greater infrastructure may accommodate larger numbers of missionaries serving within the country and maintain accelerating membership and congregational growth trends; however, sustained, rapid “real growth” will hinge on church leaders maintaining reasonably high convert baptismal standards, the continued implementation of the recent interpretation of the centers of strength policy, and the population sustaining strong receptivity to LDS missionary efforts.

[1] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 3 May 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[2] "Adjoukrou in Cote d'Ivoire," Joshua Project, retrieved 6 May 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10162/IV

[3] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 3 May 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[4] "Baule, Bawule in Cote d'Ivoire," Joshua Project, retrieved 6 May 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10734/IV

[5] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 3 May 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[6] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 3 May 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT