



# LDS Growth Case Studies

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## Unofficial Groups of Self-Identified Latter-day Saints in Sub-Saharan Africa

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### Overview

For decades groups of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints in Sub-Saharan Africa have organized themselves into congregations and have awaited the establishment of an official LDS Church presence. Initially occurring in Nigeria and Ghana and most recently in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi, self-organized groups of prospective members offer significant opportunities for rapid church growth for the LDS Church due to committed and humble local leaders, high receptivity among the general population, and the strong conviction of adherents to follow LDS teachings. These characteristics generally safeguard doctrinal integrity and convert retention resulting in good to excellent convert retention and member activity upon the baptism of self-affiliated individuals and the organization of official LDS congregations. Nonmember groups of prospective Latter-day Saints preparing for an official church establishment appear to be a unique phenomenon to Sub-Saharan Africa as there have been very few instances this occurring in other world regions.

This essay identifies African countries which have had self-organized congregations of prospective Latter-day Saints and examines the history of how mission leaders have handled these situations. Successes, challenges, and opportunities for church growth among self-affiliated groups of prospective Latter-day Saints are explored. The protocol and attitudes of other missionary-focused Christian groups in regards to groups of unbaptized adherents meeting in the name of their organizations is discussed. Prospects for future growth of the LDS Church in regards to self-affiliated groups of adherents conclude this essay.

### LDS Background

The first recorded instance of unofficial groups of Africans meeting in the name of the Church occurred in the mid-twentieth century in Nigeria and Ghana. In Nigeria, interested Nigerians sent letters inquiring about the LDS Church and requested additional information. Self-identified members organized congregations patterned after the LDS Church and registered with the Nigerian government under the Church's official name. Visa problems prevented the visit of LDS leaders at the time however. Likely precipitated by the June 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to all males regardless of race or color, a fact-finding trip headed by Elder Cannon and Merrill Bateman of Brigham Young University occurred in August 1978 and recommended that an official LDS Church establishment occur. The first LDS missionaries called to West Africa were sent to Nigeria in November 1978 and organized the first branch in Ikot Eyo. In March 1979, 184 converts were baptized in a two-day period in Ikot Eyo. A single branch operated in Nigeria in Ikot Eyo and up to 15 groups were under the administration of the branch in 1979. An additional group of prospective Latter-day Saints meeting under the name "L.D.S. Nigerian Mission" nearby the city of Owerri were discovered by church representatives shortly thereafter. International church leaders began making their first visits to Nigerian Latter-day Saints in 1979 including regional representatives and apostles.[\[1\]](#)

LDS literature and scriptures made their way to Ghana in the 1950s and ignited interest among Ghanaians. Some Ghanaians living abroad came into contact with the Church and later returned to Ghana. Church leaders attempted to visit the country in the 1960s under the direction of President David O. McKay, but were unable due to visa issues. Before the Church came to Ghana some prospective members organized unofficial congregations of the Church for interested individuals and prospective members. The Church established an official presence in 1978 and the first convert baptisms occurred later that year.

Since the late 2000s, missionaries have reported that groups of self-affiliated members emerged in Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mozambique, Namibia, South Sudan, and Uganda. These groups have varied in size and number from as many as several thousand followers meeting in seven congregations to only a couple dozen self-affiliated adherents meeting in a single congregation. Some of these groups have a few baptized Latter-day Saints whereas others have no members or investigators who have had previous contact with the

Church.

In Angola, groups of members and investigators sprouted in several cities such as Huambo, Luena, and Lubango in the late 2000s. Latter-day Saints who joined the Church in Luanda or abroad have often headed efforts to form groups outside Luanda. These efforts came to noticeable success in the early 2010s when a group meeting in Lubango became a formal LDS group. Shortly thereafter an independent branch was organized in Lubango and a senior missionary couple was assigned. In 2011, the Church appeared to organize official groups in Huambo and Luena.

In Burundi, reports surfaced in 2009 that hundreds were desiring to learn more about the LDS Church in the Cibitoke area located in the extreme northwest of the country. In Bujumbura, several pastors of other Christian faiths had accepted many tenets of the LDS Church and had desired baptism as early as 2001. The Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission President investigated the area in mid-2009 and again in late 2009 and counseled investigators to continue faithful until an official presence was established in Bujumbura. The mission president met with several congregations in the Cibitoke area of 50 to 90 individuals who desired to learn more about the LDS Church. Small groups of prospective members also met in other areas, such as refugee camps. Full-time missionaries were assigned to Bujumbura in September 2010 and organized a group. A branch was organized in late 2011 and by mid-2011 a second branch was created in Bujumbura. In 2011, one of the original pastors that the mission president met in late 2009 had joined the Church and became the branch president of the Bujumbura 2nd Branch. As of late 2011, there did not appear to be any additional congregations which were organized by the mission presidency outside of Bujumbura and it was unclear what the status was of the previously reported groups meeting in Cibitoke and elsewhere.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, unofficial groups of prospective Latter-day Saints met in several locations in late 2011. Sizable followings were present in Mbandaka, Kikondja, some villages surrounding Kinshasa, Baraka, Fizi, and Luango. In late 2009, the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission president visited several congregations of prospective Latter-day Saints in Uvira. A local pastor from Baraka related his experience of initially learning about the Church through seeing the Church's logo on the back of a wheelchair donated to a refugee camp in Uvira. Several congregations of prospective members had formed by late 2009 who met with the mission president and received additional church materials. In September 2010, there were over 50 self-identified members in Uvira, many of which traveled to Bujumbura for Church services regularly, and additional small groups of prospective members in Baraka and Fizi. In late 2011, a branch was organized in Uvira and missionaries reported that some isolated members and investigators had waited for as long as 15 years for a formal church establishment. In 2010, the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission president reported that there were over 200 prospective Latter-day Saints meeting in Luango awaiting an official church establishment. Dozens of members from Luango traveled six days to meet with mission leadership in Kananga in 2010. In the fall of 2011, a couple hundred villagers on the outskirts of Kinshasa met with church representatives and desired to learn more about the Church and be baptized. In late 2011, senior missionaries reported that as many as 1,400 in Bandundu Province had written LDS leaders and were awaiting for an official church establishment, missionary lessons, and baptism but distance from mission headquarters in Kinshasa and the perceived safety risks prevented the assignment of missionaries and establishment of an official church presence.

In the Republic of the Congo, a small group of isolated members and investigators self-organized in Doullisse (Loubomo) in 2011. Isolation from established outreach centers continued to delay the formal organization of a group or branch in late 2011 but senior and young full-time missionaries occasionally visited to assess needs, teach investigators, and hold sacrament services.

In Ethiopia, there have been several instances of unbaptized prospective members meeting in the Church's name. In 2011, several communities in the Awasa area had followings of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints emerge namely in Chiko, Shashemene, and Wendo Genet. Unlike most instances of this phenomenon occurring in Africa, LDS missionaries were instrumental in initially spreading outreach into these communities, facilitating the organization of formal groups, and teaching investigators. An unofficial group of self-identified members has met for several years nearby the Sudanese border in Gambela, but distance and a lack of baptized members has continued to delay a formal church establishment. Missionaries occasionally meet with the group, teach its members, and offer support and encouragement until the decision is made by mission and area leadership to organize an official church unit and baptize investigators.

In Gabon, several dozen members met for church services in Libreville as a group under the Africa Southeast Area - Gabon Branch in late 2011. Missionaries serving in the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission reported that political instability in Cote d'Ivoire prompted some members in Cote d'Ivoire to relocate to Gabon earlier in 2011. By late 2011 missionaries reported that several hundred prospective Latter-day Saints were waiting for the arrival of missionaries but delays in obtaining government permission to send foreign missionaries deterred an official church establishment at the time.

In Mozambique, missionaries reported in 2011 that there were thousands of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints in the Quelimane area. In late 2011, senior missionaries were carefully coordinating efforts to contact these groups, assess their level of commitment and understanding to LDS teachings, and determine whether baptizing and organizing additional units was feasible. Distance from the fledgling LDS presence in Quelimane - which was reestablished in mid-2011 - has been a major concern for expanding outreach into locations where these congregations assemble.

In Namibia, missionaries who have served in Windhoek have reported that small groups of isolated members and investigators have held unofficial meetings in a remote town or village in the northern portion of the country.

In Sudan, the first known LDS gatherings occurred in Khartoum with expatriate members and Sudanese investigators. Following the departure of expatriate members several investigators relocated to Juba, South Sudan and petitioned regional church leaders to establish an official LDS presence. Several African Latter-day Saints moved to Juba and facilitated an official church establishment. Some reports also indicate that several American-Sudanese members returned to South Sudan and further contributed initial outreach efforts. In 2008, a following of several thousand South Sudanese emerged in the Nyamlell area and requested baptism. The Uganda Kampala Mission President visit these groups in mid-2008 and noted that seven congregations met and worshipped in the name of the Church. Some locals obtained copies of church literature and began spreading word of the church throughout the region. The mission president designated several locals as leaders, distributed additional church literature, and directed these leaders to teach others. In late 2009, an official branch was organized in Juba but as of late 2011 no official LDS units appeared to operate in the Nyamlell area. In late 2011, there did not appear to be any groups of self-identified members in Sudan following the independence of South Sudan.

In Uganda, groups of investigators and isolated members have significantly influenced LDS outreach expansion since the late 2000s. The Church officially organized congregations in Gulu, Lira, Masaka, Njeru, Iganga, and Busia between early 2008 and late 2011. Outreach expansion into each city appeared to occur as the result of mission leadership finding and teaching small groups of self-affiliated individuals and isolated members. Additional small groups of interested individuals and isolated members continue to form in additional locations. Extensive humanitarian and development projects pursued by the Church in Uganda has contributed to outreach expansion in some areas such as Masaka.

## **Successes**

Within the past few years the LDS Church has taken greater advantage of highly interested and devoted groups of prospective members throughout Africa. The opening of Burundi to formal proselytism and the establishment of a branch constitutes the Church's crowning achievement in expanding outreach among unofficial groups of prospective Latter-day Saints as mission leadership opened Burundi within a year of investigating the country and meeting with the groups and their leaders. Notable instances of the Church formally organizing branches in locations which had sizable followings of self-affiliated members include Lubango, Angola; Kasumbalesa and Uvira, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Juba, South Sudan; and Gulu, Lira, Masaka, Mbale, and Njeru, Uganda. In each of these locations, member activity rates appear higher than 75% as converts principally comprise devoted self-affiliated members who carefully studied church teachings and independently obtained a personal testimony of the Church prior to receiving baptism from full-time missionaries. Convert retention rates continue to remain high in these locations through member-missionary work among the families, friends, and acquaintances of new converts.

During 2011, the Church assigned senior missionary couples to provide administrative support and organize and execute humanitarian and development projects in a few additional locations which had previously had self-affiliated groups of members. In Angola, a Brazilian senior missionary couple became the first senior missionaries assigned outside of Luanda to provide leadership and training assistance to the Lubango Branch. In Uganda, senior missionaries were assigned to serve in Gulu and in additional locations.

## **Challenges**

Distance from established church outreach centers, poor transportation systems reducing accessibility, civil strife, no or few LDS materials in local languages, unclear motivations for why some groups desire to join the Church, and limited mission resources available are barriers to establish a formal church presence in many areas with self-affiliated groups of Latter-day Saints. The challenge of reaching self-affiliated groups of prospective members shares many similarities with performing outreach in rural communities due to distance and accessibility issues. However, receptivity is often the highest in rural locations and in self-organized groups which prompt mission leaders to take advantage of favorable church growth conditions.

Notwithstanding an increase in missionary efforts to establish official church units in areas with groups of prospective members, the LDS Church has largely avoided or postponed outreach efforts and has not taken advantage of opportunities for greater growth. The "centers of strength" paradigm continues to serve as a guideline for mission outreach expansion throughout Africa. In late 2011, the Church had still not baptized investigators in Nyamlell, South Sudan despite the first visits from mission leaders beginning three years before and the independence of South Sudan successfully occurring in mid-2011. This represents a recurring pattern of delaying or postponing an official church presence among self-affiliated Latter-day Saints that is reflected in the opening of Nigeria and Ghana to LDS proselytism two decades after the first requests for church representative visits. Another notable example of this recurrent pattern is highlighted in Uvira, Democratic Republic of the Congo where an official church presence was not established until 15 years after the first requests were made by isolated members and investigators for baptism and an official church establishment. In addition to long delays and ongoing challenges reaching self-affiliated Latter-day Saint groups, the centers of strength paradigm has reduced LDS outreach in most African nations as missionary resources are restricted to only a handful of cities and locations.

Waiting to investigate self-affiliated groups and postponing official outreach efforts may result in missed opportunities for growth when populations are the most receptive. Delays in LDS outreach may make self-affiliated groups more vulnerable to counter-proselytism efforts by other Christian denominations and Islamic missionaries. Vital information regarding the status, location, and composition of unofficial groups can be lost due to poor communication between successive mission presidents. Hurt feelings and reduced or lost interest in the LDS Church can arise from these groups and individuals if outreach prospects are chronically delayed or not sufficiently investigated. Oftentimes there are no LDS materials in the native language of most individuals in groups of self-affiliated members, resulting in many prospective members relying on a few individuals who

possess the needed literacy and language skills to translate for others. Although many risks are inherent in postponing outreach to self-affiliated groups, significant periods of time elapsing between when groups request visits from church representatives and an official church establishment can solidify member testimonies and determine whether desires for church membership are sincere or fleeting.

## **Opportunities**

The opportunities presented by self-organized groups of prospective members are almost limitless. However, many opportunities remain unrealized by the Church largely due to security and travel concerns.

To address security and travel challenges, a single official branch can be established with several dependent units under its jurisdiction in nearby communities. If a location is sufficiently safe, a senior missionary couple can be assigned to facilitate leadership development and administrative tasks in the area. Otherwise, mission leadership can request an LDS family from a city or village with a church presence to relocate to the target location. Isolated members among self-organized groups can provide valuable teaching, training, and leadership that is commensurate to their abilities, depth of testimony, and experiences. The presence of an isolated Latter-day Saint priesthood holder among a self-organized group of nonmembers is an unequalled advantage that greatly increases the odds of establishing an official church unit as a potential priesthood leader is available.

Opportunities to expand mission outreach into areas with self-affiliated groups of prospective members appear most favorable in Angola, Burundi, and Uganda in the near future due to sufficiently stable political conditions, the quantity of mission resources allotted for current needs, recent successes in reaching these groups, relatively close geographic proximity to mission outreach centers, and more developed transportation systems and roads than many other nations. Recent increases in the missionary complement in the Uganda Kampala Mission and successes establishing congregations in additional cities provide favorable opportunities for future efforts reaching self-organized groups of prospective members. Recent rapid membership growth in Uganda also increases the likelihood of active members relocating to additional unreached areas and facilitating the organization of LDS gatherings. In Burundi, the development of the Church in Bujumbura and self-sufficiency of local branch leadership may permit some missionary resources to be assigned to the large group of prospective members and investigators in the Cibitoke area. Increasing numbers of missionaries assigned to Angola improve prospects of reaching groups operating outside of Luanda and Lubango.

## **Comparative Growth**

The self-organization of prospective LDS congregations is a phenomenon which has almost exclusively occurred in Africa. Other areas of the world have had informal gatherings in the name of the Church, but these have been orchestrated by isolated, committed Latter-day Saints who introduce the Church into their communities.

Most missionary-minded Christian groups have readily capitalized on the self-organization of groups of self-affiliated adherents and even encouraged their organization by distributing literature in previously unreached areas. For instance, the Seventh Day Adventist Church broadcasts radio programs in many nations in which it lacks a presence in remote areas or in the entire country altogether. Many outreach-oriented Christians do not place as great a concern as the LDS Church on reaching self-affiliated groups as they view these situations as opportunities for growth. Other Christian groups generally have a less organized hierarchical administrative and organizational structure like the LDS Church.

## **Future Prospects**

Recent successes teaching, baptizing, and organizing official congregations among self-affiliated groups of prospective members may encourage mission and area leaders to be less timid about future efforts to reach these groups and reduce the emphasis on adhering to the centers of strength paradigm. Remote location, undeveloped transportation systems, a lack of LDS materials in local languages, and no increase in the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide for the past decade present challenges for mission leaders to visit and establish the Church among self-affiliated groups in a timely manner. Placing greater emphasis on the role of local church leaders in the process of reaching groups of self-affiliated members may help alleviate stresses placed on mission leaders for these duties. Pending sufficient safety and health conditions, the assignment of senior missionary couples to work in areas with self-affiliated groups offers exciting opportunities for church planting, leadership training, and administrative support and shadowing which can take advantage of conditions when they are the most favorable for growth.

[1] "News of the Church," Ensign, February 1980.

<http://lds.org/ensign/1980/02/news-of-the-church/nigeria-and-ghana-a-miracle-precedes-the-messengers?lang=eng&query=nigeria>