LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Growth in Benin City, Nigeria

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Overview

Located in south central Nigeria, Benin City had an estimated 1.28 million inhabitants and ranked as the sixth most populous city in Nigeria in early 2012.[1] Forested plains and farmland cover most the terrain surrounding the city. The climate is tropical and marked by distinct wet and dry seasons. Benin City is the administrative capital of Edo State and center of Nigeria's rubber industry. Several prominent schools and universities are also headquartered in Benin City. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the kingdom of Benin became one of the most powerful kingdoms in present-day Nigeria.[2] Benin City played an important role in the Nigerian Civil War as Biafran forces proclaimed Edo State as the Republic of Benin. Nigerian troops captured the city the following day however.[3] One of Nigeria's official languages, Edo is the traditional language spoken in the Benin City area. Many speak English as a second language. Edo State appears wealthier than most Nigerian states as it ranks seventh by GDP[4] but only 24th by population. Christianity is the prominent religion but there are smaller numbers of Muslims and followers of traditional religious beliefs.

LDS Background

The first LDS congregation in Benin City appeared to be organized in the early or mid 1980s; less than a decade after the first official church presence was established in Nigeria. By 1988, there was one district in Benin City.[5] In 1993, the Church organized the Benin City Nigeria Stake from the sole district in the city. At the time the stake also included the city of Warri in Delta State where one branch operated. The new stake included the following five wards and five branches: The Adesuwa, Esigie, Oliha, Ugbowo, and Uzebu Wards and the Ihogbe, Ikpokpan, Okhoro, Uselu, and Warri Branches. Two additional stakes were organized in Benin City in 1997 (Benin City Ikpokpan) and 2006 (Benin City New Benin) and Warri became its own district in 1999. In 2002, Benin City was assigned to the newly created Nigeria Ibadan Mission and in 2009 was reassigned to the Benin City Enugu Mission.

The LDS Church has achieved rapid congregational growth in Benin City since its initial establishment in the 1980s. The number of congregations increased from nine (five wards, four branches) in 1993 to 16 in 2001 and 36 in 2010.

Maps of stakes, wards, and branches in the city are available for 1993, 2001, 2011, and present day.

Successes

Rapid congregational growth over the past two decades has been the crowning achievement for the LDS Church in Benin City. New congregations organized over the past two decades have been well distributed throughout the entire city. In the past five years, the most rapid congregational growth has occurred in northern and eastern areas in locations which did not previously have wards. For example, in 2001 there were no wards in the Aduwawa area - in the extreme eastern area of the city - but by mid-2010 there were three wards in the Aduwawa area (Aduwawa, Ohovbe, and Oregbeni). The Benin City Nigeria New Benin Stake had six wards when initially organized in late 2007 and by mid-2010 there were 15 wards within the stake. Prolific congregational growth has occurred from opening new wards in lesser-reached neighborhoods on the periphery of the city and creating additional wards in well-established areas.

Comparing the current number of units and their geographic location in each of the three stakes with the original number of units in the first stake in 1993 provides excellent insight into assessing the magnitude of congregational growth by different areas of the city. The area previously covered by the Ugbowo and Esigie Wards and Okhoro and Uselu Branches in the original Benin

City Nigeria Stake has become 15 wards within the Benin City Nigeria New Benin Stake, the area previously convered by the Oliha Ward and Ihogbe Branch has become 11 wards within the Benin City Nigeria Ihogbe Stake, and the area previously covered by the Adesuwa and Uzebu Wards and Ikpokpan Branch has become 10 wards within the Benin City Nigeria Ikpokpan Stake. To date there have not appeared to be any wards or branches that have closed.

No other major Nigerian city has as dense of a concentration of Latter-day Saints and LDS congregations as Benin City. Consequently the Church extends its most penetrating urban outreach in Benin City among Nigerian cities with at least half a million inhabitants. The average ward in Benin City has approximately 35,500 inhabitants within its geographical boundaries whereas the average ward in Aba has 49,000 inhabitants, the average ward or branch in Port Harcourt has 58,600 inhabitants, the average branch in Ibadan has 503,600 inhabitants, and the average ward or branch in Lagos has 657,900 inhabitants. The high density of LDS congregations permits efficient missionary activity through close proximity of most the urban population to LDS meetinghouses. The small geographic area that encompasses most wards allows for mission and ward leaders to focus on specific communities and localize outreach efforts.

Current socioeconomic conditions, the societal emphasis on weekly participation in religious activities, the predominantly Christian population, and the weak ethno-religious link between many Nigerians in Benin City to a particular Christian denomination has made much of the population highly receptive to the LDS Church and its teachings. The Church has capitalized on excellent levels of receptivity through efficient use of mission resources, active member-missionary programs, strong self-sufficiency of local leadership, and willingness to expand outreach into lesser-reached neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city.

Distance from mission headquarters originally in Ibadan and later in Enugu has likely contributed to optimal levels of interaction with mission leaders that has generated the high degree of self sufficiency exhibited by the Church in Benin City. Travel times do not seriously restrict visits from mission and area leaders but are long enough to be an inconvenience. The Church appears to have provided many leaders with sufficient training to meet their administrative responsibilities but has not held their hand in the process.

Opportunities

The sizable population of Benin City presents excellent opportunities for continuing outreach expansion. Many people reside in areas without a ward nearby. Locations which may present some of the best opportunities for outreach expansion within Benin City include communities along the Benin-Agbor Highway between Aduwawa and Iguomo, communities along the Benin Auchi Road between Aduwawa and Idumwunha, extreme northern Benin City around Idunmwowina, communities on the western fringe of Benin City such as Use and Ogogugbo, and many lesser-reached communities in southern Benin City such as Akenzua, Ivbiore, Ekae, Ewbodia, Ogbe Ibuya, and Ihimwinhin.

The Church operates no wards or branches in towns and villages surrounding Benin City. Nearly all major Nigerian cities with an LDS presence have several wards and branches in nearby suburban and rural communities. Oftentimes the Church is introduced to these locations through member-missionary efforts. Prospects for rapid church growth appear high in urban centers surrounding Benin City due to easy accessibility, close proximity to mission outreach centers in Benin City, and likely high receptivity comparable to receptivity levels within the city itself. In 2010, the Church organized its first district outside of Benin City approximately 100 kilometers to the northeast in Ekpoma. Rapid growth has also occurred in Ekpoma and an initial church presence appears to have started from active members relocating to this area within the past decade. The number of branches increased from two in 2007 to seven by 2011 in the Ekpoma area. Similar results may occur if outreach is extended into communities within close proximity of Benin City. No outreach has occurred in these locations for reasons that are not entirely clear as it is conceivable that many members likely have personal contacts with individuals living in nearby towns and villages but the rapid growth of the Church in Benin City has likely consumed all available mission resources, leaving none to allot to nearby less-populous towns and villages.

To better capitalize on the uniquely high rates of receptivity and rapid church growth in Benin City, the Church may organize a mission in Benin City. A mission in Benin City could potentially service all of Edo State and perhaps a couple adjacent states. More frequent contact with mission leaders and greater numbers of missionaries assigned to Benin City and its surroundings may address some challenges meeting enormous administrative needs with a LDS population that have been members for a short period of time. However, headquartering a future mission in Benin City has the potential to reduce self-sufficiency in established leadership. Convert retention rates would likely remain stable as Africans staff the manpower for all missions in Nigeria. African missionaries appear to have achieved more consistent results in terms of high retention rates for new converts compared to their non-African counterparts.

Challenges

Rapid membership growth and high receptivity create administrative challenges for local and mission leaders to train new leaders and staff additional congregations. Approximately half of church membership likely joined the Church within the past decade. There may be a shortage of trained and qualified Melchizedek Priesthood holders to staff both stake presidencies and ward bishoprics as evidenced by the large number of wards in each of the three stakes at present. Considering new stakes are generally organized with a minimum of five wards, the Church could potentially organize four additional stakes with the number of wards currently operating in Benin City; two of which from the same stake (New Benin).

Poverty presents many difficulties and challenges for membership to become more self-sufficient. Living standards are low and many have their basic needs unmet. A lack of economic development and financial security among Latter-day Saints presents challenges for the Church to draw upon local tithing funds to construct, renovate, and rent spaces for meetinghouses. Funding for church-built chapels constructed in Benin City likely originates from outside Nigeria due to economic constraints. Ongoing church growth in Benin City may require greater financial support from the international church to keep up with meeting local needs in the coming years.

Distance from mission headquarters and limited numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Nigeria have likely contributed to the lack of an LDS presence in towns and villages surrounding Benin City. The enormous Nigerian population serviced by a handful of missions has made efforts to assign missionaries to towns and villages surrounding Benin City impractical as many of Nigeria's most populous cities remain entirely unreached by the Church.

The Church has no translations of church materials or scriptures into Edo notwithstanding a million native speakers in Nigeria clustered in the Benin City area. Church members and leaders likely utilize English or translations of church materials and scriptures in other Nigerian languages for study.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in Benin City has experienced the most rapid congregational growth of any Nigerian city over the past decade. The Church has experienced congregational growth of a comparable magnitude to Benin City in some major cities in other African nations. In Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo the number of LDS units increased from eight in 1991 to 21 in 2001 and 45 in 2011. In Accra, Ghana the number of LDS units increased from 16 in 2001 to 45 in 2011. In Johannesburg, South Africa the number of LDS units increased from 32 in 2001 to 50 in 2011. In Antananarivo, Madagascar the number of LDS units increased from one in 1991 to seven in 2001 and 18 in 2011.

Within the last decade, the LDS Church has grown more rapidly and has more members than many other missionary-focused Christian denominations in Benin City. In 2010, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported approximately 14,000 members and 36 churches in Delta and Edo States combined[6] whereas in 2011, the LDS Church had 62 churches and possibly over 20,000 members in these two states. There are no data available on Jehovah's Witness congregations and membership on a state-level for Nigeria, but Witnesses reported 330,316 active members meeting in 5,468 congregations at year-end 2011.[7] Many other missionary-minded groups such as evangelicals appear to achieve consistent rapid growth and have sizable followings of members throughout Benin City and Edo State.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS Church growth in Benin City is excellent as congregational growth has been ongoing, all three stakes appear close to dividing, outreach has expanded into peripheral areas within the past five years, and receptivity remains high. There may be as many as eight stakes in Benin City by 2015 if recent growth trends are sustained. High receptivity and abundant opportunities for church planting may warrant a separate mission headquartered in Benin City to serve Edo State. Due to distance from Aba and the high concentration of Latter-day Saints in a small geographic area, the Church in Benin City could one day support its own temple.

[1] "The Principal Agglomerations of the World," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 1 February 2012. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] "Background Note: Nigeria," Bureau of African Affairs, 20 October 2011. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2836.htm

[3] "Edo State - About Edo," www.edostate.gov/ng, retrieved 3 February 2012. http://www.edostate.gov.ng/about-edo

[4] "List of Nigerian states by GDP," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 3 February 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nigerian_states_by_GDP

[5] "Nigeria marks twin milestones," LDS Church News, 21 May 1988. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19779/New-regional-representatives.html

[6] "Edo-Delta Conference (2002 - Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 3 February 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10152

[7] "Statistics: 2011 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 3 February 2012. http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm