



LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Growth in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Overview

Ranking as the second most populous metropolitan area in Sub-Saharan Africa, Kinshasa was known as Léopoldville prior to 1996 and is the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kinshasa has experienced rapid population growth over the past several decades, nearly quadrupling from 2.6 million^[1] to 9.6 million inhabitants^[2] in less than 30 years. As a result of haphazard urbanization and low living standards nationwide, the city experiences many challenges common to densely-populated areas in the region such as air and water pollution, improper waste disposal, erosion, flooding, poor city management, and many residing in shantytowns or slums. In 2010, Kinshasa was divided into 24 communes.^[3] The population is predominantly Christian and approximately half of Congolese are Catholic. Most other Christians are Protestant or follow Christian faiths that integrate elements of indigenous religion.

Kinshasa numbers among the most well-reached cities in Africa by the LDS Church as indicated by the number and distribution of wards and branches and steady growth in units and stakes since the Church's initial establishment. This case study summarizes past LDS growth in Kinshasa and explores successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth.

LDS Background

In early 1986, the Church obtained legal status and commenced formal missionary activity. The International Mission administered the entire country until 1987 when the Zaire Kinshasa Mission was organized. By year-end 1987, the Church operated one district comprised of three branches in Kinshasa. The Church created its first stake in Kinshasa in 1996 and organized additional stakes in Masina (1999), Ngaliema (2003), Mont Ngafula (2008), and Kimbanseke (2009). In 2010, the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission split to form the Democratic Republic of the Congo Lubumbashi Mission. By mid-2012, the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission serviced the western half of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea.

The number of units in Kinshasa has grown prolifically within the first 25 years of missionary activity. There were 21 congregations (15 wards, six branches) in mid-2001 and 49 congregations (45 wards, four branches) in mid-2012. Maps are available for the names and distributions of LDS congregations in [2001](#) and at [present](#). In mid-2012, there were 10 wards in the Kinshasa Stake, 11 wards in the Kimbanseke Stake, eight wards and one branch in the Masina Stake, seven wards and three branches in the Mont Ngafula Stake, and nine wards in the Ngaliema Stake. In 2011, the Church announced plans to build the first temple in the country in Kinshasa.^[4] In 2011, total LDS membership in Kinshasa was estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000.

In 2012, senior missionaries reported that the Church had begun a new meetinghouse construction program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to build more modest chapels by training returned missionaries in construction techniques. The pilot program not only helped the Church resolve its challenge to build more meetinghouses but to provide skilled workers to accomplish this feat. Trained meetinghouse construction workers would later be able to apply their skills in other vocational settings thereby providing education and improved employment opportunities to unemployed or under-employed returned missionaries. A senior missionary couple began teaching basic construction and masonry skills to successive teams of returned missionaries. By spring 2012, the Church had trained two meetinghouse construction teams and had plans to build approximately two dozen new meetinghouses throughout the country. In 2012, missionaries reported that the two missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo collectively baptized approximately 500 converts a month and that there were approximately 100 full-time missionaries assigned to Kinshasa in five zones.

Successes

Rapid and consistent congregational growth since the introduction of the Church in Kinshasa testifies to good convert retention levels, the high receptivity of the population to the Church, and the efficient utilization of mission resources. New congregations have formed in virtually all areas of the city over the past decade although congregational growth rates have varied from commune to commune. For example, between 2001 and mid-2012 north central areas of Kinshasa (Bandalungwa, Barumbu, Gombe, Kalamu, Kasa-Vubu, Kinshasa, Limete, Lingwala, and Ngiri-Ngiri Communes) experienced the slowest congregational growth as the number of wards increased from four to seven whereas the most rapid congregational growth occurred in the eastern areas of Kinshasa (Kimbanséke, Maluku, and N'Sele Communes) where the number of congregations increased from three branches to 11 wards. To date there has not appeared to be any wards or branches that have closed in Kinshasa although several have been renamed.

The Church has a widespread presence in Kinshasa. 19 of the 24 communes have an LDS congregation and the Church maintains as many as ten congregations in the most populous communes. Young full-time missionaries serve throughout the city and consist entirely of African members primarily from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Senior missionary couples fulfill a variety of different roles ranging from humanitarian and development work to serving as coordinators for the Perpetual Education Fund.

Convert retention and member activity rates rank among the highest in the world. Senior missionaries serving in the Kinshasa area report that church attendance exceeds the number of members on church records in some wards and that within one year up to 95% of converts continue to attend church. This finding debunks the myth of some church members that rapid growth inevitably leads to lower convert retention rates as the number of converts per LDS missionary and convert retention rates are among the highest in the world in Kinshasa. Local leadership has steadily matured as evidenced by the increase in the number of stakes from one in 1996 to five in 2009. In 2009, LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland noted that 56 men were sustained to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood in the Kinshasa Democratic Republic of the Congo Masina Stake conference.^[5] The strength of local leadership is also manifest by one stake president in Kinshasa accompanying mission leaders in 2010 to assess conditions and prepare for the opening of Burundi to missionary work later that year. High activity rates, rapid growth, and long distance appear significant contributors to the Church's 2011 announcement to build a temple in Kinshasa notwithstanding poverty, political instability, city planning and real estate complications, and the relatively recent establishment of the Church.

The implementation of an aggressive meetinghouse construction program has promising potential to accelerate church growth. Other countries that have had systematic meetinghouse construction programs in the past such as Tonga have experienced rapid growth resulting in the LDS Church numbering among the most prominent Christian denominations in these countries today. Additional meetinghouses reduce travel times, provide greater saturation of outreach, and foster a sense of LDS community on a more local level.

Opportunities

LDS missionary activity has scarcely scratched the surface in Kinshasa and harnesses only a fraction of its potential. The population exhibits excellent conditions for continued mission outreach expansion due to the prominence of Christianity, past receptivity to LDS teachings, and widespread use of French and Lingala - both of which have translations of LDS materials and all or some LDS scriptures. In mid-2012, the average ward or branch included approximately 200,000 people within its geographical boundaries; significantly higher than Lubumbashi - the Democratic Republic of the Congo's second largest city - where the average ward included approximately 80,000 people within its boundaries. The average branch in Mbuji-Mayi - the Democratic Republic of the Congo's third largest city - included the same number of people within its boundaries as Kinshasa following the Church creating its eighth branch yet congregational growth in Mbuji-Mayi has outpaced all other cities in the country over the past five years as only one branch functioned prior to 2008. The population serviced by a single ward or branch in Kinshasa amounts to the entire population of some cities with an LDS presence. For example, Luputa has five wards and two branches but fewer than 200,000 inhabitants.

The Church does not operate a congregation in five communes including Barumbu (150,319), Kinshasa (164,857), Kisenso (386,151), Lingwala (94,635), and Matete (268,781). Three of these communes - Barumbu, Kinshasa, and Lingwala - are clustered in downtown Kinshasa and number among the seven least populated communes. Smaller population size and geographic area appear partially responsible for the lack of wards and branches in communes within downtown Kinshasa. Higher living standards and lower receptivity to the Church may be additional factors, although it is unclear whether there is a significant difference in the religiosity and economic conditions between the populations inhabiting downtown communes versus other communes in the city. However, slower congregational growth in nearby downtown communes such as Kasa-Vubu and Kalamu suggests that there may be a difference in receptivity to the Church between populations inhabiting downtown areas versus other areas of the city. The primary reason for no ward or branch operating within the five unreached communes appears due to few, if any, mission resources allocated to these areas. Difficulty finding a rented space to hold church services or real estate to construct a meetinghouse may have also contributed to no congregations in these communes. Opportunities to establish the first ward or branch in an unreached commune appears most favorable in Kisenso and Matete as these communes are the most populous unreached communes and some nearby communes have experienced fair levels congregational growth over the past decade such as Masina and N'djili. A map displaying the communes of Kinshasa and status of LDS outreach can be found [here](#).

The most populous communes continue to present the greatest prospects for future growth, namely Kimbanséke (946,372),

Ngaliema (683,135), and Masina (485,167). Large populations, high congregational growth rates, excellent levels of receptivity to the Church, and availability of mission resources have improved the accessibility of the Church in these communes but there remain many neighborhoods that are lesser-reached. The average ward or branch in some of these most populous communes may service as few as 50,000 inhabitants at present. It may be feasible for the Church to establish wards that service areas populated by as few as 15,000 people within the next decade depending on the availability of mission resources, consistency of convert retention and member activity rates, and stability of receptivity to the Church.

Sustaining the pilot meetinghouse construction program that began in early 2012 has vast potential to accelerate growth as meetinghouses become closer to more inhabitants and provide a sense of local LDS community. Some seasoned meetinghouse construction workers may be utilized by the Church in the construction of the temple once property is secured and construction permits and approvals are obtained.

Challenges

Meetinghouse construction and finding suitable spaces to hold church services are major difficulties. Geographers point to Kinshasa as one of the classic examples of poor city planning and its deleterious effects on urban development and quality of life. A lack of skilled labor appears to have delayed the construction of more meetinghouses in the past decade which in turn has stunted outreach expansion efforts. Finding suitable locations to build additional chapels also presents challenges. Poorly developed city transportation systems warrant greater accessibility to meetinghouses than in other comparatively large cities around the world.

Political instability and poor living conditions remain serious concerns for the population as a whole. Disputed elections, political factions that control vast areas of the country, and corruption have rendered the Democratic Republic of the Congo as one of Africa's most unstable and insecure countries. Ineffective local government and city planning have created serious social challenges in Kinshasa for decades. Unemployment is pervasive and many do not have access to clean water. Deep poverty and current economic issues often take greater precedence than missionary activity as it is difficult for the Church to grow when people's basic needs are not met. Consequently the Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo appears to heavily depend on the worldwide church to finance its operations. Meager incomes challenge members to pay tithing faithfully and meet basic living needs. Unemployment and underemployment decrease the ability of the Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to become self-sufficient in meeting its financial needs.

Comparative Growth

Congregational growth trends for the LDS Church in Kinshasa are comparable to several major cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, between 2001 and 2011 the number of wards and branches increased from seven to 18 in Antananarivo, Madagascar; 13 to 37 in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire; 16 to 36 in Benin City, Nigeria; 16 to 45 in Accra, Ghana; and 32 to 50 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Lagos is Sub-Saharan Africa's most populous city with 12.8 million inhabitants and the number of wards and branches increased from 12 in 1999 to 22 in mid-2012. Kinshasa experiences one of the highest member activity and convert retention rates in the world and also numbers among the few major cities in Africa that does not have foreign, young full-time missionaries assigned.

The LDS Church ranks average in size in Kinshasa among outreach-oriented Christian faiths. The LDS Church appears larger than the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Adventists reported that between 2000 and 2010 the number of churches increased from 14 to 28 and the membership increased from 8,834 to 16,936 in Kinshasa and Bandundu Provinces. Adventists operate a large number of smaller church groups throughout the two provinces^[6] and have established a presence in smaller towns near the Kinshasa area. Jehovah's Witnesses appear to operate several hundred congregations in the Kinshasa area. Pentecostals and Charismatic Christians have achieved the greatest growth. One Pentecostal leader planted over 350 churches within Kinshasa alone between the late 1960s and 1997.^[7]

Future Prospects

The recent implementation of a meetinghouse construction program that utilizes local members, steady congregational growth that has lasted 25 years, high convert retention and member activity rates, good receptivity to LDS teachings, and a full-time missionary force staffed entirely by native African missionaries suggest that the Church will experience continued growth in many years to come. The Church will likely organized several additional stakes within the near future as two stakes already contain the minimum number of wards needed to form another stake. Depending on the maturity and sustainability of local Melchizedek Priesthood manpower, the Church may operate as many as ten stakes within the next five years. The Church may construct a missionary training center (MTC) in Kinshasa due to the increasing numbers of members in the Democratic Republic of the Congo serving missions. Due to its large population and steady LDS growth, Kinshasa may become the African city with the largest LDS presence in the coming decade.

^[1] "CONGO (DEM. REP.)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 14 August 2012.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/CongoDemRep.html>

^[2] "The Principal Agglomerations of the World," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 14 August 2012.

<http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html>

[3] Lateef, A.S.A., Fernandez-Alonso, M., Tack, L., Delvaux, D. (2010). Geological constraints on urban sustainability, Kinshasa City, Democratic Republic of Congo, *Environmental Geosciences*, 1(17), 17-35.
http://www.africamuseum.be/publication_docs/2010_Lateef-Kinshasa-PDF.pdf

[4] "President Monson announces new temples," *LDS Church News*, 1 October 2011.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/61509/President-Monson-announces-new-temples.html>

[5] "Dedication blesses two African nations," *LDS Church News*, 5 September 2009.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57850/Dedication-blesses-two-African-nations.html>

[6] "West Congo Field (1997-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 22 August 2012.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C11219

[7] Anderson, Allan. 2004. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, p. 111.
http://books.google.com/books?id=IPbPTOi0Rk4C&pg=PA111&lpg=PA111&dq=pentecostals,+kinshasa&source=bl&ots=sd__1mJ