



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Expanding LDS Outreach in Zimbabwe

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Overview

With an estimated population of 12.6 million, Zimbabwe is located in southern Africa and has a predominantly Shona-speaking population. The LDS Church has maintained a consistent presence in Zimbabwe longer than almost any other country in Sub-Saharan Africa but has experienced extremely little progress expanding missionary work into additional locations over the past decade. This case study reviews background information on LDS growth and outreach expansion in Zimbabwe, summarizes LDS outreach by province, identifies opportunities and challenges for expanding national outreach, provides recommendations for expanding national outreach, highlights outreach achievements of other proselytizing Christian faiths, and predicts future expansion of LDS missionary activity into additional locations.

LDS Background

The LDS Church has had an official presence in present-day Zimbabwe since 1950 although missionaries and church leaders sporadically visited as early as 1930. Missionaries concentrated proselytism and teaching efforts among the non-African population until after the revelation extending the priesthood to all men in 1978. In 1987, the Church created its first mission in Harare. The Zimbabwe Harare Mission serviced Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi until 2011 when a separate mission headquartered in Lusaka, Zambia began administering Zambia and Malawi. As of late 2012, the Zimbabwe Harare Mission was the only mission headquartered in Zimbabwe and administered the entire country.

The Church experienced dismal progress expanding national outreach in Zimbabwe during the 2000s. Between 2001 and mid-2011, the Church established a congregation in only two additional cities - both of which are located on the outskirts of Harare. As of mid-2012, the Church had a ward or branch functioning in 15 cities and villages (Acturus, Bindura, Bulawayo, Chitungwiza, Domboshawa, Enterprise, Epworth, Gweru, Harare, Kadoma, Kwekwe, Marondera, Masvingo, Mutare, and Ruwa). Currently Zimbabwe is one of the countries with the most Latter-day Saints with the fewest cities and towns with a ward or branch present. At year-end 2011, the Church reported 20,909 members meeting in 50 wards and branches. A current map of LDS wards and branches can be found [here](#).

Outreach by Province

Both cities with provincial status (Harare and Bulawayo) and six of the eight provinces have at least one LDS congregation. Harare and Bulawayo have had missionaries assigned and congregations operating since 1950^[1] and are the most reached administrative divisions by the Church due to large populations concentrated in geographically small urban areas. In mid-2012, the average ward or branch serviced 179,000 people in Harare and 73,000 people in Bulawayo. Five of the six outlying provinces (Manicaland, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland West, Masvingo, and Midlands) are minimally reached as wards or branches function in only one or two cities in each province. The Church operates wards or branches in five locations in Mashonaland East Province; three of which are small villages in semi-rural and rural areas.

The two unreached provinces (Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South) are located in western and southwestern Zimbabwe and together support a population of over one million.

Opportunities

There are over seven million people in Zimbabwe who live in locations where there is no LDS presence. One-third of the Zimbabwean population resides in Harare and Bulawayo and approximately seven percent of the national population resides in other cities with at least one ward or branch. Zimbabwe numbers among the geographically smallest countries in Africa that has over 10 million inhabitants. The relatively small geographic area of Zimbabwe reduces travel constraints for mission leaders when opening new areas to proselytism. In 2011, approximately one in 600 were LDS in Zimbabwe; one of the highest ratios of members to the general population among Sub-Saharan African countries. With an increasing percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population that surpasses nearly all other Sub-Saharan African countries, the Church can expect to increasingly find unknown, isolated members residing in unreached cities, towns, and villages who joined the Church in larger cities and later returned or resettled in unreached cities and villages. The Church has achieved higher convert retention and member activity rates in Zimbabwe than in many other countries in the world, increasing the likelihood that isolated members retain a knowledge of church teachings and desire to participate when the Church establishes a presence in their current location. For example, in 2012 missionaries performing exploratory visits to some unreached cities such as Chegutu reported small groups of Latter-day Saints awaiting an official church establishment but lived in locations too distant to feasibly attend church at the nearest congregation.

There are good opportunities to expand outreach into the two currently unreached provinces. Sandwiched between Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South Provinces, Bulawayo could serve as an outreach center for commencing missionary activity in these two provinces. Although only small villages lay just on the other side of the boundary between Bulawayo and the two Matabeleland provinces, there are a few cities that church leaders could plant congregations in Matabeleland South Province that are reasonably close to Bulawayo such as Plumtree and Shurugwi. Two cities in Matabeleland North Province - Hwange and Victoria Falls - number among the 10 most populous unreached cities in Zimbabwe and take precedent to opening to missionary activity due to their relatively large populations.

Local church leadership has demonstrated resiliency and self-sufficiency in many administrative tasks and receptivity to the LDS Church has remained high over the past decade. The increase in the number of stakes from one a decade ago to four in mid-2012 signals growing strength in church leadership and administration both in quantity and quality. In 2012, the Church organized 10 new wards and branches within the first eight months of the year, most of which were in Harare and Bulawayo. The number of congregations in Bulawayo increased from six branches in 2001 to nine wards, six branches, and two groups in late 2012. Virtually all efforts to expand outreach in cities that had at least one branch a decade ago have experienced tremendous success in organizing new wards and branches.

There is less linguistic diversity in Zimbabwe than most other Sub-Saharan countries, thereby simplifying outreach expansion efforts. Over 90% of the population speaks Shona, Ndebele, or English as a first language and many of the remaining population speaks one of these three languages as a second language. The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and many church materials into Shona and a couple basic proselytism materials into Ndebele, permitting missionaries, church leaders, and ordinary members to facilitate outreach expansion efforts into unreached areas. The distribution of printed church literature appears an effective method to instigate interest in the Church in unreached areas as literacy rates exceed 90%, a percentage higher than most other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are only 12 indigenous languages spoken by over 100 native speakers that are traditionally spoken in areas without an LDS congregation. Although many of these unreached ethnolinguistic groups reside far from current mission outreach centers, expanding LDS outreach into additional cities and towns throughout the country could potentially reach many more of these groups with little difficulty.

Challenges

The massive administrative burden on the Zimbabwe Harare Mission was one of the greatest deterrents in outreach expansion in Zimbabwe over the past decade. The Zimbabwe Harare Mission included not only Zimbabwe but Zambia and Malawi until 2011 when the Church formed the Zambia Lusaka Mission. Frequent visits and the distribution of limited resources among all three countries to meet member and missionary needs resulted in little outreach expansion within Zimbabwe. The designation of only one mission for all of Zimbabwe may direct mission leaders to refocus on outreach expansion within the coming years, but only one mission remains insufficient to service a highly receptive population of over 12 million.

Long-term economic instability has slowed church growth and outreach expansion, especially over the past decade. Missionaries and members throughout southern Africa report that many active Zimbabwean members fled the country within the past decade due to hyperinflation, pervasive unemployment, and political turmoil and sought refuge and employment in neighboring countries like South Africa. Convert baptisms and the number of active members has continued to rise over the past decade notwithstanding trying societal conditions but the net growth in active membership has remained small for most years. In the early 2010s, the economic and political situation in Zimbabwe had noticeably stabilized in comparison to the previous decade and may permit an renewed emphasis on LDS national outreach expansion efforts.

HIV/AIDS is a serious challenge for the Church in establishing a stable, long-term presence. As of 2009 the disease infected 14.3% of the adult population; the fifth highest prevalence rate for HIV/AIDS the world.^[2] The widespread presence of the disease creates health concerns for utilizing foreign missionaries and jeopardizes the health and safety on uninfected members who engage in premarital sex, use illicit drugs, or receive unsanitary health care. HIV/AIDS dramatically shortens the life expectancy of those infected and creates challenges for the Church to maintain leadership and establish full-member families among those carrying the disease.

Recommendations

Greater progress in expanding national outreach in Zimbabwe will require two methods: Opening the most populous unreached cities to missionary work and establishing congregations in small towns and villages.

There are ten cities with over 20,000 inhabitants and no LDS congregation. All of these cities are suitable to initiate church planting efforts through mission leader visits, organizing groups where church members are present, and assigning a full-time missionary companionship or designating a nearby missionary companionship to visit these cities. Six of these cities - Chegutu, Chinhoyi, Norton, Redcliff, Rusape, and Zvishavane - appear most feasible to open to proselytism due to reasonably close proximity to established mission outreach centers. Efforts to open the four remaining cities - Chiredzi, Hwange, Kariba, and Victoria Falls - may be more challenging because they are located on the peripheries of Zimbabwe distant from the established mission outreach centers located in Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, and Mutare. A map displaying the most populous unreached cities and towns can be found [here](#).

Villages within close proximity to Harare offer some of the most practical opportunities to expand national outreach into rural areas. In 2011, the Church assigned missionaries to the village of Domboshawa and experienced rapid growth culminating in the creation of the first independent branch in early 2012. Rural areas between Harare and Bindura are a good training ground for the Church to experiment in initiating systematic outreach expansion among rural populations as mission headquarters are in Harare and the Church has a noticeable presence in Harare and Bindura. The number of towns and villages in this area is staggering and only a tiny percentage are labeled on online maps. Some suitable locations for church planting in this region may include Amandas, Glendale, Govera, Jumbo, Mazowe, Munyawiri, Showground, and Wayerera.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in Zimbabwe experienced some of the slowest progress expanding national outreach among Sub-Saharan countries within the past decade. During this same time period, the number of cities or villages with an official church presence was unchanged in Namibia and the Republic of the Congo but increased from one to two in Lesotho, one to three in Angola and Tanzania, two to three in Malawi, three to five in Swaziland, two to seven in Botswana, three to nine in Uganda, three to 10 in Mozambique, seven to 14 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and 11 to approximately two dozen in Kenya.

The LDS Church has a noticeably smaller presence in Zimbabwe compared to most other outreach-oriented faiths. In 2011, Seventh Day Adventists reported approximately 680,000 members meeting in 1,324 churches and approximately 2,400 companies.^[3] Today Adventists comprise approximately five percent of the population. Jehovah's Witnesses report nearly 40,000 active members assembling in approximately 1,000 congregations. Both Witnesses and Adventists appear to have established a presence in virtually every city and town with over 1,000 inhabitants. These and other denominations have achieved impressive progress expanding national outreach due to a long-term missionary presence in Zimbabwe among the indigenous African population and aggressive church planting and outreach expansion initiatives. The Church of the Nazarene has virtually the same number of congregations as the LDS Church but Nazarenes have achieved greater national outreach.^[4]

Future Prospects

The designation of Malawi and Zambia to a separate mission and improved economic and societal conditions in Zimbabwe suggests that the Church may experience noticeable national outreach expansion within the next decade. The most populous cities that appear most likely to have an official LDS presence established within the near future include Chegutu, Chinhoyi, and Norton. Due to the sustainability of the Zimbabwean full-time missionary force, high receptivity to LDS proselytism, and improved economic conditions, the Church may organize a second mission in Bulawayo within the next decade. However, the establishment of an LDS presence in the two unreached Matabeleland provinces appears unlikely for several more years as both provinces rank among the least populated and due to long distance from mission headquarters in Harare.

^[1] "Zimbabwe," Facts and Statistics, retrieved 1 September 2012.
<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/zimbabwe/>

^[2] "Zimbabwe", CIA World Factbook, retrieved 5 September 2012.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/zi.html>

^[3] "Zimbabwe Union Conference (2003-Present), www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 10 September 2012.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U12008

^[4] "Nazarene Church Data Search," [nazarene.org](http://app.nazarene.org), retrieved 11 October 2012.
<http://app.nazarene.org/FindChurch/results.jsp?y=Zl&p=1>