LDS Growth Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach Expansion in the Central African Republic and Gabon

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Overview and LDS History

The Central African Republic and Gabon are located in Central Africa and support populations of 5.1 million and 1.6 million people, respectively. French is the official language of both countries although the majority of the population speaks an indigenous African language as a first language. The LDS Church began assessing prospects for missionary activity in the 1980s and early 1990s but no formal plans to assign young proselytizing missionaries came to fruition. With the exception of a brief period in the early 1990s when the Church based a mission in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission has administered both the Central African Republic and Gabon since its organization in 1987.

In the Central African Republic, the Church established a presence in the early 1990s due to the efforts of an isolated active member named Carol Forrest. Forrest temporarily lived in the country through her service in the United States Peace Corps. She shared her beliefs with associates and ultimately met with mission leaders to facilitate the organization of two branches in Bangui[1] that were consolidated into one shortly thereafter. A French senior missionary couple briefly served in 1993 but was withdrawn due to civil unrest. In the 2000s and early 2010s, past mission presidents from the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission generally visited only once during their service, or about every two to three years. Distance from Kinshasa to Bangui, the lack of airplane flights between the two cities, the large administrative burden of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission, and the perception that living conditions in the Central African Republic were too primitive for more frequent visits or the assignment of foreign missionaries deterred more regular mission president visits and the assignment of missionaries. In mid-2012, the mission president visited the Church's sole branch in Bangui, met with the country's president, and evaluated prospects for assigning full-time missionaries. In late October 2012, LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated the country for missionary work.[2] In late 2012, missionaries reported that plans were underway to assign the first young, proselytizing missionaries within the near future. In recent years, the Church has had small numbers of members serving missions or preparing to serve missions. There appear to be one or two returned missionaries in the branch.

In Gabon, Gabonese converts baptized in Europe began returning to Gabon in the early 1980s. The Church assigned Gabon to the Cameroon Yaounde Mission and reported permission to enter the country in 1992.[3] No mission appeared to administer Gabon for nearly the next two decades following the relocation of the Cameroon Yaounde Mission to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. In 2011, the Church created an administrative branch under the Africa Southeast Area that specifically serviced Gabon. Approximately a dozen members and investigators unofficially held church services every week but did not administer the sacrament. In August 2012, mission leaders reported that the Church became provisionally recognized by the government. The recognition came as a surprise to church leaders due to years of setbacks and frustrations attempting to register with the government and was only possible due to a series of fortunate events with relatives of church members that had government connections. During the August 2012 visit, mission leaders held a sacrament meeting service with 22 people in attendance, including nine members. At the time there were three Melchizedek Priesthood holders in Gabon. The mission president permitted church members to begin holding sacrament meeting services on a weekly basis from that time forward and urged members and investigators to invite others to attend. Final government recognition was reported to occur once the Church completed setting up a few remaining financial matters. In September 2012, the Church officially assigned Gabon to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission and discontinued the administrative branch as church services began to be held under the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission Branch. In December 2012, the Church created its first official branch in Gabon: The Libreville Branch. At the time, missionaries serving in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission reported plans to dedicate Gabon for missionary work in the near future. Missionaries report that the assignment of missionaries to Gabon will most likely occur once another French-speaking senior missionary couple arrives in the mission and is stationed in Gabon to supervise missionary activity.

Successes

Small numbers of indigenous members who actively live LDS teachings and aspire to help commence formal proselytism activity stands as the greatest success of the Church in the Central African Republic and Gabon to date. The Church would have been unlikely to assess prospects for assigning missionaries and dedicate countries for missionary work if there were no known indigenous active members as there have been no African countries opened to missionary work within the past two decades that did not already have a small number of native members. The initial beginnings of the Church in both countries underscores the importance of proselytism efforts directed towards immigrants and foreigners from countries without an LDS presence and the potential impact an isolated active member can have in establishing the Church in previously unreached areas.

Mission leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission have made earnest efforts to open the Central African Republic and Gabon to formal missionary activity notwithstanding the enormous administrative burden of the mission. Prior to 2010, the mission serviced the entire Democratic Republic of the Congo (approximately 70 million people), Cameroon (20 million people), Burundi (10 million people), the Republic of the Congo (four million people), and Equatorial Guinea (approximately 700,00 people) in addition to the Central African Republic. In late 2012, the mission serviced half of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, and Equatorial Guinea in addition to the Central African Republic and Gabon.

Opportunities

Like most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Central African Republic and Gabon present excellent conditions for church planting and missionary activity due to local populations exhibiting high receptivity to nontraditional Christian faiths. Within the capital cities of Bangui and Libreville there are countless opportunities to open additional groups in lesser-reached areas that over time can mature into independent branches. Opportunities for opening additional groups or branches in other cities are also favorable but appear unlikely for several more years until the Church channels greater resources into the region. The most populous unreached cities in both countries will take precedent in national outreach expansion efforts due to easier access than rural areas and large populations concentrated in small geographic areas. In the Central African Republic, cities that appear most favorable to target include Bimbo, Berbérati, Carnot, and Bambari whereas in Gabon cities that appear most favorable to target include Port-Gentil, Franceville, Oyem, and Moanda.

The status of French as the official language of the Central African Republic and Gabon facilitates the utilization of French translations of church materials and scriptures. The Church has translated a couple basic proselytism materials into indigenous languages for both countries. In Gabon, the Church has translated the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith into Fang; the most prevalent indigenous language that is spoken by 40% of the population. In the Central African Republic, the Church has translated the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Gospel Principles (old edition) into one of the Banda languages. One-quarter of Central Africans speak a Banda language as a first language. It appears unlikely that the Church will conduct proselytism in indigenous languages but the translation of a few basic proselytism materials provides at least some form of outreach that can help missionary efforts among those who do not fluently speak French.

In Gabon, political stability and economic development provide many opportunities for church growth. Mission leaders may assign both African and non-African missionaries due to safer societal conditions and higher living standards than most Central African countries. More developed country infrastructure mitigate transportation challenges and improve prospects for expanding outreach into additional cities. The small geographic size of Gabon reduces travel times and encourages outreach expansion to additional cities.

Both the Central African Republic and Gabon are predominantly Christian nations with sizable numbers of Muslims and followers of indigenous religions. The composition of Christian denominations is diverse and includes Catholics, traditional Protestant faiths, and nontraditional or syncretic Christian groups like Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and independent African churches. The high degree of religious pluralism encourages tolerance and will likely reduce opposition from major religious groups to LDS missionary activity.

Challenges

The Church has assigned extremely few mission resources to Central Africa since its initial establishment in the region. Mission and area leaders have struggled for decades to begin formal proselytism efforts in the Central African Republic and Gabon due to limited resources, distance from the nearest mission, civil unrest, and challenges registering with the government. The inability of the Church to assign full-time missionaries to either country over the past two decades reflects the centralization of resources in North America and the promotion of church policies that mirror those of Western nations or that are appropriate for non-African missionaries. There appeared to be few significant barriers that would prevent the assignment of African missionaries considering the Church has had missionaries consistently serving in more dangerous countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo for 25 years. Opportunities for growth in Sub-Saharan African countries that already have an LDS missionary presence have detracted resources from opening additional countries. In the late 2000s, members living in countries without an LDS presence reported that area leaders would not take steps to open additional countries to missionary activity due to the overwhelming opportunities and challenges currently faced in countries with an LDS presence. This policy likely delayed

the serious consideration of opening the Central African Republic and Gabon with African missionaries a decade earlier. The Church remains highly reliant on white North American couples to serve as mission presidents throughout the region. Although member activity rates and local leadership self-sustainability for most of Central Africa ranks among the highest in the world, the lack of African mission presidents and senior missionary couples has affected the pace and penetration of LDS missionary efforts in locations where conditions are unsafe for white Americans to visit or reside.

In the Central African Republic, civil unrest and political instability continue to pose challenges for missionary activity. Violence from Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan has spilled over into the Central African Republic from time to time. The Central African Republic is easily influenced by bordering nations due to the country's landlocked position, weak central government, and small population compared to other neighboring African nations.

Some cultural practices oppose LDS teachings or church policies. The physical integrity of women is frequently threatened and women's rights are limited. Polygamy is commonly practiced in the Central African Republic. Polygamous individuals who desire to get baptized must first divorce all but one spouse and receive approval from the mission or area president. Education is not emphasized in the Central African Republic due, in part, to limited economic development.

Some societal conditions may reduce future church growth. In the Central African Republic, poverty and low living standards are a serious challenge for developing financial self-sufficiency for the Church without reliance on international funds. Humanitarian and development work may take precedence over proselytism due to physical needs. In Gabon, economic development appears to have reduced interest and receptivity to Protestant groups as most denominations report slow growth. The Church may experience slower growth in Gabon compared to most nations in the region due to lower receptivity reported by other proselytizing Christian groups.

Comparative Growth

Preparations for opening the Central African Republic and Gabon to missionary work have been similar to the opening of other countries in Sub-Saharan African to missionary work within the past decade. The Church established a branch prior to assigning full-time missionaries in all but one country (Burundi) within the past decade. Since 2000, the Church assigned proselytizing missionaries for the first time, or reassigned missionaries after a period of no LDS presence, in Togo (early 2000s), Cameroon (early 2000s), Benin (mid-2000s), Angola (2008), Burundi (2010), and Rwanda (2012).

In the Central African Republic, evangelicals report that 32.2% of the population is evangelical. Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 10,363 members, 51 churches,[4] and approximately 50 companies in 2011. Adventists have maintained a presence in the Central African Republic since the 1960s and in recent years generally baptize between 200 and 600 converts annually.[5] Jehovah's Witnesses report 59 congregations nationwide[6] and maintain a presence in nearly all 17 administrative prefectures. Witnesses reported over 2,500 active members in 2011. In late 2012, the Church of the Nazarene reported no congregations in the Central African Republic.

In Gabon, evangelicals report that 12.7% of the population is evangelical. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 3,603 members meeting in 14 churches[7] and 14 companies in 2011. Adventists have maintained a presence in Gabon since 1975 and in recent years generally baptize 100 to 300 new converts a year.[8] Jehovah's Witnesses reported over 3,700 active members and 31 congregations in 2011. Witnesses report a presence in over half of the Gabonese provinces. In late 2012, the Church of the Nazarene did not report a presence in Gabon.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth in both nations is excellent. In the Central African Republic, mission leaders appear poised to assign full-time missionaries as soon as area leaders grant approval. In Gabon, the organization of a branch in Libreville and the assignment of full-time missionaries appears likely within the coming months. Prospects appear favorable for the organization of a mission in Cameroon that could also service the Central African Republic and Gabon and channel additional mission resources into the region. The augmentation of the worldwide missionary force in the early 2010s may result in mission planners allocating greater numbers of mission resources into the region and help spur outreach expansion.

[1] Mostert, Mary. "Medical officer ministers to souls," LDS Church News, 5 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21796/Medical-officer-ministers-to-souls.html

[2] Renlund, Ruth L.; Avant, Gerry; Holman, Marianne. "A new day begins with a blessing upon its nation and its people," LDS Church News, 8 November 2012. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62931/A-new-day-begins-with-a-blessing-upon-its-nation-and-its-people.html

[3] "Gabon," Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 481-482

[4] "Central African Republic Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 16 November 2012.

http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=CARM

[5] "Central African Republic MIssion (1986-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 November 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10047

[6] "Congregation Meeting Search," http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[7] "Gabon Mission," www.adventyearbook.org, retrieved 16 November 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=GABM

[8] "Gabon Mission (1986-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 November 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10167