LDS Growth Case Studies

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

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Overview

Abidjan is the most populous city in Cote d'Ivoire and second most populous city in West Africa with an estimated 4.7 million inhabitants in the urban agglomeration[1] and 3.84 million inhabitants within the city boundaries.[2] Abidjan served as the political capital of Cote d'Ivoire until the government relocated the capital to Yamoussoukro in 1983 and remains the commercial center of the nation. Rapid economic growth and urban development occurred in Abidjan following the independence of Cote d'Ivoire from France in 1960 and attracted migrant workers. Abidjan remains an important commercial and industrial center for the region notwithstanding little economic growth since the 1980s. The city's demographics remain diverse due to the permanent resettlement of migrant workers over the past half century from surrounding nations. Abidjan is divided into 10 administrative communes.

Abidjan numbers among the most well-reached major cities in Sub-Saharan Africa by the LDS Church and has experienced some of the most rapid LDS growth of any city in the world over the past two decades. This case study reviews past LDS growth in Abidjan and explores successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. A comparative growth section compares the growth of the LDS Church to other major cities in Sub-Saharan Africa and contrasts LDS growth with other outreach-oriented Christian groups.

LDS Background

In 1988, the Church created its first branch in Abidjan. In September 1989, the Church created a second branch (Cocody) and organized its first district in the city.[3] In 1993, the Church relocated the Cameroon Yaounde Mission to Abidjan and renamed the mission to the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission. In 1997, the Church created its first stake, today called the Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire Toit Rouge Stake. Additional stakes were created in Abobo (2000), Cocody (2006), Abidjan Niangon (2010), and Port-Bouët (2012).

The number of units in Abidjan totaled two (all branches) in 1989, 11 (all wards) in 1997, 13 (all wards) in 2001, and 35 (34 wards, 1 branch) in late 2012. In late 2012, the Port-Bouët Cote d'Ivoire Stake had six wards within Abidjan, the Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire Toit Rouge Stake had six wards, the Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire Niangon Stake had eight wards and one branch, the Cocody Cote d'Ivoire Stake had seven wards within Abidjan, and the Abobo Cote d'Ivoire Stake had seven wards within Abidjan. At the time there were five congregations assigned to stakes based in Abidjan that serviced locations outside the city limits including one ward in the Abobo Cote d'Ivoire Stake (Anyama), two branches in the Cocody Cote d'Ivoire Stake (Ahoutoue and Bingerville), and two branches in the Port-Bouët Cote d'Ivoire Stake (Grand-Bassam 1st and Grand-Bassam 2nd). In late 2012, the average ward or branch in Abidjan serviced a geographical area populated by approximately 110,000 people. Maps displaying LDS units in Abidjan are available for 2001 and present-day.

Successes

The Church has developed a highly self-sufficient full-time missionary force comprised of Ivorian members capable of meeting missionary needs within Abidjan. Some Abidjan stakes have had several dozen members serving missions at any given time.

The development of a self-sufficient mission in Abidjan has been crucial towards continuing rapid church growth as political instability prevented the assignment of North American missionaries for all but two years during the past decade. Convert retention and member activity rates appear to rank among the highest in the Africa West Area; the church area that has historically had one of the highest member activity rates in the world.[4] The size and strength of local priesthood leadership has provided ample opportunities for missionary preparation and focus on attending the temple, further strengthening the Church in Abidjan.

The Church maintains a presence within close proximity of most of Abidjan's population. Eight of the 10 communes have at least one LDS congregation that primarily services areas within the commune. The two communes without LDS units (Treichville and Plateau) are the least populated communes with 183,900 and 12,000 inhabitants, respectively, and together account for five percent of the Abidjan city population. The average congregation services fewer than 100,000 inhabitants in three communes including Cocody (one LDS unit per 56,200 inhabitants), Yopougon (one LDS unit per 67,300 inhabitants), and Port-Bouët (one LDS unit per 81,434). A map of Abidjan communes and status and degree of LDS outreach can be found here.

Congregational and stake growth has been concentrated in the most populous communes of Abidjan. The most rapid congregational growth has occurred in the Niangon area of Yopougon Commune. With the largest population among Abidjan communes, Yopougon has nearly one million inhabitants. No other commune has as many LDS units (14) and two stakes based within its geographical boundaries. The Church has extended its most penetrating outreach in Yopougon and Cocody as indicated by the average ward or branch in these communes servicing smaller populations than in the eight other Abidjan communes reached by the Church.

Virtually all areas of Abidjan have experienced steady congregational growth within the past decade. Comparing the number of congregations that functioned in mid-2001 with present day sheds insight into how congregational growth rates have varied over time by location. In 2001, the Church operated only two wards within the boundaries of the present-day Port-Bouët Cote d'Ivoire Stake (six wards currently within Abidjan city limits), two wards within the boundaries of the present-day Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire Toit Rouge Stake (six wards currently), two wards within the boundaries of the present-day Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire Niangon Stake (eight wards and one branch currently), three wards within the boundaries of the present-day Cocody Cote d'Ivoire Stake (seven wards currently within Abidjan city limits), and four wards within the boundaries of the Abobo Cote d'Ivoire Stake (seven wards currently within Abidjan city limits). Rapid congregational growth is manifest by the number congregations doubling, or even tripling or quadrupling, in all five stakes within the past decade.

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities for church planting in Abidjan. Lesser-reached communities in Cocody and Yopougon Communes present some of the best opportunities for church planting and outreach expansion. Populations in these communes exhibit high receptivity to the Church and active membership growth has consistently fueled congregational growth throughout the past decade. In Cocody, there are at least nine communities without an LDS congregation (Abata, Agien, Akouedo, Angre, Anono, Bonoumin, M'bandon, M'pouto, Rosier) that appear favorable for church planting due to distance to the nearest LDS meetinghouse and high receptivity to the Church in the area. In Yopougon, there are no LDS wards that primarily service the area north of Autoroute du Nord. Organizing branches or groups in this area as well as in the two lesser-reached communities of Azito and Niangon-Lokoa in southern Yopougon may accelerate growth. A map displaying potentially favorable locations for church planting can be found here.

The Church has not taken advantage of ethnic-specific outreach efforts in Abidjan. All church meetings appear to be held in French in order to promote ethnic integration and to simplify church administration. Opportunities abound to target Burkinabe, Malian, Ghanaian, Nigerien, and Guinean workers and their families. Successes teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts among the non-Ivorian population may one day facilitate the establishment of the Church in unreached nations such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea. With the increasing size of the Church in Abidjan, prospects to organize language-specific units will improve as a larger body of church leadership develops and a greater need to accommodate linguistic minority groups arises.

Challenges

Meetinghouse construction appears a significant challenge that hinders the Church from reaching its potential growth in Abidjan. With high population density and urban planning problems in the most densely populated communes, the Church has constructed few meetinghouses throughout the city. Many meetinghouses service two or three wards and a few meetinghouses house as many as four wards. Delays and challenges constructing additional meetinghouses has likely postponed ward divisions and forming additional units due to a lack of space. It is unclear whether meetinghouse construction has been delayed due to political instability, local government corruption, a lack of skilled labor, local church financial issues, or a combination of two or more of these challenges. The introduction of a meetinghouse construction program that trains returned missionaries in masonry and construction skills may help ameliorate the demand on insufficient chapel space. In early 2012, the Church began a meetinghouse construction program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in an effort to meet the pressing demand to construct dozens of additional meetinghouses to accommodate growing active membership in Kinshasa and elsewhere. The Church in Abidjan may accelerate meetinghouse construction if specialized workers are trained and employed by the Church to build chapels that are economical and functional for church use.

Political instability constitutes one of the greatest challenges for church growth . The United States Department of State has

issued travel warnings for years. In 2012, there were attacks on United Nations peacekeepers, police stations, military checkpoints, and power plants.[5] Recent civil wars and ongoing ethnic and political tensions between rebels in the north and the central government in the south may dissuade the Church from constructing a temple in Abidjan until consistent political stability is achieved. The Church has hesitated to expand elsewhere in Cote d'Ivoire, including cities and towns that border Abidjan. Ethnic integration issues do not appear to have hampered growth but have potential to do so if church leaders do not remain dedicated to maintaining church policies pertaining to political neutrality.

The Church has experienced slower growth in more affluent areas of Abidjan. Both communes without an LDS unit are located in the city center in some of the wealthiest areas. It is unclear whether materialism and the influence of European secularism or the lack of LDS meetinghouses and missionary efforts are to blame for little growth in these locations.

Comparative Growth

Congregational growth trends for the LDS Church in Abidjan are comparable to several major cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, between 2001 and late 2012 the number of wards and branches increased from seven to 18 in Antananarivo, Madagascar; eight to 21 in Harare, Zimbabwe; 16 to 36 in Benin City, Nigeria; 16 to 43 in Accra, Ghana; 21 to 49 in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; and 32 to 50 in Johannesburg, South Africa whereas the number of wards and branches in Abidjan increased from 13 to 35. The average LDS congregation services 35,500 in Benin City, 97,000 in Accra, 110,000 in Abidjan, 124,000 in Antananarivo, 161,000 in Johannesburg, 179,000 in Harare, and 200,000 in Kinshasa.

Other proselytism-focused Christian groups report a similarly-sized presence in Abidjan but a significantly larger presence elsewhere in Cote d'Ivoire. Jehovah's Witnesses report 79 congregations in the Abidjan area; approximately four-fifths of which are designated as French speaking. Witnesses maintain congregations that service specific linguistic minority groups such as Twi (seven congregations), Baoule speakers (four congregations, four groups), Ewe (four congregations, one group), English (two congregations), Jula (four groups), American Sign Language (two groups). and Bété (one group).[6] Seventh Day Adventists do not publish the number of congregations in the Abidjan area online but reported 60 churches and 12,522 members nationwide in 2011.[7] Over the past decade, Adventists have experienced slow congregational growth and moderate membership growth. The Church of the Nazarene reports at least half a dozen congregations in Abidjan and over 100 congregations nationwide.[8]

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Abidjan appears favorable due to ongoing congregational growth, increasing priesthood manpower as evidenced by the creation of all five stakes within the past 15 years, and sizable numbers of local members serving missions. If the Church were to duplicate its congregational growth rates over the past decade into the 2010s and early 2020s, the Church would have as many as 94 units in Abidjan and possibly as many as 13 stakes in 2022. However, congregational growth rates are rarely consistent and it appears more likely that the Church will no more than double its current number of wards and stakes within the next decade. Prospects for the construction of a temple in Abidjan appear forthcoming but will likely depend on the stabilization of the current political situation in Cote d'Ivoire and continued faithful temple attendance of members to the Accra Ghana Temple.

[1] "THE PRINCIPAL AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 1 December 2012. http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html

[2] https://www.ppiaf.org/sites/ppiaf.org/files/documents/Cote-d-Ivoire_Solid-Waste-French.pdf

[3] "Ivory Coast," Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 501

[4] LeBaron, Dale E., Devotional, as cited in Ricks College News Release, April 5, 2001.

[5] "Cote d'Ivoire," Travel Warning U.S. Department of State, 16 November 2012. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5701.html

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

[7] "Cote d'Ivoire," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 1 December 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=CIGM

[8] "Nazarene Church Data Search", 1 December 2012. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/