



LDS Growth Case Studies

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The Opening of Tamale, Ghana to Missionary Work

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Overview

Located in northern Ghana, Tamale is a city of approximately 350,000^[1] to 560,000 people^[2] and the regional capital of Northern Region. Climate consists of one rainy season from April to September and one dry season from October to March. Harmattan winds bring sand and dust from the Sahara during the dry season and can cause public health problems and transportation disruptions due to low visibility. Tamale serves as the commercial center for northern Ghana and has experienced rapid modernization and economic growth in recent years. Approximately 84% of the city population is Muslim whereas approximately 14% of the city population is Christian. Major Christian groups include Catholics (6% of city population) and Pentecostals (3% of city population). Approximately two-thirds of the Tamale Metropolitan district resides in urban areas.^[3]

This case study reviews the recent establishment of an LDS missionary presence in Tamale and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. A comparative growth section compares the opening of Tamale to missionary work to other cities in West Africa and contrasts LDS outreach in Tamale to other proselytizing, nontraditional Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for future growth are summarized.

LDS Background

In late 2011, mission leaders in the Ghana Accra Mission announced to full-time missionaries preliminary plans to open Tamale to proselytizing missionaries within the next couple years. In July 2012, the Church created a third mission in Ghana based in Kumasi from a realignment of missions in Accra and Cape Coast. In late 2012, the Ghana Kumasi Mission president visited Tamale to assess conditions for assigning missionaries. At the time the mission president also located isolated members who relocated to the city for education or employment purposes.

In early February 2013, eight full-time missionaries were assigned to Tamale, including four black African and four white North American elders. Mission leaders reported that the number of members located in the city had risen to over 20 by the time missionaries arrived. Two member groups were simultaneously organized under the Ghana Kumasi Mission Branch with high expectation that these groups would reach branch status within the near future. Due to the predominantly Muslim population and the newly established church presence in the city, mission leaders admonished full-time missionaries to avoid overtly proselytizing Muslims and to seek out Christians for teaching opportunities.

By mid-April 2013, missionaries reported that the number of investigators nearly outnumbered the number of members attending church services in one of the groups and that the first convert baptisms were planned.

Successes

The Church has taken great care to tactfully open Tamale to formal missionary activity. Church leaders located over 20 Latter-day Saints prior to the assignment of full-time missionaries. Local members offer valuable local member support and leadership development needed for establishing a permanent, and one day, self-sufficient church presence. Mission leaders simultaneously organized two member groups thereby providing two locations from which to base proselytism efforts and

providing greater proselytism saturation compared to a single member group. Local members appear to serve as group leaders in both congregations; a major advance in instilling local leadership development that can theoretically operate without full-time missionary assistance.

The opening of Tamale to formal proselytism marks the first time the Church in Ghana has initiated missionary work in the predominantly Muslim north. Assigning an equal amount of North American and African missionaries demonstrates wise appropriation of surplus missionary manpower from North America but without being totally dependent on non-African missionaries to expand outreach. Black African counterparts provide greater ability to assimilate with local culture and to increase the ability of full-time missionaries to resonate and tailor teaching approaches to the needs of African investigators.

Opportunities

Widespread, long-term political stability and pervasive religious freedom in Tamale generates a highly favorable environment for missionary activity notwithstanding strong ethnoreligious ties with Islam for some major ethnic groups indigenous to the area. Societal norms and local laws in most Muslim-majority cities do not permit open Christian proselytism. Consequently the Church has unique opportunities to engage in open proselytism in Tamale compared to other locations with predominantly Muslim populations. Tamale may offer a safe testing ground for the Church to experiment with adapting teaching and proselytism approaches to the religious background and cultural conditions of Muslims if one day permitted by mission and area leaders. Tamale's location distant from previously established outreach centers offers new opportunities to reach ethnic groups that have received no Latter-day Saint gospel such as the Dagbani. Many of these previously unreached ethnic groups are traditionally Muslim with small numbers of Christians.

Tamale provides good opportunities to base future outreach expansion in northern Ghana. As of April 2013, no other location in the three northern regions of Ghana had an LDS presence including the entire Upper East and Upper West Regions. Cities with at least 20,000 inhabitants located in these three northern Ghana regions include Bakwku, Bolgatanga, Navrongo, Salaga, Savelugu, Wa, and Yendi. Each of these cities pose good prospects for future LDS outreach if initiated by mission leaders due to small but visible numbers of Christians in each of these locations, sizable populations concentrated in small geographical areas, and widespread religious freedom in the region. Mission leaders could assign a senior missionary couple to Tamale and give the couple the primary task of humanitarian and development project management with the secondary task of conducting investigatory efforts in currently unreached cities to determine which may be most receptive to prospective outreach. It is likely that many of these most populous unreached cities have a few isolated members who may become active if missionaries visit them and orchestrate the establishment of member groups.

The large size of Tamale's population provides extensive opportunities for the establishment of additional member groups and increasing the saturation of LDS outreach. The Church would need to operate 25 member groups if the Church were to duplicate its efforts to plant new groups in Tamale to the same level of saturation as in Sunyani - a city recently opened to LDS outreach in 2010 that had an average of one member group per 22,000 people within the first year of formal proselytism. Perceived lower rates of receptivity to LDS teachings in Tamale and limited missionary manpower would make such a massive effort to open so many miniature member groups impractical. However, there are good opportunities to establish perhaps as many as ten groups and branches within the first few years of proselytism if a church planting approach is consistently implemented by mission leaders.

The small number of members in Tamale offer immediate opportunities for member-missionary work. The Church has not always benefited from this resource in opening additional locations to proselytism. Carefully mentoring these members and coordinating with them in finding, teaching, and convert retention efforts could yield long-lasting results in terms of cohesive, self-sufficient, missionary-minded congregations that experience high convert retention rates.

No previous convert baptisms in Tamale prior to the assignment of missionaries provides full-time missionaries with more time and resources to focus on finding new investigators to teach instead of focusing on relatively unproductive reactivation efforts. Full-time missionaries can almost exclusively focus on finding investigators and preparing converts for baptism rather than channeling sizable amounts of energy and time into reactivation and post-baptismal convert retention efforts. Maintaining sufficiently high convert baptismal standards and ensuring investigators become socially integrated into cohesive member groups will be crucial towards maintaining this advantageous situation for missionary work.

Challenges

The Church in Ghana continues to rely on area and mission leaders to head the expansion of LDS missionary activity into previously unreached areas. Although the structure and function of the LDS Church is such that mission and area leaders are needed to approval of opening new member groups and assigning full-time missionaries to additional locations, there can be greater involvement from local church leaders and ordinary members in these efforts. Local members can share the gospel with family, friends, and acquaintances and communicate the need for missionary lessons and teaching referrals for interested individuals and families to the appropriate sources. Mission leaders have been effective in locating isolated members in locations without a formal church presence but limited manpower and time seriously restrict the number of visits to unreached locations in addition to meeting administrative needs entailed in serving in a mission leadership position. There is a need for greater delegation of mission responsibilities to open previously unreached areas to missionary work in order to accelerate outreach expansion and improve member and local leader involvement in missionary efforts.

Restricting missionary activity to non-Muslims poses a serious challenge for long-term missionary work. It is unclear why such strict proselytism protocols have been put into place considering no such restrictions are implemented in other West African countries with sizable numbers of Muslims such as Sierra Leone and among Muslims in southern Ghana. Unfamiliarity with local culture and the recent establishment of a church presence for the first in northern Ghana have likely influenced mission leader policies to avoid proselytizing Muslims at present. Muslims residing in Tamale appear to exhibit higher rates of religious observance compared to Muslims in Sierra Leone and in southern Ghana. Stronger ethnoreligious ties to Islam with some ethnic groups native to the Tamale area such as the Dagbani may have influenced the current policy of avoiding outreach among Muslims at present, especially as the Church seeks to build a positive relationship with local government and community leaders.

The Church has delayed the opening of Tamale to missionary work for decades which has likely resulted in missed opportunities to reach some individuals that were once receptive to LDS outreach but are no longer interested. It took the Church 35 years from when it established an official presence in Ghana to open Tamale to missionary activity notwithstanding Tamale ranking as the third most populous city in the country. Small amounts of mission resources allocated to the Africa West Area in comparison to other church areas, distance from cities and towns with an LDS presence, a lack of outreach expansion vision until the past five years, and a Muslim-majority population deterred the introduction of proselytizing missionaries to Tamale for many years. Other proselytizing Christian groups have maintained a presence in Tamale for years or decades longer than the LDS Church and have converted many individuals who may have previously been receptive to the Church. Delays establishing an official church presence in Tamale has resulted in a significantly smaller presence in Tamale today compared to other major cities in Ghana. It may take many years or decades for a widespread LDS presence to be established in Tamale due to the recent establishment of the Church. It is possible that the Church in Tamale may never extend as penetrating outreach extended in other major Ghanaian cities due to delays in establishing a church presence, bans on proselytizing Muslims, and cultural and societal conditions.

Distance from mission headquarters and other cities with a current LDS presence pose difficulties for administration and mission logistics. It currently takes missionaries assigned to Tamale half a day to travel from mission headquarters in Kumasi. No senior missionary couple has been assigned to Tamale despite the Church frequently assigning a senior missionary couple to newly opened cities. Limited numbers of senior missionary couples may pose difficulties for leadership development if a senior missionary couple is not assigned in the near future. The continuity of church growth vision may be diminished due to the cycling of young full-time missionaries in and out of Tamale. Senior missionaries provide vital experience to assist in leadership development such as the preparation for the formation of districts from mission branches. It is unclear how the absence of a senior missionary couple will affect long-term growth trends in comparison to other cities in Ghana with a senior missionary couple assigned.

No translations of LDS materials are available in the most commonly spoken indigenous languages of northern Ghana such as Dagbani, Farefare, Mampruli, and Southern Dagaare. Literacy rates for speakers of these languages are generally less than 10% for a first language and less than 20% for a second language, making no immediate importance for translating printed materials into these language due to few literate speakers. Audio translations of church materials and the print translation of a couple basic proselytism materials such as the Articles of Faith and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith may be appropriate for maximizing gospel comprehension, improving the applicability of proselytism resources, and fostering testimony development in illiterate or semi-literate investigators and members.

Comparative Growth

Within the past three years, the Church in West Africa has taken increased interest in opening previously unreached cities to missionary work or rapidly expanding outreach in lesser-reached cities. In late 2010, the Church assigned six young proselytizing missionaries and one senior missionary couple to Sunyani, Ghana to simultaneously open three member groups notwithstanding no known Latter-day Saints previously residing in the city. By late 2012, the Church reported five branches and one district in Sunyani with several hundred active members. The Church has opened or reopened several other cities in Ghana to missionaries in recent years including Bibiani and Obuasi. The Church has significantly augmented the number of wards and branches in nearly all major cities in Ghana such as Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast.

Other proselytizing Christian groups in Ghana report a comparatively smaller presence in Tamale than in other major cities. However, most of these groups have maintained a presence for many years or decades. The Church of the Nazarene numbers among the largest denominations and reports 37 churches in Tamale.^[4] Jehovah's Witnesses report five congregations in Tamale.^[5] Although no city-specific statistics are available for Tamale, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reports over 5,000 members, 17 churches, and 83 companies in the three northern regions of Ghana.^[6] Adventists translate publications into Dagbani but no other major languages indigenous to the Tamale area and northern Ghana. Witnesses translate basic proselytism materials into Farefare and Southern Dagaare but not into Dagbani.^[7]

Limitations

The Church does not provide any official statistical numbers on membership and congregational data for individual cities or administrative divisions aside from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Consequently it is unclear how many members actually reside in the Tamale area and what percentage attend church regularly. Demographic data on religious affiliation and urbanization was retrieved from 2000 census figures^[8] as no more current data is available. No reports from local

members and investigators living in Tamale were available at the time of the writing of this case study. No direct reports from current mission presidents in Ghana were available in regards to church policies and procedures for opening additional locations to missionary work and the proselytism of Muslims.

Future Prospects

It is too early to tell how successful the commencement of missionary activity and the initial organization of the first LDS member groups in Tamale will be for the foreseeable future. Recent increases in church attendance due to larger numbers of investigators attending church indicate success in finding receptive individuals. Time will tell how diligently missionaries and local leaders prepare prospective converts for baptism and how well new converts become integrated into their respective congregations and undertake member responsibilities. Additional missionary companionships may be assigned in the coming months and years and more member groups may be formed due to the surge in the number of missionaries serving worldwide. Church leaders indicate that airplane services between Kumasi and Tamale may be forthcoming in the near future, reducing travel times, improving safety, and increasing the number of missionaries assigned to Tamale. A district may be organized in Tamale once there are multiple branches in the city and there is sufficient local leadership manpower to staff both branch and district positions. It is possible that a separate mission that administers northern Ghana may one day be headquartered in Tamale due to distance from other mission headquarters in the country but the likelihood of a mission in Tamale will hinge on the long-term sustainability of increases in the worldwide missionary force and the responsiveness of the Tamale and northern Ghanaian population to LDS outreach in the coming years.

[1] "Tamale Metropolitan," Ghana Districts, retrieved 24 April 2013.

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[2] "World Gazetteer: Ghana," retrieved 22 April 2013.

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[3] "Tamale Metropolitan," Ghana Districts, retrieved 24 April 2013.

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[4] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 22 April 2013.

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[5] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 20 April 2013.

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[6] "North Ghana Mission (2000-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 22 April 2013.

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[7] "Featured Items," jw.org, retrieved 22 April 2013. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/>

[8] "Tamale Metropolitan," Ghana Districts, retrieved 24 April 2013.

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