

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Rapid Growth in the Central Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Overview

Comprising the provinces of Kasaï-Occidental and Kasaï-Oriental, the central Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) or Kasaï Region is located approximately halfway between Kinshasa and Lubumbashi in Central Africa. Major cities in the central DR Congo include Mbuji-Mayi, Kananga, Tshikapa, Mwene-Ditu, Gandajika, and Kabinda. Languages most commonly spoken include French and Tshiluba. Little economic development has occurred within the past half century and most the population lives below the poverty line. The population is predominantly Catholic and Protestant.

The LDS Church has experienced rapid growth in the central DR Congo within the past decade as evidenced by all growth indicators - including increasing numbers of congregations, active membership, stakes and districts, local members serving full-time missions, and additional cities opening to missionary work. This case study reviews the history of the Church in the central DR Congo by city and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth. A comparative growth section compares the growth of the Church in the central DR Congo to other areas in Sub-Saharan Africa that have experienced rapid LDS growth and contrasts the growth of other outreach-oriented faiths to the LDS Church. Limitations to this case study are noted and future prospects for growth are predicted.

LDS Background

Recent National Trends

The Church in the DR Congo has experienced rapid church growth over the past five years. During the four-year period between 2008 and 2012, nationwide membership increased from 20,883 to 34,547, annual membership growth rates have ranged from 12.5% to 14.6%, the number of wards and branches increased from 70 to 116, and the number of stakes increased from five to eleven. During this period seminary and institute enrollment increased from 3,298 in 2008 to 5,187 in 2012;[1] a 57% increase in four years.

Central DR Congo

The DR Congo Kinshasa Mission initially supervised church activity in the central DR Congo when the first LDS presence was established. In 1997, the Church organized its first branches in the central DR Congo with one branch each in Kananga, Mbuji-Mayi, and Luputa. In 2008, the first official LDS branches were organized in Mwene-Ditu and Gandajika. In 2010, the Church transferred the jurisdiction of these cities to the newly organized DR Congo Lubumbashi Mission. In 2010, mission leaders reported that there were over 200 individuals in a city without an LDS presence that were requesting baptism and the establishment of the Church. As mid-2013, no efforts appear to have been made to reach these prospective members. In July 2013, the Kananga DR Congo Stake had eleven wards whereas the Luputa DR Congo Stake had five wards and six branches and the Mbuji-Mayi DR Congo District had eight branches. The total number of official church units increased from three in 1997 to four in 2001 and 30 in July 2013.

Member-missionary work was chiefly responsible for finding, teaching, and baptizing new members throughout the central DR Congo until the arrival of young, proselytizing missionaries in the early 2010s. In 2012, there were three missionary zones in the central DR Congo based in Kananga, Luputa, and Mbuji-Mayi. Only Congolese missionaries appear to serve in these zones.

Kananga

In Kananga, the Church had one branch in 1997 and two branches in 2001. In 2003, a district was created. The number of branches totaled four in 2008 and eight in 2011 when the district became a stake. Six of the branches originally became wards. In 2007, 600 of the 950 members in the district attended a district conference. In the fall of 2009, 2,162 attended district conference, significantly more than the 1,300 active members in the seven branches at the time. In 2010, the district baptized over 60 converts a month through the efforts of dozens of branch missionaries. Over 270 priesthood holders in the district attended a district priesthood meeting and 2,257 attended the general session of district conference held that year. By the beginning of 2011, there were approximately 40 members from the Kananga DR Congo District serving full-time missions. In May 2013, senior missionaries reported that the Kananga DR Congo Stake had reached such a large number of active members that only one facility in the entire city could accommodate the anticipated number of individuals to attend stake conference. The Church rented a theater owned by the Catholic Church for the stake conference and an estimated 2,800 attended the Sunday morning general session. Currently there are eleven wards in the stake. Missionaries report plans in the near future to create a second stake in the city and to form additional units.

Luputa

In Luputa, the Church had one branch in 1997. In 2006, a district was organized. The number of branches increased to four in 2008 and to seven to 2011 when the district became a stake. Five of the branches became wards. In September 2010, the Luputa DR Congo District had 1,735 members and no full-time missionaries assigned. 45 branch missionaries served in the district and had baptized 170 converts within the first nine months of the year.[2] In May 2013, there were five wards and two branches in the city.

Mbuji-Mayi

In Mbuji-Mayi, the Church had one branch in 1997. In 2008, a second branch was organized. In 2010, there were four branches and a district was organized. In early 2013, there were eight branches in the district. Senior missionaries have recently reported that large numbers of members in the city have received mission calls and will begin full-time missionary service in 2013. Senior missionaries have also reported that the district will likely become a stake in the near future.

Mwene-Ditu

In Mwene-Ditu, the Church organized its first branch in 2008. In 2010, a second branch was organized. Both branches have continued to pertain to the Luputa DR Congo District/Stake since their organization. In early 2013, senior missionaries reported that additional branches needed to be created as the meetinghouse can no longer accommodate all members and investigators within the building. A well-constructed building houses the branches at present.

Gandajika

In Gandajika, the Church organized its first branch in 2008. In 2012, senior missionaries reported that there were approximately 300 members in the branch and 20 members preparing to serve a mission in the near future. As of 2012, Gandajika was the only city with an LDS presence in the central DR Congo without full-time missionaries assigned. At the time the branch met in a well-constructed, sizable meetinghouse. In 2013, a second branch was organized.

Humanitarian and Development Work

There has been limited humanitarian and development work in the central DR Congo but most projects have been carried out on a large-scale and have benefited tens of thousands. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church completed a massive clean water project in Luputa. The water project consisted of three stages, the first of which was completed in the fall of 2009. The project consisted of constructing a pipeline carrying water from a source 19 miles outside of Luputa to the city as well as providing access to water in villages along the way. The project was completed in 2010 and benefited over 200,000 people.[3]

Successes

The Church has likely experienced the most rapid church growth in the central DR Congo among all areas of the world within recent memory. This achievement has been largely attributed to self-sufficient member-missionary programs that fueled growth without the assistance of full-time missionaries until the past few years. Local leadership has been successful in supervising local missionary efforts meanwhile meeting the spiritual needs of their members. Virtually all indicators of growth suggest that the Church has achieved high convert retention and member activity rates notwithstanding the baptism of large numbers of converts year to year and few seasoned church members. The high quality of new converts and the rapid pace at which additional wards and branches have been organized is a testament to the uniquely favorable opportunities for growth that a member-missionary efforts can yield. The Church in Kananga has become a major powerhouse for the Church in Central Africa despite its remote location and relatively recent establishment. Both stakes in Kananga and Luputa reached stakehood shortly

after reaching the minimum number of nominal members for a stake to operate due to high member activity rates and successful local leadership development efforts.

The Church in the central DR Congo has had significant numbers of members serve missions in recent years, providing a catalyst for long-term leadership development. Serving a full-time mission for Congolese members is a major sacrifice that often requires years of financial preparation due to poverty and rampant unemployment. Some members transport charcoal by bicycle between major cities in the region to save money to finance a mission; a process that takes years to accumulate sufficient funds. Increasing numbers of local members serving full-time missions has come with minimal intervention from mission leaders to motivate members. Several previous mission presidents have reported interviewing upwards of two dozen members for recommendation for full-time missionary service within a single visit to a city in the Central DR Congo.

The Church has addressed unique lifestyle challenges encountered by full-time missionaries and the local population. The Church has developed innovated methods to meeting the basic needs of full-time missionaries assigned. For example, senior missionaries reported in early 2013 that missionary houses were given solar panels to provide electricity due to unreliable electricity supply in the region. All missionary companionships have an emergency kit and cell phone. In response to the urgent need for clean water, the Church completed one of its largest clean water projects ever conducted to service the city of Luputa and several additional villages.

Opportunities

High receptivity, developed local leadership, and efficient member-missionary programs provide excellent conditions for opening additional locations to missionary work. Some of the most favorable opportunities for expanding LDS outreach into additional cities, towns, and villages are in those locations within close proximity of established church units. The stake in Luputa covers the largest geographical area of any stake or district in the central DR Congo and includes scores of towns and villages with no known LDS presence such as Diambo, Kalenda, Kaseka, Kisamba, Lusuku, Mwadi Kayembe, Tilen Saint Jacques, Tshabebo, and Tshiamvi. Ward, branch, and stake leaders can play an instrumental role in fellowshipping members and investigators in locations distant from meetinghouses and orchestrate the organization of cottage meetings and member groups in locations where there is a sufficient number of interested individuals. Other cities and large towns outside of the boundaries stakes and districts in the region pose good prospects for growth if mission and stake or district leaders coordinate efforts to find and teach families and individuals. A map displaying notable cities and towns with and without an LDS presence in the region can be found here.

The increasing number of returned missionaries poses many opportunities for maintaining and accelerating church growth. Returned missionaries staff local leadership positions throughout the world and offer expertise and devotion to the Church. It is likely that the surge in the number of wards in the Kananga DR Congo Stake and the maturation of the districts in Kananga and Luputa into stakes was made possible due to increasing numbers of returned missionaries. Returned missionaries that served in missions where mission leaders more aggressively expanded outreach such as in Ghana can encourage greater outreach expansion vision in the central DR Congo where only two additional cities have had an initial LDS unit established within the past decade.

The translation of LDS scriptures and additional church materials into Tshiluba presents good opportunities for fostering gospel scholarship, testimony development, and facilitating doctrinal understanding. Tshiluba has at least six million native speakers and comparatively high literacy rates among Christians (60%)[4] compared to other indigenous languages in Central Africa. The central DR Congo experiences significantly less ethnolinguistic diversity compared to many other areas of the country, requiring fewer accommodations by mission leaders to address differing language and cultural needs. Consequently, there appears no current need for the translation of church materials and scriptures into other indigenous languages native to the region.

Challenges

Difficulties allocating sufficient numbers of meetinghouse places that are large enough to accommodate the number of members and investigators attending church services poses one of the greatest challenges for church growth in the central DR Congo. Senior missionary couples and previous mission presidents have complained of a lack of modernization in the region, very low living standards, and a lack of suitable buildings that can be rented or purchased for housing wards and branches. Many meetinghouses cannot accommodate those attending church services within the building structure resulting in many members and investigators sitting outside the building and viewing sacrament meeting services through windows and doors. Some congregations hold nearly all church services outdoors due to limited indoor space. Senior missionaries reported one recently organized branch on the outskirts of Mbuji-Mayi assembled in the branch president's home for church services - the only brick adobe building in the area. In the early 2010s, the Church began a pilot meetinghouse construction program in Kinshasa that trained returned missionaries in construction and masonry skills so that they can be hired as contract laborers for construction companies that the Church selects to build meetinghouses. In early 2013, senior missionaries reported that the program had been introduced to the DR Congo Lubumbashi Mission but it was unclear whether the building program had been implemented in the central DR Congo. The program has good potential to ameliorate the extreme shortage of adequate numbers of sufficiently large meetinghouses in the region but poorly developed infrastructure poses many challenges for shipping construction materials.

Remote location from mission headquarters has deterred greater outreach expansion in the region notwithstanding high

receptivity to LDS teachings, excellent member-missionary participation, and robust local leadership development. For many years senior missionaries and former mission presidents have reported that the creation of new branches in cities that already have an LDS presence has taken many months or even years to accomplish due to challenges for mission leadership to visit the region and complete necessary paperwork to receive approval for organizing additional wards and branches. Consequently, there has been extremely little attention given to other major unreached cities and towns, including those with members and sizable numbers of investigators desiring church membership. The Congolese population has exhibited high receptivity in virtually all locations where LDS outreach has been extended and mission outreach continues to operate at only a fraction of the potential that could be harnessed. All cities in the central DR Congo remain far from reaching a level where meetinghouses and full-time missionary companionships are readily accessible to the majority of the population and there is a sufficient number of wards and branches to adequately saturate these cities with missionary outreach.

The assignment of full-time missionaries to the area has required specific criteria to help mitigate safety concerns. One of these criterion is allocating large homes for housing missionaries. Large homes have security walls affixed with razor wire on the tops of the walls and a steel gate entrance, providing adequate safety for housing missionaries. Infectious disease and low living standards also pose challenges for assigning full-time missionaries and for the well-being of members. In 2007, there was an Ebola virus outbreak in a remote area of Kasai Occidental Province resulting in 183 deaths.[5]

Comparative Growth

Among stakes that have been organized from member districts within the past 10 years, the Luputa DR Congo Stake has appeared to be the stake that reached stake status faster than any other stake currently functioning. Only five years elapsed from when the district was initially formed from mission branches to when the district became a stake. The Kananga DR Congo Stake has experienced the most rapid increase in the number of wards of any stake in the Church within the past decade as the number of wards increased from six to eleven in less than two years. The Mbuji-Mayi DR Congo District has experienced some of the most rapid congregational growth of any district in the Church within the past five years as the number of branches doubled within the first two years since the organization of the district. Only a couple districts in Papua New Guinea have experienced more rapid congregational growth than the Mbuji-Mayi DR Congo District within the past decade.

Other proselytizing Christian groups report a significantly more widespread presence in the central DR Congo than the LDS Church. However, in recent years these denominations have reported less rapid membership and congregational growth than the LDS Church. The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kasaï-Occidental and Kasaï-Oriental Provinces reports a quarter of a million members, over 500 churches, nearly 500 companies, and upwards of 20,000 baptisms a year.[6] Within the past five years, Adventist growth has varied by location within these two provinces as some areas have experienced modest membership and congregational growth (eastern areas) whereas other areas have experienced strong membership and congregational growth (western areas). Jehovah's Witnesses do not publish membership statistics for the central DR Congo but report several hundred congregations in Mbuji-Mayi, over 100 congregations in Kananga, 72 congregations in Mwene-Ditu, approximately 15 congregations in Luputa, and seven congregations in Gandajika.[7]

Limitations

Data on the number of convert baptisms, membership statistics for specific locations, and attendance figures originated from mission leader and senior missionary reports. No reports from young, returned missionaries or local members were available at the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish data on the location of dependent units. It is unclear whether any dependent units operate in the central DR Congo at present. No official statistics on member activity and convert retention are published by the Church.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth in the central DR Congo appears highly favorable due to populations exhibiting exceptionally strong receptivity to the LDS Church, high efficiency and productivity from member-missionary and full-time missionary efforts, and stalwart local leadership. Prospects for the organization of a separate mission headquartered in Kananga or Mbuji-Mayi to service the central DR Congo appears highly likely within the near future due to long distance from mission headquarters in Lubumbashi, almost limitless opportunities for additional growth due to high receptivity and good convert retention and member activity rates, and the growing number of Congolese members serving full-time missions. Additional cities may have member groups and branches organized in the coming years largely due to active members moving to unreached areas or members sharing the gospel with family and friends that do not live in cities currently reached by the Church. However, very low living standards, a lack of economic development, and poverty will pose ongoing challenges for establishing additional meetinghouses and mitigating health and safety risks.

[1] "Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2013," www.mormonnewsroom.org/files/Seminaries-and-Institutes-2013-Annual-Report/2013-annual_report_seminaries_institutes.pdf

[2] Collett, Howard. "A prayer for clean water," LDS Church News, 11 September 2010. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/59861/A-prayer-for-clean-water.html

[3] Collett, Howard. "A prayer for clean water," LDS Church News, 11 September 2010. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/59861/A-prayer-for-clean-water.html

[4] "Luba-Kasai," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 28 May 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/lua

[5] "Outbreak Postings," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, retrieved 28 May 2013. http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/spb/outbreaks/#ebola-drc-2007

[6] "West Congo Union Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 27 May 2013. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=WCUM

[7] "Congregation Meeting Search," www.jw.org, retrieved 15 May 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E