LDS Growth Case Studies

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Rapid LDS Outreach Expansion in Southwestern Cote d'Ivoire

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Posted: August 14th, 2013

Overview

Beginning in early 2012, the Church in Cote d'Ivoire has experienced rapid outreach expansion in southwestern areas of the country as evidenced by the organization of branches in four additional cities. The total number branches increased from three to 13 within an 18-month period and some cities that previously had no official branches operating had as many as three branches functioning by July 2013.

This case study reviews recent congregational growth and national outreach expansion in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire. Recent missionary and church growth successes are analyzed and opportunities and challenges for continuing congregational growth and national outreach expansion are explored. The extent of LDS outreach in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire is compared to the extent of LDS outreach in other areas of the country and in other West African nations. The size and recent growth trends of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in western Cote d'Ivoire is compared to the LDS Church. Limitations to data and findings in this case study are reported and prospects for future growth are examined.

NOTE: Southwestern Cote d'Ivoire is defined in this case study as including the following seven departments: Bas-Sassandra, Dix-Huit Montagnes, Fromager, Haut-Sassandra, Marahoué, Moyen-Cavally, and Sud-Bandama.

LDS Background

In the mid-2000s, the Church organized its first branches in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire in Divo and San-Pedro. In 2009, the Church organized a second branch in the San-Pedro area (Seweke). In 2012, the Church organized its first branch in Bouafle and later that year formed two additional branches in the city (Koko and Agbanou). In late 2012, the Church created its first branch in Meagui. In early 2013, the Church organized a third branch in San-Pedro. In mid-2013, the Church organized two additional branches in Divo (Konankro and Plateau) and organized its first branches in Gagnoa (Babre and Garahio) and Ouragahio. Provided with the number of branches in parentheses as of mid-July 2013, cities that have an official LDS presence include Bouafle (3), Divo (3), San-Pedro (3), Gagnoa (2), Meagui (1), and Ouragahio (1). Local members also indicate that the city of Danané has a member group operating. With the exception of the three branches in Bouafle, all branches do not pertain to a stake or district and report directly to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission.

Successes

The explosion in national outreach expansion in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire has appeared to coincide with the reduced geographic size of the original Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission. Prior to July 2012, the Francophone countries of Benin and Togo also pertained to the mission. Distance from mission headquarters in Abidjan, administrative challenges supervising full-time missionaries assigned to three countries, and meeting leadership needs and training for one member district in Togo and several mission branches in Benin likely prevented mission leadership from concentrating on expanding outreach within Cote d'Ivoire prior to 2012. Returning stability to the country following two civil wars within the past decade has also permitted mission leaders to open official branches in additional cities and towns when there has been a sufficient number of active members and qualified priesthood holders to fill leadership positions.

The recent expansion of national outreach has been possible due to the self-sufficiency of the Ivorian full-time missionary force,

strong member-missionary participation, and excellent local leadership development. The Church has not permitted non-African missionaries to serve in Cote d'Ivoire within the past decade due to political instability with the exception of a two-year period from 2008 to 2010. This has required the mission to depend on larger numbers of Ivorian members serving missions in order to increase the size of the mission complement. Although it is unclear how involved young proselytizing missionaries have been in the opening of additional cities in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire to the Church, vibrant member-missionary activity has appeared primarily responsible in driving the organization of new branches in so many additional cities within such a short period of time. Generally speaking, such rapid outreach expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa does not occur through the simultaneous assignment of full-time missionaries to multiple locations that previously had few or no known church members. Rather, mission leaders generally assign missionaries to additional cities once there has been a small membership and leadership base from which to build upon. Local leadership development has appeared to be excellent as all branches appear to be led by local church members and many, if not most, new branches appeared to initially functioned as member groups. This is a considerable achievement as these members have likely joined the Church only within the past two or three years at most.

The Church has begun to establish branches in small cities and large towns for the first time in the Church's history in Cote d'Ivoire. Within the past year branches have been organized in Meagui (a small city) and Ouragahio (a town/large village). As of mid-2012, the Church had established an official ward or branch in only one small city or large town in the entire country in the village of Ahoutoue. Ahoutoue is located on the outskirts of Abidjan and is where the first LDS sacrament meeting was held in the 1980s.

Opportunities

There are abundant opportunities to continue to expand LDS outreach in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire due to strong receptivity and large populations. There are dozens of small and medium-sized cities that have no official branch operating such as Daloa, Duekoue, Issua, Lakota, Oume, Sinfra, Soubre, and Tabou. Mission leaders visiting these cities and organizing member groups where there are a sufficient number of local members present good opportunities to perpetuate outreach expansion. The city of Daloa presents some of the greatest potential for LDS growth as it is the most populous unreached city in the southwest with over 200,000 inhabitants. The assignment of multiple full-time missionary companionships to Daloa and the simultaneous organization of several member groups has potential to replicate recent rapid congregational growth experienced by the Church in Gagnoa. Southwestern Cote d'Ivoire appears to be a fertile ground for the Church to implement aggressive church planting practices due to recent successes organizing the first branches in Bouafle, Gagnoa, Meagui, and Ouragahio. The organization of member districts in cities with a sufficient number of branches will likely be a an important step for local church leaders to coordinate with mission leadership in carrying out church planting tactics. A map of southwestern Cote d'Ivoire displaying the location of LDS branches and member groups and the most populous unreached cities can be found here.

Challenges

Political instability and violence has challenged efforts for the Church to expand national outreach in Cote d'Ivoire due to limited numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the country and difficulties expanding into previous unreached cities. These challenges have prevented the establishment of the Church in additional cities in the southwest until the past couple years. In the early-2000s, the Church operated congregations in only three cities (Abidjan, Bouake, and Yamoussoukro) notwithstanding over 8,000 members, 26 congregations, and 17 million people in the entire country and an LDS presence established 15 years earlier. One city (Bouake) had both of its LDS branches closed during the mid-2000s as the city fell under the jurisdiction of the rebel-held north during and following the First Ivorian Civil War; a conflict lasting from 2002 to 2007. The Church has had two North American missionaries[1] murdered in Africa within the past 15 years - both of whom were serving in Cote d'Ivoire.[2] In 2004, the number of missionaries serving in the mission declined from 64 to 22 due to the evacuation of nonnative missionaries as a result of the civil war. An inadequate supply of missionaries to the mission has not appeared to be a problem for the past five years due to increasing numbers of Ivorian members serving full-time missions and missionaries from other Francophone African countries serving in Cote d'Ivoire. However, missionary shortages in the past couple decades has likely delayed outreach expansion.

The vast majority of church membership in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire appears to have joined the Church within the past two or three years. Consequently there is a lack of qualified converts who have sufficient resources and gospel knowledge to fill leadership positions. The newness of the Church in the region poses administrative challenges for mission leaders to ensure that church services are properly organized and conducted. The learning curve for local church leaders in the Church in Cote d'Ivoire has had a remarkable history, suggesting that with continued mentoring and gospel learning and practice that recent converts and new branch leaders will likely acquire the needed skills and testimony to hold district callings once member districts are organized.

The Church has not translated LDS scriptures into indigenous languages spoken in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire. Baoule (2.13 million speakers) is the only indigenous language with any LDS materials translated at all and is also the most widely spoken indigenous language in Cote d'Ivoire. Literacy rates for Baoule and other indigenous languages are low (less than 30%).[3] Many ethnolinguistic groups exhibit higher literacy rates in French than in their indigenous language.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Cote d'Ivoire has experienced some of the most rapid outreach expansion in the world within the past couple

years but the Church nonetheless remains severely limited in the scope and duration of its national outreach. Only Abidjan and Yamoussoukro have had full-time missionaries consistently assigned and the only other locations that have had branches established for longer than one year are Ahoutoue, Bingerville, and Grand-Bassam. The Church has organized its first branch in two additional cities outside of southwestern Cote d'Ivoire since the beginning of 2012 in Abisso and Bonoua. The Church in Ghana has been the only other West African country that has had member groups and branches organized in appreciable numbers of previously unreached cities and towns. Steady increases in the number of wards and branches in other West African countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Togo has been attributed to growth within cities that have already had a previous LDS establishment rather than expansion into previously unreached cities and towns.

Other proselytizing Christian groups report a more pervasive presence in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses report a significantly more widespread presence in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire than the LDS Church but the LDS Church maintains one or two more congregations than Witnesses within cities where both denominations function. Provided with the number of Witness congregations reported per city, Jehovah's Witnesses report a presence in all but one city with an LDS presence including Bouafle (2), Divo (2), Gagnoa (2), Danané (1), Meagui (1), and San-Pedro (1). Witnesses also report a presence in a dozen additional cities including Daloa (4), Soubre (2), Duekoue (1), Gueyo (1), Guiberoua (1), Guiglo (1), Issia (1), Lakota (1), Oume (1), Sassandra (1), Sinfra (1), and Tabou (1).[4] No statistical data specific to southwestern Cote d'Ivoire is available for the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Adventists have reported stagnant congregational growth and slow membership growth within the past few years. Adventists currently maintain 60 churches and 88 companies and report nearly 12,800 members nationwide.[5]

Limitations

The lack of data on member activity rates, leadership development, missionary activity constitute the most significant limitation to this case study. No full-time missionary, local leadership, or mission leadership reports were available during the writing of this case study. No details are available on what process has driven the rapid expansion of outreach in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire. Mission leaders organizing member groups and providing local leadership development training and support appear to have been a major influence. It is unclear how full-time missionaries have been involved in this process, if at all, and how long member groups functioned in locations that have recently had branches established for the first time. Only African missionaries serve within the mission and it is unclear whether missionaries are officially assigned to any of the branches in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire. The Church does not publish data on the number and location of member groups in Cote d'Ivoire. It is unclear how many member groups operate in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire and whether many cities without an official branch have member groups established.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire appears highly favorable for the foreseeable future due to rapid congregational growth within the past 18 months, high receptivity in all areas that have had a branch established, the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission staffed by a self-sufficient full-time missionary force, and a history of good local leadership development throughout the country. The Church will likely organize several member districts in southwestern Cote d'Ivoire once there is a sufficient number of local leaders to staff both branch and district callings. Cities that appear most likely to have member districts established include Bouafle, Divo, Gagnoa, and San Pedro. The Church may organize a second mission based in Yamoussoukro that services central, northern, and southwestern areas of Cote d'Ivoire within the near or medium term as there are currently over 60 wards and branches nationwide and the Church has generally organized a second mission in Sub-Saharan African countries once there are at least 80 wards and branches in operation.

[1] "Slain missionary stood tall spiritually and physically," LDS Church News, 1 May 1999. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/35703/Slain-missionary-stood-tall-spiritually-and-physically.html

[2] "Missionary death," LDS Church News, 10 August 2002. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/42260/Missionary-death.html

[3] "Baoule," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 29 July 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/bci

[4] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 27 July 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[5] "Cote d'Ivoire Conference (2002-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 27 July 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10102