



# LDS Growth Case Studies

&gt;

## Congregations That Have Achieved Superior Levels of Member Activity and Convert Retention

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: September 21st, 2013

### LDS Background

The Church has experienced extremely high member activity rates (90% or higher) in only a handful of locations around the world. Ordinary church members and local church leaders have reported that many of these congregations are specialized units that service a unique demographic such as adult singles or married students. In recent years, extraordinarily high member activity and convert retention rates have been achieved in rural or isolated locations with a recent LDS establishment. This case study examines the unique characteristics of two locations (Saradraoa, Madagascar and Bibiani, Ghana) and what factors have contributed to the Church achieving superior levels of member activity and convert retention in these locations.

### Saradraoa, Madagascar

In Saradraoa, the Church established a member group in mid-2010 that originally met in a tent. On the day that the group was formally organized there were 17 convert baptisms that occurred in a nearby stream. 114 attended the first sacrament meeting services for the new group. Currently mission leaders describe the location of the meetinghouse as difficult to access from outside the community. Travel to the community requires the use of a four-wheel drive vehicle to ascend a steep, deeply rutted trail for several kilometers until it becomes impassible and requires visitors to proceed on foot for an additional kilometer. The current meetinghouse is located in an area where there is no real "village" but is within walking distance for most members whose homes are scattered throughout the surrounding mountains. Many members must walk long distances to attend church services. There is no electricity available in the area and no running water. The branch has a small generator to power a CD player that plays music for church services. No full-time missionaries have been permanently assigned to serve and live in the Saradraoa area. Rather, full-time missionaries serving in nearby Antsirabe travel to the branch on a weekly basis to teach and baptize investigators prepared and referred by local members.

The average percentage of members on branch records who attend church services is 96% - the same percentage of tithing faithfulness in the branch. There are times when church attendance exceeds 100% of membership for the branch due to several investigators and visitors in attendance. Four members of the branch are currently serving full-time missions - two of whom serve in the Madagascar Antananarivo Mission. All of the approximately 20 young men and women in the branch report that they are preparing to serve full-time missions. Most classes are held outdoors as the branch meetinghouse consists of a wooden building with a metal roof and one single room. Mission leaders report that the branch has an organized branch council that meets weekly and often requires church leaders to travel home from the meetings in the dark.

### Bibiani, Ghana

In Bibiani, mission leadership in the Ghana Cape Coast Mission received reports in early 2011 of individuals self-identifying as Latter-day Saints and holding church services. The mission president visited the group and found that the group was holding church services and that its members were paying a significant amount of tithing. The mission president sent a request for the group to hold formal church services and be organized as a member group but this request was denied from the Area Presidency due to no proper priesthood support in Bibiani. The Area Presidency approved a request for the group to hold a limited sacrament meeting service in mid-2011. Shortly thereafter a second group of self-identified Latter-day Saints emerged in the nearby village of Bekwai. Mission leaders visited the Bibiani Group in mid-2011 and began making preparations to upgrade the member group into an independent branch. Multiple baptismal services were held where up to 42 converts were baptized at once from the Bibiani and Bekwai areas.

In late 2012, average sacrament meeting attendance comprised 67% of membership on branch records. In October 2012, 18 men were interviewed and approved to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. In early 2013, the Bibiani Branch held several classes outdoors due to a lack of space and approximately 150 members - all of whom had been baptized within the previous two years. In mid-2013, senior missionaries reported that membership in the Bibiani Branch had increased to 300 and that local members could only think of one member when asked to provide a list of less-active members in the branch to mission leadership.

## **Factors That Appear to Have Contributed to Superior Levels of Member Activity**

Enthusiastic, dedicated local members and church leaders have been pivotal for the Church to achieve superior member activity rates in Sarodroa and Bibiani. Missionary activity in these locations is well coordinated between ordinary members, local leaders, and full-time missionaries resulting in no disconnect between the missionary efforts of full-time missionaries and local members. Most local members have strong testimonies in the Church and actively participate in member-missionary activity with family, friends, and neighbors resulting in frequent convert baptisms and good post-baptism fellowship. In branches that have operated for at least a couple years, there are several local members serving full-time missions notwithstanding many members living in poverty and most members possessing limited experience and time serving in the Church and learning the gospel.

Superior levels of member activity have occurred in branches where one or more highly committed, teachable, and devoted investigators or members have helped orchestrate the establishment of the Church in their area. These individuals have later constituted core member group and branch leadership. Stalwart local contacts with mission leadership often initiate the request for the establishment of the Church in their community, reception of the missionary lessons for themselves and other investigators, and getting baptized. These individuals often patiently and eagerly wait for many months or even years for mission leaders to respond to their petitions to get baptized, have a formal church unit organized, and full-time missionaries assigned. The high degree of commitment exhibited by these individuals has established a superb leadership base that has been teachable, faithful, and committed to following the direction of mission or district leadership in how to appropriately administer the Church within their jurisdictions.

Strong receptivity to LDS outreach has occurred in most or all areas where the Church in Ghana and Madagascar has established a missionary presence. Commensurate membership and congregational growth has occurred in both countries. In Madagascar, membership increased from 2,634 in 2002 to 9,190 in 2012 (a 249% increase within a decade) and the number of congregations increased from seven to 37 (a 429%) within the same time period. In Ghana, membership increased from 22,164 in 2002 to 52,387 in 2012 (a 136% increase within a decade) and the number of congregations increased from 67 to 148 (a 121% increase) within the same time period. There are many branches and wards that have achieved high rates of member activity and convert retention (60% and higher) in both countries and estimated member activity rates for these countries as a whole appear to range between 40-60%. Missionaries serving in both countries generally report good member-missionary participation in most wards and branches and large numbers of investigators attending church services on a given Sunday.

Remote location has been another factor involved in superior levels of member activity and convert retention. The Sarodroa Branch operates in a rural, remote area in the mountains between Antsirabe and Antananarivo whereas the Bibiani Branch is the most isolated mission branch functioning in the Ghana Kumasi Mission as of mid-2013. Distance from mission headquarters and local stake or district leadership has often increased the sense of responsibility for local members in remote locations for meeting administrative and leadership needs as there are no other individuals who can fulfill this role. These conditions have dissuaded mission and area leaders from opening isolated locations to full-time missionaries unless there is a local leadership base to provide fellowship and accountability for new converts. Distance from mission headquarters or the nearest city with a sizable LDS presence has limited contact with mission leadership; another factor that encourages self-sufficiency as local leadership must meet its own needs with often minimal contact from outside leaders.

Mission and area leadership have carefully evaluated the sustainability of a church establishment in Sarodroa and Bibiani. Mission leaders have taken months or even a couple years between the time when the initial request for receiving missionary lessons and the establishment of a church presence was initially received to when official church units are organized. Mission leaders have regularly visited these locations to teach and prepare investigators and members for the establishment of an official LDS presence in order to ensure that interest in the Church is sincere and consistent among prospective members and leaders. Acting under the direction of mission leadership, senior missionary couples have played a valuable role in conducting more regular visits to these locations to prepare individuals for future church responsibilities and identify suitable locations for holding church services and housing full-time missionaries if necessary. Mission leaders in both Sarodroa and Bibiani have been sensitive to meeting the requests of members and investigators in as timely of a fashion as permitted by area leadership and have exhibited kindness and concern to these individuals by advocating for their needs to area leadership.

Full-time missionaries were not permanently assigned or did not regularly visit Sarodroa or Bibiani until after official branches were organized. Postponing the permanent assignment of full-time missionaries has helped instill the development of self-sufficiency in local leadership as full-time missionaries that are assigned to a branch after its organization are less prone to intervene during the early stages of local leadership development when a member group is first formed. Missionaries that regularly visit or are assigned to these locations may provide mentoring to local branch leaders if needed but this has not appeared to interfere with the primary focus of missionaries to teach investigators and prepare them for baptism and long-term activity in the Church. The strength and self-sufficiency in local branch leadership has mitigated the need for young proselytizing missionaries to meet any administrative needs in these locations.

The Church has historically experienced higher member activity rates in locations with a more recently established church presence. This factor has contributed to extraordinarily high member activity rates in Sarodroa and Bibiani. The short duration of LDS outreach in many locations correlates with little time elapsed between when most converts are baptized and the present day as convert retention rates in these situations almost always decline the longer converts are members of the Church.

Mission and local church leadership have been innovative in securing spaces to hold church meetings in Sarodroa and Bibiani. In Sarodroa, church services were initially held in outdoors in no structure with chairs for the congregation to assemble and a table with cloths to bless the sacrament. Once regular church meetings are held, church members have gathered in makeshift structures such as tents until the Church ultimately constructs or rents a more permanent structure such as a brick or wood building.

There are sizable numbers of LDS materials translated into indigenous languages spoken in both Sarodroa and Bibiani and abundant translations of materials in commonly spoken second languages such as English and French. The availability of church materials and scriptures in local languages encourages gospel scholarship and testimony development.

## **Limitations**

Data on various measurements of member activity such as sacrament meeting attendance and the percentage of full-tithe paying faithfulness were obtained from several mission president, senior missionary couple, and young full-time missionary reports for both Sarodroa and Bibiani. No local member or church leader reports were available. There have been a few inconsistencies in some of these reports. For example, one senior missionary couple reported a member activity rate for the Bibiani Branch that was significantly lower than another member activity rate reported just six months later. The Church does not publish any official statistics on member activity rates and convert retention. It is unclear how many total converts have been baptized in both locations as these figures are not released to the public on a local, national, or regional level.

## **Future Prospects**

Experience from other areas of the world that have initially experienced extraordinarily high member activity rates suggests that the Church in locations such as Sarodroa and Bibiani will likely experience decreasing member activity rates within the coming years. However, high member activity rates may be able to be preserved for the long-term if local church members and leaders remain at the forefront of missionary activity, full-time missionaries primarily work on a member and investigator-referral basis, and reasonably high convert baptismal standards are maintained. Additional branches and member groups appear likely to be organized within or nearby the current branch boundaries for both Sarodroa and Bibiani once the number of members and investigators attending church services becomes too large to effectively administer from a single congregation and if distance to the church meetinghouse prevents some from attending church on a regular basis. Successes in achieving superior levels of member activity and convert retention in these branches has many ramifications for area, mission, stake, and district leaders throughout the world on the importance of member and local leadership-led missionary programs and the rapid real growth that can occur in small cities and rural areas that infrequently and inconsistently reached in Sub-Saharan Africa.