



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Comparing the Growth of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

The LDS Church has experienced some of its most rapid international growth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) within the past three decades. Church membership increased from less than 1,000 in 1986 to over 30,000 in 2012, the number of wards and branches increased from three in 1986 to 127 in late 2013, and the number of stakes increased from one in 1996 to 12 in 2013. The Church in the DR Congo has maintained a self-sufficient full-time missionary force that currently staffs two missions. Rapid church growth has also occurred in other outreach-oriented faiths. Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced similar growth trends compared to the LDS Church although Witnesses established a presence three decades earlier than the LDS Church and have more aggressively expanded national outreach. In 2012, Witnesses reported over 177,000 active members meeting in nearly 3,300 congregations.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in the DR Congo. A synopsis of membership growth trends, the expansion of national outreach, and the extend of worldwide outreach among Congolese for both denominations is examined. Factors that have influenced growth trends for both denominations are identified and discussed. The growth of other proselytism-focused groups that operate in the DR Congo is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future LDS and Witness growth is predicted.

LDS Background

The first efforts to establish the Church in the DR Congo (formerly Zaire) were directed under the International Mission, which operated between 1972 and 1987. Legal status was granted to the Church on February 12th, 1986 when only a handful of members lived in the country. [\[1\]](#) Elder Marvin J. Ashton dedicated the DR Congo for missionary work in 1987. The Zaire Kinshasa Mission was organized that same year from the International Mission. In 1991, seminary and institute commenced.

In 2010, a second mission was organized in Lubumbashi. In 2011, the Church announced a temple for Kinshasa. In 2013, the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission administered western areas of the country, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, and Sao Tome and Principe whereas the Democratic Republic of Congo Lubumbashi Mission included southern and eastern areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi. In the early 2010s, the Church began a meetinghouse construction program to help construct a larger number of meetinghouses to accommodate growth.

Witness Background

Jehovah's Witnesses received requests for literature from interested Congolese as early as 1930. In 1932, Witnesses attempted to enter the country to begin proselytism but were denied permission. At the time some members conducted limited missionary activity in the southern areas of the country from Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). By the 1940s, the government banned Witness activities and literature. Witnesses began preaching in extremely small numbers in the late 1940s and early 1950s and many were sentenced to prison and labor camps for their activities. By 1959, local government authorities permitted Witnesses to hold meetings and operate with fewer restrictions. This resulted in rapid growth. The first official missionaries arrived in the early 1960s and established a mission home in Kinshasa. In 1966, Witnesses opened a second missionary home in Lubumbashi and received official recognition from the national government. During the 1970s, Witnesses lost legal

recognition and did not regain it until 1980. By 1986, Witnesses reported 11 missionary homes in the country which operated in locations such as Goma, Isiro, Likasi, Kikwit, Matadi, and Mbuji-Mayi. That same year, Witnesses were banned again by the national government and this band was not removed until 1993. Throughout their operations in the DR Congo, Witnesses have experienced a lack of sufficient buildings to house congregations and began a meetinghouse construction program in the late 1990s.[\[2\]](#)

Membership Growth

LDS Church membership increased from 400 in 1987 to 3,400 in 1991, 6,400 in 1997, and 10,991 in 2001. Membership reached 15,960 in 2004, 20,883 in 2008, and 34,547 in 2012.

In 1957, Witnesses reported 216 attending their annual Memorial celebration. By year-end 1962, there were 2,000 active members in the country. The number of active Witnesses increased to 14,000 in 1970, 51,000 in 1990, and 177,556 in 2012.[\[3\]](#)

Both Latter-day Saints and Witnesses have experienced high receptivity in virtually all locations where outreach has been extended. Consequently both groups report similar membership growth trends in the DR Congo notwithstanding five times as many active Witnesses than nominal Latter-day Saints at present. Although the size of church membership for Latter-day Saints and Witnesses significantly differs from one another, both denominations have experienced similar membership growth rates in regards to the duration of each denomination's operations in the country. Latter-day Saints reported 10,991 members after 15 years of an official church presence in the country whereas Witnesses reported nearly 14,000 active members approximately 15 years after Witness activities began. Considering the LDS Church has achieved good to excellent levels of member activity and convert retention throughout most of its history in the country, the number of Latter-day Saints and Witnesses was comparable for when both denominations reached the 15-year milestone of operating in the country. Current membership growth rates in the LDS Church of approximately 13% a year suggest that Latter-day Saints will surpass 50,000 members in 2016 - 30 years after the Church established its initial presence. Witnesses reported reaching the 50,000 milestone for active membership in 1990 - slightly more than 30 years after Witnesses established an active presence.

National Outreach and Congregational Growth

In 1987, the LDS Church reported three branches and one district in Kinshasa. In 1988, the Church organized a district in Lubumbashi where two branches operated. In 1991, the number of branches in Kinshasa increased to eight. In 1996, the Church created its first stake in Kinshasa. The number of congregations dramatically increased from three in 1987 to 19 in 1991, 26 in 1997, and 46 in 2001. By 2001, the Church operated wards or branches in Kinshasa (21), Lubumbashi (6), Kananga (2), Kolwezi (2), Likasi (1), Luputa (1), and Mbuji-Mayi (1). The number of congregations increased to 62 in 2004, 70 in 2008, and 127 in late 2013. Provided with the number of wards and branches in parentheses as of September 2013, the LDS Church reports a presence in Kinshasa (53), Lubumbashi (22), Kananga (11), Likasi (8), Mbuji-Mayi (8), Luputa (7), Kolwezi (5), Gandajika (2), Kasumbalesa (2), Mwene-Ditu (2), Kakanda (1), Kipushi (1), Matadi (1), and Uvira (1). In early October 2013, Latter-day Saints reported 127 wards and branches nationwide, including two mission branches.

In 1952, Jehovah's Witnesses organized their first congregation in Kinshasa. The number of congregations in Kinshasa increased to five by the end of the 1950s. In the 1960s, Witnesses had established congregations in cities as remote as Gandajika, Kamina, and Kisangani and in many small villages. By 1970, Witnesses reported 194 congregations and over 200 groups. In the late 1990s, Witnesses reported 298 congregations in Kinshasa yet less than 20 adequate meetinghouses operated in the city at the time.[\[4\]](#) By year-end 2012, there were 3,288 congregations nationwide.

Witnesses have more aggressively expanded national outreach than Latter-day Saints as evidenced by Witnesses operating congregations in nearly all major cities of the country within the first 15 years of proselytism. Witnesses have more readily organized additional congregations and generally have smaller congregations than LDS wards and branches. Consequently, the LDS Church reported only 46 congregations when the Church reached its 15-year milestone in the country whereas Witnesses reported 194 congregations and over 200 groups throughout the country when the 15-year milestone was reached. At present Jehovah's Witnesses report a presence in all cities and towns where LDS units operate. As of September 2013 Witnesses reported at least 350 congregations in Kinshasa, 87 in Lubumbashi, 206 in Kananga, 27 in Likasi, 203 in Mbuji-Mayi, 16 in Luputa, 25 in Kolwezi, six in Gandajika, four in Kasumbalesa, 76 in Mwene-Ditu, one in Kakanda, two in Kipushi, 23 in Matadi, and 27 in Uvira. Witnesses have extended significantly more penetrating outreach than Latter-day Saints on both a nationwide scale and within specific sectors or neighborhoods or major cities. For example, in late 2013 Witnesses reported 54 congregations within the Masina sector of Kinshasa alone - an area where 11 LDS wards currently function. Witnesses operate approximately 25 congregations in the N'Djili sector of the city where only one LDS ward currently functions.

Witnesses operate a presence in all cities in the DR Congo where there are 100,000 or more inhabitants whereas there are 15 of these cities that have no LDS presence. Witnesses report sizable numbers of congregations in virtually all of these cities. Provided with the number of Witness congregations, these cities include Kisangani (53), Bukavu (47), Tshikapa (117), Kikwit (73), Mbandaka (27), Goma (57), Bunia (58), Boma (23), Butembo (85), Isiro (33), Kindu (22), Kabinda (45), Bandundu (54), Kamina (29), and Gemena (21).

International Congolese Outreach

Worldwide Congolese outreach significantly varies between Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. The LDS Church reports no congregations outside of the DR Congo and the Republic of the Congo that specifically service Congolese members or that are conducted in major indigenous languages spoken in the DR Congo such as Lingala. Latter-day Saints have likely hundreds or even a few thousand Congolese members who reside in Western Europe that attend French-speaking congregations.

Witness report impressive outreach among Congolese in Western Europe and in nearby Sub-Saharan African countries. In addition to the hundreds of Lingala-speaking congregations that operate in the DR Congo, Witnesses operate Lingala-speaking congregations in 10 additional countries including Angola (32 congregations, three groups), France (15 congregations, 22 groups), Belgium (three congregations, five groups), the United Kingdom (three congregations, two groups), the Republic of the Congo (three congregations, one group), Canada (one congregation, one group), Germany (two groups), Switzerland (two groups), Austria (one group), and Italy (one group). Witnesses have maintained greater international Congolese outreach than Latter-day Saints largely due to a longer history in the DR Congo than the LDS Church and greater resources and vision in establishing language-specific congregations in Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Factors Influencing Differing Growth Trends

Witnesses established a presence in the DR Congo 30 years prior to the LDS Church. Consequently, Witnesses have had a significantly longer period of time to proselyte and expand national outreach. The LDS Church's limitations on black Africans holding the priesthood and participating in temple ordinances placed most areas of Sub-Saharan Africa off limits to missionary activity until these limitations were lifted in 1978. The mobilization of missionary resources and outreach expansion vision did not come to fruition until nearly a decade had passed from the 1978 announcement and the official establishment of the Church in 1986. This delay appeared due to a combination of issues such as a lack of members residing in the DR Congo and the Church striving to adequately mobilize mission resources for newly opened mission fields throughout Sub-Saharan Africa where no previous mission outreach occurred with the exception of a few countries in Southern Africa.

Witnesses have historically maintained considerably larger amounts of proselytism resources in Sub-Saharan Africa compared to the LDS Church. Some of the initial efforts by Witnesses to reach the DR Congo began along the Zambian border where Witnesses already established a strong foothold in the 1930s. The LDS Church did not establish a sizable presence in any Sub-Saharan African country until the 1970s when the Church created its first stake on the continent in Johannesburg, South Africa. Currently the LDS Church has a minimal presence in most countries that border the DR Congo as only two of the nine bordering countries have stakes established. The LDS Church's Africa Southeast Area continues to struggle to develop self-sufficiency in meeting its missionary needs and relies on non-African missionary manpower to fully staff its ranks.

The centers of strength policy has dictated the expansion of missionary activity in the DR Congo for most of the duration that the LDS Church has functioned in the country. This policy has restricted the operations of the Church to a handful of select cities where the majority of church membership resides, such as Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, under the rationale that the strengthening of the Church in these locations will result in the emergence of centers of strength that can supply needed resources for future national outreach expansion. The Church has achieved considerable progress extending more penetrating outreach into several major cities through the allotment of surplus missionary resources into these locations but at the expense of delaying the opening of additional cities to missionary activity. The immense geographic size of the DR Congo combined with comparatively few mission resources allotted to the two Congolese missions that service a combined population of over 100 million has dissuaded mission and area leaders from initiating church planting and missionary activity in additional major cities that continue to be unreached such as Kisangani, Tshikapa, Mbandaka, Boma, and Kamina. The rapid growth experienced in locations where LDS congregations operate has also discouraged the opening of additional areas to proselytism due to the current supply of mission resources being inadequate to sufficiently meet the demand exhibited by target populations. There is considerable risk in delaying the steady opening of additional cities to missionary activity as future political instability may make some areas currently accessible to the Church difficult to reach if conflict occurs.

Unlike the LDS Church in Sub-Saharan Africa, Jehovah's Witnesses do not maintain as strict of a centralization of church operations as the LDS Church. Witnesses have tactfully opened cities, towns, and villages to proselytism at a rapid pace in all corners of the DR Congo. This national outreach expansion has driven rapid membership and congregational growth trends for over the past half century. The extend of outreach expansion and accommodations to local societal conditions is manifest in Witnesses holding worship services in 17 different languages including American Sign Language, Mandarin Chinese, Chokwe, Cibemba, English, French, Kiluba, Kinyarwanda, Kisonge, Kongo, Lingala, Otetela, Swahili, Swahili (Congo), Tshiluba, Uruund, and Zande.^[5] Witnesses have willingly opened missionary activity in politically unstable areas of the country. To the contrary, the LDS Church has taken greater precautions avoiding the expansion of missionary activity into politically unstable areas.

Slower national outreach expansion of the LDS Church compared to Jehovah's Witnesses has also appeared due to the lack of Congolese Latter-day Saints serving as mission presidents in the country. All previous mission presidents in the DR Congo have been white, non-African leaders. The Church has likely taken greater precautions entering additional areas of the country due to safety and security concerns for nonnative mission presidents traveling to these locations. Congolese mission presidents would likely experience fewer safety threats due to their familiarity with local culture and greater ability to assimilate with local cultural and societal conditions.

Comparative Growth

All worldwide proselytism-focused Christian groups report a presence in the DR Congo and have experienced moderate to rapid growth. Evangelicals number among the largest missionary-focused Christian groups and claim 18.7% of the DR Congo population.^[6] Adventists number among the largest nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups in the DR Congo but have experienced slower growth than many other groups within the past decade. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in the DR Congo reported 553,823 members, 1,724 churches, 1,577 companies, and four percent annual net membership growth for the year. Adventists reported 29% net membership growth between 2001 and 2011.^[7] The Church of the Nazarene reports 354 churches in the DR Congo.^[8] These denominations report a presence in the DR Congo that has lasted many years or decades longer than the LDS Church.

Limitations

The LDS Church does not publish data on member activity and convert retention rates. Membership criteria differ substantially between Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses resulting in no precise comparison in membership totals. Data obtained on the past location and number of LDS units was obtained from various sources including official LDS media, the Deseret News Church Almanac, and Marc A. Schindler's online LDS atlas.^[9] Current information regarding the distribution of wards and branches was obtained from the Church's online meetinghouse locator. The Church does not publish information on the location and number of dependent units such as member groups on its online meetinghouse locator or anywhere else. It is unclear whether member groups operate in cities without a ward or branch functioning. All data on Jehovah's Witness activities, growth, and congregation distributions was obtained from the Jehovah's Witnesses official internet site and previous yearbooks. With the exception of a few isolated reports, no data is available regarding the number of cities with a Witness congregation and the number of Witness congregations per city for previous years. Consequently it is unclear how rapidly national outreach expansion and congregational growth has occurred within particular locations for specific periods of time.

Future Prospects

Jehovah's Witnesses will likely continue to experience more rapid national outreach expansion and congregational growth than the LDS Church for the next decade due to Witnesses implementing more aggressive church planting tactics and greater mission resources in the DR Congo and surrounding nations. However, both Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses will likely continue to experience rapid membership and congregational growth trends within the foreseeable future due to strong receptivity of the population to these denominations. The LDS Church will likely organize several additional stakes, districts, and congregations in several areas of the country where church units currently operate. The Church may organize a third mission headquartered in Kananga or Mbuji-Mayi. A handful of additional cities may have branches or member groups organized and open to missionary activity within the foreseeable future. Jehovah's Witnesses will likely continue to experience steady national outreach expansion, including the translation of basic proselytism materials into additional languages. Witnesses may open additional mission homes in major cities that currently do not have their own mission homes.

^[1] Avant, Gerry. "LDS leave nations as missionaries not emigrants," LDS Church News, 27 February 1988. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17782/LDS-leave-nations-as-missionaries-not-emigrants.html>

^[2] <http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302004008#p56>

^[3] <http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302004008#p56>

^[4] <http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302004008#p56>

^[5] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 27 September 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrtZGT

^[6] "Congo - DRC," Operation World, retrieved 24 September 2013. <http://www.operationworld.org/cong>

^[7] "2013 Annual Statistical Report," sda.org,

^[8] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 24 September 2013. <http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=CG&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=>

^[9] <https://cumorah.com/atlas/>