

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Missed Opportunities for LDS Outreach in Kyrgyzstan

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Inhabited by 5.55 million people, Kyrgyzstan is located in Central Asia and has a population that is predominantly Muslim (75%) and Christian (20%). Major ethnolinguistic groups include Kyrgyz (65%), Uzbek (14%), and Russian (13%). Although the LDS Church had expectations and initial plans to establish an official church presence in the early 2000s, the Church missed its window of opportunity to obtain government recognition when these qualifications were attainable due to delays by mission and area leaders pursuing registration. Today government policies and legislation render any prospective LDS establishment unobtainable within the foreseeable future.

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This case study provides a brief introduction of proselytizing Christian groups in Kyrgyzstan and changes in government policies and legislation regulating the operation of foreign religious groups. Current barriers to establishing an LDS presence in Kyrgyzstan are identified. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for a future LDS establishment are predicted.

Proselytizing Christian Groups in Kyrgyzstan

Evangelical groups arrived in appreciable numbers to Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s following the independence of Kyrgyzstan from the Soviet Union. Evangelicals experienced small successes in converting nominal Muslims and Orthodox Christians primarily in urban areas. In 2012, the United States Department of State estimated that there were approximately 11,000 Protestants in Kyrgyzstan.[1] Evangelical groups currently estimate there may be as many as 40,000 evangelicals in the country.[2] However, only 0.09% of ethnic Kyrgyz[3] and 0.20% of ethnic Uzbek[4] appear to be evangelical. Provided with the number of congregations registered in parentheses as of 2012, Protestant denominations that operate in the country include Pentecostals (49), Baptists (48), Charismatic (43), Presbyterian (35), Seventh Day Adventists (30), and Lutherans (21).[5]

Jehovah's Witnesses have reported an active presence in Kyrgyzstan since the early 1950s when many Witnesses were relocated to the area by Soviet authorities.[6] Witnesses have experienced steady growth in Kyrgyzstan within the past six decades and obtained national government recognition in 1998.[7] In 2013, Witnesses reported 4,972 active members, 68 congregations, and 188 baptisms.[8] Witnesses have experienced persecution and opposition from some groups and recently reported a meetinghouse destroyed by arson.[9] In early 2014, the Jehovah's Witnesses online congregation meeting search webpage reported 61 congregations in Kyrgyzstan as seven or more congregations appeared to not be listed because they operated in southern areas of the country where there is diminished religious freedom and greater persecution. Provided with the number of language-specific congregations and groups in parentheses, Witnesses conduct worship services in Russian (34), Kyrgyz (23), Russian Sign Language (4), Turkish (2), Chinese (1), English (1), Uighur (1), and Uzbek (1).[10] A map displaying the location of Witness congregations in Kyrgyzstan can be found here.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church has appeared to maintain a presence in Kyrgyzstan for nearly a century. Although Adventists did not release membership and congregation statistics for Kyrgyzstan prior to 2002, there appeared to be at least several hundred Adventists and multiple congregations in 1989. Adventist membership for the five former Soviet Republics in Central Asia steadily increased between 1989 to 1999 from 3,863 to 7,259 and began to experience small declines thereafter.[11] Between 2002 and 2012, Adventist membership in Kyrgyzstan declined from 1,531 to 765, the number of churches declined from 23 to 13, and the number of companies increased from two to 14. Adventists have baptized less than 50 new members a year over the past five years.[12] In 2013, Adventists ordained the first native Kyrgyz pastor.[13]

Religious Freedom Conditions

Although the population is predominantly Muslim, the Kyrgyzstani government has maintained a secular state since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and has limited the influence of religion on government policies and legislation. Few restrictions and regulations on religious freedom occurred during most of the 1990s following independence. In 1997, a presidential decree required religious groups to register each individual congregation with the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA). Religious groups were also mandated to register with the Ministry of Justice to obtain legal status and this registration occurred following the registration of individual congregations with the SCRA. Foreign missionaries were permitted to openly proselyte and were required to register with the government.[14]

Concerns regarding the spread of political Islam and Islamist ideology prompted government officials to tightening legislation regarding the operation of religious groups in the 2000s. Government and community leaders also appeared worried about the impact of proselytizing Christian groups on inciting religious conflict. In 2004, religious groups had to have at least 10 adult Kyrgyzstani citizen members in order to apply for registration.[15] In 2008, the government passed a new law that imposed significant restrictions on religious freedom such as discouraging minors from participating in religious groups and prohibiting "insistent attempts to convert followers of one religion to another" and "illegal missionary activity."[16]

Currently all religious groups must register with the SCRA. Requirements for a religious group to register include at least 200 adult citizen members, the submission of an application form, minutes of "an institutional meeting," and a list of founding members.[17] The registration processes is lengthy and often times takes several months or even years to complete. The government does permit foreign missionaries to serve within Kyrgyzstan but requires these individuals to register annually and follow the 2008 religion law. Religious groups with less than 200 adult citizen members and who have been unregistered experience challenges assembling due to the government prohibiting meetings for unregistered religious groups.[18]

LDS Background

In 2000, Kyrgyzstan became part of the Europe East Area.[19] In 2002, half a dozen members serving in the United States military stationed in Kyrgyzstan held meetings in a tent used for religious services on a US military base.[20] Elder Russell M. Nelson visited in August 2003, met with government leaders, and dedicated the country.[21] In the late 2000s, the Church made donations to Kyrgyzstani hospitals to assist in prenatal resuscitation but had not appeared to assign humanitarian senior missionary couples.[22]

The Church initially applied for government registration in 2004 but had not received approval to operate as of 2012 likely due to an "erroneous or insufficient application."[23] In 2012, foreign members who temporarily resided in Kyrgyzstan reported that there were local Kyrgyz members who frequently socialized with foreign members and met when the Europe East Area presidency permitted them to do so. However, no member group appeared to regularly meet for worship services with the exception of a handful of Latter-day Saint military personnel stationed at Manas Air Base. The Church has appeared to grant specific individuals or families permission to hold private church services within their homes but these gatherings appear to occur on an inconsistent basis.

As of early 2014, the Church did not report any translations of gospel and missionary materials or LDS scriptures into Kyrgyz. The Church has translated two materials into Uzbek (Hymns and Child Songs and the 13 Articles of Faith). Translations of all LDS scriptures and a sizable number of gospel study and missionary materials are available in Russian. No convert baptisms have appeared to occur in Kyrgyzstan. All local members originally joined the Church in other countries.

Current Barriers to an LDS Establishment

The current government requirement for religious groups to have at least 200 adult citizen members in order to obtain official legal recognition and registration is an insurmountable barrier for the Church to establish an official presence in Kyrgyzstan. In the early and mid 2000s, the Church appeared unable to fulfill the previous requirement of 10 adult citizen members to obtain government recognition due to lackluster member-missionary efforts among local members and literally just a handful of Kyrgyzstani converts who joined the Church in other countries and had since returned back to Kyrgyzstan. The Church missed its window of opportunity to establish a presence in Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s when other missionary-minded Christian groups established a formal proselytism presence due to limited numbers of missionaries assigned to the former Soviet Union and the lack of growth within this region. Government policies and legislation was less strict and standardized at the time and more inviting and accommodating to foreign Christian missionary groups. The Church had no presence in Central Asia until the late 1990s when foreign members relocated to Kazakhstan for employment purposes. Distance from mission and area headquarters, limited resources allocated to the region, and a lack of vision in opening Central Asian republics to missionary work appear primarily responsible for the lack of an LDS presence in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan today. Currently the Church likely has no more than a dozen Kyrgyzstani member who reside in the country and all these members may not all reside within Bishkek. The current requirement for a single congregation to have 200 or more adult citizen members renders any prospects for the establishment of such a congregation in Bishkek or anywhere else in the country impossible.

Conditions for the handful of Kyrgyzstani members to engage in member-missionary work among friends and family appear unfavorable and possibly illegal. Current religion laws suggest that even if the Church obtained government recognition that

there would be serious challenges for maintaining a missionary program. Legislation limits proselytism activity and the involvement of youth and children in religious groups. It is unclear whether government officials would even approve the assignment of foreign missionaries to work on a member-referral teaching basis. Like other countries with limitations on missionary activity, the Church may require member-missionary activity to occur only among family members.

There are unfavorable prospects for targeting Kyrgyzstanis abroad as a means of establishing the Church in Kyrgyzstan through converts returning to their home country and remaining active. Few Kyrgyzstanis reside abroad who can be reached by LDS missionary efforts. Jehovah's Witnesses have extended some of the most widespread proselytism outreach among nontraditional Christian proselytism groups and have achieved significant growth throughout the former Soviet Union yet Witnesses report only a tiny presence among Kyrgyzstanis outside of Kyrgyzstan. In early 2014, Witnesses in Russia reported only one congregation and four groups that were designated for Kyrgyz speakers.[24] The LDS Church maintains an extremely limited presence throughout the former Soviet Union resulting in essentially no feasible prospects for concentrating missionary resources into targeting Kyrgyzstanis in locations where an LDS presence operates.

The revival of Islam in Central Asia within the past two decades poses serious challenges for the LDS Church to gain a foothold regardless of the status of religious freedom. Thousands of mosques have been constructed within the past 25 years and Islamic missionaries have rekindled active religious participation among many formerly nominal Muslims. Many of the most populous ethnolinguistic groups in Kyrgyzstan are staunchly Muslim and present challenging conditions for LDS missionary activity. The Kyrgyz are more than 97% Muslim[25] whereas the Uzbek are 86% Muslim.[26] The Church has not developed any teaching resources or approaches tailored to those with a Muslim background. Consequently any teaching and testimony development efforts will likely experience frustrations and challenges as traditional LDS missionary approaches have been developed for those with a Christian background.

Reaching smaller cities and rural areas poses significant challenges for future LDS outreach. Islam is the most commonly practiced religion in both urban and rural areas but most religious minority groups only operate in urban areas such as Bishkek.[27] The Church may experience some successes among Christians in urban areas but the more staunchly Muslim rural areas will like remain unreached for decades following the official establishment of an LDS presence.

The Church has no translations of LDS materials or scriptures into Kyrgyz. A lack of gospel study and missionary materials in this most commonly spoken and national language will likely pose serious challenges for missionary work and church growth.

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership statistics for Kyrgyzstan and other countries with no official LDS presence. It is unclear how many Latter-day Saints reside in the country at present. No data is available regarding the number of Kyrgyzstani members who reside abroad. The Church has not published an official explanation of the failed process to obtain government recognition pursued in 2004.

Future Prospects

There appear no realistic opportunities for the Church to establish an official presence in Kyrgyzstan within the foreseeable future due to religion laws that make government registration insurmountable for the Church. The handful of Kyrgyzstani members who currently reside in the country and Kyrgyzstani converts baptized abroad who return to Kyrgyzstan present the only opportunity for the Church to make any progress in making any headway with government recognition. Changes in the country's laws governing religious freedom present the greatest opportunity for the Church to one day establish a presence in Kyrgyzstan but the likelihood of any changes to occur appears poor within the foreseeable future.

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