



Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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LDS Growth Challenges in Bulgaria

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Overview

The Church has maintained an official presence in Bulgaria since 1990 although small numbers of native members resided in the country as early as 1982. Although the Church experienced steady membership and congregational growth between the early 1990s and early 2000s, membership growth rates have substantially slowed and congregational decline has occurred within the past decade. Despite the continued operation of the Bulgaria Sofia Mission since 1991, there has been little progress in establishing a sufficient number of local church leaders to meet local leadership needs.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Bulgaria with a specific emphasis on growth trends. Church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are examined. LDS growth trends in other Southeast European nations are highlighted and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Bulgaria are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

In 1990, the Church assigned its first missionaries to Bulgaria and organized the Bulgaria Sofia Mission the following year. Initial missionary efforts concentrated on Sofia, resulting in the formation of six branches in the Sofia metropolitan area during the early 1990s. In 1992, the Church organized its first branch in Plovdiv and by the mid-1990s the Church had created branches in Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Dobrich, Ruse, Shumen, Varna, and Veliko Turnovo. Focus by mission leaders during the late 1990s to improve convert retention while continuing to baptize sizable numbers of converts resulted in member activity rates reaching as high as 65% in 2000;^[1] one of the highest percentages in the world. A second wave of cities opening to missionaries and branch creations occurred during the early 2000s as branches were organized in Khaskovo, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Plevan, Sliven, Stara Zagora, and Yambol. By 2006, the Church operated 21 branches in 16 cities.

In 2010, missionaries reported that the Europe East Area presidency advised mission presidents to discontinue branches with fewer than 15 active members and to remove missionaries from these locations. This decision appeared motivated by a combination of few convert baptisms, local leadership development problems, a lack of mission resources allocated to Eastern Europe, and the Church's centers of strength policy. In 2010, the Bulgaria Sofia Mission closed branches in six cities including Dobrich, Khaskovo, Pernik, Shumen, Veliko Tarnovo, and Yambol. The mission organized member groups in some of these cities, whereas other cities no longer had an operating LDS congregation. The Church also merged all of its branches in the Sofia area into a single branch between early 2010 and early 2013. In 2011, the mission discontinued both the Plovdiv Bulgaria and Sofia Bulgaria Districts, reassigning retained branches to the direct administration of the mission president. The number of branches in Bulgaria declined from 21 in 2007 to nine in 2013. By 2013, the Church had official branches organized in only nine cities – nearly half the number from just five years earlier. Nominal membership at year-end 2013 totaled 2,402.

In the early 2010s, the Bulgaria Sofia Mission began reopening recently closed cities to missionary activity such as Haskovo, Pazardzhik, Shumen, and Veliko Tarnovo. In early 2014, missionaries reported that the Europe East Area continued to implement the minimal standard of at least 15 active members sustained over a period of three months in order for a branch to be organized. At the time missionaries reported that member groups in some of these cities were nearing the minimum qualifications to become branches again. In April 2014, the Church appeared to operate branches or member groups in at least 14 cities.

The Bulgaria Sofia Mission consisted only of Bulgaria for many years until Turkey was assigned to the mission in 2011. In early

2012, the mission assigned its first young, proselytizing elders to Turkey. In 2014, the Bulgaria Sofia Mission had missionaries assigned to two cities in Turkey (Ankara and Istanbul).

Successes

The establishment of an LDS presence in over a dozen cities constitutes the crowning LDS achievement for the Church in Bulgaria. No other country in Eastern Europe has as small of a population as Bulgaria and as many locations with an LDS presence. Previous mission presidents strategically opening additional cities to missionaries and wisely allocating limited mission resources have been primarily responsible for this noteworthy development.

The Church has historically had a handful of local priesthood leaders to fill essential branch leadership. In 2014, all branches appeared to have a native member serving as branch president. Many of the branches closed within the past five years also had a Bulgarian branch president when they operated.

There are indications that member activity rates may not have noticeably changed within the past five years despite the closure of more than half of the Church's branches and the dissolution of both districts. Enrollment in seminary and institute has increased during this period from 71 during the 2008-2009 school year to 84 during the 2011-2012 school year. This finding appears attributed to branches with the most active members supplying the largest number of enrollment numbers and these branches continuing to operate throughout the reporting period.

Opportunities

There remain many cities in Bulgaria that have never received a Latter-day Saint gospel witness. In 2012, there were 14 cities with over 30,000 inhabitants that have never appeared to have had missionaries assigned or a member group or branch operate, including Vratsa, Gabrovo, Vidin, Kazanlak, Kjustendil, Montana, Dimitrovgrad, Targovishte, Lovech, Silistra, Razgrad, Dupnitsa, Gorna Oryahovitsa, and Smolyan. Mission leaders visiting these cities, meeting with isolated members and investigators, and assessing conditions for assigning full-time missionaries appears the most feasible method at present to explore additional opportunities for proselytism in Bulgaria. Successful church planting tactics will require missionaries to implement reasonably high convert baptismal standards, gradually hand off responsibilities for local leadership, and provide church callings to new converts in order to instill self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on full-time missionaries for congregations to properly function.

The Church has yet to extend formal missionary outreach among the sizable ethnic minorities, notably Turks and Roma (Gypsy). Turkish-speaking missionaries who have been reassigned to Bulgaria have regularly contacted Bulgarian Turks, although there has been little missionary success among this demographic as of early 2014. Other proselytizing faiths have experienced good results from proselytizing Roma populations in Bulgaria, suggesting that similar results may occur if LDS leaders pursue Roma-specific outreach. Former President of the Association of Romany Pastors, Churches and Societies Assen Khristov reported that there were approximately 800 Roma churches in the country in 2007.^[2] Returned missionaries have reported that many branches have one or two Roma members. Utilizing these individuals to assist outreach efforts in Roma communities has enormous potential to accelerate growth and improve the efficiency of LDS outreach.

Challenges

The discontinuation of both Bulgarian districts is a concerning development suggesting that the Church in Bulgaria struggles to meet its own leadership needs. Rarely has the Church closed all of its districts in a country where there are over 1,000 members on church records; even if there are low member activity rates and few local priesthood holders. Oftentimes the Church will consolidate two districts into a single district to conserve local priesthood manpower as the administrative needs of district and branch callings can overwhelm available leadership resources. This has been done with the goal to strengthen individual branches and to facilitate the establishment of a stake. With the exception of Albania, the Church in every Eastern European country where a stake currently operates had two or more districts that functioned within the geographic boundaries of current stakes. The failure of the Church in Bulgaria to retain one of the districts as part of the process to prepare for stakehood indicates serious shortages of active, leadership-capable priesthood holders as there are not only a sufficient number of members on church records to qualify the country to become stake at present but also enough congregations for a stake to properly operate. Geographical distance between individual branches does not appear prohibitive in establishing a country-wide district. Districts and stakes in other Eastern European countries cover geographic areas comparable in size or significantly larger than Bulgaria such as the Novosibirsk Russia District, the St Petersburg Russia Stake, the Brno Czech Republic District, and the Budapest Hungary Stake.

Multiple cycles of expanding and contracting LDS outreach often corresponds with member activity and convert retention problems. Although the assignment and removal of missionaries may be necessary in some locations due to shortages of missionaries assigned to the mission or a lack of success in proselytism efforts, the closure of branches without the continued operation of member groups in affected locations results in many, if not most, active members becoming inactive by default; creating challenges for future efforts to reestablish an official LDS presence in the affected area. Branch consolidations in Sofia may make travel to the sole meetinghouse difficult and inconvenient for some members and investigators, resulting in diminished member activity rates.

Overstaffing small member groups and branches with multiple missionary companionships has potential to erode any remaining self-sufficiency in local church membership and leadership. Experience in many areas of the world has shown that this practice results in full-time missionaries gradually undertaking branch callings and member responsibilities due to missionaries lacking productive activities to engage in and frustration with the lack of compliance or experience of local members in fulfilling these responsibilities. In early 2014, missionaries serving in one city where a branch was downgraded to a member group in 2010 reported that there were only eight active members yet the group had four full-time missionaries assigned. Missionaries reported that the group would like be unable to properly function without the assistance of full-time missionaries.

The Church remains reliant on foreign missionary manpower to meet its missionary needs in Bulgaria despite the Church maintaining a presence for over two decades. The number of Bulgarian members serving missions has remained small for many years, creating challenges for the Church to utilize returned missionaries for local leadership development. There also appear few mission-aged, active young single adults among Bulgarian membership at present. These challenges adversely affect several aspects of the strength of the Church in the country including members marrying within the Church, the establishment of LDS community, and reducing reliance on North American missionary manpower to meet its needs in Eastern Europe.

There are many societal and cultural conditions that pose challenges for missionary activity and church growth. Bulgaria has consistently ranked within the top five countries with the most rapid population decline over the past decade due to low birth rates and high net migration rates. The Church has seen some success in growing membership over the past two decades despite the strong historical tradition of Orthodox Christianity for centuries and communist rule for four decades. Increased secularism resulting from recent economic reforms may be partially responsible for low increases in membership over the past several years. Many Orthodox Christians hold negative views and misconceptions of the Church, which have been perpetuated by local government and the media.^[3] High cigarette and alcohol consumption rates also pose challenges for convert retention and member activity as many members relapse into using substances prohibited by LDS teachings.

Comparative Growth

Currently Bulgaria is the country with the most members on church records without a district or stake. The country or dependency with the next highest church membership where no stake or district operates is Macau where the Church had 1,347 members and two branches as of year-end 2013. The Church in Southeastern Europe has experienced considerable variability in membership growth, congregational growth, local leadership self-sufficiency, and national outreach. In Romania, the Church has experienced decelerating membership growth and essentially stagnant congregational growth over the past decade. Despite these challenges, the Church in Romania operates two districts based in Bucharest and Oradea, the former of which is nearing the qualifications to become a stake. In Albania, the Church has experienced steady membership growth and stagnant congregational growth within the past decade. However, notable progress has occurred in augmenting the number of active members and strengthening Albanian leadership as evidenced by the creation of the first stake in March 2014. In Serbia, the Church has experienced virtually stagnant membership and congregational growth over the past decade and currently has 334 members and three branches. Despite the tiny size of the Church in Serbia, a district has continuously operated for over two decades, suggesting that the Church has developed a small core of active priesthood leaders capable of staffing both branch and district callings. Within the past five years, the Church established its initial presence in four Southeastern European nations (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro) and currently operates only a handful branches or member groups in each of these nations. In Greece, the Church has arguably experienced the slowest growth within the past two decades of any country where a mission has continuously operated. Extremely low receptivity to mission outreach, local leadership development problems, and difficulty obtaining foreign missionary visas for North American missionaries have contributed to the Church currently reporting only 748 members, four branches, and no districts.

Other proselytizing Christian faiths report steady growth in Bulgaria. The Seventh Day Adventist Church has a pervasive presence in Bulgaria and has experienced steady congregational growth and stagnant membership growth, implying continued national outreach expansion, improving member activity rates, and leadership development. In 2002, Adventists reported 7,731 members, 112 churches (large congregations), and 137 companies (small congregations), whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 7,408 members, 121 churches, and 181 companies.^[4] Within the past decade, Adventists have generally baptized between 200 and 400 new members each year. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a presence in many cities and have reported slow but steady growth. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 2,026 active members, 44 congregations, and 56 baptisms.^[5] In early 2014, Witnesses operated congregations in over 40 cities including Sofia (7), Plovdiv (3), Varna (3), Burgas (2), Asenovgrad, Blagoevgrad, Botevgrad, Devnya, Dimitrovgrad, Dobrich, Gabrovo, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Gotse Delchev, Haskovo, Kardjali, Karlovo, Kavarna, Kazanluk, Kjustendil, Lom, Lovech, Montana, Panagurishte, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Plevan, Popovo, Razgrad, Ruse, Samakov, Sandanski, Shumen, Silistra, Sliven, Smolyan, Stambolijski, Stara Zagora, Svishtov, Targovishte, Veliko Tarnovo, Velingrad, Vratsa, and Yambol. The Church of Nazarene maintains a limited presence in Bulgaria. In 2013, Nazarenes reported 273 full-members, 31 associate members, 12 congregations (five organized churches, seven churches not yet organized), and an average weekly worship attendance of 299.^[6]

Limitations

The Church does not publish annual, country-by-country data on the number of convert baptisms, the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the increase of children of record. No data is available to the public regarding official LDS statistics on member activity and convert retention rates. Reports from current missionaries have been scarce within the past couple years, creating challenges to accurately assess the number of active members within the entire country and for most branches. The Church does not report an official list of its member groups by country or for the entire world. Consequently there may be additional locations in Bulgaria with member groups not identified in

this case study.

Future Prospects

Although there appear no immediate difficulties for the Church in Bulgaria concerning the availability of mission resources and the continued operation of remaining branches, the outlook for achieving congregational growth and augmenting the number of active priesthood holders appears poor. Within the past five years both districts have been discontinued, more than half of the branches have closed, and no new cities have opened to missionary activity. Concentrated efforts among ethnic minorities may yield good results if properly conducted; however, experience in other countries has indicated that ethnic-specific outreach generally only occurs in locations with strong local leadership and sizable numbers of members who have joined the Church among minority groups. Unfortunately, neither condition is currently met by the Church in Bulgaria at present. The reestablishment of a single district to service most, if not all, branches appears likely once there are several large, ward-sized branches and mission and area leadership deem that the Church in Bulgaria is close to reaching the qualifications to become a stake within the short or medium terms.

[1] Stewart, David Jr.; Martinich, Matthew. "Bulgaria," *Reaching the Nations: International Church Growth Almanac*, retrieved 12 April 2014. https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=countries&cnt_res=1&wid=33&cmdfind=Search

[2] Slavkova, M.. (2007). *Evangelical Gypsies in Bulgaria: Way of life and performance of identity*. *Romani Studies*, 17(2), 205-246.

[3] Stewart, David Jr.; Martinich, Matthew. "Bulgaria," *Reaching the Nations: International Church Growth Almanac*, retrieved 12 April 2014. https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=countries&cnt_res=1&wid=33&cmdfind=Search

[4] "BULGARIAN UNION OF CHURCHES CONFERENCE (2008-Present)," adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2356531

[5] "2014 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 12 April 2014. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/>

[6] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," [Nazarene.org](http://www.nazarene.org), retrieved 12 April 2014. <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CE0QFjAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fna>