Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Slow LDS Growth in the Republic of Georgia

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Overview

Located in the Caucasus region of Eurasia, the Republic of Georgia has a population of 4.94 million people that is 89% Christian, 10% Muslim and 1% followers of other religions. The LDS Church has maintained an official presence in the Republic of Georgia since 1999 and has assigned full-time missionaries to the country since 2006. However, slow membership and congregational growth has occurred despite sufficient religious freedom for open proselytism, and other missionary-focused Christian groups experiencing steady growth within the past decade.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Georgia. Past church growth successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are examined. The size and growth of the LDS Church in the Caucasus and nearby nations is reviewed and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Georgia is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

In 1999, the Church dedicated Georgia for missionary work and baptized the first Georgian converts. The Church assigned Georgia to the Armenia Yerevan Mission shortly thereafter. A member group began formally operating in September 2001 in Tbilisi. In June 2002, the Tbilisi Branch was organized. The Church registered with the government in 2005, permitting the assignment of foreign full-time missionaries in March 2006. In 2007, the Church divided the Tbilisi Branch into two branches (Avlabari and Saburtalo) due to increasing numbers of active members. However, the branches were consolidated back into a single branch in 2011.

There were 14 members in early 2000. Membership increased to 63 in 2003, 126 in 2006, 184 in 2009, 204 in 2011, and 250 in 2013.

A few noteworthy church growth developments occurred in the early 2010s. In early 2012, senior missionaries in Tbilisi facilitated the creation of a translation team to translate the Book of Mormon into Georgian. In mid-2012, a group was organized in Rustavi and the first missionaries were assigned to the city. In late 2013, a recent convert became the first Melchizedek Priesthood holder in Rustavi and was set apart as the group leader for the Rustavi Group. In early 2014, there appeared to be approximately 50 attending church services in Tbilisi and approximately 10 attending church services in Rustavi. In May 2014, there were 13 young, full-time missionaries serving in Georgia (nine in Tbilisi and four in Rustavi). At the time missionaries reported that an area of Tbilisi with no known members opened to missionaries for the first time. In mid-2014, members in Tbilisi reported that active membership in the branch primarily consisted of a mixture of Armenians, Georgians, Russians, and Americans.

Successes

The opening of a second city to missionary work constitutes one of the greatest church growth developments in Georgia within recent memory. The Church has continued to assign full-time missionaries to Rustavi despite few convert baptisms since the initial arrival of missionaries nearly two years ago. The appointment of a local Georgian member as group leader also signals progress in establishing a self-sufficient LDS community among recent converts and handing off leadership and administrative responsibilities from full-time missionaries to local members.

The decision by the Church to translate many basic gospel study and missionary materials and to begin translating the Book of Mormon into Georgian constitute significant successes required for greater growth in the years to come. Although Russian was once commonly understood and spoken by Georgians during the Soviet era, its use by the Church has become less effective in recent years to meet local language needs as few under age 30 speak Russian fluently. Consequently the need for Georgian translations of LDS materials have increased and the Church has recently begun to translate additional scriptures and materials.

Opportunities

Tbilisi presents some of the greatest opportunities for LDS growth due to its large population concentrated in a small geographical area, good accessibility from mission headquarters in Yerevan, and an LDS presence maintained for over a decade. The organization of multiple member groups presents good opportunities for growth as the city has 1.31 million people within the metropolitan area but only one branch operates, resulting in minimal outreach by current missionary efforts. Beginning outreach expansion efforts in Tbilisi by organizing cottage meetings and family home evening (FHE) groups that assemble within targeted areas of the city has good potential to make frugal use of limited missionary manpower and assess where the opening of member groups may be most successful.

The Armenia Yerevan Mission numbers among the geographically smallest and least populated missions within continental Eurasia as there are less than 10 million people within its boundaries. Additionally, all wards and branches within Armenia fall within the jurisdiction of the Yerevan Armenia Stake, requiring no mission president involvement in meeting ecclesiastical needs of members within the stake boundaries. The mission presidency only appears to act as the overseeing church authority for the Tbilisi Branch and any member groups or isolated members who reside outside the boundaries of the Yerevan Armenia Stake. These conditions indicate ideal conditions for mission leaders to examine opportunities for expanding missionary activity within Georgia into previously unreached cities as mission resources can be almost entirely dedicated to outreach expansion and proselytism efforts, as opposed to member and leadership support efforts. There have been no recent reports of the Church in Georgia experiencing challenges obtaining foreign missionary visas, suggesting that the Church could significantly augment the number of missionaries assigned in order to orchestrate greater national outreach expansion. Currently unreached cities that appear particularly likely to have missionaries assigned include Gori and Kutaisi due to relatively large populations and close proximity to Tbilisi.

Challenges

LDS growth trends in Georgia have significantly lagged behind neighboring Armenia notwithstanding both countries sharing many cultural similarities such as the adoption of Christianity since the fourth century, similarly-sized populations that possess similar religious demographics, and most the population exhibiting strong ethnoreligious ties to the traditional Christian church. The Church in Armenia organized its first branch in 1994 and assigned the first young elders in 1995. In 2006 - 12 years following the organization of the first branch and the same amount of time that has transpired from when the Church organized its first branch in Georgia to present day - there were 2,359 members 15 branches in Armenia; more than nine times the number of members currently on church records in Georgia and 15 times the number of branches than in Georgia. By year-end 2013, the Church in Armenia reported one stake, 10 official congregations (five wards, five branches), a mission, and 3,159 members on church records.

A conservative interpretation and implementation of the centers of strength policy appears partially responsible for slow LDS growth trends in Georgia since the establishment of the Church 15 years ago. The Church in Yerevan, Armenia organized its first branch in 1994 but the branch met in six separate member groups in 1995. All six member groups became separate branches in 1995. This church-planting approach to missionary work and church growth yielded impressive results as the number of members increased from just a handful in 1993 to 200 in 1995 and 500 in 1997. The Church in Tbilisi has relied on a church-splitting approach to growth, which relies on increases in active membership to organize additional congregations rather than organizing additional congregations to increase the number of active members. This pattern for establishing new congregations and expanding outreach often yields dismal results in countries where there is a tiny LDS presence, modest receptivity, and mediocre member-missionary participation. Tactful and judicious use of limited mission resources assigned to Tbilisi has potential to accelerate growth if full-time missionaries and branch leaders hold cottage meetings and FHE groups that assemble in the homes of members.

The Church in Georgia has experienced leadership sustainability, and inactivity and retention problems within the past decade. Although the first Georgian member to serve as a branch president began this service in 2006, full-time missionaries served as branch presidents for both Tbilisi branches in 2010. In early 2014, a senior missionary appeared to serve as the branch president for the Avlabari Branch. Overreliance by local members on full-time missionaries for administrative support and testimony development appear largely responsible for these challenges. The 2008 military conflict between Georgia and Russia prompted church leaders to remove full-time missionaries for approximately three months. Missionaries and local members observed that member activity and convert retention dramatically declined once missionaries were removed and during the subsequent years after the conflict deescalated. Inactivity and a lack of Georgian members capable of serving in local leadership positions ultimately culminated in the decision to consolidate the two Tbilisi branches in 2011, thereby reducing the scope of LDS outreach within the city.

There continues to be no Georgian translation of the Book of Mormon as of early 2014. Delays in translating basic gospel study and missionary materials into Georgian have appeared to contribute to slow growth trends and problems with local leadership

development and member attrition. It was not until the late 2000s and early 2010s that the Church had translated many of its basic missionary and gospel study materials and manuals into Georgian. Postponing the translation of these materials until the Church determined that there were enough active members who could utilize these materials to justify translations demonstrates circular logic as it was challenging for the Church to obtain a sizable number of Georgian-speaking members without the assistance of translations within their native language. Consequently the Church has likely missed opportunities to convert some individuals who were once receptive to the Church but who no longer are due to reduced receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups and the shepherding of these individuals into other missionary-focused groups like Jehovah's Witnesses.

Efforts to expand LDS outreach to additional cities have only been implemented within the 2010s. Only two cities have ever had full-time missionaries assigned and congregations organized, despite many medium-sized and large cities without an LDS presence. There are two cities with over 100,000 inhabitants (Kutaisi and Batumi) and three cities with between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (Zugdidi, Sukhumi, and Gori) that remain unreached by LDS missionary efforts. The extremely limited scope of past and current LDS proselytism in Georgia suggests that the Church cannot accurately assess the receptivity of the population to outreach and opportunities for growth due to these efforts only occurring in two locations, and only recently with the utilization of Georgian language proselytism and gospel study materials.

No separate LDS mission based within Georgia poses challenges for resource allocation and growth. Although the small geographic size and administrative responsibility of the Armenia Yerevan Mission predict that mission leaders could feasibly open many additional areas within Georgia to missionary work with few complications, the headquartering of the mission in another country often poses challenges for mission leaders to service two separate countries that speak different languages and balance resource allotment.

Comparative Growth

The Church maintains a minimal presence in most areas of the Caucasus and the surrounding region if there is any LDS presence at all. In Azerbaijan, the Church has operated a small branch for several years that services foreign members in Baku. However there appear to be only a handful, if any, native members in the country and full-time missionaries have never been assigned. In Russia, the Church has no presence within the six Caucasian republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia-Alania, and only operates five branches in extreme northeast areas of the Caucasus region in Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai. Political instability, the strong ethnoreligious ties of many indigenous Muslim peoples, a lack of mission resources, and very few, if any, members residing in the Russian Caucasus have appeared to dissuade mission and area leaders from initiating mission outreach within this region. In Turkey, the Church operates only four branches and has recently assigned full-time missionaries to two cities. Only the Church in Armenia has experienced significant growth within the Caucasus region. The size and maturity of the Church in Armenia is comparable to many Western European nations as evidenced by nominal church membership constituting more than 0.10% of the population and the operation of a stake.

Several nontraditional Christian groups with an emphasis on church growth and missionary work report a significantly larger presence in Georgia than the LDS Church and have generally experienced slow to moderate growth within the past decade. Evangelicals report a small presence in Georgia and claim 1.5% of the national population. Evangelicals complain of significant church growth challenges due to the influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church on society, the limited acceptance of evangelicals by many Georgians as bona fide Christians, and struggles to establish a self-sustaining church.[1] Jehovah's Witnesses number among the most successful nontraditional, outreach-oriented Christian groups and have established a widespread presence. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 17,964 active members, 209 congregations, and 864 baptisms.[2] In early 2014, Witnesses operated more than 76 congregations within the Tbilisi area that serviced speakers of Georgian (~55), Russian (15), Kurdish (2), Armenian (2), Azerbaijani (1), and English (1). The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a limited presence in Georgia and slow growth. In 2012, Adventists reported 373 members, eight churches (large congregations), and six companies (small congregations). Adventists have experienced slow growth over the past decade and have generally baptized less than 50 new members a year.[3] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Georgia.

Limitations

Although many high-quality reports from returned missionaries, visiting members, and local members were available during the writing of this case study, there were few recent reports from missionaries serving within the country. The Church does not publish data on member activity and convert retention rates. Although missionaries indicate that no member groups operate within the country aside from Rustavi, the Church does not publish data on member groups for individual countries or the Church as a whole. It is unclear whether any members reside in cities without a current LDS presence.

Future Prospects

The worldwide surge in the number of full-time missionaries serving, slowly increasing numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Georgia, the recent opening of Rustavi to missionary work, and ongoing efforts to translate additional materials and LDS scriptures into Georgian suggest that the Church may be nearing a historic turning point in accelerating growth after stagnant or slow membership and congregational growth has occurred for over a decade. Prospects appear favorable for the

Church to open a few additional cities to missionary work within the next five years, such as Kutaisi and Gori. Tbilisi presents good prospects for organizing additional member groups or small branches if this process is approved by mission and area leaders. However, recent experience in Georgia and the Europe East Area suggest that the Church will likely continue to implement a church-splitting versus a church planting approach in Georgia for the foreseeable future. Implementing reasonably high convert baptismal standards and steadily handing off leadership and church callings to local members will be essential towards improving self-sufficiency and achieving real growth.

[1] "Georgia," Operation World, 9 May 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/country/geor/owtext.html

[2] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[3] "Georgian Mission (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 19 April 2014. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2356944