

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

>

Stagnant LDS Growth in Belarus

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: September 9th, 2014

Overview

Inhabited by 9.6 million people, Belarus is the six most populous former Soviet Republic and has a population that is 83.7% Belarusian, 8.3% Russian, 3.1% Polish, 1.7% Ukrainian, and 3.3% other ethnicities. Approximately two-thirds of the population speaks Russian whereas nearly one-quarter of the population speaks Belarusian. Followers of the Belarusian Orthodox Church account for approximately 80% of the population, whereas Catholics account for 10% of the population and other religious groups comprise the remaining 10% of the population. Although the LDS Church has maintained a presence in Belarus since 1993, stagnant growth has occurred over the past 15 years as evidenced by no net increase in the number of branches, a decrease in the number of converts baptized annually, and the number of active members not noticeably changing. apreplicas.me

//

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Belarus. LDS growth successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for overcoming stagnant growth are examined. The growth of the LDS Church in Belarus is compared to the Church in other countries, and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused groups in Belarus is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

In 1993, the Church assigned the first missionaries to Belarus from the Ukraine Kyiv Mission and dedicated the country for missionary work. By mid-1993, there were two branches in Minsk. In late 1993, the Church registered a non-governmental organization (NGO) called "SAFIA." In early 1994, the Church had full-time missionaries cease open proselytism activity in order to comply with Belarusian law and all foreign missionaries were designated as humanitarian volunteers of SAFIA. Belarusian converts staffed all local church leadership positions beginning at this time in order for the Church to meet the legal requirements to operate in the country. At this time, the Church divided its two original Minsk branches into four small branches. In 1995, the Church organized the Minsk Belarus District which consisted of the four Minsk branches. At year-end 1995, the Church reported 200 members and four branches nationwide.

In 1996, the Church transferred Belarus to the Lithuania Vilnius Mission (today known as the Baltic Mission). In 1997, the Church consolidated all four Minsk branches into a single branch likely due to few active members in each branch, limited local priesthood leadership, and hopes that one larger branch could improve the likelihood of a church-constructed meetinghouse to be approved. The Minsk Belarus District continued to operate although the district included only one combined branch. Some national outreach expansion efforts occurred in the late 1990s in cities such as Hrodna, Mogilev, Vitebsk, and Brest, although these efforts yielded few results. Branches began operating in Hrodna and Mogilev, although the Hrodna Branch was soon discontinued and the Mogilev Branch heavily relied on leadership in Minsk to operate. Slow membership growth occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s as membership reached 300 in 1997, 372 in 1999, 383 in 2000, 394 in 2001, and 403 in 2002 and 2003. The number of branches declined to two in 1997 and one in 1999.

In 2000, the Church reassigned Belarus to the Russia Moscow Mission and in 2003 the Church reassigned Belarus to the Russia Moscow South Mission (later renamed the Russia Moscow West Mission). A 2002 religious law limited religious freedoms even further, resulting in the Church maintaining a sensitive presence in the country. In the mid-2000s, the Church organized a branch in Vitebsk. In 2004, the Church split the Minsk Branch to organize a second branch in the city and called a new district presidency. By 2010, there were four branches that met in Minsk (2), Mogilev (1), and Vitebsk (1).

In 2011, the Church discontinued the Minsk Belarus District. The Church recombined the two Minsk Branches into a single branch, discontinued the Mogilev Branch, and reassigned Mogilev membership to the Minsk Branch for ecclesiastical support. In 2012, the Church transferred Belarus to the Baltic Mission. In early 2014, there appeared to be approximately 500 members in Belarus, two branches, with one branch each in Minsk and Vitebsk, and a member group in Mogilev. At the time, foreign missionary humanitarian volunteers were assigned to Minsk and Vitebsk. Local members estimated that approximately 400 members resided in the Minsk area and that 100-120 attended church; suggesting that 25-30% of members in the area were active. There appear to be only a handful of active members in Vitebsk and Mogilev. Currently Latter-day Saints are known to reside in several cities where no branch or member group operates, including Baranavichy, Brest, Gomel, Hrodna, and Maladzyechna.

The Minsk Branch has well-developed leadership and a relatively large number of active members. Unlike most branches in the region, the Minsk Branch has a large Primary organization. The branch has appeared to baptize less than five converts a year within the past few years. Recent missionary work has primarily consisted of reactivation efforts with less-active and inactive members.

Successes

The small but strong base of native local leadership in Minsk constitutes the Church's greatest church growth success in Belarus. At one time, the Church in Belarus operated four branches and a member district notwithstanding less than 500 members nationwide, member activity rates at approximately 30-35%, and distance between members in Minsk and other cities. The Church in most countries with as few church members and similar activity rates generally have multiple young full-time missionaries, senior missionaries, and foreign members staffing many essential leadership positions due to greater experience in church administration and a lack of qualified local priesthood holders. Government restrictions that prevent foreigners from leading congregations has enhanced the capacity and self-sufficiency of the Church in Belarus as full-time missionaries cannot staff leadership positions, thereby requiring only local members to undertake these responsibilities. Belarus numbers among the few former Soviet republics where a native member has served as a mission president. One member served as a mission president from 2004 to 2007 in the Russia Samara Mission.[1] In the late 2000s, Belarusian members made temple trips twice a year and these trips generally had 30 to 40 members in attendance.

The Church has maintained contact and support for isolated members who reside in locations where branches previously operated. This stands as a considerable achievement due to the legal restrictions imposed on foreign missionaries, the lack of resources available in the country, and time and distance constraints. Although these efforts have not yielded any significant growth within the past decade, maintaining contact with isolated members and conducting regular visits to these cities will be important for mobilizing greater mission resources into the country if government restrictions on religious freedom are relaxed, or if the population becomes more receptive to LDS outreach.

The Church has continued to assign full-time missionaries to Belarus as humanitarian volunteers despite significant restrictions on their activities. Although these full-time missionaries spend the majority of their time engaged in humanitarian and development work, the Church has made an effort to make full-time missionaries accessible to members so they can teach investigators and prepare them for baptism.

Opportunities

The only feasible opportunity for accelerating LDS growth in Belarus center on member-missionary activities that help find investigators and fellowship new converts. The Church in Belarus has in recent memory held member-missionary firesides in Minsk to encourage members to invite friends and family to learn more about the Church. Some native members have periodically openly proselytized at times to find new investigators as this activity is permitted within the confines of Belarusian law. Conducting similar activities, consistently over extended periods of time, may yield greater fruits if members and leaders exhibit sufficient zeal and dedication.

There may be opportunities for the Church to register additional religious communities once there are a sufficient number of adult members who reside in the same locality. Local church leaders periodically visiting members residing in cities and towns without a nearby LDS presence present good opportunities to continue accounting for and supporting isolated members, and inviting investigators to learn more about the Church in approved locations.

Challenges

Government restrictions on religious freedom and strict legislation governing the operation of religious groups constitute the greatest barriers to LDS growth in Belarus. No open proselytism by full-time missionaries has occurred in Belarus in over 20 years due to the government prohibiting foreign missionaries from engaging "in religious activity outside their host institutions."[2] The Church has had less than one year when full-time missionaries could utilize traditional finding techniques such as street contacting and door-to-door proselytism. Consequently the Church has had to rely on member referrals and self-referred individuals to find and teach new investigators. Although member-missionary participation in the finding and conversion processes has likely improved member activity rates, religious freedom restrictions prevent full-time missionaries from expanding outside the comparatively tiny nucleus of LDS faithful that number less than 1,000 in a country of more than nine million. This has therefore severely restricted the Church's ability to reach the Belarusian people with foreign, full-time

missionaries which, in turn, has resulted in decelerating growth within the past decade as family and social connections among seasoned members become exhausted. The Church has taken great care to avoid the image of openly proselytizing with foreign missionaries, especially since two American LDS missionaries were accused of illegally proselytizing in Mogilev and were subsequently expelled from the country.[3] Other outreach-oriented Christian groups have complained for many years regarding abuses of religious freedom committed by government officials and society at large. Many of these groups have expressed reluctance to report abuse and restrictions out of fear of reprisal from perpetrating groups or individuals.[4]

National outreach expansion is nearly insurmountable based on current government policies governing religious groups which were enacted in a 2002 religion law. The Belarusian Orthodox Church receives preferential treatment in order to safeguard traditional religion and Belarusian culture. The law prohibits foreigners from leading religious congregations and stipulates that all religious activity must fall within one of three classes of government recognition: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities are the smallest class of government recognition and "must include at least 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in neighboring areas."[5] To register as a religious community, a religious group must submit "a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and permission from the regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property indicated in its founding statutes."[6] The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups and prescribes a complex process for religious groups to obtain registration from the government. All approved religious activity must be confined to the geographical area where a religious community is registered. Religious groups are not permitted to hold religious services in private homes unless local authorities grant permission. As the Church cannot engage in missionary work in locations where no religious community is registered with the government, the Church cannot establishment additional religious communities due to a lack of members who reside in these cities. Additionally, the Church cannot utilize foreign missionaries to serve as church leaders in member groups or branches, thereby requiring an active, qualified Belarusian priesthood holder to serve as the local church group leader or branch president. As many locations do not have such a member present, let alone the needed 20 adult members who live in the surrounding area required for registering a religious community, the Church has no feasible option to orchestrate national outreach expansion at present. Additionally, the process of registering a religious community may be intrusive to some members due to the amount of personal information required for the registration process and concerns that such information could be misused by government officials for retribution, intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. Due to these restrictions imposed by the 2002 law, the Church currently only appears to have religious communities registered in Minsk and Vitebsk.

The Church currently falls dramatically short of reaching the minimum qualifications for forming a religious association or a national religious association. These legal statuses grant greater rights to religious groups, especially to national religious associations who may, with government permission, engage in organizing extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions, establish schools to train local clergy, and inviting foreigners to work with religious groups. The requirements for a religious association to operate include the operation of at least 10 religious communities, and at least one of these religious communities must have been active for at least 20 years. National religious associations require religious groups to have active religious communities in at least four of the country's six administrative regions.[7]

The extremely small size of the Church in Belarus poses many social challenges for Latter-day Saints. Members complain of severely limited opportunities to marry within the Church, resulting in some marrying outside the Church only to become inactive. Other members never marry due to limited dating opportunities within LDS social circles. These conditions pose challenges for youth born into the Church who have limited opportunities to socialize with fellow members. Some Belarusian members have become inactive due to social problems, such as becoming offended by another member.

Societal and cultural conditions present significant challenges for conducting LDS missionary activity. Over half a century of communism has resulted in many becoming nonreligious. Independence from the Soviet Union has rekindled traditional ties between Belarusians and the Belarusian Orthodox Church, reducing the receptivity of many religiously-interested individuals to nontraditional religious groups such as the LDS Church. Divorce rates are high, resulting in few full-member families that join the Church and challenges instilling the importance of the family unit in LDS theology. Smoking and alcohol use rates number among the highest in the world, resulting in challenges for investigators and new members to totally abstain from these substances to live in accordance with LDS teachings.

The Church does not publish information regarding the location of its meetinghouses in Belarus. Consequently some members may have the false impression that the Church maintains no presence in the country as no information regarding the Church's presence has been officially published within the past decade other than announcements regarding changes in mission boundaries or international church callings that include Belarus. Members and investigators may have challenges locating the Church due to the lack of contact information available online.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Belarus has arguably experienced the most dismal and disappointing growth among former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries that have had a continuous LDS presence for the past 20 years. No other country in Eastern Europe has had an LDS presence for as long as Belarus and has only two official branches operating. The estimated percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population is a mere 0.0048% (one LDS per 20,793), nearly tying with Poland as the least-LDS country in Eastern Europe based on nominal membership figures. However, the Church in Poland maintains a significantly more widespread presence as 12 cities currently have official branches functioning. Belarus holds the disheartening position as the country in Europe with the largest population without a mission headquartered within its geographical boundaries. Minsk ranks among the least-reached metropolitan areas in Europe with one million or more inhabitants as a single

branch services the entire city of 1.92 million people.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a small presence in Belarus, but many maintain a nationwide presence despite few adherents. Evangelicals claim 1.3% of the national population and report that strong ethnoreligious ties of Belarusians with the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, and intimidation and persecution from government authorities have limited growth.[8] Jehovah's Witnesses initially established a presence in Belarus during the first half of the twentieth century[9] and have likely maintained a continuous presence for more than three decades. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 5,300 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 228 baptisms, and 69 congregations.[10] Slow but steady membership and congregational growth has occurred in recent years despite relatively low receptivity and the shrinking Belarusian population. Witnesses maintain congregations throughout the country in all major population centers, and in many small and medium-sized cities. All Witness congregations appear to hold worship services in Russian. The Seventh Day Adventist Church also reports a nationwide presence in Belarus, but has experienced declining membership and stagnant congregational growth within the past five years. In 2008, there were 5,115 Adventists, 76 churches (large congregations), and 15 companies (small congregations),[11] whereas in 2013 there were 4,044 members, 65 churches,[12] and likely 30 companies.[13] In 2014, the Church of the Nazarene did not appear to maintain a presence in Belarus.[14]

Limitations

Although local members and returned missionaries provided high-quality reports utilized in this case study, the Church has not reported official membership or congregational totals for Belarus since 2004. Consequently more precise data on when branches opened and closed, or the total number of members on church records in the country were unavailable for the past decade. The Church does not publish official data for Belarus or any country on an annual basis regarding sacrament meeting attendance, the number of converts baptized a year, the number of members serving full-time missions, the number of full-time missionaries assigned, or the number of temple recommend holders. No worldwide or country-by-country data is published regarding the number and location of member groups.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Belarus overcoming stagnant growth within the foreseeable future appears poor due to government restrictions on religious freedom that severely limit the Church's operations and prompt most to maintain a low profile, the tiny size of the Church in Belarus, and the continued reduction in the Belarusian population's receptivity to nontraditional Christian denominations. Although the commendable devotion, dedication, and self-sufficiency exhibited by Belarusian Latter-day Saints will likely ensure a stable and ongoing LDS presence in the country for many years and decades to come, this tight-knit community of members has limited opportunities for member-missionary activity due social entrenchment in the congregation, limited opportunities to actively share the gospel with nonmembers, and the hesitancy of some members to become a focus of attention in an uninviting political climate that has discouraged participation and affiliation with nontraditional, foreign religious groups. Prospects for achieving real growth in Belarus will most likely improve if societal and political conditions become more tolerant of religious freedom for nontraditional religious groups, and if Belarusian Latter-day Saints continue to participate in member-missionary work and remain faithful.

[1] "New mission presidents," LDS Church News, 10 January 2004.
http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/44937/New-mission-presidents.html

[2] "Belarus," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 10 July 2014.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208292

[3] "Belarus expels two Mormons for 'illegal missionary activity'," Associated Press, 25 October 2004.
http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9104

[4] "Belarus," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 10 July 2014.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208292

[5] "Belarus," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 10 July 2014.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208292

[6] "Belarus," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 10 July 2014.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208292

[7] "Belarus," International Religious Freedom Report 2012, retrieved 10 July 2014.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208292

[8] "Belarus," Operation World, retrieved 2 July 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/country/bela/owtext.html

[9] "Russia," 2008 Yearbook, retrieved 2 July 2014. http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302008006#s=1025:0-1026:207

[10] "2014 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014.
http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[11] "Belarus Union of Churches Conference (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 2 July 2014.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U_BELC

[12] "Belarus Union of Churches Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 2 July 2014.
http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=BELC

[13] "Belarus Union of Churches Conference (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 2 July 2014.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U_BELC

[14] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2003-2013," nazarene.org, retrieved 9 June 2014.
http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCwQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fna
https://www.aaafinewatches.me/luminor-1950-c-114_123.html