

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Missed Opportunities for LDS Outreach in Tajikistan

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Overview

Inhabited by 8.1 million people, Tajikistan is located in Central Asia and has a population that is homogenously Muslim (97%) with a tiny Christian minority (2%). Major ethnolinguistic groups include the Tajik (80%) and Uzbek (15%). Although the LDS Church once operated a congregation in the Tajikistani capital and had expectations and initial plans to establish an official church presence in neighboring Kyrgyzstan during 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, and a lack of resources in the region. 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 Tajikistan and changes in government policies and legislation regulating the operation of foreign religious groups. Current barriers to establishing an LDS presence in Tajikistan are identified. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for a future LDS establishment are predicted.

Proselytizing Christian Groups in Tajikistan

Evangelicals report a tiny presence in Tajikistan as there are approximately 7,000 followers in the entire country. Civil war in the 1990s severely limited outreach efforts due to safety concerns. The rural population has been almost entirely unreached by Evangelical missionary efforts. Despite these challenges, Evangelicals report multi-ethnic congregations in major cities.[1] Evangelicals have the greatest followings among nonnative ethnolinguistic groups in the country, such as Koreans, Armenians, and Ukrainians. There appear to be no more than a couple thousand followers among the Tajik and Uzbek combined.[2]

Jehovah's Witnesses have operated in Tajikistan for at least two decades. In 1994, Witnesses registered with the government.[3] Witnesses currently number approximately 700 nationwide.[4] Witnesses were banned in October 2007, and in October 2012 the Supreme Court reject an appeal to obtain registration.[5] Due to the lack of current government registration and limited religious freedom, Witnesses do not publish information regarding the number and location of their congregations in Tajikistan. Witnesses have translated their official website jw.org into the Tajiki language,[6] and maintain Tajiki-speaking congregations in many areas of the world, including in Moscow, Russia (one congregation, one group); Saint Petersburg, Russia (one congregation); Khabarovsk, Russia (one group), Surgut, Russia (one group), and New York City, New York (one group).[7]

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Tajikistan has experienced a dramatic decline in its size and growth rates within the past decade. In 2003, Adventists reported nine churches (large or well-established congregations), three companies (small or recently planted congregations), and 745 members. Adventists reported 29 baptisms in 2002, 64 baptisms in 2003, and 67 baptisms in 2005.[8] However, by the early 2000s a dramatic decline occurred in growth rates and the number of members. In 2013, Adventists reported 241 members, six churches, and four companies.[9] The number of annual baptisms also plummeted to one in 2010, three in 2011, five in 2012, and three in 2013. Adventists translate general publications into the Tajiki language.[10]

Religious Freedom Conditions

Although the constitution protects religious freedom, the government has enacted laws and policies that significantly restrict

religious freedom for both the Muslim majority and non-Muslim minority groups. People under the age of 18 are prohibited from participation in public religious activity and women are banned from attending Muslim religious services. No other country in the world prohibits children and youth from participating in public religious services. Parents are only permitted to teach their children about religion if this occurs in the privacy of their home and if the child desires to learn. Children ages seven to 18 may obtain religious education from school classes and religious institutions only if written parental consent is given. All Tajik citizens who leave the country are required to follow Tajikistani legislation pertaining to religious education, associating with religious groups, and conducting proselytism. Failure to do so may result in criminal charges. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) governs all laws pertaining to religious practice and oversees the registration process for religious groups. Registration is required for religious groups to operate. Failure to obtain registration can result in the government disbanding places of worship for unregistered groups and fining participants. At year-end 2013, there were 76 registered non-Muslim religious organizations. The government has placed limitations on mosque construction in accordance with the size of the local population within the area a mosque is constructed. Significant restrictions on religious education are imposed by the CRA which require religious groups to obtain permission and register. Both registered and unregistered religious groups have recently reported instances in which the government has forcibly closed religious institutions, detained individuals, conducted raids, and monitored individuals. Notwithstanding all of these restrictions, the law permits individuals to change their religious affiliation.[11]

LDS Background

In 2000, Tajikistan became part of the Europe East Area.[12] Elder Russell M. Nelson visited Kazakhstan in August 2003 and one member from Tajikistan attended a special member meeting held in Almaty.[13] In 2007, Europe East Area President Elder Paul B. Pieper reported that the Church had a congregation in Dushanbe.[14] In early 2010, Tajikistani government authorities reported that they banned the LDS Church as the request for re-registration was apparently not granted.[15] No LDS presence has appeared to operate since the early 2010s, although there has appeared to be at least one nonlocal LDS family who has resided in the country during this period.

The Church has had a handful of Tajikistanis join the Church in other countries. In 2014, senior missionaries engaged in humanitarian and development work in Central Asia visited Tajikistan to provide neonatal resuscitation workshops and had a Tajiki-speaking member from Kyrgyzstan serve as their translator. In 2013 and 2014, senior missionaries reported that positive, cooperative relationships have been established between the Church's humanitarian and development efforts and the Tajikistani government.

As of late 2014, the Church did not report any translations of gospel and missionary materials or LDS scriptures into Tajiki. 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 Tajikistan. Any local members originally joined the Church in other countries.

Current Barriers to an LDS Establishment

Although there do not appear to be any significant challenges with the Church meeting the requirements for registration, there are many restrictions on religious freedom that pose significant barriers to an official LDS establishment in the country. The Church missed its window of opportunity to establish a presence in Tajikistan during the 1990s when government officials were more open to nontraditional Christian denominations operating within the country. Other missionary-minded Christian groups established a formal proselytism presence in Tajikistan during this period, whereas the LDS Church appeared to make no effort to open the country to missionary activity due to limited numbers of missionaries assigned to the former Soviet Union and the lack of growth within the region. Additionally, the civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997 presented safety and security concerns, and dissuaded church leaders from seriously considering the opening of Tajikistan to missionary activity at the time. Although recent reports indicate that the relationship between the Church and the Tajikistani government has improved with humanitarian and development projects completed by senior missionary couples, it is unclear whether this development has made an impact with the Church's legal status as a religious community in the country.

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 only a few Tajikistani members who reside in the country, making member efforts to establish an official LDS presence highly unlikely.

Conditions for the handful of members in Tajikistan to engage in member-missionary work among friends and family appear unfavorable and possibly illegal due to the Church's unregistered status. 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 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.

There are unfavorable prospects for targeting Tajikistanis abroad as a means of establishing the Church in Tajikistan through converts returning to their home country and remaining active. Current legislation requires Tajikistani citizens living outside of the country to obtain permission to associate with religious groups. Few Tajikistanis 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 Tajikistanis outside of Tajikistan. 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 Tajikistanis in locations with an LDS presence.

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 Tajikistan are staunchly Muslim and present challenging conditions for LDS missionary activity. The Tajik are approximately 99% Muslim,[16] whereas the Uzbek are 88% Muslim.[17] 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. 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 Tajiki. 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. However, many Tajiks speak Russian, especially in large cities like Dushanbe. Due to linguistic similarities between Tajik and Farsi, some Farsi LDS materials may be used in Tajikistan. However, Tajiki has traditionally been written in the Cyrillic script for much of the past century, reducing the utility of LDS Farsi materials. Nonetheless, LDS Farsi materials may be utilized in the future as Tajiki was originally written in the Persian alphabet prior to Soviet occupation. Furthermore, the government has experimented with transitioning back over to the Persian script in recent years.

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership statistics for Tajikistan and other countries with no official LDS presence in Central Asia. It is unclear how many Latter-day Saints reside in the country at present. No data is available regarding the number of Tajikistani members who reside abroad.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to establish an official presence in Tajikistan within the foreseeable future appears bleak due to the banning of the Church in 2010, only a handful of Tajikistanis who have ever joined the Church, the lack of members in the country at present, government restrictions on religious freedom, no translations of LDS materials into Tajik, and a lack of mission resources allocated to Central Asia. Continued humanitarian and development work appear the only feasible method for the Church to continue to improve its relationship with the government. This may one day result in the registration of the Church and initiation of formal missionary activity through member referral. However, there remain serious challenges for growth, including the resurgence of Islam since independence from the Soviet Union, no LDS teaching materials or resources tailored to those with a Muslim background, and legislation that severely limits the participation of children and youth in religious groups. The experience of other missionary-focused groups that operate in the country indicates that the LDS Church will likewise experience slow growth due to strong ethnoreligious ties of the largest ethnolinguistic groups to Islam.

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