Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Missed Opportunities for LDS Outreach in Uzbekistan

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Overview

Inhabited by 28.9 million people, Uzbekistan is located in Central Asia and has a population that is predominantly Muslim (88%) with a small Christian minority (9%). Major ethnolinguistic groups include the Uzbek (80%), Russian (5.5%), Tajik (5%), Kazakh (3%), and Karakalpak (2.5%). Aside from meetings that have occurred in private for foreign military personnel within recent years, the Church has never established a presence in Uzbekistan largely due to missing its window to enter the country during the 1990s when religious freedom conditions were more accommodating to foreign, proselytism-focused Christian groups. Today current government legislation presents insurmountable barriers to an LDS establishment.

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

Proselytizing Christian Groups in Uzbekistan

Evangelicals have appeared to maintain a presence in Uzbekistan for over two decades and report a comparatively tiny presence in Uzbekistan with approximately 85,000 followers (0.29% of the national population). Most evangelicals are ethnic Koreans. Some progress has occurred establishing a native evangelical community among the Uzbek within the past couple decades. There appear to be approximately 10,000 Uzbek believers today whereas there appeared to be none a generation ago. Intense opposition from the government, Muslim leaders, and the community, combined with a lack of Uzbek Christians outside of Tashkent and low receptivity among the Muslim majority, pose significant challenges for evangelicals to establish a self-sufficient, growing church whose demographics reflect that of the national population.[1] Evangelicals report the highest percentages of members among Koreans (16.8%), Armenians (8.7%), Ukrainians (3.8%), and Moldavians (3.7%). Evangelicals constitute 0.20% or less of the population among all three ethnolinguistic groups with one million or more people.[2]

Jehovah's Witnesses have operated in Uzbekistan for at least two decades, although Witness report that they have been unable to register new congregations since 1996. In recent years, there have been some improvements regarding Witness relations with the government. In 2013, Witnesses reported that there were no longer any Witnesses imprisoned.[3] Currently Witnesses report only one congregation legally recognized by the government located in Chirchik.[4] Due to the lack of current government registration and limited religious freedom, Witnesses do not publish information regarding the number of publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism) or the number and location of their congregations in Uzbekistan. Witnesses have translated their official website jw.org into the Uzbek language (Cyrillic and Latin),[5] and maintain Uzbek-speaking congregations in many areas of the world including 13 cities in Russia, namely the Moscow area (one congregation, three groups); Nizhny Novgorod (one congregation), Vladivostok (one congregation), Artem (one group), Chita (one group), Irkutsk (one group), Khabarovsk (one group), Nizhnevartovsk (one group), Novosibirsk (one group), Orenburg (one group), St. Petersburg (one group), Tolyatti (one group), and Tver (one group).[6] Taraz is the only city in Kazakhstan with an Uzbek-speaking congregation.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church established a presence in Uzbekistan sometime in the 1980s or early 1990s. The greatest growth appeared to occur in the 1990s. Adventists have experienced slight congregational decline and a dramatic decrease in its membership growth rates within the past decade. In 2003, Adventists reported 15 churches (large or well-established congregations), four companies (small or recently planted congregations), and 1,514 members. Adventists reported 98 baptisms

in 2003, 150 baptisms in 2004, and 131 baptisms in 2005.[7] However, growth rates began to slow and negative growth began in the mid 2000s. In 2013, Adventists reported 759 members, 12 churches, and four companies.[8] The number of annual baptisms also significantly decreased to 42 in 2010, 17 in 2011, and 24 in 2012. Adventists translate general publications into the Uzbek language.[9]

Religious Freedom Conditions

Although the constitution provides for religious freedom, the law restricts this right to religious groups registered with the government. To register with the government, a religious group "must present a list of at least 100 citizens age 18 or older and a charter with a legal address to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice."[10] The law has prohibited proselytism since 2003 and limits the activities of individuals and religious groups which it deems as a threat to national security. Additionally, the government delineates between illegal (not properly registered) and prohibited (extremist) groups. Prohibited groups primarily consist of radical Islamist groups that wish to establish a Muslim state. Harsh penalties are prescribed in the legal code for individuals organizing or participating in religious activities with an illegal or prohibited group, and for possession of illegal religious materials. Only religious groups with a central registered body are permitted to train religious personnel. Private religious instruction and religious education in public schools are prohibited. There may be as many as 12,000 religious prisoners according to the most recent estimates. In recent years, the government has denied the registration of religious groups, raided both registered and unregistered religious communities, confiscated and destroyed religious literature, and discouraged children and youth from participating in religious activities. Some of the most severe instances of abuses of religious freedom have occurred among Muslim extremists and unregistered Christian groups. The government continues to block public access to many Muslim and Christian internet news sites. Society is intolerant of proselytism and the conversion of Muslims to Christianity or other religions. Formerly-Muslim Uzbek Christians frequently experience discrimination and harassment from society.[11]

LDS Background

In 2000, Uzbekistan became part of the Europe East Area.[12] No member group or branch accessible to the public has ever appeared to operate in Uzbekistan. In 2014, the Church reported that a service member group operated in Uzbekistan to service foreign Latter-day Saint military personnel stationed in the country.[13] Uzbekistan has never been assigned to a mission. No convert baptisms have appeared to occur in Uzbekistan. Any local members originally joined the Church in other countries.

The Church has had a handful of Uzbekistanis join the Church through missionary efforts conducted in other countries. In 2010, a Korean Uzbekistani LDS convert became the first Uzbekistani to serve a full-time mission in the Korea Daejon Mission. Within the past five years, missionaries have taught and helped Uzbekistanis prepare for baptism in several countries within the former Soviet Union including Russia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan.

As of late 2014, the Church had 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.

Current Barriers to an LDS Establishment

The requirement for a religious group to have at least 100 adult citizen members to obtain government registration is an insurmountable barrier to the establishment of an LDS presence in Uzbekistan. The Church missed its window of opportunity to establish a presence in Uzbekistan during the 1990s when government officials were more open to nontraditional Christian denominations operating within the country and when registration requirements were attainable for small, foreign-based Christian groups, or when registration was not required at all for religious groups to operate. There were no laws that prohibited unregistered religious groups from operating within Uzbekistan until the 1998 Religious Law was enacted.[14] Other missionary-minded Christian groups established a formal proselytism presence in Uzbekistan during this period, whereas the LDS Church appeared to make no efforts to open the country to missionary activity due to limited numbers of missionaries assigned to the former Soviet Union, and the lack of growth and infrastructure within the region.

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, if any, Uzbekistani members who reside in the country, making member-led efforts to establish an official LDS presence highly unlikely.

The most promising prospects for the Church to make inroads among Uzbekistanis and ethnic Uzbeks exist in countries where there are sizable Uzbek populations and where the Church has an official church presence. Russia and Kazakhstan both have full-time missionaries assigned and sizable Uzbek populations, providing the Church with opportunities to proselyte, teach and baptize converts, and possibly establish an Uzbek Latter-day Saint community in these countries. Reaching Uzbeks outside their homeland will likely be key to augmenting the number of Latter-day Saints in Uzbekistan as some of these converts will likely relocate to Uzbekistan over time. However, conditions for any members in Uzbekistan to engage in member-missionary work among friends and family appear unfavorable and would likely be illegal due to the Church's unregistered status and legislation prohibiting proselytism. Current religion laws suggest that even if the Church obtained government recognition that

there would be serious challenges for maintaining a missionary program with foreign missionaries. It is unclear whether government officials would even approve the assignment of foreign missionaries to work on a member-referral teaching basis even if the Church were to have 100 adult members to attain registration and if the government approved the Church's registration.

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 Uzbekistan are staunchly Muslim and present challenging conditions for LDS missionary activity. The Uzbek are approximately 86% Muslim,[15] whereas the Tajik are 95% Muslim.[16] 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 gospel student materials or LDS scriptures in Uzbek. A lack of gospel study materials and scriptures in this most commonly spoken national language will likely pose serious challenges for missionary work and church growth. Many speak Russian as a second language, especially in large cities like Tashkent, providing some opportunities to utilize Russian translations in initial proselytism efforts.

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership statistics for Uzbekistan 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 Uzbekistani members who reside abroad.

Future Prospects

There are no realistic opportunities for the Church to establish an official presence in Uzbekistan within the foreseeable future due to severe government restrictions on religious freedom, the Church falling vastly short from reaching the minimal qualifications of 100 adult citizen members to obtain registration with the government, the lack of members in the country at present, no translations of LDS gospel study materials or scriptures into the Uzbek language, and a lack of mission resources allocated to Central Asia. There are additional challenges for growth even if these barriers are overcome, including the resurgence of Islam since independence from the Soviet Union and no LDS teaching materials or resources tailored to those with a Muslim background. Consequently the outlook for growth appears poor even if the legal, safety, and logistical concerns that prevent an LDS establish are overcome. Proselytism efforts among Uzbeks and Uzbekistanis in Russia and Kazakhstan present the only realistic opportunities for the Church to make any headway, albeit any progress would be indirect and may not correspond with the emergence of an LDS community within Uzbekistan.

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