

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Missed Opportunities for LDS Outreach in Azerbaijan

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Inhabited by 9.7 million people, Azerbaijan is located near the Caucasus in Asia and has a bestpanerai.com population that is predominantly Muslim (93.4%) with a small Christian minority (4.8%). Major ethnolinguistic groups include the Azerbaijani (91.6%), Lezgian (2%), Russian (1.3%), Armenian (1.3%), and Talysh (1.3%). Aside from meetings that have occurred in private for foreign members, the Church has never operated a proselytizing, official presence in Azerbaijan 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 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 Azerbaijan and changes in government policies and legislation that regulate the operation of foreign religious groups. Current barriers to establishing an LDS presence in Azerbaijan are identified. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for a future LDS establishment are predicted.

Proselytizing Christian Groups in Azerbaijan

Evangelicals have appeared to maintain a presence in Azerbaijan for over two decades. Currently Evangelicals report a tiny presence with approximately 18,500 followers (0.20% of the national population).[1] Many Evangelicals belong to ethnic minority groups that support populations of less than 150,000. Some progress has occurred establishing a native Evangelical community among the ethnic Azeri within the past couple decades. Most Azeri Evangelicals reside in Baku. There appear to be approximately 12,000 Azeri believers today whereas there appeared to be very few a generation ago. Opposition from the government, Muslim leaders, and the community, combined with a lack of Azeri Christians 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. Evangelicals report the highest percentages of members among the British (7.0%), Assyrians (2.0%), and Armenians (2.0%). Evangelicals constitute 0.20% or less of the population among all three ethnolinguistic groups that support populations of at least 150,000.[2]

Jehovah's Witnesses have appeared to operate in Azerbaijan since the early to mid 1990s. In 1999, Witnesses successfully registered with the government and were able to re-register in 2002 in accordance with changes in the law.[3] Witnesses have experienced intense opposition and harassment for over a decade notwithstanding registration with the government. Witnesses have complained of unauthorized police raids during worship services, the confiscation or censorship of religious literature, and the deportation of foreign Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2008, there were 12 Witness congregations or groups in Azerbaijan, 700 Witnesses, and nearly 1,700 people who attended the Memorial of the death of Jesus.[4] In 2014, Witnesses reported that there were 2,500 members in Azerbaijan.[5] In late 2014, Witnesses reported 10 congregations that assembled in the Baku area. Six of these congregations held worship services in Azerbaijani whereas four of these congregations held worship services in Russian.[6] Witnesses have translated their official website jw.org into the Azerbaijani language (Cyrillic and Latin) and have translations of Azerbaijani materials in the Arabic script available for download.[7] Witnesses maintain Azerbaijani-speaking congregations in several countries including Russia (6 congregations, 13 groups), the Republic of Georgia (4), and Ukraine (2 groups).

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church established its initial presence in Azerbaijan a century ago. In 1993, Adventists reported four churches (larger or well-established congregations), two companies (small or recently established congregations), and 259 members in Azerbaijan. Adventists experienced the most rapid growth during the 1990s. In 2001, Adventists reported four

churches, five companies, and 617 members. Membership decline and stagnant congregational growth have occurred since the early 2000s. In 2013, Adventists reported five churches, six companies, and 524 members. Adventists have generally baptized approximately 20-30 new converts a year within the past decade.[8] Adventists translate general publications into the Azerbaijani language.[9]

Religious Freedom Conditions

Although the constitution provides for religious freedom, the law restricts this right to religious groups registered with the government. Registration with the government has not always guaranteed that the individual rights of members in certain religious groups are protected or upheld. The government has changed the Law on Religious Freedom 14 times since its creation in 1992 and has used legislation to limit or criminalize the activities of some religious groups that it views unfavorably. Religious groups have had to re-register on five separate occasions since 1991. The re-registration process for religious groups has been used by the government to restrict the activities of certain religious groups as applications are denied or approval is delayed for significant periods of time. Religious materials and literature are only permitted to be imported, sold, or distributed if approved by the government. The law bans foreigners from proselytism but does not indicate any restrictions on Azerbaijani citizens engaging in proselytism efforts. Foreigners part of registered religious groups may participate in religious ceremonies and services.[10]

LDS Background

In 2000, Azerbaijan was assigned to the Europe East Area.[11] A member group appeared to begin operating in Baku sometime in the late 2000s to service the needs of nonnative members who temporarily lived in the country for employment purposes. The Church appeared to organize the Baku Branch sometime in the early 2010s. Azerbaijan has never been assigned to a mission. No convert baptisms have appeared to occur in Azerbaijan. All members in the Baku Branch have appeared to join the Church in other countries. Reports from local members indicate there were approximately 40 members on church records for the Baku Branch in 2012.

Full-time missionaries serving in Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and the United States have reported finding and teaching Azerbaijanis outside their homeland. Some Azerbaijanis have been regular investigators who receive the missionary lessons. It is unclear whether any of these investigators have joined the Church and have been retained as active members.

As of late 2014, the Church reported no translations of LDS materials or scriptures into Azerbaijani. Translations of all LDS scriptures and a sizable number of gospel study and missionary materials are available in Russian.https://www.ocntug.org/

Current Barriers to an LDS Establishment

Difficulties experienced by other missionary-focused, nontraditional Christian groups in acquiring government recognition and maintaining their operations without government interference constitutes the greatest barrier to an LDS establishment in Azerbaijan. The Church missed its window of opportunity to establish a presence in Azerbaijan during the 1990s when government officials were more open to nontraditional Christian denominations operating within the country. This was the time when other foreign-based, proselytism-oriented Christian groups obtained registration and experienced the greatest successes in finding and retaining converts. The LDS Church appeared to make no effort to establish a presence in Azerbaijan during the 1990s due to limited numbers of missionaries assigned to former Soviet republics, few or no foreign members or native converts in Azerbaijani who spearheaded efforts to establish a congregation and begin the registration process, concerns with proselytizing a predominantly Muslim population, and inadequate church infrastructure within the region.

The Church had no presence in the Caucasus until first missionaries arrived in Armenia and established a branch in Yerevan in 1994. Distance from mission and area headquarters, limited resources allocated to the region, and a lack of vision in opening former Soviet republics to missionary work appear primarily responsible for the lack of an LDS presence in the region today. Currently the Church appears to have only a handful, if any, Azerbaijani members who reside in the country, making member-led efforts to establish an official LDS presence highly unlikely. Additionally, legislation that bars foreigners from proselytism prevents current member-missionary efforts within the expatriate Baku Branch. The Church's unregistered status require meetings to be held in private and may prevent the association of Azerbaijani citizens due to government laws governing religious activity. Current religion laws suggest that even if the Church obtained government recognition that there would be serious challenges in maintaining a missionary program with foreign missionaries. It is unclear whether government officials would approve the assignment of foreign missionaries to work on a member-referral teaching basis due to disdain from government and society exhibited towards proselytism-oriented Christian groups.

The most promising prospects for the Church to make inroads among Azerbaijanis exist in countries where there are sizable Azerbaijani populations and where the Church has an official church presence. Russia, Georgia, and Armenia all have full-time missionaries assigned and sizable Azerbaijani populations. These conditions provide opportunities for the Church to proselyte, teach and baptize converts, and possibly establish an Azerbaijani Latter-day Saint community in these countries. Reaching Azerbaijanis outside their homeland will likely be key to augment the number of Azerbaijani Latter-day Saints as some of these converts will likely relocate or travel to Azerbaijan over time. The Church maintains a limited presence in Armenia and an extremely small presence in Georgia and Russia, suggesting that prospects for Azerbaijani-specific outreach appear remote for the foreseeable future. Prospects for the Church to attain government recognition in Azerbaijan will improve once there are

small numbers of native members who reside within Baku and these members take the necessary steps to complete the registration process. However, experience from other nontraditional Christian groups suggest that the registration process will likely take many years to complete and may be unsuccessful.

The revival of Islam in the predominantly Muslim former Soviet Republics within the past two decades poses serious challenges for the LDS Church to gain a foothold among the indigenous population 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. The three most populous ethnolinguistic groups in Azerbaijani are homogenously Muslim and present challenging conditions for LDS missionary activity. These peoples exhibit lower levels of religiosity compared to other Muslim peoples in Asia but nonetheless demonstrate strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam as a cultural artifact. The North Azerbaijani (population: 8.4 million) are approximately 87% Muslim[12] whereas the Azeri Turk Azerbaijani (population: 279,000) are 90% Muslim[13] and the Lezgian (population: 184,000) are 99.9% Muslim.[14] 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 likely remain unreached for decades following the official establishment of an LDS presence.

The Church has no translations of gospel study materials or LDS scriptures in Azerbaijani. A lack of gospel study materials and scriptures in the national statutory language and most widely spoken language[15] may pose serious challenges for missionary work and church growth. Russian is a commonly spoken second language, especially in large cities like Baku. There may be some opportunities to utilize Russian translations of LDS materials in initial proselytism efforts.

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership statistics for Azerbaijan or other countries without an official LDS presence in Asia. It is unclear how many Latter-day Saints reside in the country at present. No data is available regarding the number of Azerbaijani members who reside abroad.

Future Prospects

There are no realistic opportunities for the Church to establish an official presence in Azerbaijan notwithstanding the operation of the Baku Branch for several years and the presence of other missionary-focused Christian groups. The lack of Azerbaijani converts abroad has posed a serious challenge for establishing an indigenous LDS presence in Azerbaijani and presents an insurmountable barrier to the Church registering with the government. No translations of LDS materials or scriptures into Azerbaijani is a major deterrent to growth. Current mission resources available in other countries with sizable Azerbaijani populations are inadequate to meet the needs of major people groups, let alone ethnic minorities such as Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijan's poor religious freedom record coupled with isolation from LDS missionary outreach centers suggests that there are no feasible prospects for a missionary presence to be established in Azerbaijan for many years or even decades to come. Laws that ban foreigners from engaging in proselytism also implicate no realistic opportunities to assign full-time missionaries unless legislation is changed and the government specifically approves missionaries to solely work off of member referral. The Church would likely experience poor to modest receptivity to outreach even if all of these other barriers are overcome as the most populous people groups exhibit strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam.

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[14] "Lezgian in Azerbaijan," Joshua Project, retrieved 29 December 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13049/AJ

[15] "Azerbaijani, North," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 29 December 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/azj