Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

>

Stagnant LDS Growth in Serbia

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: April 18th, 2015

Overview

Serbia is located in southeastern Europe and has a population of 7.2 million people. Serbs constitute 83% of the national population. Sizable ethnic minority groups include Hungarians (3.5%), Romany (2.1%), and Bosniak (2.0%). Serbian is the official language and is spoken by 88% of the population. Commonly spoken minority languages include Hungarian (3.4%), Bosnian (1.9%), and Romany (1.4%). Most of the population (85%) adheres to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Sizable religious minorities include Catholics (5%), Muslims (3.1%), atheists (1.1%), and Protestants (1.0%). The LDS Church in Serbia has experienced stagnant growth since the late-1990s as evidenced by no new congregations organized since 1997 and extremely slow membership growth rates. Cartier Ballon Bleu Replica Watches

//

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

LDS Background

A handful of Serbians joined the Church in Central European nations during the 1970s and 1980s. The Church assigned its first senior missionary couple to serve in Serbia in 1983 and organized a branch in Belgrade. However, the branch appeared to close sometime in the mid-1980s.

The current Beograd (Belgrade) Branch was organized in January 1988. Proselytizing missionaries did not enter the country until 1992. A second branch was organized in Novi Sad in August 1992 and a district was organized in November 1992 (today known as the Beograd Serbia District). The Church organized a third branch in Sremska Mitrovica in 1997. The Church previously operated member groups in Subotica and Panchevo in the late 2000s but closed these groups when missionaries were withdrawn. The Church appeared to have native branch presidents in two of the three branches (Beograd and Sremska Mitrovica) as of early 2015.

Missionaries were inconsistently assigned to Serbia during the 1990s and 2000s as a result of political instability and war. Full-time missionaries were removed from the country between 1999 and late 2001 due to the Kosovo conflict. Missionaries were again withdrawal for several months in 2008 due to hostilities surrounding the independence of Kosovo and subsequent anti-American sentiment. The Adriatic North Mission (formerly known as the Austria Vienna South, Slovenia Ljubljana, and Croatia Zagreb Missions) has administered Serbia since 1996.

The Church in Serbia reported less than 100 members in 1993. Church membership in Serbia increased to 100 in 1995, 203 in 2001, 265 in 2006, 307 in 2010, and 347 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates averaged 4.4% during the 2000s and 3.8% in the early 2010s. Returned missionaries reported that were approximately 50 active members in 2009. In 2013, there was one nominal Latter-day Saint per 21,600 people.

The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and a sizable body of gospel study and missionary materials into Serbian. All LDS scriptures and a large body of gospel study and missionary materials have been translated into Hungarian. Many of these materials are available free of cost online on lds.org. The Church has translated the missionary guidebook Preach My Gospel

into Serbian and Hungarian. The Church has translated its old edition of mormon.org into Hungarian.

Successes

The Church has established a small core of active, devoted members in Serbia that has been able to fill essential leadership positions in two of the three branches. The Church has continued to maintain the operation of the Beograd Serbia District despite less than 400 members on church records and few active members. This suggests that there have been a sufficient number of priesthood holders to fill both branch and district callings. The continued operation of the member district stands a significant accomplishment considering low member activity rates and few members. The Church in other nations with few active members has struggled with member burnout due to members often holding multiple leadership responsibilities for extended periods of time. However, member burnout has not appeared to have negatively affected the self-sufficiency of the Church in Serbia.

The Church has made diligent efforts to translate LDS scriptures and gospel study materials into Serbian and extend Serbian language proselytism. Few languages with as few Latter-day Saint speakers have had as many LDS materials and scriptures translated. This stands as a significant success as the population has exhibited very low receptivity to LDS outreach for many years.

Opportunities

The Church is registered with the Serbian government[1] and does not appear to experience any difficulties obtaining foreign missionary visas. Consequently there do not appear to be any barriers preventing the Church from opening additional cities to proselytism or augmenting the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Serbia. The recent worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions presents good opportunities to initiate national outreach expansion and openly previously unreached areas of Serbia to missionary work.

The most populous unreached cities present some of the greatest opportunities for growth due to high population densities and accessibility. There are 15 cities with populations exceeding 50,000 where no LDS congregations operate. Mission leadership visiting these cities, holding cottage meetings, teaching investigators, and identifying housing for future full-time missionaries to serve in these locations will be essential for national outreach expansion efforts to be successful. Cities that appear most favorable to assign full-time missionaries and open member groups include Kragujevac, Niš, Pan?evo, Šabac, and Subotica. A map displaying the location of major cities in Serbia and LDS congregations can be found here.

There are good opportunities for online proselytism efforts. The current version of mormon.org is a valuable resource in helping individuals research the Church on their own and contact missionaries if they desire to receive the missionary lessons. The website presents good opportunities for social media advertizing in which members or missionaries target specific audiences with ads that promote websites such as mormon.org or Serbian translations of LDS materials on lds.org. These advertisement campaigns are cost effective and can be specialized to target specific populations through social media platforms such as Facebook or Google Ads. Additionally, these campaigns can enhance the efficiency of missionary work through finding investigators and referring interested individuals to missionaries serving in Serbia.

Specialized outreach among ethnolinguistic minority groups such as Hungarians and Romany may present good opportunities for growth. These peoples have exhibited stronger receptivity to other nontraditional, missionary-focused Christian groups than ethnic Serbs. The opening of cities within locations of Serbia where these peoples traditionally reside may coincide with accelerated growth and greater mission productivity.

Challenges

Strong ethnoreligious ties exhibited by Serbians with the Serbian Orthodox Church, societal hostility towards nontraditional Christian denominations, and disinterest in organized religion constitute the greatest challenges for the Church to achieve growth in Serbia. Decades of communism taught Serbians to be weary of organizations that come from outside the country, especially from America. Substance use rates are high and pose challenges for convert retention and member activity due to relapse. Serbian news media has painted the LDS Church in an extremely negative light. Consequently many view the LDS Church as a cult with ties to the American government that seeks to exploit Serbs of their money.[2] Consequently most do not view the Church has being compatible with Serbian culture or society and regard the Church as a threat to Serbian identity. These conditions have severely impacted the receptivity of the Serbian population to LDS proselytism for decades and have been a major deterrent to growth.

Disruptions to missionary work due to war, political conflict, and anti-American sentiment have posed an additional challenge for the Church to achieve real growth. Missionaries have been frequently evacuated within the past two decades. Returned missionary reports indicate that some of these evacuations were hastily done resulting in members and investigators suddenly losing contact with the Church. Broken lease agreements for missionary housing and no warnings given to local members or investigators coincided with the removal of missionaries from some cities in 2008. The Church has also appeared to periodically close Serbia to missionary work due to extremely low productivity. Inconsistent mission outreach has therefore resulted in delays and major setback to steadily increasing the national scope of LDS outreach.

There has been no increase in the number of branches since 1997. Increases in the number of congregations strongly correlates with national outreach expansion and active membership growth. There has appeared to be little, if any, increase in the number of active members within the past two decades despite some modest numerical increases in church-reported membership. The Church in Serbia has historically struggled with modest to low member activity and poor convert retention rates due to challenging societal conditions, opposition from family and friends, the lack of a sizable LDS community, no translations of LDS scriptures until 2007, and disruptions to missionary work.

A conservative interpretation and implementation of the centers of strength policy appears partially responsible for stagnant LDS growth trends in Serbia in the twenty-first century. Mission leadership has concentrated its resources on strengthening branches although this approach has appeared to yield little to no progress accelerating growth. It is possible, however, that some branches may have been discontinued if it were not for consistent missionary support in the three Serbian branches. Additionally, efforts to organize member groups in additional cities have thus far been unsuccessful such as in Panchevo and Subotica.

The Church has yet to translate mormon.org into Serbian. Although the Church maintains a Serbian version of lds.org,[3] the website has been developed to be primarily used by members for news, resources, and information rather than online missionary work. The translation of mormon.org into Serbian may result in greater success in online proselytism efforts and an increase in self-referred investigators. No LDS materials have been translated into Romany (Serbia). Consequently, some Romany may experience challenges with utilizing Serbian translations of LDS materials and scriptures for testimony development and gospel study.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Serbia has experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth rates in Europe. The percentage of nominal members in the Serbian population is extremely low for the region as there is approximately one Latter-day Saint per every 21,600 people. Only a handful of European nations have as few Latter-day Saints in the population as Serbia. LDS membership growth trends in Serbia have been significantly lower than surrounding nations as nearly stagnant growth has occurred for two decades. Most neighboring countries experienced moderate membership growth rates in the 1990s and have reported slow membership growth rates within the past 15 years. The Church in all other countries in the former Yugoslavia reports less than one thousand members and mediocre or low member activity rates. The Church operates only one stake within the Balkans in Albania that was organized in 2014.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups report a significantly larger presence in Serbia than the LDS Church. However, all of these groups have comparatively tiny membership and report slow or stagnant growth. Evangelicals claim 0.6% of the population in Serbia and report very slow growth. Half of Evangelicals in Serbia are from ethnic minority groups.[4] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in Serbia but report few members. Witnesses have historically experienced slow but steady growth. Witnesses operate congregations in 47 cities and towns. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 3,857 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 61 congregations, and 106 baptisms in Serbia.[5] Witnesses conduct meetings in Serbian, Hungarian, Romany (Serbia), Serbian Sign Language, and Chinese (Mandarin/Cantonese). The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence in Serbia but reports few members. Adventists have experienced slight declines in total membership and have reported stagnant congregational growth within the past decade. Adventists reported 171 churches (large or well-established congregations), six companies (small or recently established congregations), and 7,097 members in 2003 and 172 churches, zero companies, and 6,795 members in 2013. Adventists have generally baptized between 100 and 300 new members a year within the past decade.[6] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Serbia.

Limitations

Although many high-quality reports from returned missionaries, visiting members, and former mission presidents were available during the writing of this case study, there were few recent reports from local members or missionaries currently serving within the country. The Church does not publish official statistics on the number of converts baptized per country or mission. Consequently it is unclear how many converts join the Church a year in Serbia and how these trends have changed over the years. The Church in Serbia does not publish membership figures by administrative province or city. There are no official statistics that provide the number of members who reside in locations without a branch. The Church does not annually publish data on the number of missionaries serving per country or the number of missionaries assigned per country or mission. No official statistics on member activity or convert retention rates are available to the public. Although missionaries indicate no member groups operate within the country, the Church does not publish data on member groups for individual countries or the Church as a whole.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Serbia to reverse stagnant growth trends that have persisted for decades appears unfavorable for the foreseeable future. Negative public views of the Church, disinterest in organized religion, suspicion of religious groups headquartered in the United States, and high rates of substance use predict no change in the population's receptivity to the LDS Church. The tiny core of active, devoted Latter-day Saints appears capable of maintaining the Church's three branches.

However, emphasis on strengthening current branches and the challenging conditions for missionary work in Serbia will likely discourage mission leaders from considering the opening of additional cities to missionary work. The translation of mormon.org into Serbian, the consistent assignment of full-time missionaries to Serbia, and the exploration of opportunities to open additional cities to missionary work, including areas where ethnolinguistic minorities traditionally reside, will be vital to make progress in overcoming these challenges.

[1] "Serbia," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 21 March 2015. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222265

[2] Milosevic, Sasa; Stack, Peggy Fletcher. "Mormon Serbs: Tiny group faces big opposition," Salt Lake Tribute, 26 June 2012. http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/54341704-80/lds-mormon-church-serbia.html.csp

[3] http://www.crkva-isusa-hrista.rs/

[4] "Serbia," Operation World, retrieved 21 March 2015. http://www.operationworld.org/country/serb/owtext.html

[5] “2015 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 18 March 2015. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2015-yearbook/

[6] "South-East European Union Conference," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 21 March 2015. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10101