

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in Croatia

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Overview

Croatia is located in southeastern Europe and has a population of 4.5 million people. Croats constitute 90.4% of the national population. Serbs comprise the largest ethnolinguistic minority (4.4%) whereas other ethnolinguistic groups (e.g. Bosniak, Hungarian, Slovene, Czech, and Albanian) constitute the remaining 5.2% of the population. Croatian is the official language and is spoken by 95.6% of the population. Most of the population (86%) adheres to the Roman Catholic Church. Sizable religious minorities include Orthodox Christians (4.4%) and Muslims (1.5%). The LDS Church in Croatia has experienced stagnant growth within the past decade as evidenced by no new congregations organized since 2004 and extremely slow membership growth rates.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in Croatia. 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 Croatia is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

A handful of Croats joined the Church in Central European nations during the 1970s and 1980s. Krešimir ?osi?, a popular Croatian basketball player who joined the Church in the 1970s, helped raise awareness of the Church and its teachings in Yugoslavia. The first sacrament meeting in Croatia was held in Zadar in September 1972.[1] The Church assigned a limited number of missionaries to present-day Croatia in the late 1970s from the Austria Vienna Mission. Missionaries began to be more consistently assigned to Croatia in appreciable numbers during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Austria Vienna East Mission began administering Croatia in 1987 followed by the Austria Vienna South Mission in 1996. The Adriatic North Mission (formerly known as the Austria Vienna South, Slovenia Ljubljana, and Croatia Zagreb Missions) has administered Croatia since 1996. The mission has been headquartered in Zagreb since the late 2000s.

The current Zagreb 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 for Yugoslavia was organized in 1980 (today known as the Zagreb Croatia District). The Church in Croatia organized additional branches in Karlovac (1992), Varaždin (1997), Osijek (2002), Rijeka (2002), and Zadar (2004). All of these branches continued to operate as of mid-2015. The Church previously operated a branch in Split from approximately the 1980s until 2005. A member group also briefly operated in Pula from the late 2000s until the early 2010s. The Church appeared to have native branch presidents in four of the six branches (Karlovac, Rijeka, Varaždin, and Zagreb) as of mid-2015.

The Church in Croatia reported less than 100 members in 1995. Church membership in Croatia increased to 300 in 1997, 424 in 2004, 503 in 2007, and 588 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates ranged from -1% to 13% during the 2000s and 0% to 6% in the early 2010s. Missionaries reported in early 2015 that were approximately 50 active members in Zagreb. There appeared to be approximately 100 active members nationwide, or 15-20% of nominal church membership. There was one nominal Latter-day Saint per 7,265 people in 2014.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and many gospel study and missionary materials into Croatian. The Church has translated its old edition of mormon.org into Croatian.[2]

Successes

The Church has established a small core of active, devoted members in Croatia that has been able to fill essential leadership positions in four of the six branches. The Church has continued to maintain the operation of the Zagreb Croatia District for several decades despite less than 600 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 Croatia.

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

Opportunities

The Church appears to experience full religious freedom in Croatia. The government and society generally respect religious freedom.[3] There do not appear to be any difficulties acquiring 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 Croatia. 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 Croatia to missionary work for the first time.

The most populous unreached cities present some of the greatest opportunities for growth due to high population densities and accessibility. There are 13 cities with populations exceeding 20,000 where no LDS congregations operate.[4] 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. Some of these cities have previously had a member group or branch organized that has since closed. Locations where an LDS presence previous operated may present good prospects for future missionary activity if isolated members and former investigators can be contacted. Cities that appear most favorable to assign full-time missionaries and open member groups include Split, Pula, Sesvete, and Slavonski Brod.

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 Croatian 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 Croatia.

Challenges

Strong ethnoreligious ties exhibited by Croats to the Roman Catholic Church and disinterest in organized religion constitute the greatest challenges for the Church to achieve growth in Croatia. Decades of communism has significantly reduced the importance of religious participation for most Croats. The LDS Church is viewed as a deviant religious group. Substance use rates are high and pose challenges for convert retention and member activity due to relapse.

The Church in Croatia has experienced low member activity rates for many years. Convert retention rates have also been very low. Challenging societal conditions, strong ethnoreligious ties to the Roman Catholic Church, opposition from family and friends, and the lack of a sizable LDS community appear primarily responsible for inactivity and convert attrition problems. Little to no increase in the number of active members within the past decade has corresponded with no net increase in the number of branches during this period. 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.

A conservative interpretation and implementation of the centers of strength policy appears partially responsible for stagnant LDS growth trends in Croatia within the past decade. 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 provided to the six Croatian branches that currently operate. The most recent effort to organize a member group in a previously unreached city (Pula) was unsuccessful. The failure of the mission to maintain the member group and advance it to branch status has likely discouraged mission leaders in opening additional cities to missionary activity.

The Church has yet to translate the current version of mormon.org into Croatian. The translation of the current mormon.org

website into Croatian may result in greater success in online proselytism efforts and an increase in self-referred investigators. The new Mormon.org website has many features that can be effective in online proselytism such as member profiles and more interactive webpages that explain LDS teachings.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Croatia has experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth rates in Europe despite a longer LDS presence than most nations in Southeastern Europe and Eastern Europe. The percentage of nominal members in the Croatian population is average for the region as there is one Latter-day Saint for approximately every 7,000 people. LDS membership growth trends in Croatia have steadily decreased within the past decade in a fashion similar to most other countries in the region. The Church operates only one stake within Southeastern Europe in Albania that was organized in 2014.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups report a significantly larger presence in Croatia than the LDS Church. However, all of these groups have comparatively tiny memberships and report slow or stagnant growth. Evangelicals claim 0.4% of the population in Croatia and report very slow growth. Many Evangelicals in Croatia are from ethnic minority groups.[5] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in Croatia but report few members. Witnesses have historically experienced slow but steady growth. Witnesses operate congregations in over 50 cities and towns. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 5,412 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 67 congregations, and 93 baptisms in Croatia.[6] Witnesses conduct meetings in Croatia and Croatian Sign Language. The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a widespread presence in Croatia but reports few members. Adventists have experienced slight declines in total membership and have reported very slow congregational growth within the past decade. Adventists reported 83 churches (large or well-established congregations), five companies (small or recently established congregations), and 3,195 members in 2004 and 84 churches, 11 companies, and 2,785 members in 2014. Adventists have generally baptized between 50 and 100 new members a year within the past decade.[7] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in Croatia.

Limitations

Many high-quality reports from current and returned missionaries, visiting members, and former mission presidents were available during the writing of this case study. However, there were no reports available from local members. 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 Croatia and whether convert baptism trends have changed over the years. The Church in Croatia 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 publish the location, names, and number of member groups. 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 that 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 Croatia to reverse stagnant growth trends that have occurred during the past decade appears unfavorable for the foreseeable future. Strong ethnoreligious ties with Roman Catholicism, negative public views of the Church, disinterest in organized religion, and high rates of substance use predict no change in the population's receptivity to the LDS Church within the foreseeable future. The tiny core of active, devoted Latter-day Saints will likely continue to maintain the operation of the Church's six Croatian branches. However, emphasis on strengthening current branches and the challenging conditions for missionary work will likely discourage mission leaders from opening of additional cities to missionary work. The translation of the current version of mormon.org into Croatian and the exploration of opening additional cities to missionary work are tactics that appear likely to make some improvements in the Church's long-term growth in Croatia. However, dependence on foreign, full-time missionaries to accomplish these feats indicates significant problems for the Church in Croatia to become self-sustaining in meeting its ecclesiastical and missionary needs.

[1] "Croatia," Deseret News 2013 Church News Almanac, p. 466.

[2] http://www.mormon.org/mormonorg/hrv/

[3] "Croatia," International Religious Freedom Report 2013, retrieved 2 May 2015. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222201

[4] "Croatia: Major Settlements," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 2 May 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/Croatia-Cities.html

[5] "Croatia," Operation World, retrieved 27 May 2015. http://www.operationworld.org/croa

[6] "2015 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 18 March 2015. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2015-yearbook/

[7] "Croatian Conference (1999-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 27 May 2015. http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2651972