

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Stagnant LDS Growth in the Baltic States

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Overview

Located in northeastern Europe, the Baltic States consist of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and have a combined population of 6.9 million people. Commonly spoken languages in the Baltic States include Lithuanian (2.8 million speakers),[1] Russian (1.6 million speakers),[2] Latvian (1.5 million speakers),[3] and Estonian (1.0 million speakers).[4] Although the LDS Church experienced steady growth during the 1990s and 2000s within these nations, stagnant growth has occurred within the past five years as evidenced by slowing rates of annual membership growth and a net decline in the number of branches within the three countries.

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This case study reviews the history of the Church in the Baltic States. IWC Replica Watches 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 the Baltic States is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

A handful of Estonians and Latvians joined the Church during the mid to late twentieth century in nearby European nations such as Finland and Germany. The Finland Helsinki Mission commenced missionary activity within the Baltic States in 1989 when the first baptisms were performed in Estonia. Formal recognition from the Estonian government was obtained in June 1990 and a branch was organized in Tallinn. The Church organized the Finland Helsinki East Mission in July 1990 to orchestrate the opening of the Baltic States and northwestern Russia to missionary activity. Missionaries opened Riga, Latvia to missionary activity in mid-1992 and organized a branch shortly thereafter. The Church reassigned the Baltic States to the Russia St. Petersburg Mission in July 1992. Missionaries opened Vilnius, Lithuania to missionary work in December 1992. The Church established a separate mission to administer the Baltic States in July 1993. The mission is currently called the Baltic Mission but was previously known as the Latvia Riga Mission (1993-1996) and Lithuania Vilnius Mission (1996-2002).

Most cities with an LDS presence in the Baltic States opened to missionary work in the 1990s or early 2000s. In Estonia, branches were established in Tallinn (1991), Tartu (1994), Narva (2001), and Pärnu (2007). In Latvia, branches were established in Riga (1994), Liepaja (1997), and Daugavpils (2002). Member groups began functioning in Jelgava (late 2000s) and Bauska (late 2000s/early 2010s). In Lithuania, branches were established in Vilnius (1994), Kaunas (1994), Klaipeda (1996), and Siauliai (2000). In early 2015, the Church operated official branches in three cities in Latvia, four cities in Estonia, and four cities in Lithuania. The total number of cities in the Baltic States with an official branch increased from one in 1991 to five in 1994, seven in 1997, 10 in 2002, and 11 in 2007. The Church has permanently discontinued two congregations in Estonia (a second Estonian-speaking branch in Tallinn in 1997 and the Russian-speaking Tallinn 2nd Branch in 2013) and two congregations in Latvia (a second Latvian-speaking congregation in Riga in 2012 and a second Russian-speaking congregation in Riga in 2014).

The Church currently operates one district in each of the Baltic States. Provided with the date of creation in parentheses, these districts include the Tallinn Estonia District (1997), Riga Latvia District (1998), and the Vilnius Lithuania District (1998). The Church has operated a mission branch to administer areas outside the boundaries of districts or ordinary branches since 1993 called the Baltic Mission Branch.

The Church in Estonia reported less than 100 members in 1991. Church membership in Estonia increased to 200 in 1993, 300

in 1997, 551 in 2000, 751 in 2005, 1,010 in 2009, and 1,106 in 2014. The Church in Latvia reported 100 members in 1993. Church membership in Latvia increased to 200 in 1995, 508 in 2000, 747 in 2004, 1,025 in 2008, and 1,189 in 2014. The Church in Lithuania reported 100 members in 1995. Church membership in Lithuania increased to 400 in 1997, 554 in 2000, 791 in 2005, 900 in 2009, and 969 in 2014. Member activity rates range from 20-30% throughout the region.

At year-end 2013, the Church reported 3,230 members in the Baltic States. In early 2015, there were 13 branches within the mission. Most branches had between 20 and 60 active members as of the mid-2010s.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and a large body of gospel study and missionary materials into Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Russian. Many of these materials are available free of cost online on lds.org. The Church has translated the missionary guidebook Preach My Gospel into all four of these languages. The Church has translated the new version of mormon.org into Latvian.

Successes

The Church has established a small core of active, devoted members in all three of the Baltic States. These members have been able to fulfill leadership and member responsibilities with a high degree of self-sufficiency for over 15 years. Some branches have branch presidencies entirely staffed by local, indigenous members and youth passing the sacrament - rarities for congregations in the former Soviet Union. All branches appear to have a local member serving as branch president. This stands as a significant accomplishment considering mediocre member activity rates and relatively few priesthood holders available to staff these leadership positions.

The Church has maintained a separate mission to administer the Baltic States for over two decades. Rarely has the Church in Eastern Europe established missions that service as small of a target population as in the Baltic States. The operation of the mission has appeared essential in the maintenance of active language proselytism programs in Estonian, Latvia, and Lithuanian. Additionally, the mission has maintained the vision in establishing a self-sufficient Church in each of these nations.

The Church has made diligent efforts to maintain Russian language missionary programs in the Baltic States. The Church currently operates Russian-speaking branches in Riga and Vilnius and has previously operated a Russian-speaking branch in Tallinn. The Church in Europe has typically combined different ethnolinguistic groups into the same congregations due to few active members and shortages in priesthood leaders and missionary manpower.

Opportunities

There are no legal obstacles to proselytism as religious freedom is upheld throughout the Baltic States. Governments have not restricted the practice of religious freedom and society has been tolerant of nontraditional Christian groups operating within their nations. These conditions present excellent conditions for the Church to expand its missionary presence into additional locations within the Baltic States, especially considering most former Soviet Republics have restricted religious freedom for nontraditional Christian groups within the past 15 years. The recent worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions also provides the needed manpower to orchestrate greater saturation of the Baltic States with LDS missionaries. There have been no recent reports of the Church in the Baltic States experiencing challenges obtaining foreign missionary visas, suggesting that the Church could significantly augment the number of missionaries assigned in order to orchestrate greater national outreach expansion. These conditions indicate good opportunities for growth as the Church has historically had limited numbers of members serving full-time missionaries, thus resulting in difficulties to adequately staff its current missions and proselytism areas.

The Baltic Mission numbers among the geographically smallest and least populated missions within continental Eurasia. There are less than 10 million people who reside in nations within the mission boundaries where there are no proselytism restrictions. These conditions suggest that the mission president has a relatively small administrative burden in overseeing church operations within the mission compared to other missions in Eurasia that administer tens of millions more people, span thousands of miles, and administer larger numbers of congregations.

The most populous unreached cities in the Baltic States present some of the greatest opportunities for growth. Pärnu is the most recent city to have had a branch organized and in 2013 the branch had over 100 members on its records - a significant accomplishment considering the branch was first organized in 2007.[5] Similar results may occur in additional cities currently unreached by the Church. Less than half of the population resides in cities where LDS congregations operate. The most successful efforts to open additional cities to missionary work will require mission leaders to identify cities with the largest number of inhabitants where there are also small numbers of isolated members who reside in the city. Mission leadership visiting these cities, holding cottage meetings, teaching investigators, and identifying housing for full-time missionaries to be assigned 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 Kohtla-Järve, Viljandi, and Rakvere, Estonia; J?rmala, Ventspils, R?zekne, and Valmiera, Latvia; and Panev?žys, Alytus, Marijampol?, and Mažeikiai, Lithuania.

There are good opportunities for online proselytism efforts. The Church has translated its current version of mormon.org into Latvian and Russian. This website serves as a valuable resource in helping individuals research the Church on their own and

contact missionaries if they desire to receive the missionary lessons or contemplate membership. Latvian members and full-time missionaries assigned to Latvia can utilize the website in their efforts to find and teach interested individuals online. These websites also present good opportunities for social media advertising in which members or missionaries target specific audiences with ads that promote the Latvian and Russian versions of mormon.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.

Challenges

Secularism and disinterest in nontraditional Christian groups constitutes the primary barrier to growth in the Baltic States. Many have become increasingly more secular due to Soviet occupation during much of the 20th century and increasing materialism since independence. Most are only nominally affiliated with the Christian denomination traditionally associated with their ethnicity. Some ethnicities exhibit strong ethnoreligious ties to specific denominations such as Lithuanians with the Roman Catholic Church. The ascension of the Baltic States into the European Union in 2004 has appeared to strengthen ties with Western and Central Europe but has also resulted in an increased influence of European secularism on these nations. The assignment of the Baltics to the Europe East Area has also appeared to pose cultural challenges as the Baltics more strongly associate with Western cultures and societies. Today most do not consider religion an important aspect of everyday life. This has resulted in significant challenges for finding interested individuals who seriously contemplate membership. Moderate to high rates of cigarette and alcohol use present barriers for many prospective members and contribute to convert relapse when substance addictions have not been fully overcome.

Active membership growth and "real growth" accomplishments within the Baltic States has plateaued during the past decade. Local members report that extremely few youth have been successfully raised in LDS families to remain active into adulthood. The number of active members has remain stagnant in essentially all cities during the past several years. Problems have also emerged with former members of branch presidencies becoming inactive. Most branches outside the capital cities report few active members. These branches generally have between 20 and 40 active members despite missionary efforts targeting most of these cities for 10 to 20 years.

This lack of progress has appeared attributed to a combination of the population exhibiting reduced receptivity to LDS missionary efforts, challenges organizing additional congregations in the most populous cities, and a strong emphasis on the "centers of strength" policy to establish stakes in each nation. Efforts to establish multiple congregations within the most populous cities has yielded mixed results. The Church has struggled to augment the number of active members in these cities, especially after the establishment of additional branches. This has resulted in the Church going through cycles of splitting and consolidating branches in order to stimulate growth. As a result, the number of congregations has declined from three to one in Tallinn and four to two in Riga notwithstanding steady increases in numerical membership in both cities.

A conservative interpretation and implementation of the centers of strength policy appears partially responsible for stagnant LDS growth trends in the Baltic States within the past decade. The Church has relied on a church-splitting approach to growth, which relies on increases in active membership to organize additional congregations rather than organizing additional congregations to increase the number of active members. This pattern for establishing new congregations and expanding outreach often yields dismal results in countries where there is a tiny LDS presence, modest receptivity, and mediocre member-missionary participation. Mission leadership has concentrated on preparing local membership and congregations to operate within stakes one day; however, this emphasis has appeared premature as none of the Baltic States come close to reaching the minimum criteria for stakes to operate. All districts in the region appear approximately a thousand members short of qualifying to become stakes. With current growth rates, it may be half a century until individual districts become close to meeting the minimal criteria to operate as stakes. Slow growth in some of the most recently opened cities to missionary work such as Jelgava has also appeared to discourage the exploration of additional prospects for national outreach expansion. This, in turn, has resulted in additional slowdowns in membership and congregational growth rates as missionary activity remains concentrated in a handful of select locations and within areas accessible to less than half of the national population. Local members note that area leadership has disapproved of the opening of additional cities to proselytism in recent years due to concerns with the lack of progress in currently opened cities to missionary work.

The Church has yet to translate mormon.org into Estonian and Lithuanian. Although the Church maintains an Estonian version of lds.org, the website has been developed to be primarily used by members instead of investigators for news, resources, and information. The translation of mormon.org into Estonian and Lithuanian may result in greater success in online proselytism efforts and an increase in self-referred investigators.

Comparative Growth

The Church in the Baltic States has achieved growth rates comparable to Scandinavia and other former Soviet Republics in Eastern Europe. The percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in the population of the Baltic States is comparable to the percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in Finland, Norway, and Sweden but higher than the percentage of Latter-day Saints in Moldova, Russia, or Ukraine. LDS membership growth trends in the Baltic States have mirror membership growth trends in other former Soviet Republics such as Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. These growth trends have consisted of strong membership growth during the 1990s and steady decreases in annual membership growth trends during the 2000s and 2010s. Today annual membership growth rates in the Baltic States and Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine are all less than three percent whereas in the 1990s and early 2000s annual membership growth rates typically exceeded 10%. The Church operates no stakes within the Baltic States but has established stakes in Russia and Ukraine due to larger numbers of members clustered

within major metropolitan areas.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups report a significantly larger presence in the Baltic States than the LDS Church. However, essentially all of these groups have reported stagnant growth within the past five years. Evangelicals claim 7.0% of the population in Latvia,[6] 4.9% of the population in Estonia,[7] and 1.1% of the population in Lithuania.[8] Evangelicals note that secularism, materialism, and strong ethnoreligious ties to traditional Christian denominations within the Baltic States have limited growth and reduced receptivity. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in the Baltic States, but have experienced stagnant growth in most areas. The number of active Witnesses in the Baltic States has remained unchanged or has declined within recent years. In 2014, Witnesses reported an average of 4,091 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 53 congregations, and 91 baptisms in Estonia; an average of 2,296 publishers, 36 congregations, and 89 baptisms in Latvia; and an average of 3,130 publishers, 51 congregations, and 103 baptisms in Lithuania.[9] Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in all major cities in the Baltic States and report 17 congregations in the Riga metropolitan area, 14 congregations in the Tallinn metropolitan area, and eight congregations in the Vilnius metropolitan area. Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in all three nations and report congregations in approximately three dozen cities in Estonia, three dozen cities in Lithuania, and two dozen cities in Latvia. Witnesses conduct meetings in Russian, Estonia, Latvian, Lithuanian, sign language (Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian), and English in the Baltic States. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports a widespread presence in the Baltic States but reports few members. Adventists have experienced stagnant membership and congregational growth within the past decade. Adventists reported 83 churches (large or well-established congregations), eight companies (small or recently established congregations), and 6,643 members in 2003 and 89 churches, zero companies, and 6,493 members in 2013. Adventists have generally baptized between 100 and 200 new members a year within the past decade.[10] The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence in the Baltic States.

Limitations

Although many high-quality reports from returned missionaries, visiting members, and local members were available during the writing of this case study, there were few recent reports from missionaries currently serving within the region. The Church does not publish data on member activity and convert retention rates. Although missionaries indicate that no member groups operate within the country aside from Jelgava, the Church does not publish data on member groups for individual countries or the Church as a whole. It is unclear whether any members reside in cities without a current LDS presence.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in the Baltic States to reverse stagnant growth trends appears bleak within the foreseeable future. Mission and area leadership continue to concentrate missionary resources on the strengthening of church centers in major cities despite these efforts yielding little to no measurable progress within the past decade. A stringent focus on a conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy has neglected vast areas of the Baltic States and many medium-sized cities throughout the region continue to have no LDS presence. This lack of progress has occurred despite widespread religious freedom throughout these nations and the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions providing the needed manpower to augment the size of the Baltic Mission missionary force. Local populations have exhibited steadily declining receptivity to the LDS Church and other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups within the past decade, suggesting that future missionary efforts will become more challenging to find, teach, baptize, and retain converts. These factors therefore point to no realistic prospects for the establishment of stakes within individual Baltic nations for many years or decades to come.
https://www.orisonlinesale.com/

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