

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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LDS Outreach Expansion in Slovakia

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Overview

Although the Church established a brief, minimal presence in Slovakia during the early twentieth century, a permanent official presence was not reestablished until the early 1990s. The Church organized branches in three cities within less than five years but did not open any additional cities until the mid-2000s and experienced virtually stagnant membership growth between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s. Within the past five years, the Church has experienced a significant acceleration in opening additional cities to missionary work and augmenting membership growth.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Slovakia. Past outreach expansion successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for national outreach expansion and future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church in Slovakia is compared to other countries in the region and to other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups who maintain a presence in Slovakia. Limitations to this case study are reviewed and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church established its first branches in Slovakia in the early 1990s in Trencín and Bratislava. In the mid-1990s, the Church in Slovakia opened a third branch in Zilina. In the mid-2000s, missionaries opened the cities of Martin and Kosice. The Church organized a branch in Kosice in 2007 whereas the mission withdrew missionaries from Martin sometime in the late 2000s. In 2008,tag heuer replica watches missionaries opened a group in Banská Bystrica. In the early 2010s, the Church opened two additional cities to missionary work (Zvolen in 2012 and Nitra in 2013) and established groups.

Church membership did not reach 100 until 1997. Virtually stagnant membership growth occurred between 1997 and 2007 as membership increased from approximately 100 to 134. Membership growth experienced a slight acceleration following the Church obtaining legal status with the government. Church membership increased from 134 in 2007 to 193 in 2010 and 221 in 2012.

The Church did not obtain government recognition until 2006. Prior to this time missionaries only temporarily served in the country from the Czech Republic. Known colloquially as the Slovakian Miracle, in September 2006 missionaries throughout the Czech Prague Mission obtained over 30,000 signatures from those who agreed to have the LDS Church enter Slovakia. In addition to their signatures, Slovakian citizens also had to provide their personal identification number, home address, and full name.[1]

In early 2013, the Church published a translation of the Book of Mormon into Slovak for the first time.

In mid-2013, missionaries reported that only the Bratislava and Kosice Branches held church for the complete three hours. The Bratislava Branch was the largest congregation in the country. At the time the Kosice Branch had approximately six active members and 20 members on church records who resided in the city.

In October 2013, missionaries reported three proselytism areas in one city (Bratislava), two proselytism areas in four cities

(Kosice, Nitra, Trencín, and Zilina), and one proselytism area in two cities (Banská Bystrica and Zvolen).

Successes

Within the past decade, the Church has revamped its outreach expansion efforts in Slovakia as evidenced by the number of cities with a branch or member group operating more than doubling from three to seven. This accomplishment has occurred notwithstanding very slow membership growth and little increase in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the region due to stagnant numbers of missionaries serving worldwide during most of the 2000s. Successive mission leaders have maintained consistent outreach expansion vision in Slovakia by concentrating surplus missionary manpower into the opening of additional cities. Mission leaders have taken advantage of the Church's relatively recent government recognition that has permitted the permanent assignment of full-time missionary companionships. These efforts to open additional cities to missionary work appear primarily responsible for the reversal of stagnant membership growth rates prior to the late 2000s and subsequent maintenance of slow membership growth trends to present day.

Larger amounts of LDS materials are now translated into Slovak, including a complete translation of the Book of Mormon and the missionary guide Preach My Gospel. In 2013, there were approximately 50 gospel study and proselytism materials available in the Slovak language.[2] The Church has translated General Conference talks into Slovak for several years.[3] These additional language resources can help facilitate testimony development in Slovak investigators and members and diversify proselytism efforts by members and full-time missionaries.

The event known as the Slovakian Miracle constitutes an extraordinary success for the Church in obtaining government recognition required for the Church to permanently assign missionaries and experience greater religious freedom. The approximately 60 full-time missionaries assigned to the Czech Prague Mission obtained over 30,000 signatures of Slovakian citizens within a week's time. Citizens who provided their signatures also had to provide personal information; a considerable achievement due to the lack of religious freedom previously experienced in the country, the minimal presence of the LDS Church, and the lack of awareness of the Church and its teachings. This achievement provided the necessary legal grounds for the Church to expand its missionary operations in the country and focus on strengthening established branches.

Missionary efforts among Slovakians in other countries has facilitated outreach expansion efforts in Slovakia. In the early 2010s, the Church experienced rapid growth among a tiny community of Slovakian Roma residing in Sheffield, England that culminated in the organization of a Slovak-speaking branch in 2013. One of the new converts in Sheffield coordinated with mission leaders in the Czech/Slovak mission to begin missionary activity in the city of Zvolen.

Opportunities

Slovakia has one of the most religious populations among countries within the European Union. Higher levels of religiosity pose opportunities for the Church to find, teach, baptize, and retain converts who previously developed personal religious habits that can carry over into an LDS setting such as church attendance, prayer, and scripture study. Slovakia has experienced significant economic growth and modernization within the past two decades, suggesting that delays in expanding outreach in the country may result in missed opportunities to proselyte the population before secularism erodes traditional religious values and morality. Finding programs that appear favorable for local cultural and societal conditions include free English classes, special activities hosted by branches and member groups that have a passive religious theme such as a music concert or service project, and family home evening (FHE) groups for young single adults.

The Church has not appeared to make any proactive, concentrated effort to reach the Roma population notwithstanding startling successes in England. Continued coordination between mission leaders in England and in the Czech/Slovak Mission poses one of the greatest opportunities for reaching the approximately 90,000 Roma who reside in Slovakia.[4] There are likely many Slovakian Roma in England who have joined the Church that can supply referrals to teach family and friends in Slovakia. Intuitive interventions are likely to have the highest rate of success in making inroads among the Roma in Slovakia such as using internet and teleconferencing technologies to help Roma members in England participate in member-missionary efforts in their home country. It is possible that some Roma members may visit or relocate back to Slovakia, thereby providing an impetus for outreach expansion among this minimally-reached ethnolinguistic minority group.

The Church does not extend any formal outreach among the sizable Hungarian population. The Church in Hungary has experienced greater growth than in many other Eastern European countries due to higher receptivity and proactive outreach expansion efforts headed by successive mission presidents. In 2001, there were an estimated 521,000 Hungarian speakers in Slovakia, most of whom residing along the Hungarian border.[5] Successes reaching Hungarians in Slovakia will require the assignment of Hungarian-speaking missionaries to areas with sizable Hungarian populations.

There remain several additional large cities that remain unreached by the Church. Assigning one missionary companionship to all cities with over 50,000 inhabitants would help the Church become more visible and reach a higher percentage of the national population. Currently there are five cities with approximately 50,000 or more inhabitants including Presov, Trnava, Martin, Poprad, and Prievidza.

Challenges

Extremely small nominal and active membership in each branch or group constitutes the greatest challenge for the Church in Slovakia. The average branch has 55 members on its records; significantly less than the average branch in the neighboring Czech Republic (182). In early 2012, missionaries and members in Sheffield, England working with the Slovakian-speaking member group reported that the group had over 80 attending church services - a number greater than the combined church attendance for the entire country of Slovakia. All branches and groups in Slovakia have too few members to adequately meet their own administrative, ecclesiastical, and social needs. Three of the seven cities with an LDS presence do not have enough active members and priesthood holders to organize a branch. Members and investigators who do not find active members who share similar interests and personalities run a risk of not socially integrating into their congregations. Frustratingly few convert baptisms in the seven cities with missionaries currently assigned may dissuade future mission leaders from continuing outreach expansion due to the lack of growth experienced in areas where missionaries currently serve.

The Church operates only one branch in the most populous city of Bratislava notwithstanding over 400,000 inhabitants in the metropolitan area. The mission has opened additional missionary proselytism areas in Bratislava to help provide greater outreach in the city but it nonetheless remains minimally reached by only one meetinghouse. Extremely slow membership growth has occurred in Bratislava notwithstanding the Church operating its largest branch in the country in the city and extending missionary outreach for over two decades. The Church may benefit from organizing a couple member groups that assemble in locations that are distant from the current branch meetinghouse such as Podunajské Biskupice and Ra?a. Organizing family home evening (FHE) and cottage meetings in these and other lesser-reached areas can help mission and branch leaders assess receptivity and strengthen a sense of LDS community in these locations in preparation for organizing additional church units.

There is a risk that recently organized member groups may become dependent on full-time missionaries to properly operate. The Czech/Slovak Mission has assigned multiple missionary companionships to cities with tiny numbers of active members. With very low receptivity to LDS missionaries at present, it is likely that there is not a sufficient amount of work for a single missionary companionship to do in these cities let alone two missionary companionships. The oversaturation of missionary resources in these locations may result in membership becoming reliant on missionaries to staff leadership, teach lessons, bless and pass the sacrament, and give talks in sacrament meeting. Care must be taken to ensure that missionaries gradually hand off these responsibilities to new converts in order to establish resource-endowed congregations that can one day become branches that require little to no full-time missionary involvement in branch administration.

There were considerable delays in the Church completing its Slovak translation of the Book of Mormon. The Church had maintained a presence in Slovakia for over two decades prior to the completion of the Slovak translation of the Book of Mormon. Delays in obtaining government recognition and translating the Book of Mormon into Slovakian may have resulted in the Church missing its greatest window of opportunity to achieve growth in the 1990s and 2000s.

Comparative Growth

Within the past decade, the Church in Slovakia numbers among the few countries in Europe that experienced rapid national outreach expansion as the number of cities with an LDS presence increased from three to seven. The Church in the Czech Republic, for example, had no new branches organized in additional cities within the past decade and has had only one city open to missionaries but this city did not have a member group organized. The Church experienced significant outreach expansion in a few additional countries. In Hungary, the number of cities with LDS congregations and missionaries assigned increased from 16 in 2005 to 22 by 2012. Rapid national outreach expansion in Hungary was associated with the formation of the first stake in 2006 and mission leadership redistributing mission resources to open additional areas to proselytism. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Church established its initial presence in the early 2010s and by 2013 had congregations and proselytizing missionaries in three cities. In Kosovo, the Church established an initial presence in the early 2010s and currently has congregations and missionaries in two cities. The Church in Slovakia has recently experienced significantly higher annual membership growth rates compared to other countries in the region but has a considerably smaller church membership and percentage of members in the general population. In 2012, the Church had approximately one member per 25,000 people. Serbia is the only other country in the region that has had an LDS presence lasting longer than five years and a smaller percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population (one Latter-day Saint per 32,000).

Other nontraditional Christian groups generally report a small presence and very slow or stagnant growth in Slovakia. However, virtually all denominations are significantly larger than the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 1.2% of the population and have complained of slow growth in recent years.[6] Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the most successful denominations and have established a widespread presence. In 2012, Witnesses reported 11,184 active members, 159 congregations, and 173 baptisms in Slovakia. Witnesses have recently experienced slow growth as evidenced by less than one baptism per congregation a year. Witnesses hold church services in five languages including Slovak (132 congregations), Hungarian (26 congregations), English (one congregation, one group), Slovakian Sign Language (six groups), and Mandarin Chinese (one group). The Seventh Day Adventist Church has experienced stagnant growth in Slovakia within the past 15 years. In 1997, Adventists reported 2,127 members, 43 churches, and seven companies whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 2,211 members, 40 churches, and 15 companies.[7]

Limitations

Reports from current and returned missionaries and mission presidents provided data on the opening of additional cities to

missionary work in Slovakia. No reports from local members were available during the writing of this case study. Recent estimates for member activity rates were unavailable for some some branches. The Church does not publish information on the location of member groups on its online meetinghouse locator. No official LDS statistics are available regarding the number of members per branch, member activity rates for the country, or for the number of missionaries assigned to Slovakia at present or in previous years. Standards for membership and congregations differ by denomination resulting in some limitations comparing these groups to one another.

Future Prospects

The recognition of the Church by the Slovakian government in 2006, the publication of the Slovak translation of the Book of Mormon in 2013, and ongoing efforts by mission leaders to open additional cities to missionary work suggest that the Church may experience some improvements in baptizing larger numbers of converts and augmenting church attendance. The Church may organize a separate member district for Slovakia if there are a sufficient number of local priesthood leaders to staff both branch and district leadership. Some member groups may become branches in the coming years once there are several active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders who can lead congregations with minimal involvement from missionaries. It is too early to tell whether the Slovak translation of the Book of Mormon will have a significant impact on the success of missionaries in finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining new converts but experience in other countries suggest that some improvement may occur.

[1] Stahle, Shaun D. “Daunting task known as Slovakian miracle,” LDS Church News, 11 November 2006. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49733/Daunting-task-known-as-Slovakian-miracle.html

[2] store.lds.org, retrieved 5 October 2013.

[3] http://www.lds.org/languages/slk

[4] "Romani, Carpathian," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 October 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/rmc

[5] "Slovakia," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 October 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/country/sk/languages

[6] "Slovakia," Operation World, retrieved 7 October 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/slov

[7] "Slovakia Conference (1972-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 7 October 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2222294