

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Recent LDS Growth Developments in Macedonia

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Overview

Inhabited by 2.09 million people, Macedonia is a small, landlocked country located in southeastern Europe. The population is 64.2% Macedonian, 25.2% Albanian, 3.9% Turkish, 2.7% Roma (Gypsy), 1.8% Serb, and 2.2% other ethnicities. Macedonian is spoken as a first language by two-thirds of the population whereas Albanian is spoken as a first language by one-quarter of the population. Approximately two-thirds of the population are Macedonian Orthodox, whereas one-third of the population is Muslim. Religious affiliation is strongly correlated with ethnicity as the vast majority of Macedonians adhere to Orthodox Christianity, whereas the vast majority of Albanians adhere to Islam. The LDS Church established an initial missionary presence in Macedonia for the first time in 2012 and has since experienced slow but steady growth in the Skopje area.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Macedonia and examines recent church growth and missionary successes. Opportunities and challenges for growth and missionary activity are explored. The growth of the Church in other former Yugoslav republics and Albania is summarized. A synopsis of the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Macedonia is provided. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The first known LDS activity to occur in Macedonia began sometime in the late 2000s when a member group started functioning in Skopje to service a handful of foreign members and one Macedonian family. In May 2010, the Church organized an administrative branch for Macedonia under the direction of the Europe Area Presidency. Missionaries indicated that this action was taken to help prepare for a formal LDS establishment in the country and to help organize membership records in the region. In 2011, the Macedonian government approved the registration application for the Church.[1]

In early 2012, the Church renamed the Albania Tirana Mission to the Adriatic South Mission and expanded the mission's boundaries to include Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro. In April 2012, the Church assigned its first young, proselytizing missionaries to serve in Macedonia. A senior missionary couple designed to primarily complete humanitarian and development projects was assigned to Macedonia sometime during the early 2010s. By November 2013, local members reported that the fourth Macedonian convert joined the Church since the arrival of young, full-time missionaries. The first sister missionaries also appeared to begin serving in Macedonia around this time.

Several missionary and church growth developments occurred during the first half of 2014. In March, the Church discontinued its administrative branch for Macedonia and organized the Skopje Branch. At the time the branch met in a rented room at a hotel for church services. Missionaries reported that the branch held church services in Macedonian and did not translate services into other languages such as English. The branch only met for sacrament meeting and Sunday School. Senior missionaries indicated that the branch utilized Serbian translations of LDS materials and General Conference. Local members also began to more regularly hold callings and responsibilities in the branch. In April, one local male member was ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood. In May, there were four young elder missionaries and two sister missionaries assigned to Macedonia. At the time approximately 25-30 attended church services in the Skopje Branch. Senior missionaries also reported visiting several cities throughout the country to conceptualize and organize humanitarian projects, including Bitola, Kumanovo, Prilep, Stip, and Tetovo.

As of mid-2014, the Church reported translations of five church materials available for order on its online store, including the 13 Articles of Faith, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, a book of hymns and child songs, and Gospel Fundamentals.[2] The Church has a page on its official website lds.org that lists all Macedonian translations of church materials available for free download, including all the materials listed on the online store website as well as the sacrament prayers.[3]

Successes

The Europe Area Presidency taking a proactive stance on opening Macedonia and other remaining unreached former Yugoslav republics to missionary work constitutes the greatest success in the Church becoming established in Macedonia. Formal registration with the government obtained in 2011 permitted the Church to assign Macedonia to the Adriatic South Mission and assign its first young, proselytizing missionaries in 2012. The Church has also assigned senior missionary couples who have prepared the groundwork for the Church to conduct humanitarian and development projects throughout the country. Although only one young elder missionary companionship appeared to be initially assigned to Skopje, the Church has assigned two additional missionary companionships, including a pair of sister missionaries, to further saturate the city with mission resources.

The Church has appeared to maintain reasonably high convert baptismal standards since the arrival of full-time missionaries. This finding has been evidenced by the Skopje Group becoming a branch within less than two years from when the first convert baptisms occurred notwithstanding relatively few convert baptisms during this period. Local member and missionary reports suggest that sacrament meeting attendance may exceed nominal church membership for Macedonia. There do not appear to be more than 20 members on church records as of mid-2014 yet sacrament meeting attendance reaches as high as 30 due to foreigners visiting the branch and investigator attendance. Additionally, senior missionaries report Macedonian members progressing in their activity in the Church as evidenced by the ordination of male members to the Melchizedek Priesthood and local members beginning to hold callings in the branch such as teaching lessons. The small core of Macedonian membership has good potential to accelerate growth and improve the efficiency of missionary work if these members remain active, serve in essential branch leadership positions in sufficient numbers to reduce reliance on full-time missionaries, and participate in member-missionary work.

The Adriatic South Mission has emphasized Macedonian language usage in church meetings to help promote a sense of compatibility between the Church and local culture. These efforts have been facilitated by the Church translating several essential gospel study and missionary materials into Macedonian despite the high degree of mutual intelligibility between the Macedonian language and other South Slavic languages such as Bulgarian, Croatian, and Serbian. The availability of even a handful of basic gospel study and missionary materials in Macedonian will likely prove effective in reaching the Macedonian majority in the coming years.

Opportunities

There are few restrictions on religious freedom in Macedonia. Foreign missionaries may serve in the country once they obtain a work visa; a process that can take upwards of four months. Additionally, foreign missionaries must register with the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups.[4] There do not appear to be any limits on the number of foreign missionary visas the Church can acquire, suggesting that the Adriatic South Mission could substantially increase the size of the full-time missionary force in Macedonia if desired and if there is a commensurate increase in the number of missionaries assigned to the mission. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions in the early 2010s on the order of tens of thousands implies that there is a sufficiently large full-time missionary force to supply needed manpower into Macedonia if desired by international church leadership. As the Church in Macedonia remains in its infancy stages and does not have a sufficient number of members to self-organize in additional cities, full-time missionaries will be essential to expand national outreach and introduce the Church into additional locations.

There appear good opportunities for senior missionaries to help orchestrate the expansion of missionary work into additional cities as missionaries currently only serve in Skopje. Geographically, the Adriatic South Mission is the smallest mission in Eastern Europe and also services one of the smallest populations in the region. The recent establishment of the first stake in neighboring Albania has freed mission resources previously allocated for member and leadership support. These resources can now be utilized to expand missionary work in Kosovo and Macedonia. The Church has recently opened several additional cities in neighboring Kosovo to missionary work, suggesting that the Adriatic South Mission may conduct similar expansions in Macedonia within the foreseeable future. Cities inhabited by over 50,000 appear most favorable for proselytism due to larger target populations than less populated areas and easier accessibility than smaller cities and towns. Provided with population figures as of 2010, there are four cities that currently have more than 50,000 people and no LDS presence, namely Bitola (73,000), Kumanovo (72,200), Prilep (65,900), and Tetovo (55,000).[5] Senior missionaries reported in 2014 that they had visited all four of these cities to meet with local officials for planning humanitarian and development projects, suggesting that visits to these locations to prepare the groundwork for assigning full-time missionaries may be forthcoming in the near future. Humanitarian and development work may also be an effective segue for the Church to establish important community contacts and raise awareness of the Church's operations in the country. Senior missionaries and young full-time missionaries serving in Skopje identifying isolated members and investigators living in other cities, visiting these individuals and strengthening them in their testimony development, and holding cottage meetings where missionaries present a brief, informal gospel lesson has good potential to make frugal use of limited missionary resources and to assess receptivity and potential for growth in additional locations.

The Albanian population in Macedonia presents good opportunities for LDS outreach due to the Church experiencing greater

receptivity among Albanians compared to other ethnic groups within the region. Albanians are concentrated in western and northwestern Macedonia along the border with Albania and Kosovo. Many appear to reside in towns and rural areas. The assignment of Albanian members as full-time missionaries to serve in Macedonian cities where there are sizable numbers of Albanians appears the most effective means of reaching this subset of the population and implementing language-specific outreach. However, this action appears many years or even decades away from realization due to the tiny, fledgling LDS presence in Macedonia that has yet to make noticeable inroads with the ethnic Macedonian majority.

Challenges

The Macedonian population exhibits relatively low receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups as evidenced by the LDS Church experiencing few convert baptisms within the first two years of full-time missionaries serving in the country and the slow growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups in Macedonia that have operated for many years or decades longer than the LDS Church. These conditions pose serious challenges for the Church to achieve growth and expand national outreach, particularly if mission and area leaders advocate for a more conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy that delays the opening of additional cities to missionary work until the Skopje Branch becomes self-sufficient and reaches an arbitrary number of active members. Current conditions and past experience in other areas of Southeast Europe suggest that it may take the Skopje Branch many years or even a decade or two to become sufficiently strong in active membership to have totally self-sufficient branch leadership. The Church in Skopje may never reach a sufficient number of active members to warrant the creation of a second branch in the city. Consequently it will be imperative for mission and area leaders to steadily open additional cities to proselytism even if dismal results are achieved in Skopje. Delays in expanding missionary work to additional cities may result in missed opportunities for growth, even if these opportunities appear meager at best.

The Church has tailored its teaching, missionary, and gospel study resources to Western Christian audiences and does not have any specialized resources for those with an Orthodox Christian or Muslim background. Past experience from missionaries serving in areas with sizable numbers of Orthodox Christians or Muslims indicate that LDS teaching resources and proselytism tactics have created challenges for investigators to properly understanding the LDS gospel witness in light of their religious background and understanding.

The Church in Macedonia remains in its earliest infancy stages and totally relies on foreign members to operate. The branch appeared to have a foreign member serving as the branch president when the Skopje Branch was officially organized in March 2014. No local members have appeared to serve a full-time mission, resulting in limited leadership experience and expertise among native members. Multiple Macedonian members successfully serving full-time missions, returning to Macedonia after their missions, and remaining active for the long term will be important to help strength the Church and augment the size of local missionary manpower.

Comparative Growth

The Church has recently established an official missionary presence in additional former Yugoslav republics within the past five years. In Kosovo, the Church organized its first branch in Pristina sometime in 2010 and by mid-2011 the Church had assigned its first missionaries from the Albania Tirana Mission (later renamed Adriatic South in 2012). In early 2013, the Church assigned missionaries to a second city in Kosovo (Gjakova) and organized a member group. By April 2014, the Gjakova Group became an official branch. At the same time, missionaries also opened two additional cities to missionary work (Peja and Prizren). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Church organized its first branch in Sarajevo sometime in 2010 and assigned the first full-time missionaries to the country in March 2012. By the end of 2012, missionaries were also assigned to two additional cities (Banja Luka and Tuzla) where member groups also began functioning. In March 2013, the Banja Luka Group became an official branch. In Montenegro, the Church organized an administrative branch in 2010 and assigned the first missionaries in April 2012. The first convert baptisms in Montenegro occurred later that year. As of May 2014, an administrative branch continued to operate in Montenegro and included a member group based on Podgorica. The Church has maintained a presence in Croatia since 1975, in Serbia since 1983, and in Slovenia since 1992 but has experienced extremely slow growth in all three of these nations. In 1992, the Church assigned its first missionaries to neighboring Albania where the Church has experienced its significant growth in the region. Albania is currently the only country in the region with more than 1,000 members and a stake.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups with a worldwide presence report a presence in Macedonia, although these groups have few members and experience slow growth. Evangelicals report a tiny presence in Macedonia compared to most countries in Europe. Evangelicals account for 0.2% of the national population, or about 4,000 people.[6] Jehovah's Witnesses have established a widespread presence in Skopje and maintain congregations in many of the most populous cities in the country. In 2013, Witnesses reported an average of 1,320 publishers (active members who regularly proselyte), 25 congregations, and 29 new members baptized.[7] In early 2014, Witnesses reported congregations in approximately a dozen locations, including 10 congregations in Skopje and one congregation each in Bitola, Gevgelija, Kriva Palanka, Kochani, Kratovo, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Prilep, Shtip, Strumica, and Veles.[8] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains a presence in many major cities but has experienced slow growth within the past decade. In 2002, Adventists reported 605 members and 16 churches (large congregations), whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 550 members, 15 churches, and eight companies (small congregations).[9] The Church of the Nazarene reports no members or congregations in Macedonia.

Limitations

Although reports from foreign members and full-time missionaries were available during the writing of this case study, there

were no reports available from indigenous Macedonian members. The Church does not publish membership figures for Macedonia and it is unclear precisely how many members live in the country. The Church does not publish a breakdown of its worldwide membership by first language usage. It is unclear how many Macedonians have joined the Church in other countries. The Church does not released country-by-country data to the public regarding the number of converts baptized, the increase of children of record, the number of missionaries assigned, the number of members serving full-time missions, and various measurements of member activity such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth in Macedonia appears favorable due to the registration of the Church with the government in 2011, sufficient religious freedom to permit the assignment of young full-time missionaries since 2012, small increases in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the country, the organization of the Skopje Branch in 2014, and increases in church attendance within the past few years. Prospects appear favorable for the opening of additional cities to missionary work within the foreseeable future, namely cities with the most inhabitants and where there are multiple members and committed investigators. Past experience in other countries in the region recently opened to missionary work suggests that slow growth will likely occur in most areas where missionaries are assigned for many years due to the population exhibiting low receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups and a lack of native members.

[1] "Macedonia," International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, retrieved 21 May 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192835

[2] store.lds.org, retrieved 21 May 2014.

[3] "Macedonian," lds.org, retrieved 21 May 2014. https://www.lds.org/languages/mkd?lang=eng

[4] "Macedonia," International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 21 May 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208340

[5] "Macedonia," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 21 May 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/Macedonia.html

[6] "Macedonia," Operation World, retrieved 20 May 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/mace

[7] “2014 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” jw.org, retrieved 12 April 2014. http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2014-yearbook/

[8] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 13 May 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[9] "Macedonian Mission (1996-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 20 May 2014. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10230