

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Beginning LDS Missionary Work in Turkey

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Posted: January 10th, 2013

Overview

Ranking as the 17th most populous country in the world, Turkey is one of the most populous homogenously Muslim countries with approximately 80 million people. The LDS Church conducted periodic missionary activity in Turkey and operated the Turkish Mission between 1884-1909 and 1921-1933. Missionary efforts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were concentrated among Armenians, Arabs, and Western Europeans with few Turks joining the Church. In recent decades, small numbers of Turks have joined the Church in Europe and Turkey largely through member missionary efforts and conversions in other countries as no Turkish-specific outreach occurred until 2012. In early 2012, young proselytizing missionaries began teaching in the Turkish language and were assigned to Istanbul, Turkey.

This case study reviews and analyzes the recent opening of Turkey to formal missionary activity and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth.

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LDS Background

The first missionaries assigned to Turkey arrived in the mid-1990s and were senior couples that only performed humanitarian service.[1] Local members and church leaders primarily taught investigators and baptized converts between the mid-1990s and early 2010s.

Sometime in 2011, the Church assigned Turkey to the Bulgaria Sofia Mission. In October 2011, the Church received official legal status from the Turkish government under the name The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints - Istanbul Association. On Saturday, February 11th, 2012 the Church held its first meeting under the recently registered association and conducted financial and administrative matters to make the association fully operational. 22 people attended the meeting; the first to occur at the new Levent meetinghouse to house the Istanbul Branch.

On February 14th, 2012 the Church assigned its first young, proselytizing missionaries to Istanbul. All four missionaries were elders (three Americans, one British) that previously served in Bulgaria. In June 2012, LDS apostle Elder D. Todd Christofferson visited the Istanbul Branch and met with 40-45 members. At the time the Church stationed two senior missionary couples in Istanbul.[2] Sometime in mid-2012, the original four missionaries assigned to Turkey were relocated to Bulgaria as they were unable to renew their visas. Four different Turkish-speaking missionaries were assigned to Istanbul in October 2012. Missionaries reported that the first four missionaries kept meticulous records on investigators, significantly facilitating the restart of missionary activity in October 2012.

In late 2012, full-time missionaries reported that most members in the Istanbul Branch spoke English. One companionship served on the European-side of Istanbul whereas the other companionship served on the Asian-side of Istanbul. Sacrament meeting services accommodate both Turkish and English speakers as branch business is conducted in Turkish and translated into English and any talks given in English are translated into Turkish. Members are primarily Turkish or American; there are small numbers of African members from Nigeria and Ethiopia. In November 2012, there were approximately 10 active youth and children in the Istanbul Branch.

Successes

The Church has methodically planned the introduction of full-time missionaries to Turkey for several years. Obtaining government recognition and the reassignment of Turkey from the Europe East Area to the Bulgaria Sofia Mission laid the groundwork for assigning proselytizing missionaries. Church leaders have demonstrated good coordination in starting Turkish language training for foreign full-time missionaries that has included enrollment in university language classes. Church leaders have taken advantage of opportunities for Turkish-speaking missionaries to target Turkish populations outside of Turkey. For example, a handful of Turkish-designated missionaries temporarily served in New York among Turkish immigrants while waiting for visas. In Bulgaria, the Church has begun to teach Turks more regularly than in the past as some missionaries who previously served in Turkey have transferred to Bulgaria due to visa problems. With Turkish speakers accounting for approximately 10% of the population of Bulgaria, the presence of a few Turkish-speaking missionaries in Bulgaria has provided at least some outreach to the country's largest ethnic minority group.

The Church has translated a sizable body of church materials into Turkish notwithstanding a tiny number of Turkish-speaking members. Turkish translations include the entire Book of Mormon, the Articles of Faith, The Family: A Proclamation to the World, The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, Book of Mormon Stories, Doctrine and Covenants Stories, Old Testament Stories, the Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple booklet, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, the Faith in God guidebook for both boys and girls, a young women manual, an Aaronic Priesthood manual, a New Testament Gospel Doctrine teacher's manual, a teaching guidebook, Relief Society manuals, family history record sheets, a few resources and manuals for teaching Primary, and booklets that accompany some missionary lessons.

The Church has taken measures to maximize outreach potential in Istanbul with limited numbers of missionaries. Mission and local church leaders have met the language needs of both Turkish and English speakers in Istanbul, resulting in outreach capabilities for both native and nonnative populations. The new Istanbul Branch meetinghouse is centrally located in Levent, reducing travel times for the city as a whole. One set of missionaries serves on east side of the Bosporus whereas the other set of missionaries serves on the west side, providing minimal outreach to both sides of the city. The Istanbul Branch is the only branch in Turkey with a native member serving as the branch president.

Church membership has steadily grown over the past decade notwithstanding the lack of formal missionary activity until 2012. Convert baptisms and foreign members relocating to Turkey have driven church membership growth. LDS membership nearly doubled from 151 in 2003 to 293 in 2011. The Church has maintained branches in three other cities for over two decades; a significant accomplishment considering there are only a few hundred members nationwide.

The Church has taken advantage of meeting local humanitarian and development needs for over 15 years through senior missionary couples. Commonly-completed projects include disaster relief and community-based welfare projects for disadvantaged groups and populations in poor, rural communities.

Opportunities

Turkey is one of the world's most tolerant Muslim-majority countries and has a proud tradition of a secular government that promotes religious freedom and shuns fundamentalism. There is no other country that has as high of a percentage of Muslims and has recognized the LDS Church and permitted the assignment of foreign proselytizing missionaries. Consequently, opportunities for LDS missionary work in Turkey are unmatched in the Muslim world.

There are opportunities for expanding proselytism into additional cities. At present, formal missionary activity only occurs in Istanbul. Appointing missionaries to dedicate one day per week to visit outlying cities and towns nearby Istanbul could provide at least some outreach in currently unreached locations and assess opportunities for growth if permitted by current government regulations. Due to the extremely limited presence of the Church in Turkey, it is unclear how receptive populations in smaller cities, towns, and villages are to LDS teachings. Senior missionary couples have conducted humanitarian and development work nationwide for over 15 years, increasing public exposure to the Church. Opportunities to open the most populous unreached cities to missionary work are more difficult due to distance from established church centers, limited numbers of full-time missionaries, and tiny size of LDS membership in Turkey. Pending on receiving more missionary visas, the assignment of larger numbers of foreign full-time missionaries appears the most likely and feasible method to open currently unreached major cities in Turkey such as Bursa, Gaziantep, and Konya - all of which have over one million inhabitants. A senior missionary couple specifically appointed to travel to these cities, hold cottage meetings, locate isolated members, and teach and find investigators may be a more practical solution that does not exact unfeasible amounts of mission resources.

Other cities with branches without full-time proselytizing missionaries assigned (Ankara, Izmir, and Adana) appear the most likely to have missionaries assigned and formal proselytism programs initiated. The Ankara Branch has several native members who are active that can facilitate missionary efforts among the indigenous population in addition to several foreign members in the branch. Obtaining more missionary visas will be required for assigning missionaries to these locations.

There are opportunities to translate additional materials and scriptures into Turkish. The Church has yet to translate The Restoration DVD into Turkish; an effective resource in teaching about the organization of the Church and explaining basic LDS doctrines to investigators. The Church has not translated the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price into Turkish. No LDS magazines are translated into Turkish. The translation of these materials and scriptures could improve gospel

scholarship among local members and foster testimony development.

Challenges

Difficulties securing larger numbers of missionary visas restrict LDS missionary efforts to Istanbul and to only a couple companionships at present. Government refusal to renew visas for missionaries has disrupted missionary activity within the first year of proselytism. It is unclear why the Church has experienced challenges obtaining larger numbers of missionary visas and why past missionary visas were not renewed for the first cohort of missionaries to enter Turkey in February 2012. Distance from mission headquarters in Sofia, Bulgaria limit mission president visits.

Turkey numbers among the world's most homogenous Muslim nations. Most recent estimates indicate as many as 99.8% of the population is Muslim. The Church engages in proselytism efforts in few Muslim-majority countries and lacks teaching resources tailored to the religious background of Muslims. Receptivity among Muslims appears higher than most traditionally Muslim nations as indicated by consistent numbers of convert baptisms in Istanbul and occasional convert baptisms in Ankara. LDS missionary efforts face the challenge of overcoming ethnoreligious ties to Islam and nominalism as the influence of secularism on society has reduced the religiosity of the population. Teaching approaches will therefore need to accommodate the religious background of nominally-affiliated Muslims to be most effective.

The size of the Turkish LDS community is miniscule in comparison to Turkey's enormous population and remains totally reliant on foreign missionary manpower to staff its missionary needs. It is unclear whether any native Turkish members that currently reside in Turkey have served a full-time mission. The lack of mission-aged Turkish young adults constitutes a serious challenges that will continue dependence on foreign missionaries for many years to come. There has been no recent progress expanding national outreach in Turkey. The Church has not opened congregations in additional cities in over two decades notwithstanding steady membership growth.

Missionaries have reported some safety concerns. In early 2012, a missionary apartment was burglarized. Due to the strong ethnoreligious ties between Turks and Islam, mission leaders must take care in ensuring that LDS proselytism and teaching methods do not damage the Church's image and are respectful to local culture and customs.

Comparative Growth

Prior to the assignment of missionaries in February 2012, Turkey was the country with the fourth largest population without proselytizing missionaries after mainland China, Bangladesh, and Egypt. Other countries in the region that have proselytizing LDS missionaries and where Muslims comprise the largest religious group include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. The opening of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to missionary work occurred in mid-2011 and March 2012, respectively, whereas the opening of Albania to missionary work occurred in 1992. All countries in Southeastern Europe, the Levant, and Anatolia have fewer than 1,000 members each except Albania (2,093), Bulgaria (2,251), and Romania (2,972).

Nontraditional Christian faiths in Turkey report an extremely small presence if any presence at all. Jehovah's Witnesses number among the largest denominations in Turkey but do not publish congregation meeting locations online. In 2011, there were 2,143 active Witnesses and 29 congregations in Turkey. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported less than 100 members and two congregations. The total number of Protestants that identify with other denominations is approximately 5,000.[3]

Future Prospects

The outlook for future missionary activity in Turkey appears favorable as steady numbers of converts have joined the Church, international LDS leaders and mission presidents have collaborated and organized a formal Turkish language missionary program, and the Church has obtained legal recognition from the government to permit the assignment of full-time proselytizing missionaries. Prospects appear most favorable for expanding of missionary activity in Istanbul due to its large population and established church presence. A separate congregation to service the eastern half of Istanbul may be forthcoming followed by the creation of additional units to increase the saturation of missionary activity and plant new congregations. Ankara appears most likely to have full-time proselytizing missionaries assigned in the foreseeable future due to its status as national capital of Turkey and it is the second most populous city in Turkey. The Church may create a separate mission for Turkey once the Church obtains enough visas to assign a sufficient number of missionaries to merit the organization of a mission. However, a separate mission for Turkey appears most likely once multiple cities have missionary assigned and visa issues with the government are resolved to permit missionaries to serve their entire missions in Turkey.

[1] Avant, Gerry. "'Saints on the frontier' - Church leaders visit Eastern Europe," LDS Church News, 30 June 2012. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62493/Saints-on-the-frontier---Church-leaders-visit-Eastern-Europe.html

[2] Avant, Gerry. "'Saints on the frontier' - Church leaders visit Eastern Europe," LDS Church News, 30 June 2012. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62493/Saints-on-the-frontier---Church-leaders-visit-Eastern-Europe.html

[3] "Turkey," International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, retrieved 1 December 2012.

http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dlid=192871