

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Beginning LDS Missionary Work in the Previously Unreached Former Yugoslav Republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro

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Overview and LDS History

In the 1970s and 1980s, the LDS Church began holding church services and performing limited missionary activity in Yugoslavia. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia into several independent countries in the early 1990s, the Church had already established an official presence in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. No concentrated mission efforts were made to reach the two former Yugoslav republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia for another two decades although both countries pertained to the Slovenia Ljubljana/Croatia Zagreb Mission for much of this time. There was no previously established LDS presence in Montenegro or Kosovo when these nations became independent from Serbia in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

In spring 2010, the Church organized a new class of branches called “administrative branches” in each of the four former Yugoslav republics without an official LDS presence. This decision occurred at approximately the same time that these nations were reassigned from the Slovenia Ljubljana Mission (which was renamed the Adriatic Mission) to the Europe Area Presidency. The four affected countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro – were the only non-city state countries without an official church presence in Europe. The organization of administrative branches occurred in tandem with efforts by the Europe Area Presidency to prepare for a formal church establishment and the assignment of full-time missionaries. In September 2010, LDS Apostle Elder Russell M. Nelson dedicated all four countries for missionary work.[1] By January 2011, the Church created its first independent branches in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Sarajevo Branch) and Kosovo (the Pristina Branch). In mid-2011, the Albania Tirana Mission assigned the first proselytizing missionaries to Kosovo; a young missionary companionship and a senior missionary couple. Sometime in 2010 and 2011, senior missionaries began regularly visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily on humanitarian assignment and organized a group in Banja Luka. In 2011, the Macedonian government approved the registration application for the Church.

In early 2012, mission leaders announced that the countries in the former Yugoslavia and Albania would be realigned into two missions called the Adriatic North and Adriatic South Missions. The Adriatic North Mission included Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia whereas the Adriatic South Mission included Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. In March 2012, the Adriatic North Mission assigned the first proselytizing missionaries to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Six young missionaries were assigned; four to Sarajevo and two to Banja Luka. Missionaries reported no restrictions on proselytism and regularly street contacted. Missionaries were permitted to teach investigators regardless of religious background. Membership in the Sarajevo Branch primarily consisted of Americans and missionaries reported that only one Bosnian member attended church services at the time. In the Banja Luka Group, missionaries reported that there were several Bosnians who joined the Church within the past year due to the efforts of local members in the group and a senior missionary couple. In April 2012, the Adriatic South Mission assigned the first proselytizing missionaries to Macedonia and Montenegro. Later that month, the first Montenegrin investigator attended church services in Podgorica, Montenegro. At the time unofficial reports indicated that the Church had recently obtained legal status in Montenegro. By late 2012, missionaries reported baptizing the second Montenegrin member in the country. At the time, full-time missionaries began serving in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina and a member group began functioning.

In early 2013, missionaries opened Gjakovë, Kosovo to missionary work and organized a member group. The Sarajevo Branch also began holding the third hour of Sunday meetings for priesthood and Relief Society for the first time. At the time the Sarajevo Branch had between 10 and 15 members and investigators attending on most Sundays. In March, the Banja Luka Group became an official branch. In mid-2013, the Church removed information on the meetinghouse locations for its two branches in Bosnia and Herzegovina from its online meetinghouse locator. At the time the Church also reassigned Montenegro

from the Adriatic South Mission to the Adriatic North Mission. Similarities between the Serbian and Montenegrin languages appeared to prompt the mission boundary realignment. The Podgorica Group also began meeting in a new meetinghouse, held an open house, and conducted the first branch conference for the administrative branch. In October 2013, church membership in the Tuzla Group reached 10. In November 2013, the Banja Luka Branch had an average of 20-25 attending church meetings and on one Sunday there were 43 in attendance. At the time five members held the Melchizedek Priesthood and two held the Aaronic Priesthood. Missionaries reported plans to relocate the meetinghouse for the Banja Luka Branch to a more central location in the city. Provided with the estimated number of members in parentheses, in late 2013 there were three cities with an LDS presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Banja Luka - 20-30, Sarajevo - 20-30, Tuzla - 10), two cites in Kosovo with an LDS presence (Pristina - 10-20, Gjakovë - 10-20), and one city each in Macedonia (Skopje - less than 10) and Montenegro (Podgorica - 10) with an LDS presence. Member activity and convert retention rates in most locations appear to range between 50-75% among individuals baptized within the past 18 months.

Successes

Translations of LDS materials are available in the primary languages of each country. Albanian translations of some church materials have been available for two decades. Church materials and some LDS scriptures are translated into Croatian and Serbian. The Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian languages all utilize the Shtokavian dialect of Serbo-Croatian and all four are mutually comprehensible.[2] The distinction between all four languages centers on nationalistic, religious, and ethnic ties rather than unique linguistic features that rend each language incomprehensible from one other. The Bosnian language has two scripts – one Latin-based and the other Cyrillic-based – but utilizing Croatian language materials among those who use the Latin-based script and Serbian language materials among those who use the Cyrillic-based script reduce the need for translations of church materials into either Bosnian script. Some minor variances in orthography between Serbian and Montenegrin pose no major obstacle in utilizing Serbian translations of LDS materials in Montenegro. The need for any translations in Bosnian or Montenegrin hinges on whether nationalistic attitudes discourage most from seriously reading and studying about the Church through Croatian and Serbian translations. The translation of LDS materials into Macedonian has occurred more recently and in late 2013 the Church's official online store listed five basic church materials available (Gospel Fundamentals, hymns and child songs, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the 13 Articles of Faith).[3] No LDS scriptures are translated into Macedonian however.

Mission leaders in both the Adriatic North and Adriatic South Missions have taken steps to expand missionary activity and open additional cities to missionary work. The Church opened three cities to missionary work in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the first year of official proselytism efforts; a significant accomplishment considering many other countries in the region had an LDS presence restricted to a single city for many years. The Church in Kosovo has likewise also experienced national outreach expansion success as evidenced by the assignment of missionaries to Gjakovë in less than two years following the arrival of the first proselytizing missionaries to the country.

Thus far member activity and convert retention rates in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro have been considerably higher than most other countries in the region. This achievement has occurred likely due to the recent establishment of the Church in the region but nonetheless presents greater opportunities for instilling self-sufficiency in newly organized congregations and concentrating missionary resources on finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining new converts as opposed to reactivation efforts.

The Church had at least a couple native members in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo prior to the official assignment of the first proselytizing missionaries. Missionaries serving in Serbia in the mid-2000s reported that there was one active local member in Montenegro who would attend church services in Serbia infrequently due to distance. In 2009, the Church reported a native family of four in Macedonia[4] but by spring 2012 the Adriatic South Mission president reported that there were no known native members in Macedonia or Montenegro. Native members provide invaluable assistance in providing teaching referrals to full-time missionaries and accompanying missionaries when teaching lessons to investigators. Indigenous investigators and prospective converts often have a higher likelihood of being baptized, remaining active, and staying in their home country if there are already a handful of local members.

Opportunities

There are no significant restrictions on religious freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Proselytizing Christian faiths openly practice and worship in all four previously unreached countries by the LDS Church. The Church has experienced few, if any, government restrictions on missionary activity in these four nations. Consequently, the Church has excellent opportunities to assign missionaries to additional unreached cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Cities that appear most favorable for the assignment of missionaries and the opening of member groups include Zenica and Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Prizren and Gjilan in Kosovo, Bitola and Kumanovo in Macedonia, and Nikši? in Montenegro.

The capital cities of all four countries constitute a large portion of the national population for each nation and present good opportunities for organizing additional member groups or branches. Sarajevo accounts for 10% of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pristina constitutes 11% of the population of Kosovo, Skopje comprises 24% of the population of Macedonia, and Podgorica accounts for 24% of the population of Montenegro. All four countries are geographically small, requiring fewer mission outreach centers to effectively reach the population and shorter travel times for missionaries to transfer between cities than in most European countries.

The recent worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides more manpower for the Church to assign missionaries to lesser-reached countries such as previously unreached nations in the former Yugoslavia. In early 2012, missionaries serving in the Adriatic South Mission reported that the number of missionaries receiving mission calls to begin service in the mission later that year significantly increased as a result of coordinated plans with the Missionary Department to open Macedonia and Montenegro to proselytism and expand outreach in Kosovo. Missionaries in 2013 reported that many countries would receive larger numbers of missionaries and that this may enable the opening of additional cities to missionary work.

Challenges

Receptivity to nontraditional Christian faiths is very low in the former Yugoslavia and constitutes one of the greatest barriers to the growth of the LDS Church in the region. In 2011, Croatia was the only country among the seven countries of the former Yugoslavia where the Church had more than 500 members on church records notwithstanding 20 years of proselytism in Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia and a restricted presence in these three nations for over three decades. During the past 20 years other outreach-focused Christian groups have shepherded many previously receptive individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro, likely resulting in reduced receptivity for current LDS outreach. The increasing influence of Western European secularism on society has also appeared to reduce receptivity to the Church. The Church has experienced very slow growth in a few locations where missionaries have begun serving such as Pristina, Kosovo and Skopje, Macedonia notwithstanding large target populations in these locations.

Strong ethnoreligious ties among the various ethnic groups in the Balkans present a major challenge for the Church in achieving noticeable growth. Cultural connections between Croats and Catholicism, Serbs and Orthodoxy, and Bosnians and Islam require converts to often choose between remaining faithful to familial cultural traditions or severing some of these traditions to join the Church. Society views most nontraditional Christian faiths as incompatible with tradition and culture and regards these denominations as heretical and strange. In Croatia and Serbia, the Church has faced serious challenges baptizing devote converts and retaining them over the long term. Societal intolerance has resulted in many Latter-day Saint converts in Croatia and Serbia facing intense criticism, harassment, persecution, and ostracism from family and friends. Past ethnic conflict in some countries such as in Macedonia between Albanians and Macedonians, in Kosovo between ethnic Albanians and Serbs, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina between Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians pose potential ethnic integration challenges if these ethnicities meet in the same congregations.

Both missions in the region have a large administrative burden as each services three or more countries. Crossing international borders to visit all counties within each mission's jurisdiction adds additional challenges for mission personnel due to visa regulations, time consuming stops at check points, and ensuring that financial resources are in order and in compliance with government regulations. Most countries in the former Yugoslavia have petitioned for European Union (EU) membership and some have visa agreements with nearby countries. Increasing integration into the EU will likely reduce the challenge faced by mission leaders to travel throughout their missions but national differences in culture, religion, and language will continue to place high demand on mission presidencies especially due to a lack of native church leaders in all countries in the two missions with the exception of Albania.

Expatriate North Americans constituted a majority or sizable minority of membership in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro prior to and at the time of the introduction of full-time, proselytizing missionaries. Foreign members and full-time missionaries continue to hold many, if not most, church leadership positions. This creates challenges for handing off these responsibilities to recently baptized converts. Foreign Latter-day Saints constituted the majority of church membership in Bosnia and Herzegovina and held all leadership positions in mid-2012.

There appear to be some legal challenges for the Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Macedonia. The Church no longer publishes the meetinghouse locations and meeting times for branches in Bosnia and Herzegovina and foreign members report some legal challenges for the Church in Macedonia that have appeared to restrict the number of full-time missionaries assigned.

Comparative Growth

The opening of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro to proselytism constitutes the LDS Church's greatest initiative to expand missionary activity to additional countries since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Between the mid-1990s and 2010, the Church entered or reentered only a handful of countries, namely Moldova, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Dominica, Rwanda, and Burundi. However mission leaders did not open multiple countries to missionary activity in a coordinated manner between the mid-1990s and early 2010s.

Other outreach-focused faiths report few members and congregations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 605 members and 23 congregations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 555 members and 15 congregations in Macedonia, and 254 members and three congregations in Montenegro[5] whereas Jehovah's Witnesses reported 1,224 members in 17 congregations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 216 members and five congregations in Kosovo, 1,358 members and 23 congregations in Macedonia, and 246 members and four congregations in Montenegro.[6] Adventists have a presence in Kosovo but membership and congregational data is included in totals for Serbia. Over the past decade both Adventists and Witnesses have experienced slow or stagnant growth in the region.

Limitations

The Church has not published official membership statistics for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, or Montenegro. It is unclear exactly how many members are in each country and whether many isolated members reside in currently unreached cities. The Church does not publish the annual number of convert baptisms per country. There are no official statistics on member activity and convert retention rates. No data is available on the number of full-time missionaries assigned to each country and how many members from each country currently serve a full-time missions. No local member or church leader reports were available during the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

The coordinated opening of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro to formal missionary activity is a welcomed development in an era of infrequent efforts to open additional countries to LDS proselytism. The Church has baptized small, albeit steady, numbers of new converts in all four nations and has experienced varying degrees of receptivity both within and between these four countries. The Church may open additional cities to missionaries, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. International church leaders remain highly positive about future LDS growth trends in these four countries. Relating the experience of the recent opening of Tuzla to missionary work in his April 2013 Priesthood Session General Conference address, President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency of the Church predicted that one day the Tulza Group would become a branch and later a stake and that a temple would be established in the city one day.[7] Due to moderate to low receptivity and delays in opening these four nations to proselytism two decades after most proselytizing Christians first established a presence, LDS membership may not reach 100 in any of these four recently opened countries for several more years or even decades to come. Noticeable "real" church growth will hinge on baptizing devoted and adequately prepared investigators from the indigenous population, avoiding the overstaffing of tiny branches and groups with multiple full-time missionary companionships, opening of additional cities to missionary work, and assigning callings and leadership responsibilities to converts in a timely and responsible manner.

[1] Avant, Gerry. “Elder Nelson pronounces blessing on six Balkan nations,” LDS Church News, 23 September 2010. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/59902/Elder-Nelson-pronounces-blessings-on-six-Balkan-nations.html

[2] “Shtokavian dialect,” en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 6 April 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shtokavian_dialect

[3] store.lds.org, retrieved 21 November 2013.

[4] Mattox, Elder Raymond P. "Members are good citizens in Albania," LDS Church News, 20 June 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57493/Members-are-good-citizens-in-Albania.html

[5] "2013 Annual Statistical Report," sda.org, retrieved 21 November 2013. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&ved=0CDQQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.adve

[6] jw.org

[7] Eyring, Henry B. "We Are One," General Conference, April 2013. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/we-are-one