

Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes

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Successful LDS Outreach Expansion in Hungary

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Overview

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the LDS Church began formal missionary activity in most Eastern European nations for the first time since 1950. The Church concentrated on expanding outreach within the largest cities in most nations before opening additional cities to missionary work. Frustrations in developing self-sufficient local leadership, retaining converts, and sustaining large numbers of baptisms year to year in locations with a church presence resulted in the failure of the Church to continue expanding outreach to additional, previously unreached locations in many Eastern European nations as resources continued to be channeled into previously reached cities. Mission and area leaders attempted to revitalize efforts to expand outreach into additional cities in the late 2000s, but by this time receptivity in the general population had fallen significantly lower compared to the early and mid 1990s. Consequently, many of these more recent efforts yielded no lasting results.

Contrary to the overall trend of outreach expansion in Eastern Europe over the past two decades, the LDS Church in Hungary has achieved noticeable returns in outreach expansion efforts. This essay chronicles the successes of opening additional cities in Hungary to proselytism, the establishment of additional congregations, and provides a detailed analysis on the methodology that has spurred ongoing outreach expansion.

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LDS Background

In modern times, the first LDS congregation in Hungary was organized sometime in the 1980s. In 1989, there were two branches in Hungary. The number of branches reached 18 by year-end 1993, 19 by year-end 1997, and 21 by year-end 2000. By 2002, there were 17 cities with an LDS congregation (Budapest, Debrecen, Dunaujvaros, Eger, Erd, Gyor, Kecskemet, Miskolc, Nyiregyhaza, Papa, Pecs, Sopron, Szeged, Szekesfehervar, Szombathely, Vac, and Veszprem). Two cities outside Budapest - Miskolc and Pecs - had two branches but in the early 2000s only one branch operated in both cities. LDS membership increased from 75 in 1990 to 1,400 in 1993, 2,800 in 1997, 3,448 in 2000, 4,147 in 2005, and 4,738 in 2010.

The creation of the Hungary Budapest Stake was a major catalyst for revamping outreach expansion efforts because some missionary resources were allocated to strengthen branches to become wards before the stake was organized. After several of these congregations became wards and local leaders were sufficiently self sufficient in their church responsibilities, mission leaders redistributed missionary manpower to previously unreached cities. In 2007 and 2008, missionaries opened Bekescsaba, Hodmezovasarhely, Kaposvar, Kiskunfelegyhaza, Komlo, Oroshaza, Szolnok, and Tatabanya to proselytism and groups were established for Sunday worship in Bekescsaba, Kaposvar, Szolnok, and Tatabanya. In the early 2010s, missionaries began holding Sunday church services in Komlo and opened Zalaegerszeg for proselytism. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, several cities formerly opened to missionary work appeared to have no missionaries permanently assigned anymore, such as Hodmezovasarhely, Kiskunfelegyhaza, Oroshaza, and Zalaegerszeg. Low receptivity and limited numbers of missionaries assigned to the mission prompted the removal of missionaries from each of these locations. In early 2012, missionaries stationed in Szolnok began regularly visiting Cegled to assess prospects for initiating proselytism.

Successes

LDS mission leaders in Hungary have generally demonstrated skill and enthusiasm in opening additional areas to proselytism

and expanding outreach with full-time missionaries. The small geographic size of the Hungary Budapest Mission and its jurisdiction limited to just Hungary has reduced logistical and administrative burdens on mission leaders that often frustrate outreach expansion in many other Eastern European missions which service multiple countries. As a result, Hungary is one of the most reached nations by the LDS Church in Eastern Europe. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, no other Eastern European nation had as many cities open to missionary work as Hungary with the exception of Ukraine and Russia. Russia and Ukraine had several additional cities open to missionary work but as of early 2012 many of these locations neither had missionaries assigned nor a branch or group functioning. Hungary was also the Eastern European country that experienced the most rapid congregational growth during this period as a result of expanding national outreach and success in finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining enough converts to organize additional groups and branches.

Within the past five years, the Church in Hungary has successfully created branches in Bekescsaba, Kaposvar, Szolnok, and Tatabanya. Each of these branches appeared to have at least 30 active members in early 2012; a significant achievement considering most branches in Eastern Europe have between 20 and 50 active members and have operated for over a decade.

Mission leaders have demonstrated versatility in mission resource allotment over the past five years. Missionaries are seldom assigned to unproductive areas for more than six months. Due to limited numbers of full-time missionaries, cities which exhibit poor receptivity close so that additional cities can open. The surge in additional cities opening in the latter half of the 2000s appears partially attributed to an increase in the number of missionaries assigned to the Hungary Budapest Mission. Few cities have opened for proselytism in the 2010s as the number of missionaries assigned has decreased due to stagnant numbers of members serving missions worldwide and expanding opportunities in other, more receptive areas of the world.

Opportunities

Higher receptivity than many other nations in Central and Eastern Europe, dozens of unreached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants, the small geographical size of the mission, and willingness from mission and area leaders to expand outreach in Hungary present opportunities for opening additional cities to proselytism. Many of the ten most populous unreached cities appear favorable for beginning LDS outreach, such as Nagykanizsa, Dunakeszi, Vac, and Baja.

Many communities in the Budapest metropolitan area are poorly reached by the Church as only three wards operate in the city of 2.53 million. However, each ward meets in its own meetinghouse and all three meetinghouses are well distributed throughout the city, thereby maximizing outreach potential with each ward. Budapest is administratively divided into 23 districts or kerület that range in population from 20,000 to 145,000 and average around 75,000.[1] It is conceivable that the Church could operate a branch in most of these 23 districts to maximize outreach potential in Hungary's largest city, but inadequate numbers of local leaders and low receptivity make any large scale outreach expansion efforts impractical. Some communities on the outskirts of the city which may benefit from opening groups or branches include Kistarcsa, Dunakeszi, Gyal, and Szigetszentmiklos.

Challenges

The LDS Church in Hungary is far from being the quintessential model for successful outreach expansion in Eastern Europe. Delays in opening larger numbers of cities to proselytism from the late 1980s to mid 2000s have resulted in missed opportunities to capitalize on when the general Hungarian population was most receptive. As a result of missionary activity restricted to only a handful of cities within the first decade of an official church presence, the Church in Hungary has many self-sustainability problems as there are few qualified leaders. The Church has demonstrated good resilience in active members in many cities but the number of Hungarian leaders remains too few to make significant headway expanding outreach without assistance from full-time missionaries. In recently organized branches, full-time missionaries often serve as branch presidents due to no local male members meeting the qualifications to hold this position. Only a handful of Hungarian Latter-day Saints serve missions at any given time, resulting in the Church relying on foreign missionaries to staff nearly the entire missionary force. Consequently the Hungary Budapest Mission must compete with other resource-lacking missions in Eastern Europe for limited numbers of North American missionaries assigned to the Europe and Europe East Areas.

In the early 2000s, the Church consolidated branches in Budapest and nearby cities in an effort to increase the number of active members in each branch to create wards for the Budapest Hungary Stake. Located north of Budapest, Vac had an LDS branch that was closed to facilitate the organizing of branches with more active members. As a result of increased travel times and assimilation challenges, nearly all previously active members stopped attending church services and went inactive. The Church may face challenges reestablishing a presence in Vac due to the large number of inactive members. The consolidation of branches in other areas of Hungary in the attempt to create units with more active members may threaten the Church's ability to effectively reach the population and incur similar disappointments in reduced member activity.

Comparative Growth

Other Christian groups have experienced mixed results on outreach expansion in Hungary but most generally have more members, operate more congregations, and extend more penetrating missionary outreach. Between 2008 and 2011, Jehovah's Witnesses reported approximately 23,000 active members yet the number of Witness congregations increased from 268 to 286 notwithstanding stagnant membership growth. Seventh Day Adventists reported virtually no change in membership during this period but a decline in the number of congregations from 112 to 105.

Future Prospects

The outlook for ongoing LDS outreach expansion in Hungary is mixed as the Church relies on foreign missionaries to open additional cities to proselytism. Assigning a single missionary companionship to multiple cities within reasonably close proximity to one another appears an effective solution to efficiently utilize the limited number of missionaries available. Passing the enthusiasm and vision of expanding outreach in Hungary to successive mission presidents and area leaders will be required to achieve any long-term growth and outreach expansion sustainability.

[1] "Hungary: Budapest," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 4 February 2012. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/hungary-budapest.php