

Comparative Growth Case Studies

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Comparing the Growth of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses in Albania

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

In 1992, both Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses established an official presence in Albania. Prior to this time, the LDS Church had no known members whereas Witnesses reported several dozen members and over 100 attending the first formal worship service when official government recognition was obtained. Notwithstanding the formal establishment of both denominations at the same time under similar circumstances, growth trends have significantly differed between the two denominations.

This case study compares the past growth of the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in Albania. Membership growth, national outreach, and international outreach among Albanian populations are compared and contrasted. Factors that have influenced differing growth trends between the two denominations are discussed followed by sections on comparative growth and future prospects. Data on Witness history, membership, and congregations was retrieved from the Watchtower Online Library,[1] past statistical reports, and the online congregation meeting search website.[2] Latter-day Saint history and statistical data was obtained from past issues of the Deseret News Church Almanac and the Albania country profile[3] on cumorah.com. Witness membership data includes only active members whereas LDS membership data consists of all members on church records regardless of current activity status.

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Membership Growth

Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints reported the same number of members in the early to mid 1990s. The LDS Church reported 100 and 400 members in 1993 and 1995, respectively and Witnesses reported 30 and 354 members in 1992 and 1994, respectively. Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced differing membership growth rates since the mid 1990s. The LDS Church has consistently increased membership by approximately 100 a year for two decades resulting in church membership increasing from 100 in 1993 to 1,160 in 2002 and 2,093 in 2011. Annual membership growth rates for Latter-day Saints have declined over the past two decades from over 10% prior to 2004 to 5% in 2011. Witness growth rates significantly surpassed Latter-day Saints from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. The number of members increased from 354 in 1994 to 942 in 1996, 1,805 in 1999, 3,122 in 2003, 4,125 in 2009, and 4,497 in 2011. Annual Witness membership growth rates declined from over 100% in the early 1990s to over 30% in the late 1990s to approximately five percent since 2003. Within the past five years, both Witnesses and Latter-day Saints have experienced commensurate membership growth rates.

National Outreach and Congregational Growth

In 2012, Latter-day Saints reported 11 congregations nationwide meeting in seven cities whereas Witnesses reported 74 congregations meeting in over 30 cities and towns. All 12 prefectures have at least one Witness congregation whereas only six prefectures have an LDS congregation. LDS congregations only operate in cities with 30,000 or more inhabitants. Approximately 80% of Witness congregations operate within the most densely populated area of Albania between Lezhë on the north, Elbasan on the east, and Vlorë on the south. Witnesses maintain congregations in approximately a dozen cities and towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. The number of Witness congregations typically increases by one to five a year whereas the number of LDS congregations over the past decade has increased by one every three years.

All cities with an LDS congregation have at least two or more Witness congregations with the exception of Shkodër where Latter-day Saints and Witnesses both operate only one congregation. Latter-day Saints operate more than one branch only in

Tirana (four branches) where Witnesses report 29 congregations just in the Tirana area. Cities with an LDS congregation include Durrës (five Witness congregations), Elbasan (three Witness congregations), Fier (four Witness congregations), Lushnjë (two Witness congregations), and Vlorë (four Witness congregations). Two cities without an LDS presence have more than one Witness congregation: Berat (5) and Korçë (2). Witnesses also operate one non-Albanian-speaking congregation in Tirana (Tirana English) whereas the LDS Church does not operate any non-Albania-speaking units.

A map displaying the names and locations of Witness and Latter-day Saint congregations can be found here.

In 2011, the average Witness congregation in Albania had 62 active members whereas the average Latter-day Saint congregation had between 40 and 50 active members.

International Albanian Outreach

Worldwide Albanian outreach varies significantly between Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints. The LDS Church reports no Albanian-speaking congregations outside of Albania and Kosovo whereas Witnesses report at least one Albanian-speaking congregation or group in at least 11 countries including Austria (4 groups), Belgium (4 groups), Canada (1 group), Germany (2 congregations, seven groups), Greece (24 congregations, 34 groups), Italy (33 congregations, 28 groups), Kosovo (6 congregations), Macedonia (1 group), Slovenia (1 group), the United Kingdom (1 congregation, 2 groups), and the United States (1 congregation, 10 groups).

Factors Influencing Differing Growth Trends

Differing growth trends between Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses appear primary attributed to the source for supplying missionaries to Albania during the first years of proselytism and policies and vision for expanding outreach. Witnesses quickly mobilized European missionaries from Italy and Greece immediately following government recognition. At the time the LDS Church had only a handful of members serving missions from Italy, no members serving missions from Greece, and heavily relied on North American missionary manpower to staff virtually all European missions. Closer proximity and greater familiarity with local culture than their North American counterparts permitted European Witness missionaries to aggressively expand outreach.

In the mid to late 1990s, Witnesses developed an increasing more self-sufficient Albanian proselytism force at a time when Latter-day Saints continued to depend entirely on foreign missionary manpower to find and teach investigators. Witnesses achieved remarkable growth in the late 1990s during the Trazira; a time when political instability resulted in widespread violence that disrupted missionary activity for foreign missionaries. In 1997, Witnesses reported that most of the 125 missionaries serving in Albania were relocated to Tirana due to safety concerns. At the same time, the LDS Church reported that all of its 33 young proselytizing missionaries were evacuated to Italy in March and reassigned to other missions.[4] The LDS Church reassigned missionaries in September 1997, again evacuated all 20 young proselytizing missionaries and two senior couples in August 1998,[5] and reassigned missionaries back to Albania shortly thereafter. During this period, Witnesses achieved some of their most rapid numerical growth and reported an increase of 500 active members within at 15-month period. Latter-day Saints also experienced an slight increase in membership growth rates during the Trazira, but missionary evacuations deterred outreach expansion efforts. Today the LDS Church remains almost entirely dependent on nonnative full-time missionaries to staff the missionary force in Albania.

The LDS Church assigned almost all of its missionaries to Tirana during the first decade of missionary activity. Witnesses quickly established congregations throughout the country resulting in a Witness missionary presence most major cities by year-end 1993[6] at a time when Latter-day Saints operated branches only in Tirana and Durrës. A centers-of-strength paradigm adopted by LDS leaders continues to target locations with established congregations in an effort to augment active membership at the expense of opening additional cities to missionary activity. Lackluster outreach expansion efforts resulted in the LDS Church reporting branches in only three cities by year-end 2000 (Tirana, Durrës, and Elbasan) and seven cities by year-end 2010 (Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, Fier, Lushnjë, Vlorë, and Shkodër). Today the LDS Church does not operate a branch in 11 cities with over 10,000 inhabitants (Korçë, Berat, Pogradec, Kavajë, Gjirokastër, Kukës, Lezhë, Sarandë, Peshkopi, Kuçovë, and Burelë) whereas Witnesses do not operate congregations in only two cities with over 10,000 inhabitants (Peshkopi and Burelë). In recent years, the aggressive church planting and outreach expansion vision of Witnesses has resulted in many small cities and towns with a Witness presence whereas all small cities and towns remain untouched by LDS proselytism efforts.

Differences in policies and doctrines between the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses also explain differences in growth. The LDS Church depends on full-time missionaries to meet proselytism needs in most areas of the world. Witnesses initially relied on foreign missionaries from Italy and Greece to proselyte but in recent years has depended significantly less on outsourced missionary manpower. Witnesses require active members to participate in a certain number of proselytizing hours a week whereas Latter-day Saints have no such requirements for full activity status and defer many of these responsibilities to full-time missionaries. The LDS Church encourages ordinary members to share the gospel with others and perform member-missionary activity, but most of these programs are uncoordinated with mission leaders. Generally speaking, the separation of missionary activity and local church administration in the LDS Church has created less continuity between members and full-time missionaries. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain no separation in missionary work and local church administration, resulting in greater collaboration from ordinary members in proselytism activities. Qualifications for interested individuals to become members in the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses differ and appear another cause for differing church growth trends.

Comparative Growth

Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's witnesses number among the most prominent nontraditional Christian faiths in Albania. Other proselytism faiths report little growth. The Seventh Day Adventist Church began reporting an official presence in 1993. At the time there was one congregation and 130 members.[7] In 2010, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Albania reported only three churches and three companies servicing 339 members.[8] Baptists report only seven congregations in Albania. The Church of the Nazarene reports no churches in Albania.[9] There are approximately 160 evangelical churches nationwide and the number of Protestants is estimated at less than 10,000.[10]

Future Prospects

Both Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses appear likely to perpetuate recent growth trends for the foreseeable future as both denominations currently experience commensurate membership growth rates, the LDS Church opens a new city to missionary work only about once every three years, and Witnesses steadily establish additional congregations every year. The renaming of the Albania Tirana Mission to the Adriatic South Mission and the assignment of Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro to the mission may deter outreach expansion efforts in Albania for several years as the Church establishes an initial presence in these three recently opened countries to missionary work. Witnesses will likely continue to demonstrate consistency in meeting their own proselytism needs in Albania due to past outreach expansion efforts, active member-missionary programs, and higher baptismal standards.

[1] http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302010002#p277

[2] http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E

[3] http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=missiology_articles&story_id=30

[4] "'Reluctant refugees' leave Albania," LDS Church News, 22 March 1997.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/29612/Reluctant-refugees-leave-Albania.html

[5] "Church reassigns missionaries serving in Albania," LDS Church News, 29 August 1998.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31537/Church-reassigns-missionaries-serving-in-Albania.html

[6] http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302010002#p177

[7] "Albania SDA Church (1993-1993), www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 26 September 2012.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=1957288

[8] "Albanian Mission of SDA," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 26 September 2012.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10002

[9] http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=AL&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[10] "Albania," European Baptist Federation, retrieved 7 September 2012.
http://www.ebf.org/articles/display-article.php?article=427&cat=imp&lang=eng