

Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Expanding LDS Outreach in Romania

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Overview

At year-end 2012, the Church in Romania had a presence in 17 cities that altogether accounted for 23% of the national population of 21.8 million people. Notwithstanding a presence in over a dozen cities and congregations accessible to almost a quarter of the population, the Church in Romania remains extremely small. 26 of the 41 administrative countries have no LDS presence and nominal LDS membership accounts for only 0.014% of the national population (one LDS in 7,300). The Church has experienced few government and societal barriers to missionary activity in Romania compared to other countries in the region but has experienced very slow growth over the past decade.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Romania in regards to the expansion of mission outreach. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for expanding missionary work to additional locations is discussed. A comparative growth section compares and contracts the growth of the Church in Romania to the growth of the Church in other countries in the region and to other proselytizing Christians in Romania. Limitations of this case study are provided followed by the outlook for future growth.

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LDS Background

The first proselytizing missionaries in modern times were assigned to Romania in December 1990. The Church created its first branch the following year. In 1993, the Church organized the Romania Bucharest Mission. By May 1999, there were 12 cities with missionaries assigned (Arad, Bacau, Brasov, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Constanta, Iasi, Oradea, Pitesti, Ploiesti, Sibiu, and Timisoara).

In the 2000s, the Church opened four additional cities to missionaries including Alexandria, Craiova, Deva, and Galati. In the early 2010s, the Church renamed the Romania Bucharest Mission to the Romania/Moldova Mission.

In late 2012, senior missionaries reported efforts to open a group in Feldioara - a small town north of Brasov with approximately 5,700 inhabitants. The first sacrament meeting service occurred in the fall of 2012 after missionaries located three Latter-day Saint families who had relocated to Feldioara nine years earlier and lost contact with the Church. 12 locals attend the first sacrament service. In November, missionaries reported that a group had been officially organized under the Brasov Branch with hopes that it would become its own branch in spring 2013.

At year-end 2012, there were 18 branches and one group nationwide. At the time most cities or branches had two missionary companionships assigned.

Successes

Many cities have a tiny nucleus of highly dedicated members that have withstood various administrative and cultural challenges that often result in the closure of the sole branch or group operating in a city. Romania numbers among one of the only countries in Europe that has never had the sole branch or group closed within a city with an LDS presence; a significant achievement considering mission leaders in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine have closed the only LDS unit in multiple cities within their jurisdictions. With the exception of one or two branches, all

branches in Romania have a native member serving as branch president and less than 50 active members. The relatively good degree of self-sufficiency of local members in individual branches limits the role of full-time missionaries in church administration, preventing the closure of the only branch in a city or downgrading of branches to groups. All closed branches in Romania previously operated in Bucharest. No other cities appear to have had have had a branch closed and missionaries withdrawn. The small average size of church members in Romanian branches stands as another testament to good self-sustainability. In 2011, the average branch had 165 members - considerably lower than most countries in the region with over 2,000 members. In 2012, the first Romanian senior couple began their mission - another noteworthy achievement considering the Church in most Eastern European countries has never had a native senior couple serve a mission.

Opportunities

With nearly 22 million inhabitants, Romania is Southeastern Europe's most populous country and provides opportunities for the Church to reach an additional 17 million people that currently reside in locations that have no missionaries assigned and no congregations. Only Greece has as many unreached cities with over 100,000 inhabitants as Romania (five) among countries in Southeastern Europe. In 2010, there were over 180 cities in Romania with between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants that were unreached by the Church.

The Church in Romania has experienced some of its highest receptivity among Eastern European countries within the past decade as indicated by steady membership growth. Receptivity remains comparatively low to other countries worldwide as demonstrated by official membership totals increasing by approximately 100 a year between 2001 and 2011. All countries in Eastern Europe with fewer than 3,000 nominal members at year-end 2011 reported an average annual increase in membership of approximately 50 or less with the exception of Albania where church membership increased by approximately 100 a year. Greater success baptizing larger numbers of converts year to year in Romania suggests that prospects for initiating additional national outreach expansion would prove fruitful. The recent success of organizing a group in the small city of Feldioara is another testament to the potential growth that may be achieved if church leaders visit unreached cities and towns and take a proactive stance on outreach expansion and church planting.

The organization of the first stake in Romania has excellent potential to initiate a new era of outreach expansion as mission resources previously dedicated to leadership development and reactivation efforts to strengthen branches to become wards are redistributed to outreach expansion initiatives. In 2012, missionaries reported that preparatory efforts were underway to create the first stake in Romania from the Bucharest Romania District sometime in the near future. In 2011 and 2012, the boundaries of the district were expanded to include three additional branches in southern Romania to help reach the needed number of members and congregations to qualify for stake status. The Church in Eastern Europe has experienced a surge in opening additional cities to proselytism following the organization of the first stake in a country. For example, in Hungary mission leaders assigned missionaries to eight additional cities within the first two years following the organization of the first stake whereas no additional cities opened to proselytism during the previous five years. In Ukraine, the Church opened two additional cities in western Ukraine shortly after the organization of the first stake but did not appear to open any cities to missionary activity in western Ukraine during the previous four years.

The greatest priority for expanding outreach in Romania centers on opening the most populous unreached cities as missionaries can reach a larger number of people if they are concentrated in small geographic areas. 24 of the 39 cities with over 50,000 inhabitants (62%) have no LDS congregations and, with the exception of Hunedoara, are all located in administrative counties currently without an LDS congregation. The Church could feasibly assign two missionary companionships per city and establish groups without overburdening the Romania Bucharest Mission. However, a single missionary companionship per city would be most effective to maximize the efficiency of limited resources and reduce the risk of creating self-sufficiency problems in new congregations. If the Church assigned two missionary companionships per currently operating branch or group and two missionary companionships to each unreached city with over 50,000 inhabitants, there would be approximately 170 missionaries serving in Romania - just six missionaries more than the average mission at year-end 2011. There are several cities in southern Romania nearby Bucharest with over 50,000 inhabitants that appear favorable for assigning missionaries and organizing groups including Braila, Buzau, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Târgu Jiu, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Târgovi?te, Slatina, and Tulcea. A map of cities that appear favorable for opening to missionary work can be found here.

The Church has not conducted any known ethnic-specific outreach in Romania notwithstanding Hungarians and Roma constituting 6.6% and 2.5% of the national population, respectively. The Church has experienced good success and greater growth in Hungary than in most countries in the region as Hungarians appear to exhibit some of the highest receptivity to LDS teachings among peoples in Eastern Europe. Opportunities for outreach among Hungarians in northern Romania appear good although a tiny presence in the northern half of the country and limited mission resources create a bleak outlook for the Church commencing any Hungarian-specific outreach in Romania unless sizable numbers of Hungarians express interest in the Church over a consistent period of time.

Challenges

Receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups has significantly declined in Romania over the past two decades. Efforts to open additional cities to proselytism will likely face greater difficulties than in previous years as many previously receptive individuals have lost interest in organized religion or have been shepherded into other outreach-oriented faiths. Many Romanians view the LDS Church with suspicion and question their motivation and purpose in proselytism efforts. The lack of native Romanian members and full-time missionaries has further reinforced common stereotypes that the Church is a foreign denomination

incompatible with Romanian culture. LDS missionaries reported using private English lessons as a means of finding and attracting investigators due to little success with other finding methods. Short-term convert retention rates appear as high as 50% for investigators found using the English program. However, the number of converts baptized through this finding approach has historically been extremely low in Romania and limited to only a few new converts a month.

The Church has experienced convert retention and member activity challenges in many locations, particularly those first opened to missionary work two decades ago. Inactive membership has steadily increases in many of these branches as a result of changing mission policies for convert baptisms, socialization difficulties, testimony development problems, and quick-baptism tactics. There has been little growth in the number of active members for most branches within the past decade notwithstanding nominal membership in Romania increasing from 1,985 in 2001 to 2,972 in 2011.

The Church has experienced significant challenges expanding outreach within individual cities, including the most populous city Bucharest. There are only two branches in Bucharest today; an extremely small number considering its large population (1.68 million) and the Church headquartering a mission in the city for two decades. Today Bucharest is the only city in Romania with more than one LDS congregation. Member activity issues appear most severe in Bucharest as indicated by the number of branches declining from six to two in less than a decade. The reason for closing branches in Bucharest centers on the Church forming ward-sized congregations to provide greater socialization opportunities for limited numbers of active members and to prepare for the creation of a stake. However, like many other cities in Eastern Europe that had a major reduction in the number of congregations, these consolidations often result in little progress augmenting active membership and frequently result in many members becoming inactive due to longer travel times, distances to attend church, and social integration difficulties. In the long run, the reduction of the number of congregations in Bucharest and the inability of the Church to open multiple units in the largest cities has reduced the outreach capabilities of the Church and has created greater difficulties for members to travel to church meetings.

Opportunities to capitalize outreach efforts on the largest cities has declined since Romania opened to proselytism. Virtually all cities in Romania have experienced population decline over the past two decades due to negative population growth. The population of Romania declined by approximately three million between 1992 and 2012,[1] or 16.5%. The Church has achieved membership growth despite declining populations throughout the country, but low birth rates and heavy emigration create long-term stability challenges for the Church in Romania.

Full-time missionaries report challenges locating unaccounted members on church records. Many inactive members have no current or past addresses on church records, making efforts to find and contact these individuals extremely difficult. Consequently, reactivation efforts have been mixed due to challenges finding inactive members. Poor record keeping in some cities frustrates efforts to visit isolated members and investigate prospects for expanding missionary activity into previously unreached locations.

Comparative Growth

The Church has extended more penetrating outreach in most other countries in the region. There are 11 countries in Eastern Europe where LDS congregations operate in locations accessible to a higher percentage of the population than in Romania including Estonia (47%), Bulgaria (44%), Croatia (43%), Latvia (42%), Hungary (40%), Greece (35%), Lithuania (35%), Ukraine (34%), Russia (33%), Belarus (29%), and the Czech Republic (26%). Outreach expansion efforts in Romania have been slower but more consistent than most countries in the region.

Other proselytizing Christian groups report a significantly larger presence in Romania than the LDS Church. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports 66,593 members and 1,092 churches in Romania.[2] Adventists appear to have multiple churches operating in nearly all medium and large cities throughout the country. Jehovah's Witnesses report nearly 40,000 active members and 535 congregations. Witnesses operate at least one congregation in all 41 administrative counties.[3] The Church of the Nazarene reports only three churches in Romania.[4]

Limitations

The Church does not publish official statistics on the number of active members and the creation dates for individual congregations for public view. No local leaders and members were available to provide their observations and experiences regarding church growth and outreach expansion in their cities as all data in this case study originated from official church sources and returned missionaries.

Future Prospects

The recent success of organizing a group in the small city of Feldioara, an expected surge in the number of missionaries assigned to the Romania/Moldova Mission, historically higher receptivity to LDS missionaries than many surrounding countries, and realistic prospects for the organization of a stake headquartered in Bucharest within the foreseeable future generate a positive outlook for future expansion of LDS outreach in Romania during the next decade. Several additional cities will likely open to proselytism due to surplus mission resources in the coming years. There remains a major need for local church leaders to facilitate outreach expansion efforts to improve the self-sufficiency of the Church in Romania notwithstanding their small

numbers and large number of administrative responsibilities.

[1] "ROMANIA: Major Cities," retrieved 27 December 2012. http://www.citypopulation.de/Romania-Cities.html

[2] "Romanian Union Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 27 December 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=RMUC

[3] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 27 December 2012. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[4] "Nazarene Church Data Search," retrieved 27 December 2012. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=RO&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=