

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among the Yakut of Russia

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Native to the Sakha Republic of Russia, the Yakut number among the most populous non-Slavic peoples in Siberia and the Russian Far East with over 440,000 people.[1] The Yakut comprise half of the population of the Sakha Republic and speak the Yakut language which they call Sakha. Yakut speakers number 363,000.[2] Unlike most ethnic groups native to the Volga region of Russia, the Yakut maintained many of their indigenous religious beliefs and practices into the twentieth century notwithstanding russification and Christianization efforts by Imperial Russia. A revival of religious expression and interest occurred following the suppression of religious expression during the Soviet era, particularly with Catholicism and Protestantism. Orthodoxy constitutes the largest religious group in Sakha Republic (44.9%). Other major religious groups include Shamanism (26.2%), New Religious Movements (2.4%), Islam (1.2%), Buddhism (1%), Protestantism (0.9%), and Catholicism (0.4%). 23% of the population does not affiliate with a religious group.[3]

This essay explores the opportunities, challenges, and future prospects of establishing an LDS presence among the Yakut and highlights achievements by other Christian groups in reaching the Yakut population.

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Opportunities

The Yakut have overall exhibited good receptivity to newly-arrived Protestant denominations. Religion researchers have noted that Yakuts report stronger affinity to Protestantism and Catholicism than Orthodoxy because they perceive Orthodoxy as tied to Russian ethnicity and associated with government authority. Many Yakuts regard Catholicism and Protestantism as accepting of all ethnicities and in greater harmony with worshipping God.[4] With the exception of Catholicism, weak ties to traditional Christian denominations suggest that some Yakut may be open to LDS teachings and proselytism efforts as indicated by the success of Protestant groups in recent years.

Local culture may make Yakuts more receptive to LDS outreach than other ethnic groups in eastern Russia. The relatively peaceful coexistence of various Christian denominations and indigenous religious practices over the past couple decades may foster better acceptance of the LDS Church in society than in many other Russian republics. The Sakha Republic appears to exhibit one of the highest levels of religious freedom in Russia today as within the past two decades government leaders have advocated for freedom of religious practice. In annual reports on the status of religious freedom, the U.S. State Department has not identified any restrictions or abuses of religious freedom in the Sakha Republic during the past decade whereas infringements on religious freedom have been identified in many other areas of the country.[5] The Church has operated in many oblasts, republics, and other administrative divisions where society and local government authorities have harassed and limited the activities of the Church. Slow to modest LDS growth has occurred in these locations. Higher levels of religious freedom in Sakha Republic may indicate that the Church can expect greater mobility and freedom in proselytism, securing rented spaces for church services, and baptizing and retaining converts with fewer social pressures to conform to traditional faiths.

Constituting one-quarter of the population of Sakha Republic, Yakutsk presents the most promising prospects for initial LDS outreach among the Yakut. A sizable population concentrated in a small geographic area and good accessibility by airplane from other regions in Russia permit visits from mission leaders and the assignment of missionaries. Due to its size and prominence as a mining center in Russia, it is likely that several ethnic Russian Latter-day Saints baptized in other areas of Russia have relocated to Yakutsk for employment purposes. Finding these isolated members and providing them with the needed ecclesiastical and administrative support from mission leadership may one day spur the development of a self-sufficient

LDS community that can later facilitate efforts to reach the Yakut population.

Challenges

The LDS Church has no presence in the Sakha Republic. The nearest city with an LDS branch is Khabarovsk; over 1,500 kilometers away. The Russia Vladivostok Mission administers Sakha Republic but its headquarters in Vladivostok are approximately 2,100 kilometers away. Due to a lack of a church presence in their homeland, few if any Yakut appear to have joined the Church elsewhere in Russia. Prospective LDS outreach efforts among the Yakut may struggle to gain the Church's initial converts and establish a firm foothold in Yakutsk and other major cities. The Church is better equipped to establish a presence among ethnic Russians in the Sakha Republic considering the sizable body of Russian language materials, over 21,000 nominal members nationwide, and missionary activity in Russia occurring principally among ethnic Russians.

Less than one million inhabitants are spread over a massive geographic area over three million square kilometers in size. Compared to Russia's 138 million inhabitants, the relatively tiny population of the Sakha Republic ranks as a lesser priority to prospective LDS outreach expansion in comparison to other more easily accessible and more densely populated administrative divisions. The population density in the Sakha Republic is about 27 times smaller than that of Russia as a whole as there is one person per every three square kilometers in the Sakha Republic and eight people per one square kilometer nationally. Many Yakut appear to reside in rural areas. In 2010, 48% of the population of Sakha Republic populated cities with 10,000 or more inhabitants whereas 73% of the national population resided in urban areas. Efforts to reach the nearly half a million rural inhabitants of Sakha Republic - many of which are Yakuts - presents one of the greatest challenges in expanding LDS proselytism efforts in Russia today. A traditional LDS proselytism paradigm headed by full-time missionaries presents many challenges to effectively proselyte this comparatively small population spread over vast geographic areas. It is impractical to assign missionaries to the large number of small towns and rural communities spread throughout the millions of square kilometers of the republic. The Church will need to accommodate missionary tactics to these inherent conditions by organizing proselytism approaches that are self-sufficient, efficient in utilizing small numbers of full-time missionaries, and adaptable and transportable to permit missionary activity in more than just one or two of the most populous cities. Waning receptivity to nontraditional Christianity and the disciplining of many previously receptive individuals into other Christian faiths presents many challenges for the Church to establish an initial presence headed by Yakuts that can perpetuate itself throughout the republic.

There are no translations of LDS materials into Yakut. Utilizing Russian translations of church materials may adequately meet language needs initially as many Yakut speak Russian as a second language. However, translations of LDS materials into Yakut are warranted due to their cultural and ethnic implications. Protestant groups have conducted church services and proselytism in Yakut and have experienced positive results.

Delays in extending LDS missionary activity into areas traditionally populated by Yakut have resulted in other missionary-focused Christians shepherding many previously receptive individuals. Like most peoples in post-Soviet Russia, the Yakut appeared to reach their peak religiosity and interest in nontraditional Christianity in the mid to late 1990s. Most of the receptive population has since been discipled into Christian groups like evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists. These denominations and many others were initially established in the Sakha Republic shortly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and have since sustained outreach over the past two decades. The LDS Church will face the challenge of trying to reach the religiously active population that has become increasingly committed to their churches and socially intertwined in their religious communities and social networks. The Church will also face the challenge of proselytizing the nonreligious majority that demonstrates little interest and motivation toward spirituality and has exhibited indifference and at times resistance to proselytism efforts by other faiths. Protestant denominations have experienced some of the greatest growth among religious groups in terms of opening new churches and the number of active adherents, yet the percentage of Protestants is slightly less than one percent of the population of the Sakha Republic.

The rise of secularism on contemporary culture and the long-lasting effects of Soviet communism continue to reduce the population's receptivity to outreach. This results in a population that exhibits few if any spiritually-driven behaviors and habits with little or no familiarity or conviction to traditional Christianity and personal religious practices. In the future, efficient LDS outreach approaches will need to be tailored to the specific challenges, issues, culture, and understanding of individuals unfamiliar with basic Christian doctrines and practices such as prayer and scripture reading, study, and personal application of doctrine.

The Church has experienced poor receptivity and little or no growth among other Turkic, Uralic, Altaic, and Paleo-Siberian ethnic minority groups in other areas of Russia. It is unclear whether a lack of concentrated LDS mission outreach among these ethnic groups or cultural incompatibilities with LDS teachings are responsible for poor responsiveness to the Church or whether it is a combination of the two. The integration of Russian and Yakut Latter-day Saints into the same congregations may present challenges for fostering unity and cohesiveness due to differing linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

Comparative Growth

The number of Protestant congregations surpassed the number of Orthodox congregations within the first ten years of religious freedom granted at the end of the twentieth century. Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses share many similarities with the LDS Church in terms of standardization of missionary work across countries and cultures, doctrinal differences with most mainstream Christianity, fervent desire to expand outreach, and formation as a Christian denomination in the United States

during the nineteenth century. Adventists and Witnesses both have a presence in the Sakha Republic among the Yakut and Witnesses have completed translations of religious materials into Yakut.[6] Unlike the LDS Church which restricted itself to a handful of the most populous cities in Russia following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Adventists, Witnesses, and many Protestant groups quickly mobilized throughout the country and had established congregations in nearly every major city by 2000.

Future Prospects

In recent years, the contraction of LDS outreach in Russia as a whole and ongoing administrative and leadership challenges in many cities with a church presence predict a poor outlook for any prospective outreach among the Yakut for the foreseeable future. The most successful prospects for a future LDS establishment will occur through member-missionary efforts that result in the initial baptism of committed Yakut converts, the willingness and enthusiasm of new converts to build up the Church in their communities by sharing the gospel with friends and family, and the development of self-sufficient local leadership capable of leading branches independent of full-time missionary assistance. Active Russian Latter-day Saints who relocate to Yakutsk or other major cities and petition the Russia Vladivostok Mission presidency to hold church services and establish a church presence appears the most likely way that the Church will establish any presence in the Sakha Republic in the coming years.

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[3] "Sakha Republic," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 15 March 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakha_Republic

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[6] "Yakutsk," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 17 March 2012. http://www.watchtower.org/yk/index.html