

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among Uyghurs in China and Central Asia

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Posted: August 31st, 2015

Overview

The Uyghur, or Uighur, are a traditionally Muslim people who generally reside in western China and Central Asia. The vast majority of Uyghurs inhabit the restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China where they constitute approximately half the population. Estimates for the worldwide number of Uyghurs range from 10.4 million[1] to 15 million.[2] The LDS Church has never appeared to engage in proselytism efforts that specifically target Uyghurs.

This case study provides a brief introduction to the Uyghurs. Opportunities and challenges for the establishment of an LDS presence and the proselytism of Uyghurs are examined. The growth of the Church among other ethnic minority groups in mainland China is reviewed and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups who have a presence among the Uyghurs is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Uyghur Background

The Uyghurs trace their ancestry to Turkic tribes that inhabited Central Asia and Mongolia during the first millennium AD. A Uyghur state was established in the eighth century but was later conquered by the invading Kirghiz in the ninth century. Uyghurs originally adhered to a variety of religions such as Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Many Uyghurs converted to Islam during the tenth century[3] and by the eleventh century Islam began to be strongly associated with Uyghur identity.[4] Today the Uyghur are homogenously Muslim.[5] Adherence to Islam is highest in southern areas of the Uyghur homelands.[6] Less than one percent of 0.1% of Uyghurs worldwide adhere to Christianity.[7] Most of the Uyghur homelands have been under Chinese control for the past several centuries although the region has experienced significant autonomy. Many Uyghurs have resented Chinese rule and have sought for an independent, sovereign Uyghur nation called East Turkestan for centuries. Human rights abuses and accusations of terrorism have been made by both sides of the conflict. There have been reports of governmental abuses of religious freedom that target Uyghurs.[8] The Chinese government has encouraged the relocation of Han Chinese to Xinjiang for decades to help reduce Uyghur separatist tendencies and increase national integration. The Uyghur language pertains to the Eastern branch of the Turkic language family.[9] A map displaying the location of the Uyghur homeland can be found here.

Opportunities

Uyghur populations in Kazakhstan present the greatest opportunity for LDS mission outreach at present. The Uyghur homelands in Kazakhstan are located within close proximity to Almaty – the most populous city in the country. The LDS Church has maintained a branch in Almaty since 2001. Small numbers of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan have joined the Church in Almaty and a Uyghur member served as the branch president in the early 2010s. Uyghur members present good opportunities for the Church to translate LDS materials into the Uyghur language, conduct member-missionary efforts among friends and family members, and assist in formal missionary efforts that specifically target Uyghur populations.

Urumqi presents the greatest prospects for LDS outreach among Uyghur populations in China due to its large population, accessibility from other major cities in China, and sizable number of Uyghurs who reside in the city. There are 3.5 million people who inhabit the metropolitan area[10] – a significant target population. The Church in China appears to maintain a member group or branch in Urumqi albeit most, if not all, members appear to be Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese. The operation of a congregation in the Uyghur homelands of China presents good opportunities for future outreach if government restrictions on

religious freedom are relaxed and formal missionary efforts are permitted one day.

Unlike many of the most populous ethnolinguistic minority peoples native to China, the Uyghur exhibit little diversity in language and culture. There is only one Uyghur language. Uyghur is written in the Cyrillic script in Central Asian nations and the Arabic script in China. To contrast, other sizable minority groups such as the Yi (Lolo) or Zhuang comprise large collections of related peoples that speak as many as a dozen to 100 different languages. Only minor dialectical differences exist in the Uyghur language among Uyghurs scattered throughout Central Asia.[11] These conditions indicate simplicity in orchestrating outreach among Uyghurs in multiple nations with comparatively fewer resources than many other of the largest ethnolinguistic minorities in China.

Although it is unclear whether there are any Uyghur Latter-day Saints in Xinjiang, there may be opportunities for member-missionary work to occur among Uyghur populations in China if there are any Uyghur converts who have family connections in China. The Church is permitted to teach and baptize converts in China through familial connections. The Church has grown rapidly within China in recent years without the assistance of foreign missionary personnel through member referral among family members. The lack of interconnectedness between Han Chinese and Uyghur peoples presents the greatest obstacle in following this approach as very few, if any, Han Chinese Latter-day Saints have any familial relationships with Uyghur peoples which would currently qualify under the law for sharing the gospel.

Translations of all LDS scriptures and many gospel study materials into simplified Chinese characters provides resources for future missionary efforts among Uyghurs in China who are bilingual in Mandarin Chinese. Bilingualism in Mandarin Chinese is highest among intellectuals, young people, and those who live in Urumqi.[12] Current government policies and legislation severely limit missionary activity and prevent the assignment of full-time missionaries. Consequently local Chinese members would be required to meet any missionary needs within the confines of the law. As Mandarin Chinese-speaking members utilize simplified character translations for gospel study, these members would likely be well equipped to bridge linguistic and cultural barriers through the use of these materials.

Challenges

There are significant religious freedom restrictions in both China and Kazakhstan that severely restrict any missionary activity among Uyghur populations. Current legislation and policies governing religious freedom in China prevent any formal missionary efforts among Uyghurs in Xinjiang at present. Concentrated efforts by the LDS Church to target these populations may appear more suspicious compared to proselytism efforts among the dominant ethnic groups. Regulations on religious assembly and ecclesiastical contact between foreign and native members prohibit full-time missionaries or foreign church leaders to meet with Uyghur populations. The Church has maintained a positive, respectful relationship with the Chinese government for many years by strictly following the law. Deviation from this approach could result in deleterious effects on the Church's relationship with the government and potential harm to local members as those accused of prohibited religious activities have at times been imprisoned or sentenced to labor camps.

Government legislation in Kazakhstan has become increasingly strict and prohibitive to nontraditional Christian denominations. Current laws prevent the Church from opening additional cities to missionary activity unless there are 50 individuals who will consent as founders to obtain government registration.[13] These restrictions have created a nearly insurmountable task for opening additional major cities within or nearby the Uyghur homelands such as Kegen, Shonzhy, and Talgar.

The Church maintains a tiny presence in mainland China and is poorly prepared at present to establish a presence among Uyghurs if religious freedom restrictions are relaxed to permit open proselytism and the assignment of full-time missionaries. If any improvements in religious freedom conditions occur, the Church will most likely concentrate its resources to saturate the most populous cities throughout mainland China. The sheer geographic size and enormous population of China would totally overwhelm the Church at present. Even if the Church were to hypothetically allocate all of its approximately 88,000 missionaries and 418 missions to service only mainland China, the average mission would include 3.27 million people within its boundaries. To contrast, the average mission in the United States services 2.60 million people.

Strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam pose a significant challenge for establishing an LDS presence among Uyghurs. Islam has become inextricably connected to Uyghur ethnicity. Even more moderate Uyghur Muslims in Kazakhstan and northern Xinjiang appear unreceptive to Christian proselytism. However, Uyghurs in China have received extremely limited or no overt Christian missionary activity due to proselytism restrictions and remote location. The Church may discourage or prohibit missionary activity among Uyghur Muslims due to concerns with the safety of investigators and converts. Prospective missionary efforts among Uyghurs may yield very few converts even if mission leaders consistently extend specialized outreach for extended periods of time.

The remote location of Uyghur populations from the nearest LDS missions and “centers of strength” may delay outreach for many years or decades. The Church has often postponed outreach to locations distant from mission headquarters due to challenges for church leaders to regularly visit and supervise church activities. This challenge with LDS centralization of administration may pose serious challenge for future missionary outreach even if challenges with religious freedom and strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam are overcome.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church appears to maintain no noticeable presence among indigenous ethnic minority groups within mainland China. The Hmong (Miao) people are the only indigenous ethnic minority people who have received specialized LDS outreach. However, essentially all of these Hmong populations were resettled to the United States from Laos and Thailand rather than mainland China. The Church in Kazakhstan appears to be predominantly composed of ethnic Kazakh and Russian converts who have joined the Church within the past 15 years.

All missionary-focused Christian denominations with a worldwide presence report a minimal presence among Uyghurs, if any presence at all. Evangelicals note essentially no presence among Uyghurs.[14] Jehovah's Witnesses do not report any information on their activities, membership, or congregations in mainland China. However, Witnesses report three Uyghur-speaking congregations in Kazakhstan. Witnesses have translated their official website, jw.org, into Uyghur (Cyrillic and Arabic scripts). The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has over 400,000 members and thousands of congregations in mainland China. However, there does not appear to be an Adventist presence among Uyghurs in China or elsewhere.

Limitations

The Church does not publish any statistical data on language usage among church membership for languages not within the top 10 languages spoken by church membership. It is unclear how many Uyghurs have joined the Church worldwide. No reports were available from Uyghur or mainland Chinese Latter-day Saints. The Church does not publish membership or congregational statistics for mainland China due to the Church's sensitive presence among Chinese nationals.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to extend specialized outreach among Uyghurs appears highly unlikely for many years or decades to come. The Church in China continues to experience severe restrictions on religious freedom that permit missionary activity only through member referral among immediate familial relationships. There does not appear to be any feasible means for the Church to establish a presence among Uyghurs in China due to a lack of association between the predominantly Han Chinese LDS membership in the country and the isolated Uyghur population located in Xinjiang. There appear some realistic opportunities for missionary work among Uyghurs in Kazakhstan. However, these prospects appear limited to coincidental contacts from missionaries with Uyghurs who reside in Almaty. Legal barriers pose challenges for introducing the Church into additional cities within the Kazakhstani Uyghur homelands. Prospects for the translation of the Book of Mormon and basic gospel study or missionary materials into Uyghur appear poor. The Church will likely not explore opportunities for Uyghur-specific proselytism in Kazakhstan within the foreseeable future due to the tiny size of the Church in Kazakhstan, a lack of specialized outreach among the Kazakh majority, and Uyghurs exhibiting strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam.

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[5] “Uyghur,” Joshua Project, retrieved 7 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15755

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[8] “China,” International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 7 July 2015. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222123

[9] “Uyghur,” www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 July 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/uig/18

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[12] “Uyghur,” www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 July 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/uig/18

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[14] “Uyghur,” Joshua Project, retrieved 7 July 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15755