



Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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The Central Eurasian Mission - Taking the Gospel to the Turkic Nations

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Overview

The Church announced in April 2015 plans to organize a new mission to administer the Turkic nations of Central Asia, Asia Minor, and the Caucasus. Most of these nations were not previously assigned to a mission but rather fell under the direct administration of the Europe East Area. The Church indicated that the new mission would be named the Central Eurasian Mission and have headquarters based in Istanbul, Turkey. Nations to be assigned to the new mission included Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and possibly Turkmenistan. Two nations in the new mission were previously assigned to other missions, namely Kazakhstan (Russia Novosibirsk Mission) and Turkey (Bulgaria Sofia Mission). Altogether the new Central Eurasian Mission will include approximately 150 million people within its geographical boundaries, thereby tying with the Uganda Kampala Mission as the mission in the LDS Church with the fourth largest population.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in Turkey, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan. Recent church growth and missionary developments are identified. Opportunities and challenges for the Central Eurasian Mission to achieve growth and expand missionary work are analyzed. Efforts by the LDS Church to open new missions in lesser-reached or previously unreached areas of the world are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background - Turkey

The Church began missionary work in present-day Turkey during the nineteenth century. Missionaries targeted British soldiers fighting in the Crimean War during the 1850s although these efforts lasted for only four years. Missionary work recommenced three decades later in 1884 when the Church organized the Turkish Mission. The mission appeared sporadic in extending outreach in present-day Turkey. Christian Arabs and Armenians appeared to constitute the majority of the small numbers of converts who joined the Church until the mission closed in 1909. The Turkish Mission reopened in 1921 and was relocated to Palestine and Syria in 1933. The Church has maintained a presence among American military personnel and their families stationed in Turkey since the 1950s and has operated member groups and branches since this time in a handful of cities. The Church extended no "concerted effort to conduct missionary work among native Turks" during the twentieth century and in the 2000s.^[1] Humanitarian senior missionary couples were first assigned to Turkey in the mid-1990s.^[2] Local members and church leaders primarily taught investigators and baptized converts between the mid-1990s and early 2010s.

The Church assigned Turkey to the Bulgaria Sofia Mission sometime in 2011. The Church received official legal status from the Turkish government in October 2011 under the name The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints - Istanbul Association. The Church held its first meeting under the recently registered association and conducted financial and administrative matters to make the association fully operational on February 11th, 2012. A total of 22 people attended the meeting; the first to occur at the new Levent meetinghouse.

The Bulgaria Sofia Mission assigned its first young, proselytizing missionaries to Istanbul on February 14th, 2012. All four missionaries were elders (three Americans, one British) who previously served in Bulgaria. LDS apostle Elder D. Todd Christofferson visited the Istanbul Branch and met with 40-45 members in June 2012. At the time the Church stationed two senior missionary couples in Istanbul.^[3] The original four missionaries assigned to Istanbul were relocated to Bulgaria in mid-2012 due to visa renewal problems. Four different Turkish-speaking missionaries were assigned to Istanbul in October 2012. Missionaries reported that the first four missionaries kept meticulous records on investigators, significantly facilitating the restart of missionary activity in October 2012.

Full-time missionaries reported that most members in the Istanbul Branch spoke English in late 2012. One companionship served on the European-side of Istanbul whereas the other companionship served on the Asian-side of Istanbul. Sacrament meeting services accommodated both Turkish and English speakers. Branch business was conducted in Turkish and translated into English. Any talks given in English were translated into Turkish. Members at the time were primarily Turkish or American; there were small numbers of African members from Nigeria and Ethiopia. In November 2012, there were approximately 10 active youth and children in the Istanbul Branch.

The Church first assigned young missionaries to Ankara in mid-2013. Missionaries noted in April 2014 that there had been 16 Iranian convert baptisms and two Turk convert baptisms since the arrival of missionaries. The Church reported in mid-2014 that there were six young, full-time missionaries assigned to Istanbul and six young, full-time missionaries assigned to Ankara. Four senior missionary couples were also assigned to Turkey at the time. Church leaders noted that many members in the Istanbul and Ankara Branches were Iranians and Iraqis.[\[4\]](#)

The Church in Turkey has experienced slow membership growth within the past four decades. There was essentially no change in the number of church-reported members between 1977 (141 members) and 2003 (151 members). Membership increased from 151 in 2003 to 221 in 2008, 313 in 2012, and 397 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have widely oscillated within the past 10 years from as low as -5.4% in 2009 to as high as 24.5% in 2014.

LDS Background - Kazakhstan

American expatriate Latter-day Saints began temporarily relocating to Kazakhstan for employment purposes in the mid to late 1990s. The Church obtained government recognition, formed the first branch in Almaty, began regularly baptizing local converts, and dedicated Kazakhstan for missionary work in the early 2000s. The first young, proselytizing missionaries arrived in 2004 but limited formal missionary activity to Almaty. Proselytizing missionaries began serving in Astana in March 2011. The Church frequently reassigned Kazakhstan to various Russian missions during the 2000s and early 2010s such as the Russia Novosibirsk Mission, the Russia Moscow Mission, and the Russia Moscow West Mission.

The Russia Novosibirsk Mission President announced in July 2012 that all missionaries assigned to Kazakhstan would begin learning Kazakh to teach the gospel. The motivation for the language change from Russian to Kazakh for proselytism and teaching centered on improving the Church's image as conducive and respectful to Kazakh culture. This was hoped in turn to reduce restrictions and difficulties encountered with government authorities. Missionaries began meeting with a Kazakh language tutor at a local university and were encouraged to only study Kazakh instead of both Kazakh and Russian. In August 2012, there were eight young, proselytizing missionaries serving in Almaty. The government passed a new religion law in 2011 that required religious groups to reregister with the government in order to operate on a local, regional, or national scale. The Church successfully reregistered its congregations in Almaty and Astana by the end of 2012. The Astana Group became an official branch in mid-2014.

The Church in Kazakhstan has experienced slow, albeit steady, membership growth. Church-reported membership increased from 46 in 2001 to 102 in 2005, 216 in 2012, and 281 in 2014. Annual membership growth rates have generally ranged from 10-20% within the past 15 years.

LDS Background - Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were assigned to the newly organized Europe East Area in 2000. The Church has reported only small groups of members who have resided in these nations within the past 15 years – the vast majority of whom consisting of Western expatriates. The Church has never previously assigned these nations to a mission. No full-time missionaries have served in these nations and no convert baptisms have occurred. There appear to be no more than 100 members within these five nations.

A member group has appeared to operate in Kyrgyzstan since 2002 for a handful of expatriate and American military personnel. Elder Russell M. Nelson met with government leaders and dedicated the country in August 2003.[\[5\]](#) The Church initially applied for government registration in 2004 but had not received approval to operate as of 2013 likely due to an "erroneous or insufficient application."[\[6\]](#) Foreign members who temporarily resided in Kyrgyzstan in 2012 reported that there were several local Kyrgyz members. These indigenous members frequently socialized with foreign members and attended worship services in the homes of foreign members when permitted by the Europe East Area Presidency. All Kyrgyz members have appeared to join the Church abroad in nations such as Kazakhstan and Russia. However, no member group has appeared to regularly meet for worship services with the exception of a military group to accommodate a handful of Latter-day Saint military personnel stationed at Manas Air Base. The Church has appeared to grant specific individuals or families permission to hold private church services within their homes, but these gatherings appear to occur on an inconsistent basis.

A member group appeared to begin operating in Baku, Azerbaijan sometime in the late 2000s to service the needs of nonnative members who temporarily live in the country for employment purposes. The Church appeared to organize the Baku Branch sometime in the early 2010s. Reports from local members indicate there were approximately 40 members on church records for the Baku Branch in 2012. There do not appear to be any Azerbaijani Latter-day Saints in the country.

One member from Tajikistan attended a special member meeting held in Almaty when Elder Russell M. Nelson visited

Kazakhstan in August 2003.^[7] The former Europe East Area President, Elder Paul B. Pieper, reported in 2007 that the Church had a congregation in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.^[8] Tajikistani government authorities reported that they banned the LDS Church in early 2010 as the request for re-registration was apparently denied.^[9] No LDS presence has appeared to operate since the early 2010s, although there has appeared to be at least one nonlocal LDS family who has resided in the country during this period. Senior missionaries engaged in humanitarian and development work visited Tajikistan in 2014 to provide neonatal resuscitation workshops. A Tajiki-speaking member from Kyrgyzstan served as their translator. Senior missionaries reported that positive, cooperative relationships have been established between the Church's humanitarian and development efforts and the Tajikistani government within recent years.

The history of the Church in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is extremely limited. Only a handful of American expatriate members have appeared to reside in Turkmenistan over the past two decades. The Church reported in recent years that a service member group administers foreign Latter-day Saint military personnel stationed in Uzbekistan.^[10]

Successes

The establishment of a new mission that includes less than one thousand Latter-day Saints and a population of over 150 million within its geographical boundaries constitutes a major success and advancement in the expansion of the Church into lesser-reached areas of the world. Rarely has the Church organized new missions in locations of the world where there are few members spread over vast geographical distances, widespread government restrictions on religious freedom, and predominantly Muslim populations. The Central Eurasian mission will include only seven branches (four in Turkey, two in Kazakhstan, one in Azerbaijan) and only four of these branches currently have full-time missionaries assigned.

The organization of a separate mission headquartered in a Turkic nation that specifically administers Turkic nations in Asia stands as an unprecedented decision by the Church to advance missionary efforts in a region of the world that has been almost totally unreached by the LDS gospel witness. The organization of new missions correlates with greater mission resource allocation. This is afforded by greater administrative infrastructure to accommodate larger numbers of missionaries. The establishment of new missions also corresponds to greater vision exhibited by mission leaders to take the LDS gospel witness to populations within their jurisdiction. Turkic ethnolinguistic groups constitute the majority of the population in all nations within the new mission with the exception of Tajikistan where the majority of the population is ethnically Persian (Tajiki). All national statutory languages in the new mission outside of Tajikistan are related to the Turkic language family and include North Azerbaijani in Azerbaijan, Kazakh in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmen in Turkmenistan, and Northern Uzbek in Uzbekistan. The decision by the Church to include all Turkic nations within the same mission provides for mission leaders to extend outreach specialized to the needs and cultural background of Turkic peoples.

The Church has made minor inroads in some nations within the boundaries of the Central Eurasian Mission. The Church assigned its first proselytizing missionaries to Kazakhstan in 2004 and Turkey in 2012. Both nations have full-time missionaries assigned to the two most populous cities. Mission leaders in recent years have advocated for missionaries to study, learn, and teach in the Kazakh and Turkish languages. The Church has secured legal status with the governments of Kazakhstan and Turkey within the past three years. Larger numbers of convert have appeared to be baptized within recent years. Annual membership growth rates for Kazakhstan and Turkey accelerated in 2014 to 17.1% and 24.5%, respectively. The Book of Mormon and a small number of gospel study and missionary materials has been translated into Turkish. A handful of gospel study and missionary materials has been translated into Kazakh. The Church has translated two materials into Northern Uzbek: the 13 Articles of Faith and Hymns and Child Songs.^[11]

Iranian refugees constitute a sizable number of recent converts in Turkey notwithstanding a mere 3,321 Iranian refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as of January 2014. The United States has historically accepted the majority of Iranian refugees in Turkey for resettlement.^[12] Although progress with Iranian and Iraqi refugees joining the Church has been encouraging, most of these converts will be resettled outside of Turkey and thus do not present as assets to establishing the Church in Turkey for the long-term.

Opportunities

The operation of a separate mission to administer the Turkic nations presents good opportunities for the Church to strengthen current congregations, extend more coordinated outreach in local languages, and explore opportunities for opening additional cities and nations to missionary activity. The handful of LDS branches in the new mission have historically been isolated from mission headquarters based in other countries. The Church has had some struggles maintaining some of these branches due to few active members and a lack of trained, experienced local priesthood holders. The Church has historically placed a strong emphasis on Russian language use in Kazakhstan and English language use in Turkey.

Turkey presents the greatest opportunities for immediate national outreach expansion among the nations in the Central Eurasian Mission due to greater religious freedom, the Central Eurasian Mission's headquarters based in Istanbul, and the recent assignment of young, proselytizing missionaries. The government permits religious groups to operate throughout the country. However, a religious group must register as an association with the provincial governor or as a foundation with the central government. The process to register as a foundation is significantly more costly and lengthy than the registration of an association, although foundations provide greater legal rights on the local level. Places of worship must be recognized as such by the government in order for religious services to be held.^[13]

The Church has yet to assign full-time missionaries to two Turkish cities that have branches, namely Adana and Izmir. The assignment of missionaries to these two cities will require significant planning and preparation. The Adana Branch specifically administers military personnel and meets on the military base. Consequently the branch has been largely inaccessible to the indigenous population. The Izmir Branch has had periods when no worship services have been held due to a lack of active members. Thus, the establishment of the Church in Izmir will share many similarities with the opening of an unreached city to missionary work where no LDS congregation previously operated.

Mission leaders have good opportunities to locate isolated members in additional Turkish cities where no branch currently operates and begin the process to apply as an association. Locations that will likely present the best prospects for an LDS establishment include the most populous cities, cities within close proximity to current LDS branches, and cities where there are multiple Latter-day Saints who follow church teachings and appear likely to become active members once a congregation is established. Cities that appear most favorable for mission leaders to visit and lay the groundwork for a future LDS presence include Antalya, Bursa, Denizli, Eskisehir, Kayseri, Kirikkale, Konya, Mersin, and the many large and medium-sized cities within the Istanbul area.

There are 13 metropolitan areas in the Central Eurasian Mission with at least one million inhabitants including nine in Turkey, one in Azerbaijan, one in Kazakhstan, one in Turkmenistan, and one in Uzbekistan.^[14] Each of these metropolitan areas present the greatest opportunities for growth due to large populations, accessibility from mission headquarters, and larger numbers of Christians than in smaller cities or rural areas. There are good opportunities to saturate currently-reached major cities in Kazakhstan and Turkey with additional full-time missionaries and congregations. The Almaty metropolitan area supports 1.74 million inhabitants^[15] and remains minimally reached by the Church as only one branch functions in the extreme southeastern portion of the city. There are opportunities to form groups in lesser-reached areas of the city where distance has contributed to lower rates of church attendance. Outreach expansion efforts in Almaty will be most successful if they do not split the current Almaty Branch but rather start groups in areas with no known active members. Likewise, there appear good opportunities to organize member groups within Istanbul and Ankara in areas distant from current meetinghouses.

Challenges – Government Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government restrictions on religious freedom constitute the primary barrier to the Central Eurasian Mission opening additional cities to missionary work and achieving "real growth." The Church missed its window of opportunity in the 1990s to establish a presence in Central Asian nations and Azerbaijan when governments implemented fewer restrictions on religious freedom. This was the time when other foreign-based, proselytism-oriented Christian groups obtained registration and experienced the greatest successes in finding and retaining converts. The LDS Church appeared to make no effort to establish a presence in these nations during the 1990s due to limited numbers of missionaries assigned to former Soviet republics, few or no foreign members or native converts in these nations to spearhead efforts to establish congregations and begin the registration process, concerns by LDS leadership regarding the proselytism of Muslim populations, and inadequate church infrastructure within the region.

Some laws and government policies currently pose insurmountable barriers to an LDS establishment in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan within the foreseeable future. Turkmenistan currently numbers among the most restrictive countries in the world in regards to religious freedom conditions. These restrictions have been largely instigated by concerns from government leaders regarding the influence of radical Islam on society and Western Christian groups promoting greater democratic freedoms. Currently religious activity may only occur if authorized by the Turkmen government. All religious groups must register with the government to operate in the country. Leaders of religious groups must have "advanced theological training." The government monitors and restricts foreign financial and material assistance, the training of clergy, religious education, and the use of religious literature. Monetary penalties were introduced in September 2013 regarding the dissemination of religious literature. Both individuals from registered and unregistered religious groups may be fined for distributing religious material unless they receive state approval. Religious groups have often avoided reporting societal abuses of religious freedom due to concerns of government surveillance and harassment. The government previously required a religious group to have at least 500 members in a single locality for a congregation to be officially registered,^[16] whereas today only five adult members were required for a congregation to be registered. In 2003, a new religious law required all religious groups to register, made the operation of unregistered religious groups a crime, limited religious education, and tracked foreign financial and material assistance to religious groups. Some religious groups are required to obtain both national and local approval/registration to operate. Religious groups must register as a religious group if there are between five and 50 members in a given location and religious groups must register as a religious organization if there are at least 50 members. Religious groups report that the registration process is confusing and complicated. The law bans foreign missionary activity. The government does not provide alternatives to mandatory military service for those who object due to religious beliefs. Although there are no legal penalties for individuals changing their religious affiliation, the government scrutinizes and questions ethnic Turkmen who convert to Christianity or other non-Islamic religions. The government and society view lesser-known Protestant Christian groups with suspicion.^[17]

The Uzbekistani government requires that a religious group "must present a list of at least 100 citizens age 18 or older and a charter with a legal address to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice"^[18] – an insurmountable criterion for the Church at present. The law has prohibited proselytism since 2003 and limits the activities of individuals and religious groups which it deems as a threat to national security. Additionally, the government delineates between illegal (not properly registered) and prohibited (extremist) groups. Prohibited groups primarily consist of radical Islamist groups that endeavor to establish a Muslim state. Harsh penalties are prescribed in the legal code for individuals organizing or participating in religious activities with an illegal or prohibited group, and for possession of illegal religious materials. Only religious groups with a central registered body are permitted to train religious personnel. Private religious instruction and religious education in public schools are prohibited.

There may be as many as 12,000 religious prisoners according to the most recent estimates. In recent years, the government has denied the registration of religious groups, raided both registered and unregistered religious communities, confiscated and destroyed religious literature, and discouraged children and youth from participating in religious activities. Some of the most severe instances of religious freedom abuses have occurred among Muslim extremists and unregistered Christian groups. The government continues to block public access to many Muslim and Christian internet news sites. Society is intolerant of proselytism and the conversion of Muslims to Christianity or other religions. Formerly-Muslim Uzbek Christians frequently experience discrimination and harassment from society.

The Kyrgyzstani government currently requires religious groups to have at least 200 adult citizen members in order to obtain official legal recognition and registration, thus creating an insurmountable barrier for the Church to establish an official presence in Kyrgyzstan. In the early and mid 2000s, the Church appeared unable to fulfill the previous requirement of 10 adult citizen members to obtain government recognition due to lackluster member-missionary efforts among local members and only a handful of Kyrgyzstani converts who had returned to Kyrgyzstan. Currently the Church likely has no more than a dozen Kyrgyzstani members who reside in the country. The current requirement for a single congregation to have 200 or more adult citizen members renders any prospects for the establishment of such a congregation in Bishkek or anywhere else in the country impossible.

The Tajikistani government also imposes significant religious freedom restrictions that pose challenges for the LDS Church to operate. People under the age of 18 are prohibited from participation in public religious activity and women are banned from attending Muslim religious services. No other country in the world prohibits children and youth from participating in public religious services. Parents are only permitted to teach their children about religion if this occurs in the privacy of their home and if the child desires to learn. Children ages seven to 18 may obtain religious education from school classes and religious institutions only if written parental consent is given. All Tajik citizens who leave the country are required to follow Tajikistani legislation pertaining to religious education, associating with religious groups, and conducting proselytism. Failure to do so may result in criminal charges. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) governs all laws pertaining to religious practice and oversees the registration process for religious groups. Registration is required for religious groups to operate. Failure to obtain registration can result in the government disbanding places of worship for unregistered groups and fining participants. Significant restrictions on religious education are imposed by the CRA which require religious groups to obtain permission and register. Both registered and unregistered religious groups have recently reported instances in which the government has forcibly closed religious institutions, detained individuals, conducted raids, and monitored individuals.^[19] Although senior missionary couples report improvements in the Church's relationship with the government, the government banned the Church in 2010^[20] which may result in future challenges for the Church to hold worship services.

The Azerbaijani government has imposed some restrictions that create significant challenges for the Church to establish a missionary presence. Registration with the government has not always guaranteed that the individual rights of members in certain religious groups are protected or upheld. The government has changed the Law on Religious Freedom 14 times since its creation in 1992 and has used legislation to limit or criminalize the activities of some religious groups that it views unfavorably. Religious groups have had to re-register on five separate occasions since 1991. The re-registration process for religious groups has been used by the government to restrict the activities of certain religious groups as applications are denied or approval is delayed for significant periods of time. Religious materials and literature are only permitted to be imported, sold, or distributed if approved by the government. The law bans foreigners from proselytism but does not indicate any restrictions on Azerbaijani citizens engaging in proselytism efforts. Foreigners who adhere to a registered religious group may participate in religious ceremonies or services.^[21]

Government legislation that has become increasingly strict and prohibitive to nontraditional Christian denominations stands as the greatest challenge for church growth in Kazakhstan. 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. These restrictions have created a nearly insurmountable task to open additional major cities to proselytism such as Shymkent, Karagandy, and Aktobe due to government restrictions on foreign missionaries and local registration requiring at least 50 members.

The Church in Turkey has reported difficulties securing missionary visas. Past instances of the government refusing to renew visas for missionaries disrupted missionary activity within the first year of proselytism. It is unclear why the Church has experienced challenges obtaining larger numbers of missionary visas and why past missionary visas were not renewed for the first cohort of missionaries to enter Turkey in February 2012. Some religious groups in Turkey have experienced challenges with registering congregations and places of worship such as Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses.^[22]

Additional Challenges for LDS Growth and Missionary Work

The revival of Islam in the predominantly Muslim former Soviet Republics within the past two decades poses serious challenges for the LDS Church to gain a foothold among the indigenous population regardless of the status of religious freedom. Thousands of mosques have been constructed within the past 25 years and Islamic missionaries have rekindled active religious participation among many formerly nominal Muslims. Consequently most populations in the Turkic nations and Tajikistan appear less receptive to nontraditional, proselytizing Christian groups that 20 years ago due to many strengthening or rediscovering their Islamic roots.

Strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam and the high percentage of Muslims in some nations poses challenges for missionary work.

Turkey numbers among the world's most homogeneously Muslim nations as recent estimates indicate as many as 99.8% of the population is Muslim. The population of Tajikistan is estimated to be 97% Muslim. The Church has historically engaged in few proselytism efforts in Muslim-majority countries and currently lacks teaching resources tailored to the religious background of Muslims. Receptivity among Muslims appears higher than most traditionally Muslim nations as indicated by frequent convert baptisms in Turkey and Kazakhstan. LDS missionary efforts face the challenge of overcoming ethnoreligious ties to Islam and nominalism as the influences of secularism and communism have reduced the religiosity of the population within the past century.

The size of the LDS community in Turkic nations and Tajikistan is miniscule in comparison to the enormous population of these nations. There are 82 cities in Turkey with 100,000 or more inhabitants without an LDS presence^[23] and 20 cities in Kazakhstan with 100,000 or more inhabitants without an LDS presence.^[24] The Church remains totally reliant on foreign missionary manpower to staff its missionary needs in the Turkic nations. It is unclear whether any native Turkish members that currently reside in Turkey have served a full-time mission. Only a handful of Kazakhstani members have served full-time missions. The lack of mission-aged young adults constitutes a serious challenge that will continue dependence on foreign missionaries for many years to come. There has been no recent progress expanding national outreach in the region aside from the opening of Astana, Kazakhstan to missionary work in the early 2010s.

The Church has yet to translate materials into many of the most commonly spoken indigenous languages of the Turkic nations and Tajikistan. No LDS materials have been translated into Azerbaijani, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Talysh, Turkmen, or Uighur. Only a handful of gospel study and missionary materials have been translated into Kazakh and Northern Uzbek. Turkish is the only Turkic language that has had the Book of Mormon translated. The future translation of the Book of Mormon into Kazakh appears of significant importance due to the Church's establishment in Kazakhstan, the assignment of full-time missionaries to the country, and opportunities for growth in Almaty and Astana.

Comparative Growth

The Central Eurasian Mission is the Church's first mission to be created to have had as few members within its geographical boundaries since 1999. There were 25 missions organized in the 1990s that appeared to initially include less than one thousand members within their geographical boundaries including 18 in Eastern Europe (the Czechoslovakia Prague Mission in 1990 to administer Czechoslovakia, the Greece Athens Mission in 1990 to administer Greece, the Hungary Budapest Mission in 1990 to administer Hungary, the Poland Warsaw Mission in 1990 to administer Poland, the Finland Helsinki East Mission in 1990 to administer the western Soviet Union, the Bulgaria Sofia Mission in 1991 to administer Bulgaria, the Russia St Petersburg Mission in 1992 to administer northwestern Russia, the Ukraine Donetsk Mission in 1993 to administer eastern Ukraine, the Latvia Riga Mission in 1993 to administer the Baltic States, the Romania Bucharest Mission in 1993 to administer Romania, the Russia Samara Mission in 1993 to administer central Russia, the Russia Rostov-na-Donu Mission in 1994 to administer southwestern Russia, the Russia Novosibirsk Mission in 1994 to administer Siberia, the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission in 1995 to administer western Siberia, the Albania Tiara Mission in 1996 to administer Albania, the Austria Vienna South Mission in 1996 to administer the former Yugoslavia, the Armenia Yerevan Mission to administer Armenia in 1999, and the Russia Vladivostok Mission in 1999 to administer the Russian Far East), four in Sub-Saharan Africa (the Kenya Nairobi Mission in 1991 to administer East Africa, the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission (later relocated and renamed the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission) in 1992 to administer Central Africa, the Nigeria Ilorin Mission in 1992 to administer northwestern Nigeria, and the Nigeria Jos Mission in 1992 to administer central and northern Nigeria), two in Asia (the Mongolia Ulaanbaatar Mission in 1995 to administer Mongolia and the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission in 1997 to service Cambodia and Vietnam), and one in the Caribbean (the Trinidad Tobago Mission in 1991 to administer Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname). No LDS missions were organized in the 2000s that included less than one thousand members within their geographic boundaries.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups maintain a small presence in the Turkic nations. Essentially all of these groups established an initial presence in the Turkic nations during the 1990s or earlier. These groups initiated missionary activity at a time when there were fewer government restrictions on religious freedom and society was more tolerant of nontraditional Christian faiths.

Growth trends have significantly varied by denomination. Evangelicals claim less than one percent of the Turkic population. Evangelicals have reported the greatest successes in Kazakhstan^[25] and Kyrgyzstan^[26] where the population is approximately 0.7% evangelical and indigenous Evangelical communities have been established among the ethnic Kazakh and Kyrgyz. Evangelicals maintain the most minimal presence in Turkey^[27] and Turkmenistan^[28] as evidenced by the Evangelicals constituting less than 0.1% of the population in either nation.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has experienced significant declines in Central Asia within the past decade. Adventists reported 6,809 members, 110 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 53 companies (small or recently-established congregations) in 2004 and 4,527 members, 71 churches, and 52 companies in 2014.^[29] Adventists reported less significant declines in Azerbaijan during the same period as the number of members declined from 670 to 531, the number of churches decreased from six to five, and the number of companies remained unchanged.^[30] Adventists maintain a minimal presence in Turkey and have experienced very slow growth. Adventists in Turkey reported 57 members, three churches, and two companies in 2004 and 132 members, two churches, and two companies in 2014.^[31]

Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a presence in all Turkic nations and Tajikistan, but report widespread challenges with obtaining government recognition, experiencing interference from government and community leaders, and persecution. Witnesses have

experienced the greatest growth in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey within recent years. Very slow or stagnant growth has occurred in other nations. Witnesses reported 2014 statistical data for four Turkic nations including Azerbaijan (1,220 average publishers [active members who regularly engage in proselytism], 42 baptisms, 12 congregations), Kazakhstan (17,475 average publishers, 624 baptisms, 240 congregations), Kyrgyzstan (4,936, 202 baptisms, 69 congregations), and Turkey (2,408 average publishers, 86 baptisms, 30 congregations). Witnesses appear to have fewer than one thousand members in each of the following Turkic or Central Asian nations: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Limitations

Although several high-quality reports from senior missionary couples and full-time missionaries were available in the early 2010s, reports from full-time missionaries serving in Kazakhstan and Turkey have been unavailable since mid-2014. Policies by mission and area presidencies discouraging blogs and social media sites for missionaries serving in these nations have appeared primarily responsible for the lack of data on recent missionary activity in these locations. No reports from local members were available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish country-by-country statistics regarding the number of convert baptisms, the number of members serving full-time missions, or the number of full-time missionaries assigned. Data collected by the Church regarding member activity and convert retention rates is not released to the public. The Church does not publish membership data for Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan. The Church does not publish data on the operation of member groups. Thus, it is unclear whether any member groups operate in the Turkic nations.

Future Prospects

The organization of the Central Eurasian Mission presents exciting opportunities for the Church to make inroads in the Turkic nations and Central Asia due to greater mission president oversight, greater probability of culturally-specific outreach due to the Turkic nations grouped into a single mission, and the minimal presence of the Church in this region of the world. Prospects appear most favorable for the assignment of larger numbers of missionaries to Almaty and Astana in Kazakhstan, and Istanbul and Ankara in Turkey. Additional cities in Turkey may have missionaries assigned such as Izmir and Adana. Government restrictions on religious freedom and strong ethnoreligious ties with Islam predict significant challenges or insurmountable barriers for the Church to establish a missionary presence in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The translation of basic gospel study and missionary materials and LDS scriptures into indigenous languages will be important for future proselytism efforts.

[1] "Turkey," Deseret News 2013 Church Almanac, p. 579

[2] Avant, Gerry. "'Saints on the frontier' - Church leaders visit Eastern Europe," LDS Church News, 30 June 2012. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62493/Saints-on-the-frontier---Church-leaders-visit-Eastern-Europe.html>

[3] Avant, Gerry. "'Saints on the frontier' - Church leaders visit Eastern Europe," LDS Church News, 30 June 2012. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62493/Saints-on-the-frontier---Church-leaders-visit-Eastern-Europe.html>

[4] Avant, Gerry. "Elder Bednar Says Church Growing Steadily in Europe East Area," lds.org, 12 June 2014. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/elder-bednar-says-church-growing-steadily-in-europe-east-area>

[5] "Elder Nelson Visits Kazakhstan," LDS Church News, 13 September 2003. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/44312/Elder-Nelson-visits-Kazakhstan.html>

[6] "Kyrgyz Republic," Religious Freedom Report for 2012, retrieved 1 February 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208432>

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