



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Failed Efforts to Expand Outreach in Greece

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Overview

The LDS Church in Greece has arguably experienced some of the slowest membership growth and outreach expansion in Europe over the past two decades. The most recently opened city which currently has an LDS presence is Thessaloniki where LDS missionary efforts commenced in the late 1980s.^[1] Efforts to open additional cities to missionary work, such as Kavala and Patra in the mid and late 2000s, have been unsuccessful as LDS meetings no longer appeared to occur in these locations as of mid-2011.^[2] Strong ethno-religious ties with Greeks and the Greek Orthodox Church are a major barrier to growth, but not one which is insurmountable as indicated by steady growth and sizable followings of a few nontraditional Christian groups in recent years such as Jehovah's Witnesses which numbered nearly 30,000 active members in 2010.^[3] This essay explores the past history of attempted LDS outreach expansion in Greece, identifies barriers to outreach expansion today, and provides suggestions for addressing barriers and identifying strengths and successes.

LDS Background

The LDS Church has concentrated its outreach to Athens largely due to its large population four times that of the second most populous city, Thessaloniki, and easy accessibility. The first full-time missionaries were assigned to Greece in 1986 and the Greece Athens Mission was organized in 1990. Several branches functioned in Athens in the early 1990s but by late 2011 only two branches continued to function in the city of 3.2 million. With over 800,000 inhabitants, Thessaloniki has received consisted outreach due to its large population and small nucleus of active members. All other cities in Greece have fewer than 200,000 inhabitants and only Patra and Kavala have ever had LDS missionaries assigned. In late 2011, the Church appeared to have no more than 50 missionaries assigned to Greece.

Successes

The continued operation of the Greece Athens Mission for two decades notwithstanding extremely slow church growth and many proselytism challenges is the greatest achievement by the LDS Church in Greece. Receptivity to the Church has not noticeably changed since proselytism began in 1986. Maintaining an active proselytism presence may yield more dramatic growth in coming years if the Greek population becomes more receptive to LDS outreach. In the short term, avoiding the overstaffing of missionaries to the few branches in Greece will be required to reduce the likelihood of local members becoming reliant on full-time missionaries for member responsibilities such as home teaching, blessing the sacrament, and holding branch callings.

Opportunities

Although few lasting results have been achieved by the LDS Church in Greece, greater progress has occurred reaching Greek Americans in the United States where converts have greater access to social support networks in the Church, language issues are simplified due to many Greeks speaking English fluently, religious freedom is respected, and Greek communities appear more socially tolerant of religious diversity among ethnic Greeks. More favorable conditions for baptizing and retaining converts in the United States offer few benefits to the Church in Greece, although Greek American converts who serve missions in the Greece Athens Mission may lead to some breakthroughs. Greek American missionaries assigned to Greece may provide more effective encouragement to converts to remain active and serve missions, foster the development of an international Greek Latter-day Saint community, and relate with investigators who must confront conversion issues pertaining to cultural norms such as strong ethno-religious ties to the Greek Orthodox Church, the ostracism of nontraditional Christians, and the prevalence of substances forbidden by the Word of Wisdom such as tobacco and alcohol.

Challenges

One of the greatest difficulties that has discouraged LDS outreach expansion is retaining native Greek converts in locations with a church presence. Missionaries reported in 2006 that native Greek members were in the minority of most LDS congregations at the time and in 2011 appeared to comprise a minority of active LDS membership in Greece. The strong ethno-religious connection between native Greeks and the Greek Orthodox Church results in many LDS converts becoming ostracized from their families, friends, and communities for disgracing their Greek heritage. As a result of low receptivity among the Greek majority and higher receptivity among Asians and other foreign workers, non-Greeks constitute the majority and create assimilation challenges with the Greek population. Full-time missionaries have consistently worked to compensate for a lack of active Greek members in branches and groups by heading Greek language use in their congregations. Due to dependence on full-time missionaries for ecclesiastical and administrative support in established units, larger numbers of missionaries have not been assigned to unreached cities and towns.

The mixed religious freedom record of Greece since the Church's initial establishment has complicated and likely discouraged outreach expansion. Missionaries have repeatedly been harassed, fined, arrested, and briefly imprisoned for engaging in missionary activity that is within the confines of Greek law. Corruption in law enforcement has created persistent frustrations and setbacks for mission leaders who must weigh the prospects for expanding missionary work to additional locations with concerns for prospective harassment, intimidation, and disruption of missionary work.

Dismal progress establishing strong branches comprised of ethnic Greek members has likely discouraged mission leaders from opening additional locations to proselytism. Thessaloniki remained the only city outside of Athens to support a branch with several active Greek members in late 2011 notwithstanding efforts to open Kavala and Patros to missionary work in the 2000s. Missionaries in the late 2000s reported that mission leadership considered assigning missionaries to Crete but as of late 2011 no missionaries were assigned. Missionaries have nonetheless periodically visited additional areas to teach and baptize isolated sincere investigators but as of late 2011 the handful of isolated converts remained too dispersed and few in numbers to merit the establishment of additional congregations. Mission leaders and missionaries who periodically visit these members and hold cottage meetings in their cities and towns allow for some limited outreach expansion that does not exact many mission resources.

A lack of local, native Greek LDS leaders has also been a major contributor to failed outreach expansion efforts. Only a handful of local members served missions in the 2000s. LDS missionaries often provide extensive assistance with convert retention, reactivation, and administrative efforts resulting in fewer available resources to dedicate toward opening additional cities to proselytism. As a result of some of the lowest convert baptismal rates among the Church's 340 missions worldwide and dismal results for three decades, the size of the LDS missionary force in Greece has been drastically reduced in recent years.

Language issues

A lack of active Greek members challenges mission efforts to conduct church services in the Greek language when non-Greek-speaking members comprise the majority and often speak English as a second language. Providing multiple language translations to meet the needs of members challenges efforts by mission leaders who have few resources available.

Comparative Growth

Since 1990, the LDS Church in Europe has experienced no outreach expansion and a current presence restricted to only one or two cities in only a handful of countries. Nearly all of these nations have fewer than one million inhabitants and congregations primarily comprised of native members. Nations where the Church has struggled the most in Europe to expand national outreach include Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia.

Most nontraditional, missionary-minded Christian groups maintain greater national outreach in Greece than the LDS Church but with the exception of Jehovah's Witnesses all struggle to expand outreach and have a presence in most areas of the country. Other outreach-focused Christians have experienced similar setbacks and barriers to outreach expansion as the LDS Church but appear to have achieved higher convert retention likely due to many of these groups relying on local members to conduct missionary activity.

Future Prospects

Low convert retention and member activity rates among Greek members, societal intolerance of Greek Orthodox adherents converting to the LDS Church, low receptivity, and frequent harassment from law enforcement paint an unfavorable picture for future LDS outreach expansion in the coming years. Maintaining currently operating branches and facilitating the organization of groups and cottage meetings in unreached cities and towns appears the most feasible course of action for the future due to low receptivity and societal intolerance of nontraditional Christian groups. Performing humanitarian projects and public affairs campaigns may help improve the Church's image in the coming years.

[1] "From around the world," LDS Church News, 9 May 1992.

<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/22238/From-around-the-world.html>

[2] "Meetinghouse locator," www.churchofjesuschrist.gr (Greek Country Website), retrieved 22 September 2011.
<http://www.churchofjesuschrist.gr/index.php?id=252>

[3] "Statistics: 2010 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 22 September 2011.
http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm