LDS Growth Case Studies

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Methods of LDS Outreach in Muslim Nations

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Overview

Muslims number among the least reached religious groups by Latter-day Saints. With only a handful of exceptions, nearly all nations without an LDS presence have predominantly Muslim populations. The Church maintains a presence in many Muslim nations; albeit a tiny presence generally limited to foreign members who relocated for employment or military purposes. Oftentimes congregations operate in private on a semi-official basis due to government restrictions on religious assembly. It is encouraging that the Church has members and congregations in as many Muslim nations as at present, but such a presence is largely transient and artificial considering little or no contact with the native Muslims occurs. A lack of an LDS presence among native populations of Muslim nations has originated from legal and societal restrictions on Muslim-targeted proselytism, government regulations prohibiting public religious assembly for non-traditional Christian groups, low receptivity, and a lack of LDS mission resources allocated to Muslim nations. Any mission resources assigned to predominantly Muslim nations are generally concentrated among Christian minorities, such as in Pakistan. The Church has often discouraged any outreach among Muslims out of fears that the safety of converts and local leaders could be jeopardized. A few Muslim-majority nations that are secular or have populations with no strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam have LDS missionaries who openly proselyte Muslims and non-Muslims alike, such as Sierra Leone and Albania.

Restrictions on religious freedom and low receptivity do not present insurmountable challenges in all Muslim nations for establishing the Church among native populations. Many Muslim nations permit their citizens to convert to another religion but these converts often face significant pressure from their government and communities not to do so. Several missionary-focused nontraditional Christian groups extend outreach in many Muslim-majority nations such as Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. These and other Christian groups frequently report small numbers of formerly-Muslim converts that are self-sustaining in their worship and local leadership in their home nations. In 2011, the LDS Church did not appear to possess a small number of formerly-Muslim converts in any Muslim-majority nation worldwide. Generally formerly-Muslim Latter-day Saint converts are isolated and comprise only a handful of individuals in nations which have an LDS presence. The Church has experienced some success baptizing former Muslims outside their home countries in Europe and North America.

Methods of Outreach

Even if government restrictions on foreign missionaries were lifted, full-time proselytizing missionaries offer few benefits toward missionary activity in Muslim nations due to the lack of language training in local languages, societal restrictions of proselytism, and low receptivity. Successful outreach and church growth will hinge on more passive approaches such as member-missionary activity conducted within the bounds of the law and humanitarian and development projects. The development of teaching approaches specially tailored to the religious and cultural background of Muslims presents an ongoing need for significant inroads to occur among establishing the Church in these areas. Many Muslim nations permit their citizens free access to the internet. Creating church-sponsored websites explaining LDS beliefs, providing contact information for gospel teaching and church service times and locations, and online church materials in commonly spoken languages by Muslims such as Arabic, Farsi, Berber languages, Urdu, Turkish, and Indonesian can improve outreach potential in a manner that is adapted to the unique cultural conditions of many Muslim nations. The Church has yet to experiment with broadcasting radio programs into Muslim nations in commonly spoken languages. Radio broadcasts could explain LDS beliefs, convey testimonies of formerly Muslim converts, and offer direction for additional resources for interested individuals.

Founding nonreligious LDS institutions in Muslim nations present good opportunities for meeting local developmental and educational needs, increasing awareness of the Church among the general population, and establishing a positive reputation. Visitor centers, hospitals, schools, health clinics, employment workshops, and orphanages can be operated by Christian organizations in many Muslim nations. Visitor centers can provide information on LDS educational institutions and programs

such as the Perpetual Education Fund. Church schools such as BYU have attracted some Muslims due to the high moral code enforced. In 1989, the Church received permission from the Jordanian government to register a visitor center in Jordan[1] which has been utilized for branch activities and outreach educating the general Muslim population about BYU. The establishment of this center appears to have influenced the development of an indigenous Jordanian LDS community and has strengthened positive ties with the government. Today, Jordan is one of the only Muslim nations which has at least one branch that conducts church meetings in an indigenous language to service native Latter-day Saints.

West African nations present the most favorable conditions for beginning LDS outreach among predominantly Muslim populations. Mali, Niger, Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia, Chad, and Burkina Faso have tolerant Muslim populations that permit Christians to worship and proselyte. Most missionary-minded Christians have had a presence in these nations for years or decades and experience slow membership and congregational growth as few Muslims have converted to Christianity. The LDS Church has yet to take advantage of the impressive amount of religious freedom granted to nontraditional Christians in these nations. Failure to establish an LDS presence in the near future may result in a deterioration of religious freedom in these nations if fundamentalist Muslim groups gain greater influence on government and legislation.

The Church has the opportunity to reach millions of Muslims who live as temporary workers, foreign students, and immigrants in Western Europe, North America, Latin America, and East Asia. With few or no legal restrictions on proselytism, these nations present good testing grounds for reaching lesser-reached and unreached peoples who are traditionally Muslim. Baptizing and retaining even a handful of formerly-Muslim individuals from these nations could bring breakthroughs in establishing the Church in Muslim nations if converts return to their home countries and provide a nucleus for an LDS community to be established. Latter-day Saint converts who once adhered to traditional Christian faiths in the region such as Copts, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians can also contribute to the formation of an LDS community that meets the social and emotional needs of potentially outcast and conflicted converts who must negotiate their devotion to their new faith and follow societal norms respecting family and tradition.

In stanchly Islamic nations such as the Gulf States and countries in North Africa, the Church may gain only a handful of formerly Muslim converts over an extended period of outreach. Societal and government harassment of Christian converts who renounce Islam, ostracism from family and society, and at times physical threats against converts pose serious concerns that may outweigh the benefits of forming a small group of native Latter-day Saints in these nations at present. Protocol for how investigators who seriously consider baptism handle these issues is warranted if the Church pursues passive outreach in these locations. Failure to develop criteria that addresses the specific ramifications of a former Muslim joining the LDS Church may result in reduced convert retention and physical and psychological threats directed at prospective converts. The possibility of baptizing native formerly-Muslim converts in such locations should not be entirely written off. The Church has permitted the baptism of converts and open proselytism in non-Muslim nations which experience similar adverse societal conditions such as Greece.

Barriers to Outreach

The overwhelming list of barriers to extending LDS outreach into Muslim nations has likely discouraged mission planners from considering the allotment of mission resources. The lack of personal connections between local Muslims and expatriate and local converts who previously adhered to a traditional Christian faith is a major deterrent to establishing the LDS Church in many Muslim nations today. Additional barriers include the small number of active LDS members in the region, indigenous Latter-day Saints consisting of only a handful or a few individuals in most nations, the preponderance of members from North America, Europe, and the Philippines who do not speak local languages, limited member-missionary participation, government and societal restrictions on proselytism, church policies dissuading members from proselytism in nations in which proselytism is permitted, low receptivity due to strong ethno-religious ties to traditional faiths, bans on distributing religious literature, challenges obtaining foreign missionary visas, war, ethnic violence, and political instability.

Several Muslim nations uphold such severe restrictions on religious freedom by government and community leaders that any prospective outreach would be impractical at present. Saudi Arabia, Western Sahara, Mauritania, and Iran number among the Muslim nations with the lowest degree of religious freedom and the highest intolerance of any Christian presence; especially if Christians are from nontraditional denominations.

Future Prospects

There appear to be no upcoming changes in church policy regarding the proselytism of Muslims in their home nations. Isolated from the indigenous Muslim majority, the tiny Latter-day Saint presence in these nations is almost always limited to temporary foreign workers and offer few resources to reach native populations if permitted by local laws. The Muslim nations of Sub-Saharan Africa such as Mali, Senegal, and Burkina Faso may be among the next nations to receive purposeful Latter-day Saint proselytism and missionary activity. Stagnant numbers of Latter-day Saints serving full-time missions worldwide in an era of expanding opportunities for missionary work will likely continue to delay the assignment of missionaries in Muslim nations where they may be permitted to work.

[1] "Jordanian leaders approve LDS center," LDS Church News, 9 September 1989. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19128/Jordanian-leaders-approve-LDS-center.html