LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Growth among Slovak Immigrants in Sheffield, England

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Overview

The LDS Church has experienced little growth among immigrant communities in the United Kingdom over the past century. All missionary activity appeared to occur in the English language and without any specialization towards specific ethnic groups until the late twentieth century. In 2010, the Church operated only two non-English-speaking branches in the United Kingdom, one Spanish-speaking and the other Portuguese-speaking, and also extended Chinese-directed missionary work with full-time missionaries assigned to teach in Mandarin Chinese. All non-English outreach efforts appeared restricted to the London area at the time.

In the early 2010s, the LDS Church experienced rapid growth among a small community of Slovak immigrants in Sheffield, England notwithstanding few Slovaks residing in the United Kingdom. In 2001, the census counted only 595 residents in the United Kingdom who were born in Slovakia[1] but by 2011 there were an estimated 600-700 Romani Slovaks living in Sheffield alone.[2]

In 2010, a Slovak immigrant who had previously resettled in Darnell, Sheffield, England was baptized into the Sheffield 1st Ward. The new convert proved instrumental in referring friends and relatives living in the area to the Church resulting in a surge of convert baptisms. Initially Slovak investigators and converts attended church services in the Sheffield 1st Ward. The number of Slovaks attending church services swelled in 2010 resulting in increased involvement from full-time missionaries and local church leaders in facilitating leadership development, convert retention, and teaching investigators. In late 2011, the Missionary Department approved a request from the England Leeds Mission president for assigning a Slovakian-speaking, full-time missionary companionship to the mission to teach the sizable number of recent converts and investigators. In early 2012, missionaries reported that a Slovakian-speaking unit was organized and that sacrament meeting attendance reached as high as 80. The number of new convert and investigators attending the Slovakian-speaking group in Sheffield was higher than for the entire country of Slovakia at the time notwithstanding the Church maintaining a presence in Slovakia for two decades, performing missionary work in five cities, and operating four branches and a group. Less than two years elapsed from the first Slovak convert baptism in Sheffield to the formation of a group with 80 regularly attending meetings. In early 2012, missionaries also reported plans for assigning a senior missionary couple to Sheffield to provide administrative and leadership support and training to the fledging group of Slovak Latter-day Saint converts.

Factors Promoting Growth

The Church has been resourceful and adaptive toward meeting the language needs of Slovaks in Sheffield. Local members report that English-speaking full-time missionaries assigned to Sheffield have studied Slovakian on their own and utilize these language skills to the best of their ability. Returned missionaries who served in the Czeck/Slovak Mission provide the bulk of leadership training and development for Slovak converts who hold leadership positions in the group in addition to language support for Slovaks who are not fluent in English. Local leaders have initiated contact with the Czech/Slovak Mission for additional resources. A Ukrainian sister missionary fluent in Slovakian and a Slovakian Latter-day Saint fluent in English have also provided additional resources for meeting language needs such as supplying Slovakian translations of LDS materials and translating church meetings into English and Slovakian.

Commitment for many Slovaks to join the Church has been high resulting in good convert retention. Transportation challenges and distance from the church meetinghouse require diligence and self discipline for investigators and members to often walk several kilometers to church each week. Initial converts exhibited strong levels of devotion to the Church as language resources were less developed at the time of their conversion resulting in limited understanding of church services and fewer

socialization opportunities. The level of commitment among most converts has remained consistent notwithstanding these challenges.

Entire Slovak families have joined the Church at once. In addition to accelerating growth, a family-centered proselytism approach engenders the development of local church resources that are more equipped to reach a larger population of Slovaks in the area. Many husbands and fathers boost available manpower for local leadership positions and offer support for adult male-directed missionary work. Women provide resources for reaching the female Slovak population. Youth and children provide fellowshipping to additional converts and investigators.

The organization of a separate congregation for Slovakian-speaking members fosters a sense of community at church as church services, social gatherings, and testimony-building activities are tailored to language and cultural needs. Slovak group leadership has actively participated in missionary efforts among the Slovak community in Sheffield. A member-missionary approach to proselytism results in more efficient use of missionary time, higher convert retention rates, and long-term ecclesiastical and social support whereas a foreign full-time missionary approach to proselytism reduces efficiency of missionary time, lowers convert retention rates, and creates problems maintaining outreach consistency through cycles of new missionaries assigned to an area.

Local English members and leaders have extended fellowship, support, and kindness to Slovaks and other foreigners notwithstanding cultural differences and language barriers. Many English members initially gave new converts and investigators rides to church in their cars to address transportation difficulties. Local English leadership has advocated policies which instill self-reliance in new converts and investigators however. The Sheffield 1st Ward Bishop requested that English members let new converts and investigators find their own method to travel to Church.[3] Church attendance numbers among Slovaks increased after ward leadership implemented this policy.

Opportunities

Contact with the Czech/Slovak Mission offers many opportunities for growth. Greater collaboration and accountability for Slovak converts between England and Slovakia permits more efficient outreach capabilities among Slovaks in both nations. In early 2012, missionaries serving in the Czech/Slovak Mission reported that recent converts in Sheffield, England provided teaching referrals for relatives and friends in Slovakia.

High receptivity in Sheffield suggests that the Church may experience similar growth among Slovaks and other Eastern European groups in additional English cities if there are initial converts who share enthusiasm for missionary work, available mission and member resources, and cooperative and caring English church leaders and members who understand and meet the spiritual needs and economically-discouraging and socially-trying circumstances of immigrant groups. To date the Church has not appeared to have experienced success among a particular Eastern European immigrant group of a similar magnitude as among Slovaks in Sheffield. The Church may experience similar success in England among other Eastern European peoples.

Challenges

Many Slovaks experience low living standards. Life expectancy rates among Slovaks appear among the lowest in the United Kingdom due to poor access to healthcare caused by harassment, discrimination, illiteracy, and language barriers.[4] Native LDS leadership can provide education and direction for needy members to obtain adequate healthcare and secure long-term employment, but have little power advocating for social change to integrate Slovak converts into mainstream English society. The Church may experience difficulties maintaining a strong presence among Slovaks if life expectancy rates do not increase and health and economic challenges are not adequately addressed.

The LDS Church has faced challenges maintaining real membership growth, self-sufficiency in local leadership, and missionary work among ethnic groups few in number living outside their traditional homelands. The Slovak population in Sheffield of a couple thousand at most is minuscule compared to the 640,720 inhabitants of the entire city. With such a small target population, LDS leaders will have to face the challenge of maintaining continuous Slovak-directed outreach. As a result of few Slovaks in the area, it may be impractical to continue outreach if most Slovak Latter-day Saints move outside the city or develop sufficient English-speaking abilities to integrate into one of the three English-speaking wards. With the recent pace of missionary activity among the Slovak community, it is possible that members and missionaries will make contact with virtually all members of the Slovak community in a matter of a couple years. With Latter-day Saints potentially accounting for as much as 5-10% of the Slovak population in Sheffield at present, the Slovak community may become oversaturated with LDS outreach resulting in few if any additional converts joining the Church. In turn, this could lead to an entrenchment of the LDS Slovak community as few new individuals join the Church, insinuating integration challenges for new converts several years later.

The assignment of Slovakian-speaking missionaries may generate immediate positive results such as additional teaching and leadership development resources but hurt self-sufficiency in leadership in the long run. Local leadership may become dependent on full-time missionaries for administrative issues considering many LDS missionaries possess significantly more experience and doctrinal knowledge than recent converts serving in leadership positions. Care must be taken by local church and mission leaders to limit full-time missionary involvement in administrative affairs and direct full-time missionaries to fulfill their role as teachers and exemplars of gospel living.

Conclusion

The growth of the LDS Church among the Slovak community in Sheffield constitutes one of the greatest breakthroughs for the Church in reaching ethnic minority groups in the United Kingdom. Much of the success in finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts has occurred through member-missionary efforts led by local church leaders. Prospects appear favorable for the formation of a permanent LDS Slovak community in Sheffield that has the potential to become self sustaining. The assignment of Slovakian-speaking full-time missionaries offers benefits relating to teaching resources but presents drawbacks pertaining to reducing self-sufficiency. Careful coordination between full-time missionaries, Slovak and English church leaders, and mission leadership will be required for the Church to troubleshoot potential self-sufficiency challenges with local leadership and perpetuating an LDS presence among the Slovak community if receptivity declines. Ongoing communication between the England Leeds and Czech/Slovak Missions may result in accelerated growth in Slovakia among the friends and relatives of recent Slovak coverts in Sheffield. The Church may experience breakthroughs with other ethnic minority groups in the United Kingdom in the foreseeable future if initial converts exhibit a strong, consistent desire to share the gospel and if local and mission leaders can quickly mobilize resources to capitalize on these opportunities.

[1] "Database on Immigrants in OECD countries (DIOC)," www.oecd.org, retrieved 7 February 2012. http://www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en_2649_33931_40644339_1_1_1_1,00.html

[2] "Gypsies and Travellers," Sheffield First Partnership, retrieved 6 February 2012. https://www.sheffieldfirst.com/the-partnership/health-and-well-being-partnership/jsna/neighbourhoods/bme-communities/gypsies-and

[3] Nettleship, Brenda. "The Slovak Saints of Sheffield," News from England - www.lds.org.uk, 12 December 2011. http://www.lds.org.uk/news/article-view/article/the-slovak-saints-of-sheffield/

[4] "Gypsies and Travellers," Sheffield First Partnership, retrieved 6 February 2012. https://www.sheffieldfirst.com/the-partnership/health-and-well-being-partnership/jsna/neighbourhoods/bme-communities/gypsies-and