LDS Growth Case Studies

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Expatriate LDS Growth in the Middle East

Author: Matt Martinich

Overview

In 2008, the LDS Church organized the Middle East Africa North Area principally from the Europe West Area. Between year-end 2007 and 2010, LDS membership growth was most rapid in the Middle East Africa North Area among the Church's approximately two dozen administrative areas. At year-end 2007, there 2,813 members, one stake, two districts, six wards, and 19 branches in the area[1] whereas three years later there were 3,795 members, one stake, four districts, eight wards, and 29 branches.[2] During this three year period, membership increased by 35% and the number of congregations increased by 48%. The Africa South East Area experienced the second highest membership growth during this period (27%) followed by the Area West Area (20%). The Africa West area experienced the second highest congregational growth during this period (26%) followed by the Africa Southeast Area (22%). Membership growth in the Middle East has surpassed other world areas not due to accelerated growth among the indigenous population of these nations but rather from the steady flow of expatriates relocating to the region for business and employment. Today LDS membership in the Middle East is overwhelmingly North American, Western European, and Filipino. This essay examines the successes, opportunities, and challenges of a predominantly foreign LDS population on church growth in the Middle East.

LDS Background

In the 1960s and 1970s, expatriate Latter-day Saints began arriving to the Middle East in appreciable numbers. Many North American and European members were businessmen and contractors who worked for companies that extracted the region's vast oil and natural gas reserves. In 1983, the Church organized its first stake in the region - the Arabian Peninsula Stake - to service the hundreds of active members living in the Gulf States. Towards the end of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of Filipino and Southeast Asian Latter-day Saints moved to the Middle East to work in industry and services. In the 1980s and 1990s, the bulk of active LDS membership appeared to reside in Saudi Arabia but in the 2000s active membership became more balanced between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. The first LDS congregation in Kuwait appeared to begin operating sometime in the 1980s or early 1990s whereas the first congregation in Oman likely began meeting in the 1990s. By the late 2000s, the Manama Bahrain Stake - renamed from the Arabian Peninsula Stake - had 16 units. In 2011, the Church relocated the headquarters for the stake to the United Arab Emirates and renamed the stake the Abu Dhabi Stake. At the same time, the Church also created a district based in Bahrain called the Manama Bahrain District. At present, the Abu Dhabi Stake services Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates whereas the Manama Bahrain District services Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

The Church has generally experienced stagnant membership and congregational growth in North Africa, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria for the past several decades. The Church once maintained a presence in Iran between the 1950s and late 1970s and even operated a mission based in Tehran from 1975 to 1979 until the Iranian Revolution but has since had no known presence. In the 2000s and early 2010s, the United States-led invasion and occupation of Iraq resulted in the establishment of an LDS presence among military personnel on military installations in many areas of Iraq. However, by early 2012 the Church closed the Baghdad Iraq Military District following the withdrawal of United States military personnel and continued to operate only one branch based in Baghdad.

Successes

The Church has achieved strong, stable growth in the Gulf States notwithstanding the transient nature of most members living in the region and the somewhat artificial structure of church administration to service only foreigners. A stake has functioned for nearly 30 years notwithstanding the high turnover rate inherent in migrant worker and expatriate populations. To operate stakes

require over 100 active Melchizedek Priesthood holders and scores of dedicated members to fill leadership for both individual congregations and for the stake itself. The continued operation of a stake for such a long period of time suggests that the Church has achieved self reliance in filling leadership and meeting local ecclesiastical demands with little or no assistance from international church leadership and missionary manpower. The functioning of the stake has adapted to demographic shifts in LDS membership as indicated by the relocation of the stake from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to the United Arab Emirates. To reduce the administrative burden on local leaders, the Church split the stake to form a district to service members in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In 2010, the Church reported that membership increased from 786 to 906 just in the United Arab Emirates.

There is an LDS presence in almost every country in the Middle East. In early 2012, the only countries in the region without independent congregations operating were Iran, Palestine, and Yemen although it is likely that a small group met in members' homes for church services in Palestine and Yemen. In North Africa, it is unclear whether there is a permanent LDS presence in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia especially following the political and societal instability resultant from the Arab Spring protests and revolutions.

Steady growth has occurred among non-European ethnic groups such as Filipinos. In the late 2000s, members residing in Qatar reported that increasing membership necessitated the organization of a second ward in Doha which solely met the needs of Filipino Latter-day Saints. Some congregations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States appear to have large numbers of Filipinos.

Government agreements and the legal status of the Church have permitted the construction of some LDS facilities. In 1989, the Church obtained permission from the Jordanian government to construct a visitor's center that provides information on church-run universities and study abroad opportunities. The center is also used for local branch functions.[3] By 2011, the Church had three permanent facilities in Israel: The BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern studies, the Galilee Branch meetinghouse (completed in 2007)[4], and the Tel Aviv Branch meetinghouse (completed in 2011).[5] The Church obtained a 99-year lease on the property where the BYU Jerusalem Center stands.[6] In the early 2010s, the Church constructed its first meetinghouse in the Gulf States in the United Arab Emirates.

Opportunities

There are millions of non-Muslim foreign residents and temporary workers in the Middle East. Some nations permit limited member-missionary activity among non-Muslims. However any overt Christian proselytism is forbidden by governments in virtually all the Gulf States and most other nations in Middle East. In countries where there are no specific government restrictions in missionary activity, societal norms prohibit any open missionary work. Any gospel sharing approaches must follow government regulations and target other non-Muslim foreigners in appropriate locations. Notwithstanding these limitations, there are opportunities to reach some foreign ethnic groups who originate from locations unreached by the LDS Church. In India, the Church has congregations in cities that are populated by only five percent of the national population. Casual member-missionary activity among receptive Indian workers can broaden the scope of potential proselytism activity in the region and simultaneously promote outreach expansion in unreached areas of India if converts return to their hometowns and share the gospel with friends and family.

The large number of active members in the region presents good prospects for the Church to learn how to adapt teaching the gospel to Muslim populations as some members become acculturated to Middle Eastern customs. Church leaders have the opportunity to learn more about Middle Eastern cultures and how to tailor teaching approaches and missionary work to local traditions and laws. Latter-day Saints in the region have learned cleaver and appropriate methods of explaining their beliefs and practices to Muslims without engaging in proselytism activity. Stake and district leaders can coordinate with the missionary department and area presidency in the development of proselytism approaches that would present the gospel in a manner intelligible to Muslims and other traditional religious groups in the region.

Challenges

The impact of the steadily growing number of expatriate Latter-day Saints on prospective missionary efforts in the region is limited due to restrictions on religious freedom rendering most populations in the Middle East inaccessible through traditional missionary approaches. Laws, societal customs, and government regulations prohibit Christian missionary activity targeting Muslims and seriously discourage or ban Muslims from converting to another faith. The growth of the LDS Church among expatriates has established the needed administrative infrastructure to effectively reach populations often in several of the most populous locations. However, this achievement does not guarantee any impending opportunities to organize missionary efforts among indigenous populations. Even if government regulations on religious freedom were relaxed to permit some passive Christian proselytism activity, there are few expatriate members with personal connections among the indigenous population. Most countries in the region have few if any native Latter-day Saints. Future missionary activity will likely struggle to make segue in reaching the enormous indigenous populations of Egypt, Iran, and Syria as the majority of LDS membership in the region is socially isolated for socio-economic, political, and religious reasons.

War and political instability challenge any prospective missionary activity in most Middle Eastern nations. The persistent turmoil and societal upheaval of Arab Spring protests, insurgencies, sustain civil disorder, and violence make any near-term proselytizing efforts dangerous and impractical. Many foreigners who resided in nations which have experienced the most

intense fighting and instability over the past year have fled these countries, thereby diminishing the strength of any LDS presence established or totally uprooting any church presence altogether. Due to recent chaos and violence in Syria, it is unclear whether there remains any LDS presence in the country as service senior missionaries have likely been withdrawn and these missionaries played a pivotal role in the operation of the tiny Damascus Branch.

Comparative Growth

The Middle East is the only world region where foreign Latter-day Saints constitute the majority of church membership; native members comprise the bulk of membership in all other world regions. Since the 1990s, the LDS Church has had a significant foreigner presence in mainland China and expatriate members once outnumbered their Chinese counterparts until the mid-2000s. However in mainland China the Church has grown rapidly among the indigenous population through the conversion of Chinese overseas and their subsequent return.

Many outreach-oriented Christians report that foreigners constitute a large portion of their membership in the Middle East and North Africa. However, these groups appear to have a stronger following among non-North Americans than the LDS Church. Some of these groups have a permanent presence among the indigenous population independent of foreigners, making these Christian faiths less likely to experience a disruption in their operations in the Middle East than the LDS Church if the foreigner population had to relocate elsewhere.

Future Prospects

The continuation of congregational and membership growth among expatriate members appears likely for the LDS Church in the Middle in the coming years. Growth rates will largely depending on global and regional economic growth trends and performing member-missionary activity among non-Muslim foreigners in countries where permitted. The sustained presence of a large expatriate community of Latter-day Saints provides excellent opportunities to develop teaching and missionary work resources tailored to prospective future outreach initiatives among Muslims and other traditional religious groups if permitted by government and society one day.

[1] Deseret News 2009 Church Almanac, p. 177

[2] Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 181

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

[4] "Galilee Branch facility dedicated," LDS Church News, 31 March 2007.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50331/Galilee-Branch-facility-dedicated.html

[5] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Historic visit: Apostle tours 8 nations," LDS Church News, 30 April 2011.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/60852/Historic-visit-Apostle-tours-8-nations.html

[6] "Dedication of the Galilee Branch House," jerusalem.nielsonpi.com, retrieved 17 January 2011.
http://jerusalem.nielsonpi.com/galileebranch.pdf