



LDS Growth Case Studies

>

Prospective LDS Outreach among the Roma in Europe

Author: Matt Martinich

Special thanks to Sead Osmani and Matt McDonald for their research contributions to the writing of this case study.

Overview

The Roma (Gypsies) are among the most populous unreached peoples in Europe by the LDS Church, numbering at least several million in the 2000s. As of early 2012, the Church had not pursued any known Roma-specific outreach in any European country notwithstanding few or no restrictions on religious freedom in countries with sizable Roma populations. In recent years, full-time missionaries have taught and baptized a handful of Romani converts in several European nations but such outreach has been neither premeditated nor coordinated by mission leaders. This essay identifies opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for LDS growth among the Roma in Europe.

Background

Commonly known as gypsies, the Roma or Romany have lived in tight-knit communities throughout Europe for centuries. Originating from western India, the Roma originally called themselves the Dom and migrated to Central Asia and later to Southeastern Europe along the Silk Road during the Middle Ages. Roma dispersed throughout Europe and were found throughout the region by the late fifteenth century. Proud cultural traditions have been perpetuated from the Roma's historic roots in India and include music, dance, metal working, and animal training. Traditional religious beliefs share many commonalities with Hinduism and stress the need for natural balance in the universe.^[1] Many Roma affiliate with the traditional Christian denomination in their country of residence but are not practicing.^[2] Christians began proselytism among Romani groups in the nineteenth century and intensified missionary efforts in the latter-half of the twentieth century. Pentecostal Christianity established its roots among the Romani in France in the mid-twentieth century and spread to other areas with Romani populations in Europe and elsewhere.^[3] There are seven different sublanguages of Romani. Provided with the number of speakers and the primary country where spoken, these sublanguages include Balkan Romani in Serbia (709,570), Baltic Romani in Poland (58,460), Carpathian Romani in the Czech Republic (472,470), Kalo Finnish Romani in Finland (11,590), Sinte Romani in Serbia (318,920), Welsh Romani in the United Kingdom (no estimate available), and Vlax Romani in Romania (885,970).^[4]

Today the Roma number among the most discriminated ethnic groups in Europe and frequently report mistreatment by police, forced evictions, racist attacks, and denial of health care and citizenship.^[5] Many Roma reside in segregated communities and minimize their interaction with other ethnic groups, resulting in continued marginalization in mainstream society and little changes in societal attitudes of Roma culture and identity. Negative societal attitudes and abuse have appeared most severe in Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Romania.^[6]

Opportunities

Some groups of Roma have exhibited good receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups in Central and Eastern Europe. There do not appear to be any reason for why the LDS Church would experience any lesser degree of receptivity than other Christian groups among the Roma other than the fact that there is no LDS community among the Roma from which to base missionary operations.

The Roma number among the most populous ethnic minority groups in Europe and have sizable communities in over a dozen countries. The Church has a presence in every European country with the exception of a few small city-states such as San

Marino and Liechtenstein. Missionary activity occurs in many areas of Europe with Roma communities. Prospective LDS proselytism among the Roma is a unique opportunity for the LDS Church as many ethnic groups currently unreached by the Church resides in countries where government regulations restrict missionary activity. Most of the Roma population in Europe resides in locations where there are few if any restrictions on missionary activity. The Church has baptized several Romani converts in recent years. A returned missionary from the Bulgaria Sofia Mission, Matt McDonald reported that some branches in Bulgaria have a Romani member. Area and mission leaders can coordinate to gather resources among the handful of Roma Latter-day Saints to produce translations of basic church materials into Romani sublanguages, especially audio recordings due to low literacy rates in Romani. Roma members can also provide valuable insight and recommendations to mission planners, area leaders, mission presidencies, and local church leaders for culturally-appropriate and adaptive ways to present LDS teachings to Roma populations.

Lower standards of living and refusal to integrate into mainstream society present good opportunities for the Church to provide humanitarian and development work to individual Romani communities. Workshops and special events sponsored by the Church that provide education on nutrition and health care, wheelchair donations, clean water projects in rural communities, clothing drives, and economic self-reliance classes may provide appropriate assistance to needy Romani communities throughout Europe and also spur church growth if these approaches are implemented skillfully and adapted to the cultural needs and understanding of the Roma. These projects could particularly help the Church make a good first impression on Roma communities and provide a segue to perform missionary activity at a later time. The Church has already participated in some humanitarian and development work among Roma populations in Europe, but few if any of these projects have included passive missionary approaches.

Challenges

The lack of Romani Latter-day Saints is the greatest barrier towards initiating Roma-specific outreach. One of the few Latter-day Saint Romani converts from Europe, Sead Osmani reported that he believes that the Church will need to have ethnic Romani missionaries for successful outreach to occur. Romani missionaries can provide invaluable insight and skill into adapting teaching and proselytism approaches to the Roma people and teaching the gospel to their understanding. The utility of assigning non-Romani missionaries to serve in Romani communities will have limited efficiency due to unfamiliarity with Romani customs, traditions, and language. With the exception of some LDS meetinghouses nearby locations with sizable Roma populations, the Church is entirely unprepared to extend any premeditated and purposeful outreach with resources and personnel at present.

There are no translations of LDS materials in any varieties of Romani. Prospective translations of LDS materials and scriptures will be a challenge to develop as the Romani language lacks many words for gospel terminology in the Church. The lack of even basic proselytism materials in Romani presents a major obstacle for Roma to learn about the Church and for investigators and converts to study the gospel. Roma esteem their native language as crucial toward protecting their culture.^[7] Missionaries and members utilizing other language materials in outreach efforts among Roma appear an appropriate substitute as many are literate the predominant language spoken in the country where they live. However, in the long run the imposition of other language materials on Roma may be interpreted as belittling their culture. Literacy rates are lower than the general European population and will require audio versions of scripture and church materials to maximize efficiency and outreach potential. There are no LDS teaching approaches tailored to the cultural, religious, and social background of Roma. The complex religious demographics of Roma populations in Europe will require teaching approaches that address basic Roma cultural beliefs and traditions but also which are tailored to the religious background of Muslims and Hindus and Orthodox, Catholic, traditional Protestant, evangelical, and nominal Christians.

It is not surprising therefore that the Church has baptized few, if any, Roma in most European countries. In the recent past, returned missionaries have reported that mission leaders have discouraged proselytism targeting Roma out of perceived security and safety concerns. For example, one member reported an incident that occurred in Portugal where a group of missionaries were threatened by a group of drunken Romani men after one missionary made an ethically degrading remark. Negative attitudes and prejudices about the Roma held by some Latter-day Saints in Europe may further deter any concentrated outreach efforts.

Many other Christian groups have readily extended outreach among Roma throughout Europe and have shepherded many previously receptive individuals into their respective denominations. Evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists have monopolized on the window of opportunity to reach Roma populations in Eastern Europe following the fall of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Any future LDS outreach efforts may bear comparatively fewer results than Protestant groups due to delays in reaching these populations and likely lower receptivity at present compared to the last two decades.

The flexibility for evangelical groups to adapt to Roma cultural practices and norms presents a major barrier for the LDS Church as the LDS Church permits little variation in the manner worship services are conducted from place to place and culture to culture. Evangelicals have embraced the loud and highly social atmosphere of many Roma social events and integrated these cultural characteristics into worship services. These adaptations have included Romani music in worship and a high level of interaction between the pastor and the congregation during sermons. Many of these practices would be deemed irreverent, disorganized, and incompatible with the proscribed protocol for LDS sacrament meeting services and may pose a barrier for Roma who insist on transposing their traditional means of worship and celebration into an LDS worship setting.

LDS outreach success among the Roma will likely require segregated Roma units that meet separately from other ethnic

groups. The impressive growth of evangelicals and other outreach-minded Christian groups has occurred through planting Roma-specific congregations. At present the Church has struggled to open additional groups and branches in Europe. The major reduction in the LDS missionary force in Europe will challenge efforts to assign full-time missionaries to exclusively serve among the Roma without further redistributing the limited number of missionary resources throughout the region. Cultural and socioeconomic differences between Roma groups and other ethnic groups challenge efforts to integrate Roma into ordinary congregations attended by other ethnic groups. The Roma number among the most stigmatized and discriminated minority groups in Europe and have developed many practices that reinforce their marginalization in society. Even if the LDS Church successfully plants congregations in Roma communities, local administrative leadership generally filled by the predominant ethnic group in the country may presents challenges for these leaders to fulfill their ecclesiastical duties without discriminating or neglecting Roma congregations within their jurisdiction.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church is possibly the largest missionary-focused Christian group in the world that does not pursue Roma-specific proselytism. Most Christian groups with an international missionary presence report thousands of Romani members in Europe. In 2009, evangelical Christians baptized over 500 Roma converts in the small Romanian town of Toflea. In 2010, one evangelical group reported over 1,000 Roma churches in Spain.^[8] Missionary-focused Christians have produced websites in Romani and even have translations of portions of the Bible available online, such as at <http://www.romanibible.org/>. Translations of specific biblical books into various Romani sublanguages have facilitated growth among many Christian groups.^[9] In Bulgaria, former President of the Association of Romany Pastors, Churches and Societies Assen Khristov reported that there were approximately 800 Roma churches in the country in 2007.^[10] Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses pursue missionary activity and church planting in Roma communities in several European countries.

Future Prospects

The outlook for any concentrated LDS missionary activity among the Roma in Europe appears poor for the foreseeable future as the Church has downsized missionary manpower in the region, regional missionary self-sustainability has been low due to comparatively few European Latter-day Saints serving full-time missions, mission and area leaders have demonstrate sporadic and inconsistent interest in reaching ethnic minority groups in Europe, and the trend of stagnant or declining national outreach has been ongoing in most European nations today. The organization of a committee by the Church in Europe to assess the opportunities and challenges for commencing Roma-specific LDS outreach is warranted to help coordinate between various countries and implement appropriate strategies for missionary work and church planting.

^[1] "Roma," Countries and Their Cultures, [www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Norway-to-Russia/Roma.html#b), retrieved 4 May 2012.

^[2] Persaud, Trevor. "Christianity Thrives among 'Gypsies' Despite Prejudice," [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/3.15.html), October 26th, 2012.

^[3] Slavkova, M.. (2007). Evangelical Gypsies in Bulgaria: Way of life and performance of identity. *Romani Studies*, 17(2), 205-246.

^[4] "Language Family Trees," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_family.asp?subid=1020-16), retrieved 11 May 2012.

^[5] "Europe's Roma community still facing massive discrimination," [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/feature-stories/europes-roma-community-still-facing-massive-discrimination-2009040), 8 April 2009.

^[6] "Roma," Countries and Their Cultures, [www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Norway-to-Russia/Roma.html#b), retrieved 4 May 2012.

^[7] "Romani Gospel warmly received in Serbia," [www.unitedbiblesocieties.org](http://www.unitedbiblesocieties.org/news/436-romani-gospel-warmly-received-in-serbia/), May 11th, 2011.

^[8] Persaud, Trevor. "Christianity Thrives among 'Gypsies' Despite Prejudice," [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/3.15.html), October 26th, 2012.

^[9] "Romani Gospel warmly received in Serbia," [www.unitedbiblesocieties.org](http://www.unitedbiblesocieties.org/news/436-romani-gospel-warmly-received-in-serbia/), May 11th, 2011.

^[10] Slavkova, M.. (2007). Evangelical Gypsies in Bulgaria: Way of life and performance of identity. *Romani Studies*, 17(2), 205-246.

