LDS Growth Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among Ancient Christian Denominations in the Middle East and North Africa

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Overview

The Middle East and North Africa have harbored Christian communities for nearly two millennia. Unlike Christian groups in areas bordering the Mediterranean and in Europe, many of these denominations separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the fourth century. These indigenous Christians weathered many arduous events such as Arab conquests that spread Islam throughout the region, the Crusades, Mongol invasions, and long-term persecution from Muslims. Not only did these Christian communities endure centuries of war and religious suppression, but in some locations comprised a sizable minority or even the majority of the population at one time. For example, in Egypt Christians comprised the majority until the ninth century.

As of mid-2012, the LDS Church had not extended any overt missionary activity among native Christian communities in the Middle East or North Africa notwithstanding a shared fundamental belief in Jesus Christ as a Savior, often greater tolerance for conversion to nontraditional Christian faiths than their Muslim counterparts, and the efforts of other missionary-minded Christian groups to reach these Christian groups. This case study discusses the history of three ancient Christian denominations traditionally anchored in the Middle East or North Africa, analyzes opportunities and challenges for future, outlines the growth of other nontraditional Christian faiths among these ancient Christian communities, and predicts prospects for future LDS growth in the event the LDS Church initiates formal proselytism activity.

History of Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Syriac Orthodox Church

Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria

Copts trace the introduction of Christianity to Egypt in the first century AD by the apostle Mark. Egypt became an early Christian stronghold resulting in the city of Alexandria housing the seat of the Christian theological studies beginning in 313. The Coptic Church significantly shaped the evolution of Christianity through its stance on doctrines such as the trinity that were later accepted as Christian-defining beliefs through councils such as the Council of Nicaea. However, by the fifth century the influence of Egyptian church leaders declined and Coptic-advocated beliefs and doctrines were viewed as heretical by Christian leaders elsewhere. The solidification of Coptic Christians as a separate Christian denomination occurred at this time. Egyptian Copts experienced persecution and harassment from Byzantine leaders until the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Muslims and Christians generally lived peaceably for the following two centuries until a Christian uprising in 830. By the ninth century, Muslims had outnumbered Christians in Egypt for the first time. The percentage of Coptic Christians in Egypt steadily declined to 10% by the late twentieth century. Researchers note that the two enduring Coptic legacies include martyrdom and monasticism.[1]

Assyrian Church of the East

Among the most ancient of Christian denominations, the Assyrian Church of the East traces its origins to Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and Persia (Iran) within the first two centuries following Christ's ministry. Christianity allegedly spread to the region through the efforts of the apostles Thomas, Thaddeus, and Bartholomew. In 280, the Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Papa bar

Gaggai of Seleucia-Ctesiphon established the Church of the East and Assyrian church leaders participated in the Council of Nicaea. In 410, the Church of the East separated itself from Catholicism by renouncing subjection to the See of Antioch. The Assyrian Church spread Christianity eastward, establishing churches and gaining converts in present-day Afghanistan, South Asia, and as far east as western China. The advent of Islam resulted in heavy persecution and coerced conversion to Islam for many Assyrian Christians resulting in the patriarchal see relocating into the mountains of northern Iraq.[2] Due to persecution for over a millennia, the few remaining Assyrian Christians are currently scattered in small communities worldwide but nonetheless maintain a noticeable presence in some Middle Eastern countries where there are few Christians such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Assyrian Christians in the Middle East appear to number approximately 170,000.[3]

Syriac Orthodox Church

Headquartered in Syria, the Syriac Orthodox Church numbers among the largest Christian denominations traditionally centered in the Middle East. Syriac Christians trace their beginnings to the proselytism efforts of the apostle Peter following the mortal ministry of Christ. Like other ancient Christian groups, Syriac Christians participated in councils such as the Council of Nicaea and shaped the evolution of early Christianity. Syriac Christians separated from Western Christianity shortly after the Assyrian Church of the East in the fifth century. The Syriac Orthodox Church continues to use a dialect of Aramaic called Syriac as its liturgical and official language. Today most Syriac Christians reside in India but comprise a sizable minority of Christians in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean.

Opportunities

Indigenous Christian communities in the Middle East and North Africa present unique opportunities for LDS missionary activity due to the lack of Christians in the region and separation from Western Christianity since the fifth century. The conversion of native Christians in the Middle East and North Africa to nontraditional Christian faiths is met with less hostility than the conversion of Muslims by proselytizing Christian denominations. There are no realistic prospects for the LDS Church to perform any active missionary activity among Muslims in virtually all countries in this region. However, legislation permits Christian-to-Christian proselytism in some countries without the use of foreign missionaries. Some proselytizing Christian faiths such as evangelicals have already initiated outreach in many of these countries and may encourage greater tolerance for indigenous Christians to join nontraditional denominations over time.

The tiny group of Jordanian Latter-day Saints provides for some limited and exciting opportunities for premeditated mission outreach among ancient Christians throughout the region. Fluency in Arabic, personal experience dealing with the common issues relating to joining the Church from the standpoint of an individual that previously followed a traditional Christian faith, and experience serving as a missionary, studying at BYU, or serving in a branch leadership position make these few individuals invaluable in organizing and heading LDS missionary outreach efforts in the region. These individuals can help create culture-specific teaching resources to aid proper understanding of LDS teachings and develop appropriate finding and teaching methods appropriate for the region.

There are opportunities to raise public awareness of the LDS Church through humanitarian and development work, special traveling exhibits, and education. The Church has performed service and humanitarian projects in several nations in the region and can assist these Christian communities. Recent political instability and war provide opportunities for humanitarian relief and aid to reduce suffering. Propagating information of Brigham Young University (BYU) can attract interest for college education. The LDS Church's past and concurrent interests in the Near East, Egyptology, archaeology, and the study of the early Christian Church may increase awareness of the LDS Church among traditional Christian communities through facilities such as the Church's BYU Jerusalem campus in Israel and its visitor center in Amman, Jordan.

Challenges

The Church appears to have only a small handful of converts from traditional Christian faiths in the Middle East. Virtually all of these converts have joined the Church in only one country: Jordan. In mid-2012, Jordan appeared to be the only country in the region that had at least one branch that principally serviced native members as indicated by the operation of an Arabic-speaking branch in Amman led by a native member. A second branch called the North Jordan Branch appeared to primarily contain converts from traditional Christian faiths and was also led by a local Arabic-speaking member at the time.

Government restrictions intended to prevent Christian groups from proselytizing Muslims or Islamist fundamental groups from threatening political stability pose a significant barrier for the LDS Church to reach Christians. The assignment of foreign missionaries - let alone Christian missionaries - is an insurmountable challenge for establishing an LDS presence considering the Church utilizes full-time missionaries to introduce the Church into previously unreached locations. Members and church leaders indicate that church policies in the Middle East/African North Area adhere to all government regulations surrounding the practice of religious activities and missionary work. The Church has avoided any overt proselytism activity for decades due to security concerns and desire to convey respect to government officials for granting the religious freedoms currently enjoyed by the Church in some nations. At present, the only missionary activity that may be approved by church leaders and sanctioned by government authorities would be limited to passive member-missionary activity only among Christians.

Resistance to convert to Western Christianity and Islam for over 1,500 years has created a subculture in ancient Christian groups in the Middle East that resists modern-day conversion efforts from nontraditional Christian groups. The experience of

other missionary-focused groups such as evangelicals that have proselytized Copts and Assyrian and Syriac Orthodox Christians suggests these populations will exhibit low receptivity to the LDS Church. Effective missionary activity among these groups will require patience. Teaching resources and proselytism approaches will need to be adapted to culture, religious background, and language.

Comparative Growth

Most worldwide missionary-focused Christian groups have attempted outreach among traditional Christian groups in the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt, evangelicals are the most prominent proselytizing group among Copts and have met stiff resistance from church leaders.[4] Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have also experienced resistance from Coptic Orthodox leaders. In 1989, Pope Shenouda III declared that both denominations were non-Christian cults and advised Copts to avoid attending the worship services of these groups and to not invite these groups into their homes.[5] Adventists and Witnesses appear to have no presence among Syriac and Assyrian Christians in the Middle East. However, evangelicals and Pentecostals have experienced growth among these denominations both in the Middle East and abroad. For example, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church may have upwards of 20,000 members worldwide in Australia, Iran, and North America.[6]

Future Prospects

The outlook for initiating LDS missionary activity among ancient Christian denominations in the Middle East and North Africa is bleak due to a lack of native Latter-day Saints in the region, religious freedom restrictions barring the use of foreign full-time missionaries for proselytism, the persecution of Christian minorities by Muslim-dominated governments, and the recent widespread protests, political instability, civil disorder, and civil wars connected with the Arab Spring. Copts, Assyrian Christians, and Syriac Orthodox Christians nonetheless present valuable opportunities for the LDS Church to gain a tiny foothold among the indigenous population of some countries in the Middle East and North Africa where the vast majority of the population is legally and socially unreachable at present.

[1] "Copts," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 8 August 2012. http://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Copts.html

[2] "Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East," World Council of Churches, January 1st, 2006. http://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/regions/north-america/united-states-of-america/holy-apostolic-catholic-assyrian-church

[3] "Nestorian," Encyclopedia Britannica, retrieved 11 August 2012. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/409819/Nestorian

[4] Bradley, Matt. "Evangelicals woo Egyptian Copts," 10 November 2009. http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/africa/evangelicals-woo-egyptian-copts

[5] Metropolitan Bishoy, H.E. 2000. "Seventh Day Adventists: Responding To Their Erroneous Doctrine," retrieved 11 August 2012. http://www.copticnet.com/Books/English%20Books/H.G.%20Bishoy/Seventh%20Day%20Adventists.pdf

[6] "Assyrian Pentecostal Church," retrieved 11 August 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_Pentecostal_Church