

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Slow LDS Growth in Poland

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Posted: October 4th, 2012

Overview

Poland is one of Eastern Europe's most populous countries with 38.4 million inhabitants. However, the LDS Church has experienced slow growth since its reestablishment in the late twentieth century. Over the past two decades, the Church has grown to 1,716 members, 13 branches, and two districts notwithstanding the assignment of proselytizing full-time missionaries since 1988[1] and the maintenance of an entire mission since 1990. This case study identifies successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth and compares the growth of the LDS Church to other proselytizing faiths.

LDS Background

In 1892, the first LDS missionaries entered Poland. The Church established a few small branches in the early twentieth century but the majority of members were ethnic Germans. Notwithstanding the establishment of a communist government in the late 1940s, a tiny LDS presence endured until 1971 when the last remaining branch was closed as a result of German members relocating to Germany. The Church reestablished a presence in the late 1970s partially as a result of Poles in Germany joining the Church and relocating to Poland. In 1977, LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball dedicated Poland for missionary work and the first senior missionary couples were assigned. By 1988, the Church assigned young proselytizing elders. In 1990, the Church organized a separate mission to administer Poland - the Poland Warsaw Mission.

Slow membership and congregational growth in Poland has occurred ever since the Church's initial establishment. Perhaps as few as 200 converts joined the Church prior to 1977. Between 1985 and 1990, only 230 converts were baptized nationwide,[2] or about 46 a year. In 1990, the Church had a presence in only four cities and there were approximately 200 membership nationwide.[3] The number of church-reported members increased to 500 in 1993, 1,094 in 1999, 1,531 in 2005, and 1,716 in 2011. Between 1991 and 2011, church membership increased by 71 members per year on average. The number of branches increased from two in 1989 to nine in 1993 and 19 in 2001. Since 2002, the number of branches has oscillated between 12 and 13.

The Church has periodically opened additional cities to proselytism. The number of cities with an LDS congregation increased from four in 1990 to 22 in 2002 (Bialystok, Brzeg, Bytom, Bydgoszcz, Dabrowa Gornicza, Gorzow Wielkopolski, Grudziadz, Gdansk, Glogow, Jelena Gora, Katowice, Krakow, Legionowo, Legnica, Lodz, Lublin, Poznan, Szczecin, Warsaw, Walbrzych, Wroclaw, and Zabrze). In the mid to late 2000s, missionaries opened Kielce, Torun, Zamosc, and Zgorzelec but by mid-2012 only Kielce and Zgorzelec appeared to have an LDS presence. As of mid-2012, there were 13 cities that once had an LDS presence but no longer appeared to have a group or branch functioning (Brzeg, Bytom, Dabrowa Gornicza, Gorzow Wielkopolski, Grudziadz, Glogow, Jelena Gora, Legionowo, Legnica, Torun, Walbrzych, Zabrze, and Zamosc). A map of cities with over 100,000 inhabitants and status of LDS outreach can be found here.

In the late 2000s, full-time missionaries reported that there were no more than 300 active members nationwide.

Successes

Mission leaders have regularly attempted to open additional cities to proselytism notwithstanding few active members and little church growth in previously opened cities. There have been three periods of national outreach expansion within the past two decades (early 1990s, late 1990s, and mid to late 2000s) which have each yielded some long term results. The diligence and

vision of mission leaders to continually open new cities to proselytism is a welcome and unusual occurrence in Eastern Europe where mission leaders have avoided opening new cities after past outreach expansion efforts have failed or yielded mixed results. Mission leaders in Poland have also demonstrated more flexibility and versatility in distributing mission resources by closing unproductive areas and opening new ones.

A small nucleus of native Polish membership has been achieved after nearly 25 years of consistent mission outreach although active members number only approximately 300. Few active members gained over a long period of time indicates low receptivity and poor mission productivity but constitutes a small success as the Church has been unable to baptize and retain local, indigenous individuals in sufficient numbers to fill leadership positions and outnumber nonnative membership in several European nations such as Greece and Cyprus. The Church has generally had at least a few Polish members serving a full-time mission at any given time whereas some other countries in the region have had no local members serve missions for years at a time.

The Church has experienced some growth among Polish Americans who immigrated to the United States within the past century. Many Polish American Latter-day Saint converts speak Polish and frequently serve missions in Poland. The Church once operated a Polish-speaking branch in Chicago but closed the branch in the latter-half of the 2000s. Missionaries continue to report that Polish Latter-day Saints from the Chicago area routinely serve missions in the Poland Warsaw Mission.

Opportunities

Notwithstanding efforts to introduce the Church to over two dozen cities during the past two decades, there remain 20 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants that have never appeared to have an LDS gospel witness including Gdynia (249,139), Cz?stochowa (236,796), Radom (221,287), Sosnowiec (216,420), Gliwice (187,474), Rzeszów (179,386), Olsztyn (174,645), Bielsko-Bia?a (174,534), Ruda ?l?ska (142,510), Rybnik (140,924), Tychy (129,378), Elbl?g (124,668), Plock (124,553), Opole (122,625), Zielona Góra (118,982), W?oc?awek (116,783), Tarnów (114,053), Chorzów (111,692), Koszalin (109,248), and Kalisz (105,386).[4] Past national outreach expansion efforts have been successful about half the time in establishing an enduring branch or group that warrants the continued assignment of full-time missionaries. Considering 13 of the 26 cities that have had a group, branch, or missionaries assigned continue to have an LDS presence today, the Church could potentially establish a long-term presence in approximately 10 of these 20 cities that have never had an LDS missionary presence if all 20 were to have missionaries assigned and a group organized.

Medium-sized and small cities have been scarcely reached by the LDS Church since formal proselytism began in the late 1980s. There are 183 cities that are inhabited by between 20,000 and 100,000 people totaling 7.5 million people, or nearly 20% of the population of Poland. Today only one of these cities has an LDS presence (Zgorzelec) and only six others have ever had a branch or group or full-time missionaries assigned but are currently unreached. It is unclear how receptive the populations of these cities will be to the Church due to the lack of LDS proselytism efforts, but most medium and small city populations do not appear to exhibit significant differences in receptivity from larger cities.

Travelling missionaries may present some unexplored opportunities for LDS growth in Poland. The Church can designated a few missionary companionships as travelling missionaries to visit unreached cities, look for isolated members, find interested contacts, meet with teaching referrals, and hold cottage meetings if a willing member or investigator is present. Travelling missionaries can help spur interest in the Church in locations by participating in media programs, humanitarian and development projects, and distributing church literature. Locations which exhibit noticeable interest in the Church can receive regular visits and eventually the mission may assign an ordinary full-time missionary companionship if warranted.

Long distances between individual members' homes has created challenges for maintaining branches that are within close proximity of most church members in many areas of Poland. The Church may help reduce travel constraints and promote efficient national outreach expansion by holding church services as a branch once a month (such as on the first Sunday) and in individual groups closer to members' homes on other Sundays throughout the month. For example, the Church operates only one branch in the Katowice area where there are approximately 311,000 people within the immediate city of Katowice but 2.45 million people in the entire Katowice agglomeration that includes seven nearby cities populated by over 100,000 each including Bytom, Chorzów, D?browa Górnicza, Gliwice, Ruda ?l?ska, Sosnowiec, and Zabrze. The Church could potentially hold church services monthly for all members in the eight cities in the agglomeration and hold worship services as groups in each individual city that has at least two Latter-day Saints (one of which who must be a priesthood holder) on remaining Sundays for the month. This paradigm permits wise appropriation of resources and simultaneously encourages outreach expansion but without sacrificing the need for church members to socialize frequently with larger numbers of fellow Latter-day Saints. As individual groups within the branch become large and self-sufficient, they can split off of the parent branch and become their own individual branches.

Challenges

Emigration of active membership to Western Europe has been a major frustration for the Church lasting several decades. The collapse of the Church in Poland in the early 1970s due to the few remaining German members emigrating to Germany set back the development of local leadership capabilities as senior missionaries had to start from scratch with native Poles in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today there appears to be no concentrated outreach among the tiny German minority despite membership primarily comprised of ethnic Germans for most of the twentieth century. In recent years, many active members

have moved outside of Poland searching for employment in other European Union (EU) nations particularly following Poland's ascension into the EU in 2004. Poor receptivity and historically low to modest member activity and convert retention rates combined with the siphoning of active membership to other European countries has weakened the development of LDS community in most individual cities.

The strong link between Polish identity and the Catholic Church has been challenging for the Church to overcome. Traditional LDS missionary teaching paradigms are tailored for those with a Protestant background. Nominalism in the Catholic Church and increasing secularism has further eroded receptivity to the LDS Church and demands teaching and finding approaches that meet local needs and societal conditions. Other proselytizing faiths have shepherded previously receptive individuals into their churches, further reducing receptivity to the Church and challenging proselytism efforts.

All cities with an LDS presence report an extremely limited presence generally comprised of one branch and 10 to 50 active members. For example, Lodz is the third most populous city with approximately 730,000 inhabitants[5] but the Church operates only one branch with approximately 45 active members. Warsaw is the only city that has two branches. A tiny church membership currently distributed over a little more than a dozen cities creates significant challenges for developing church leadership and reducing reliance on foreign full-time missionaries to proficiently operate congregations in some areas.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced greater growth in most Eastern European countries that have had an LDS presence for at least two decades compared to Poland. The Church in Ukraine has had a presence since the early 1990s and in 2011 had 11,015 members, one stake that consisted of eight wards that all operated within the city of Kyiv, three member districts, and 57 wards and branches nationwide. The Church in Albania has four large branches (by Eastern European standards) in the capital city Tirana which has only 421,000 people, or one-quarter the population of Warsaw. The Church in the Czech Republic has a presence in approximately the same number of cities as the Church in Poland at present yet the Czech Republic supports a population less than one-third the size of Poland. In Hungary, the population is also less than one-third the size of Poland's population yet the Church operates a stake and two districts, reports nearly 5,000 members, and congregations in over 20 cities. The self-sufficiency of local leadership and growth in active membership for the Church in Poland has been more reminiscent of the Church in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia than most other countries in the region. However, the dedication and resilience of mission leadership in consistently attempting to expand national outreach despite low levels of receptivity has been admirable and only parallels the Church in Hungary within Eastern Europe.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups experience slow or stagnant growth but report more members than the LDS Church. Seventh Day Adventists have experienced stagnant growth for the past decade. Between 2000 and 2010, Adventist membership increased from 5,678 to 5,785, the number of churches declined from 119 to 118, and the number of converts baptized a year has ranged from 126 to 244.[6] Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the most successful proselytizing groups and reported 126,196 active members, 1,814 congregations, and 2,275 baptisms in 2011.[7] Evangelicals report a larger presence than Latter-day Saints and Adventists and appear comparable in size to Jehovah's Witnesses.

Future Prospects

There appear to be no signs that the decade-long trend of extremely slow membership growth and stagnant congregational growth in Poland is close to reversing as receptivity remains low, member activity rates are mediocre, and the mission remains almost totally reliant on foreign missionaries to staff its ranks. Repeated attempts to open more cities to proselytism and mixed results from past outreach expansion efforts suggest that mission leaders will continue to target a handful of select unreached cities that number among the most populated. Cities that appear most likely to have full-time missionaries assigned for the first time include Radom, Rzeszów, Olsztyn, and Gdynia. It is likely that the Church will not experience noticeable active membership growth in most cities and instead experience slight national outreach expansion within the next decade if current conditions are sustained. The Church in Poland will likely continue to struggle in meeting its basic needs for many years to come.

[1] "Eight new missions announced," LDS Church News, 3 March 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19805/Eight-new-missions-announced.html

[2] Stahle, Shaun D. "Proclaiming the gospel: Witness to events that reshaped Poland," LDS Church News, 10 March 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39451/Proclaiming-the-gospel-Witness-to-events-that-reshaped-Poland.html

[3] Lloyd, R. Scott. "Polish convert answers mission call," LDS Church News, 29 September 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20484/Polish-convert-answers-mission-call.html

[4] "POLAND: Major Cities," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 27 August 2012. http://www.citypopulation.de/Poland-Cities.html

[5] "POLAND: Major Cities," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 27 August 2012. http://www.citypopulation.de/Poland-Cities.html

[6] "Polish Union Conference (1986-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 24 August 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10085

[7] "Statistics: 2011 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 24 August 2012. http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm