



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Recent LDS Church Developments in Kazakhstan

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Overview

After two decades following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan remains the only Central Asian country with an LDS presence. Notwithstanding the formal establishment of the Church for over a decade, only two cities have a congregation and missionaries assigned. As of year-end 2011, there were less than 200 members nationwide. In recent years, the Church has revamped its outreach efforts in Kazakhstan through emphasis on Kazakh language fluency for missionaries, the opening of a second city to missionary activity in 2011, and the reassignment of the country from the Russia Moscow West Mission to the Russia Novosibirsk Mission in 2012. This case study reviews the history of the Church in Kazakhstan and analyzes successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth.

LDS Background

In the mid and late 1990s, American expatriate Latter-day Saints began temporarily relocating to Kazakhstan for business. In the early 2000s, the Church obtained government recognition, formed the first branch in Almaty, began regularly baptizing local converts, and dedicated Kazakhstan for missionary work.^[1] In 2004, the Church assigned its first proselytizing missionaries but limited formal missionary activity to Almaty until the assignment of proselytizing missionaries to Astana in March 2011.

In July 2012, the Russia Novosibirsk Mission President announced that all missionaries assigned to Kazakhstan would begin learning Kazakh for teaching the gospel. The motivation for the language change from Russian to Kazakh for proselytism and teaching centered on improving the Church's image as conducive and respectful to Kazakh culture. This was hoped in turn to reduce restrictions and difficulties encountered with government authorities. Missionaries began meeting with a Kazakh language tutor at a local university and were encouraged to only study Kazakh instead of both Kazakh and Russian. In August 2012, there were eight young proselytizing missionaries serving in Almaty. The Church appeared to be completing registration in Astana in September 2012.

In 2011, the government passed a new religion law that requires religious groups to reregister with the government in order to operate on a local, regional, or national scale. To operate on a local scale, the new law requires a religious group to have at least 50 members who must submit their names and addresses with the application for local registration. Local registration permits a religious group to only operate within locality for which registration was approved. Regional registration requires a religious group to have at least 500 members each in two or more regions. National registration mandates that a religious group have at least 5,000 members nationwide and "a sufficient representation in each of the country's oblasts."^[2] The new law was set to come into effect in on October 25th, 2012. At year-end 2011, the Church reported nearly 200 members nationwide - nearly all of which residing in Almaty - creating serious challenges for the Church to register in Astana. By mid-2012, missionaries and local leaders were able to find 50 individuals who consented to submitting their names as part of the registration application for both Almaty and Astana. Many of these individuals in Astana were not baptized members of the Church but were rather investigators or friends of members. In addition to regulating the operation of congregations within specific localities, the government also regulates the activities of full-time missionaries and must approve proselytism materials as part of a missionary visa. Materials not approved as part of the missionary visa cannot be used in proselytism activity.^[3] In the fall of 2012, mission and area leaders directed full-time missionaries assigned to Kazakhstan to refrain from any proselytism activity and the performance of convert baptisms until the registration process was completed.

Successes

The Almaty Branch has established many aspects of LDS community as indicated by the independence and self-sufficiency of local leadership, an active seminary and institute program, local members occasionally serving full-time missions, a few active full-member families, members organizing and participating in service projects, temple marriages between local members, and special youth activities like young women camp. Few congregations within the former Soviet Union exhibit as high independence, self-sufficiency, and member activity as the Almaty Branch. A full branch presidency consisting entirely of native members guides the branch and meets local administrative needs whereas many branches in former Soviet Republics have historically had a full-time missionary or two serving as counselors in a branch presidency due to a shortage of active male members capable of filling this position. The Church in Kazakhstan has one of the highest percentages of members enrolled in seminary or institute (18%); all students appear to attend the Almaty Branch. Several members have served missions and one member just began her mission to the Utah Salt Lake City Temple Square Mission in September 2012. Missionaries assigned to the branch report that there are a few full-member families where the mother, father, and children are active in the Church; a significant achievement for a country with a recent church establishment and tiny church membership. Dozens of branch members have participated in service projects such as removing garbage from the shoreline of Kapshagay Reservoir. A few couples in the branch have been married in the temple. In mid-2012 a couple in the branch was civilly married in Almaty and sealed in the Kyiv Ukraine temple. The Church has held regular activities for youth - particularly young women - with most of the teaching and mentoring headed by local youth and branch leaders. The Church in Kazakhstan has appeared to achieve better long-term convert retention than in most other former Soviet republics. Several of the original Kazakh converts remained active as of late 2012 and served in leadership positions.

The placement of full-time missionaries in Astana occurred at a crucial time within less than a year before the passage of the new religion law. Within the first year of full-time missionaries assigned, there were nearly a dozen convert baptisms and the number of members, friends of members, and investigators exceeded 50. The new law prohibits any outreach expansion efforts into locations where the Church is not locally registered as the Church must have at least 50 members in a locality to assign missionaries. In Astana, missionaries scrambled to find enough individuals who were willing to submit their names and addresses for the Church to submit an application for local registration before the deadline. Without the introduction of missionaries in March 2011 to Astana, there would be virtually no possibility for the Church to register in Astana before the deadline as there would be an insufficient number of members, investigators, and friends of the Church needed to reach the threshold. If mission leaders were not proactive about assigning missionaries to Astana when the opportunity was available, there would likely be no LDS presence in Astana at present.

There are reports of non-Slavic and non-Kazakh individuals joining the Church. In 2012, missionaries serving in Almaty reported that the branch president was Uighur; an ethnic group principally found in western China that has strong ethnoreligious ties to Sunni Islam. There have also been past reports of Kyrgyz converts joining the Church in Kazakhstan within the past decade.

The Church's fortuitous establishment in Kazakhstan in the late 1990s and early 2000s was only possible through the valuable efforts of American expatriates in Almaty and would be practically impossible in the early 2010s if there had been no presence established over a decade earlier. Other Central Asian countries have no formal LDS presence as the Church did not send missionaries or have American expatriate members live in sufficient numbers to justify organizing a congregation. The Church did not take advantage of more tolerant government legislation that permitted nontraditional Christian groups to obtain government recognition and send missionaries. Within the past decade, the degree of religious freedom in Central Asia has deteriorated at an alarming rate due to resurging Islamic identity and concerns over the influence of Western society on local culture.

Opportunities

The strength of local membership in the Almaty Branch and the emerging Astana Group provide the greatest opportunities for long-term growth. Ordinary members do not experience restrictions on teaching or inviting others to church services and serve as a valuable asset. There are many programs and activities held by the branch that provide excellent segues for members to invite nonmember friends and family such as service projects, young women's activities, and branch social events.

With 1.64 million inhabitants, Almaty remains minimally reached by the Church as only one branch functions in the extreme southeastern portion of the city. There are opportunities to form groups in lesser-reached areas of the city where distance has contributed to lower rates of church attendance. Outreach expansion efforts in Almaty will be most successful if they do not split the current Almaty Branch but rather start groups in areas with no known active members.

Mission president emphasis on Kazakh language study for full-time missionaries provides excellent opportunities for missionaries to socialize with ordinary people in various settings and presents a passive proselytism approach for missionaries to teach about the Church when asked about their reason for living in Kazakhstan and learning the Kazakh language. Reports from missionaries who serve in Kazakhstan remain consistently positive in that most people are kind and curious about why they are serving missions in Kazakhstan. Missionaries can provide simple and appropriate explanations to questions asked and invite interested individuals to various church activities and services.

Challenges

Government legislation that has become increasingly strict and prohibitive to nontraditional Christian denominations stands as

the greatest challenge for church growth in Kazakhstan. Current laws prevent the Church from opening additional cities to missionary activity unless there are 50 individuals who will consent as founders to obtain government registration. The interference of religious legislation on the activities and assignment of foreign missionaries has likely improved convert retention and member activity rates in Almaty as missionaries depend on local members for assistance in finding and teaching investigators and overcoming language barriers. Converts who join the Church at present appear to attain a higher degree of commitment to the Church compared to many other nations due to greater government restrictions on religious freedom and societal pressures to shun foreign Christian faiths. These restrictions have created a nearly insurmountable task of opening additional major cities to proselytism such as Shymkent, Karagandy, and Aktobe due to government restrictions on foreign missionaries and local registration requiring at least 50 members.

Comparative Growth

No other Central Asian country has an official LDS presence. The only other country where the Church attempted to establish an official presence was Kyrgyzstan. In 2003, LDS apostle Elder Russell M. Nelson dedicated Kyrgyzstan to missionary work prior to obtaining government registration. In 2004, the Church attempted to register with the Kyrgyz government but was unable as it lacked the 10 needed Kyrgyz citizens required to register with the government. In 2009, the Kyrgyz religion raised the required number of Kyrgyz citizen members to register a religious group from 10 to 200^[4] - an insurmountable number for the Church. The Church has operated groups for American military personnel in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Small groups have also operated in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan for isolated American expatriates but no official church presence or formal missionary activity has occurred in either nation. In 2010, the government of Tajikistan officially banned nine religious groups - including the LDS Church.^[5]

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian faiths have established a presence in most major cities in Kazakhstan and report several thousand members. In 2011, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 17,641 active members meeting in 223 congregations nationwide whereas Seventh Day Adventists report 3,217 members, 51 churches, and 34 companies.^[6] Within the past decade, Witnesses have experienced steady growth whereas Adventists have experienced stagnant growth. Baptists and evangelicals have experienced steady growth over the past two decades and number among the most heavily targeted religious groups by the government in regards to tightening religious freedom legislation.

Future Prospects

Meticulous preparation and care by mission leaders to reregister congregations in Almaty and Astana in accordance with recent revisions of the Kazakh religion law will likely permit the Church to continue extending mission outreach in these cities for many years to come. The promotion of Kazakh language study and use for teaching and communication among foreign missionaries may help improve the Church's public image and reputation as compatible with Kazakh culture although the revival of Islam and continued migration of Orthodox Christians out of Central Asia will continue to pose challenges for acceptance in mainstream society. There appear no realistic opportunities to open additional cities to proselytism. However, mission leaders may experience success in church planting efforts in Almaty due to its large population and past successes in establishing a self-sufficient branch notwithstanding the closest branch operating over 1,100 kilometers away in Islamabad, Pakistan.

^[1] "Elder Nelson Dedicates Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic," Ensign, Nov. 2003, 124-25

^[2] "Kazakhstan," International Religious Freedom Report 2011., retrieved 5 October 2012.
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dliid=192925>

^[3] "Kazakhstan," International Religious Freedom Report 2011., retrieved 5 October 2012.
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dliid=192925>

^[4] "Kyrgyz Republic," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009.
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127367.htm>

^[5] "Tajik Court Suspends Baptist Church's Activities," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 10 February 2010.
http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Court_Suspends_Baptist_Churchs_Activities/1954581.html

^[6] "Southern Union Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 2 October 2012.
<http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=ESUC>