



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among the Sami of Scandinavia

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Overview

Numbering between 50,000^[1] and 165,000^[2] the Sami (formerly called Lapps) are an indigenous people that traditionally inhabit an area of northern Scandinavia called Sápmi or Lapland. The Sami are historically renowned for reindeer herding; a tradition documented as early as a millennium ago by Norwegian chieftains. Christianization efforts from missionaries occurred for centuries following the introduction of the Catholic Church to Scandinavia with little success. In the mid-nineteenth century, an evangelical Congregationalist named Lars Levi Læstadius successfully made deep inroads converting the Sami people^[3] resulting in most Sami practicing Lutheranism today.^[4] The Sami have never established a separate country and have experienced centuries of marginalization from governments throughout the region. It has not been until the past few decades that the Sami have become more integrated into mainstream Scandinavian society and gained basic rights to education and politics. Today the Sami enjoy many aspects of self-autonomy such as separate parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland and have also acculturated to many aspects of Scandinavian life such as reduced emphasis on reindeer herding and most living in homes with central heating and running water.^[5] There are nine living sublanguages or dialects of the Sami language branch that pertain to the Uralic language family.^[6] A map of the locations of Sami sublanguages in Scandinavia can be found [here](#). Provided with government-released figures or ethnographer estimates, countries with sizable Sami populations include Norway (37,890),^[7] the United States and Canada (30,000),^[8] Sweden (14,600),^[9] Finland (9,350),^[10] and Russia (1,991).^[11]

This case study examines prospective LDS outreach that specifically targets Sami populations in Scandinavia through identifying successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth. The growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups among the Sami is contrasted with the LDS Church.

Opportunities

The Church has maintained a long-term, sizable missionary presence in Scandinavia notwithstanding the strong influence of secularism on society, few convert baptisms, and relatively small populations. The Church operates separate missions in Norway, Sweden, and Finland that each service between 4.7 and 9.1 million people whereas the average LDS mission in Europe services nearly 20 million people. The operation of three missions in Scandinavian countries with sizable Sami populations channels mission resources into the region; some of which could be potentially allocated to the Sami. Mission leaders could assign a couple missionary companions per mission to target Sami populations in an effort to extend at least some outreach without drawing away needed resources from potentially more productive areas considering small target populations and low perceived levels of receptivity.

Current translations of LDS materials in the most commonly spoken languages in the region provide extensive materials for the Sami to learn about the Church. There are extremely few if any Sami that are not literate in Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, or Russian. Consequently there is little need to translate church materials into Sami languages at present as second language materials can be applied in Sami-proselytism efforts and Sami populations exhibit higher literacy rates in a second language than in their native languages. Due to high levels of economic development and fluency in the dominant languages of Scandinavia, the Church may experience some success with internet outreach as the Church has published materials online in these languages and local members utilize social media.

In Norway, the Church operates a branch in four cities (Alta-Hammerfest, Bodø,

Narvik, and Tromsø) located north of Saltfjellet where the most densely concentrated populations of Sami reside.^[12] The Church also extends limited outreach to Hammerfest and Harstad as missionaries occasionally visit isolated members and investigators living in these cities. With the exception of Harstad, all settlements with more than 10,000 inhabitants have an LDS branch in northern Norway. Although many Sami reside in small towns and rural areas, cities in northern Norway with LDS branches serve as excellent mission outreach centers from which to base mission operations to lesser-reached areas. Effective outreach expansion efforts in northern Norway into predominantly Sami communities may include holding cottage meetings, participating in radio and television programs, and organizing church groups that met once or twice a month in these locations under the jurisdiction of an independent mission branch or the Norway Oslo Mission Branch. A map of Sápmi and the status of LDS outreach in cities throughout the region can be found [here](#).

Challenges

Nominal Christianity and secularism pose the greatest challenges for the Church to make inroads among the Sami as interest in nontraditional Christian faiths is low and few place value on the caliber of personal religiosity demanded of active members in the LDS Church. Over the past 150 years, the Sami have exhibited strong ethnoreligious ties to the dominant Lutheran Church in their respective countries. There is little motivation for Sami to convert to other Christian faiths due to overall disinterest in organized religion and the cultural heritage of Lutheranism. LDS missionaries serving in northern Norway and Sweden report only a handful of active Sami members. The lack of an LDS Sami community is attributed to low receptivity, no known Sami-specific outreach endeavors since the Church's arrival in Scandinavia in the 1850s, and many Sami residing in rural areas and small towns that have never received a Latter-day Saint gospel witness.

The small size of the Sami population that is distributed over sparsely populated frigid areas within the Arctic Circle constitutes another major barrier that has discouraged LDS proselytism efforts. Many Sami reside far from established branches in Norway and are spread over large geographical areas difficult for full-time missionaries to effectively tract and traverse. Mission headquarters are distant from Sápmi in all four countries with sizable, indigenous Sami populations, challenging efforts for mission leaders to visit the area and assign missionaries. The Church operates branches within the area where only one Sami sublanguage is traditionally spoken (North Sami). Efficient proselytism approaches will require member-missionary efforts due to the infeasibility of assigning full-time missionaries to remote, rural areas to proselyte a group that has demonstrated little to no receptivity to previous proselytism efforts. Any active Sami members in Sápmi will be crucial toward the success of ethnic-specific outreach. The Church operates no congregations within close proximity to areas traditionally populated by Sami in Finland, Russia, or Sweden, rendering these populations entirely unreached through traditional mission outreach approaches.

It is unclear whether the Church will continue to maintain its presence in cities that currently have branches in northern Norway. The Church maintains a tiny presence in northern Norway as all branches each appear to have fewer than 50 active members in late 2012. Some branches have fewer than 10 active members. Missionaries and members report that active members have steadily relocated to southern areas of the country in recent years. If this trend continues, some branches may close resulting in reduced outreach capabilities among the Sami.

High living standards and a well-developed government welfare systems create few opportunities for the Church to engage in humanitarian and development work among the Sami. The Church has initially gained a foothold among many indigenous peoples around the world through these efforts as individuals passively learn about the Church whether through being beneficiaries of aid or through the exposure of the Church when it performs these efforts in local communities. Other passive missionary approaches such as special musical performances, public exhibits, and culturally-adapted activities and programs may help engender interest in the Church and find receptive individuals.

Comparative Growth

Nearly all nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report no Sami-specific outreach efforts. Neither Jehovah's Witnesses nor Seventh Day Adventists translate materials into any Sami sublanguages. Witnesses do not report any Sami-speaking congregations or groups in Norway. Evangelicals report a small presence among the Sami.

Future Prospects

Nominalism in the dominant Lutheran churches in the region, the strong influence of secularism on society, increasing integration into mainstream Scandinavian society, and a comparatively small target population spread over a large, sparsely populated geographic area will continue to pose ongoing challenges for the Church to initiate any Sami-specific outreach for years to come. The stability and continued operation of the four branches in northern Norway will take greater precedence for mission leaders than concentrating on commencing missionary activity specifically directed toward the Sami due to few active members in the region and continued migration of active membership southward. Innovative outreach expansion techniques that bring a gospel witness to larger numbers of Sami such as cottage meetings and traveling missionaries will be warranted to achieve any noticeable advancements in taking the gospel to this largely forgotten people of northern Scandinavia.

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