



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Comparing the Growth of the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

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Overview

Around the turn of the twentieth century, both Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints initiated their first proselytism efforts in Russia. Witnesses experienced slow growth during the first two decades of the twentieth century whereas the LDS Church reported only a handful of members until the Revolution of 1917 at which time all known Latter-day Saints fled the country. In the early twentieth century, Witnesses expanded Russian-directed proselytism to other countries. In the 1920s, Witnesses achieved success proselytizing Russians in the United States as indicated by over 250 attending a Russian conference in Pennsylvania. Thousands of Witnesses were incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Soviets expanded into Eastern Europe during World War II. In the 1950s, many Jehovah's Witnesses were exiled to forced labor camps in Siberia and the Russian Arctic. Witness reports indicate intensive efforts by government official to infiltrate Witness leadership with KGB agents. In the late 1980s, the LDS Church reestablished an unofficial presence and baptized the first convert in the Soviet Union in 1989. In 1990, the LDS Church registered its first congregation and assigned its first foreign missionaries although all missionary activity and church meetings occurred in a private setting.[\[1\]](#)

In March 1991, Witnesses received official recognition from the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union. At the time there were 15,987 active Witnesses in Russia. In mid-1991, the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union recognized the LDS Church.[\[2\]](#) By year-end 1991, there were 700 Latter-day Saints nationwide.

This case study compares the past growth of the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. Membership growth, national outreach, and international outreach among Russian populations are compared and contrasted. Factors that have influenced differing growth trends between the two denominations are discussed followed by sections on comparative growth and future prospects. Data on Witness history, membership, and congregations was retrieved from the Watchtower Online Library,[\[3\]](#) past statistical reports, and the online congregation meeting search website.[\[4\]](#) Latter-day Saint history and statistical data were obtained from past issues of the Deseret News Church Almanac and the Russia country profile[\[5\]](#) on cumorah.com. Witness membership data includes only active members whereas LDS membership data consists of all members on church records regardless of current activity status.

Membership Growth

In 1991, the LDS Church began reporting official membership totals for Russia. LDS membership totaled 3,700 in 1995, 13,509 in 2000, 18,785 in 2005, and 21,023 in 2010. At year-end 2011, the LDS Church reported 21,418 members in Russia.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Witnesses reported annual increases in active membership by about 3,000. At year-end 2011, Witnesses reported approximately 165,000 active members in Russia.

Witnesses in Russia have achieved greater growth among the deaf population compared to the hearing population. In 2006, the percentage of active Witnesses was three times higher among the deaf population than among the hearing population.

National Outreach and Congregational Growth

The LDS Church has provided year-to-year unit totals. At year-end 1991, there were four branches that functioned in St. Petersburg (2), Moscow, and Vyborg. The number of branches increased to 33 in 1993, 59 in 1995, 96 in 1997, 103 in 1999, and 112 in 2000. The number of branches totaled 120 in 2002, 114 in 2004, 121 in 2006, 129 in 2008, and 116 in 2010. At year-end 2011, there were 109 wards and branches. Although no year-to-year Witness statistics were available at the writing of this case study, the number of Witness congregations reportedly increased by 68 in 2011.

Over the past two decades, Jehovah's Witnesses have provided specific examples of congregational growth occurring on a local level for various areas of Russia. In Volgograd, Witnesses augmented the number of congregations from four to 20 within a three-year period in the early 1990s. In St. Petersburg, Witnesses reported five congregations in 1991. By 2006, there were over 70 congregations in St. Petersburg. In Sakhalin, Witnesses operated one congregation in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in 1990. By 1993, there were nine congregations in Sakhalin. In 2008, there were nine congregations and four groups on Sakhalin. In Moscow, there were 43 congregations in September 1998 which increased to 93 in 2006. At year-end 2011, Witnesses reported 2,407 congregations in Russia. Witnesses have established congregations in remote, rural towns and villages throughout Russia including the Sakha Republic among the Yakut and other indigenous peoples.

Today Jehovah's Witnesses operate congregations in nearly all of Russia's 83 administrative divisions. The only administrative divisions that do not appear to have at least one Witness congregation are a few of the least populous administrative divisions in the Russian Far East and Arctic. With the possible exception of Chechnya and Ingushetia, all administrative divisions in the Caucasus have at least one Witness congregation. Witnesses operate at least one congregation in nearly all cities with over 100,000 inhabitants.

Latter-day Saints maintain at least one congregation within 47 of the 83 administrative divisions although the Church operates only one congregation in 30 of the 47 reached administrative divisions. The Church operates two or more branches or wards in only 13 of the 83 administrative divisions (16%) that comprise a combined population of 50 million people, or 35% of the national population. There remain over 100 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation.

Witnesses provide significantly more penetrating outreach in the most populous cities of Russia compared to the LDS Church. Witnesses appear to operate 10 or more congregations in each of the 13 cities with over one million inhabitants. In late 2012, Witnesses listed over 100 congregations in Moscow, 85 congregations in St. Petersburg, 18 congregations in Novosibirsk, 11 congregations in Yekaterinburg, 14 congregations in Nizhny Novgorod, 17 congregations in Omsk, 15 congregations in Chelyabinsk, 12 congregations in Rostov-na-Donu, and 36 congregations in Volgograd whereas the LDS Church reported eight congregations in Moscow, seven congregations in St. Petersburg, two congregations in Novosibirsk, two congregations in Yekaterinburg, two congregations in Nizhny Novgorod, two congregations in Omsk, one congregation in Chelyabinsk, four congregations in Rostov, and for congregations in Volgograd. The ratio to Witness and LDS units was smallest in Rostov (three to one) and largest in Moscow (13 to one).

International Russian Outreach

Witnesses operate Russian language congregations in at least three dozen countries. In late 2012, Witnesses reported Russian-designated congregations in Ukraine (several hundred), Germany (over 100 congregations and groups), Moldova (96 congregations and groups), the United States (72 congregations and groups), Italy (69 congregations and groups), Estonia (29 congregations and groups), Georgia (23 congregations and groups), Greece (23 congregations and groups), Latvia (23 congregations and groups), France (22 congregations and groups), Spain (17 congregations and groups), Lithuania (nine congregations, five groups), the Czech Republic (seven congregations, five groups), Portugal (seven congregations, five groups), Israel (seven congregations), Belgium (four congregations, four groups), Canada (four congregations, three groups), Cyprus (four congregations), Finland (three congregations, 10 groups), Poland (three congregations, eight groups), Austria (three congregations, one group), the United Kingdom (two congregations, eight groups), South Korea (two congregations, seven groups), Norway (one congregation, three groups), Sweden (one congregation, one group), Argentina (one congregation), Denmark (one congregation), Ireland (one congregation), the Dominican Republic (two groups), Hungary (two groups), the Netherlands (two groups), Switzerland (two groups), Australia (one group), Brazil (one group), Luxembourg (one group), Mexico (one group), and New Zealand (one group).

The LDS Church operates Russian-speaking branches in five countries outside of Russia including Ukraine (approximately 20), Latvia (2), Estonia (1), Lithuania (1), and the United States (1).

Factors Influencing Differing Growth Trends

Jehovah's Witnesses in the former Soviet Union began member-missionary proselytism efforts in present-day Russia decades prior to Latter-day Saints resulting in Witnesses reporting 20 times more members than the LDS Church at year-end 1991 - the year both denominations obtained official government registration. Witnesses established a far-reaching presence that included locations as remote as Sakhalin Island in the Russian Far East whereas the LDS Church maintained a presence only in three cities at the time in western Russia. Witnesses have benefited from a sizable native member-missionary force that has enthusiastically expanded outreach throughout the entire country at a rate that has been unmatched by the LDS Church in any other country. With local members performing proselytism efforts, Witnesses in Russia have obtained greater growth than the LDS Church due to longer periods of prebaptismal preparation and emphasis on establishing resource-laden congregations as opposed to hastily meeting baptismal goals with little concern for long-term growth. Receptivity to nontraditional Christian

groups was significantly higher in the 1990s than in the 2000s and early 2010s, resulting in Witnesses capitalizing on better conditions for church growth. The LDS Church lacked the local infrastructure and worldwide missionary manpower to expand outreach as rapidly and efficiently as Witnesses during these years when the Russian population was most receptive. As a result of these differences, the LDS Church had fewer active members in 2011 than active Witnesses in 1991.

In the early 1990s, Witnesses relied on foreign missionary manpower from neighboring European countries such as Poland and Finland to accelerate growth whereas the LDS Church primarily relied on North American missionary manpower to expand outreach in Russia. In 1990, the LDS Church initiated proselytism in Russia from missions based in Finland and Austria but full-time missionaries assigned to the Soviet Union comprised almost entirely of North American missionaries with only a small number of native Europeans. There were virtually no native Russian missionaries until the mid-1990s. By the late 2000s, native Russian missionaries appeared to constitute only 10-20% of the full-time missionaries in Russian missions. In the late 2000s, the Church drastically reduced the number of full-time missionaries in Russia due to changes in visa requirements that mandate most foreign missionaries to leave the country every 90 days. In the early 2010s, mission presidents reported anticipated increases in the number of missionaries assigned for most missions largely due to the surge in the worldwide missionary force attributed to the lowered minimum mission age. With ongoing reliance on foreign missionaries primarily originating from Western Europe and North America, the LDS Church continues to be regarded as an American denomination and viewed by many Russians with suspicion. Witnesses remain poorly received by the Russian public as evidenced by hundreds of reports of harassment, intimidation, and arrests throughout the country but have been successful at developing a resource-endowed church that can operate independent of other countries.

Witnesses have zealously targeted minority ethnolinguistic groups throughout Russia whereas the LDS Church has not conducted any proselytism efforts targeting ethnic minority groups. These efforts reflect a nationwide effort to proselyte all peoples and indicates that there are sufficient local resources to provide outreach to many ethnic groups. In the late 2000s, the Russia Branch of Jehovah's Witnesses translated literature into over 40 languages whereas the LDS Church translated materials into only a handful of languages that are primarily spoken outside of Russia. The LDS Church operates only one non-Russian speaking unit in all of Russia - the Moscow (English) Ward - whereas Witnesses operate hundreds of congregations that are specifically designated for speakers of at least 31 minority languages. In late 2012, Witnesses reported on their online meetinghouse locator congregations that served speakers of Russian Sign Language (over 100 congregations and groups), Armenian (72 congregations and groups), Azerbaijani (27 congregations and groups), Tatar (23 congregations and groups), Ossetian (nine congregations, three groups), Georgian (five congregations, three groups), Uzbek (three congregations, 11 groups), Mandarin Chinese (three congregations, eight groups), Chuvash (three congregations), English (two congregations, five groups), Udmurt (two congregations, one group), Altai (two congregations), Digor (two congregations), Tajik (two congregations), Kyrgyz (one congregation, four groups), Bashkir (one congregation, one group), Kabardin-Cherkess (one congregation, one group), Tuvian (one congregation), Khakass (three groups), French (two groups), Kazakh (two groups), Spanish (two groups), Adyghe (one group), Karachay-Balkar (one group), Korean (one group), Mari (one group), Romanian (one group), and Vietnamese (one group). Witnesses also operate congregations in Abkhaz and Yakut but do not publish the number of congregations that meet in these languages.^[6]

Comparative Growth

Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints number among the most visible nontraditional faiths in major Russian cities due to their open proselytism tactics. Most outreach-oriented nontraditional Christian groups with a presence in Russia report a more widespread presence than the LDS Church but a smaller presence than Jehovah's Witnesses. The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Russia reports approximately 50,000 active members organized in 641 congregations. Adventists have established a widespread presence in Russia and operate congregations in most administrative divisions. Adventists have experienced stagnant growth or slight decline in most areas of Russia over the past decade as receptivity has waned. Evangelicals claim approximately one percent of the national population.^[7] The Church of the Nazarene reports approximately a dozen congregations nationwide.^[8]

Future Prospects

The outlook for future growth of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia appears significantly different between the two denominations. Witnesses appear likely to experience steady outreach expansion, active membership growth, and congregational growth whereas the LDS Church appears likely to experience stagnant or declining congregational growth and only slight increases, if any, in national outreach expansion and the number of active members. The LDS Church appears likely to organize additional stakes from several districts within the near future and may initiate a new period of outreach expansion as mission resources are redistributed from preparing members and leaders for the responsibilities of operating stakes to opening currently unreached cities to proselytism. This pattern of mission resource redistribution has been exhibited by the LDS Church in other countries in the region following the organization of stakes such as Ukraine and Hungary. Witnesses appear poised to make additional inroads with ethnic minority groups throughout Russia due to the impressive size of active membership and the devoted, growing number of church leaders who possess significant member-missionary resources and outreach expansion vision.

^[1] "Registration of Leningrad Branch approved," LDS Church News, 29 September 1990.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20180/Registration-of-Leningrad-Branch-approved.html>

^[2] Avant, Gerry. "Church is recognized by Russian republic," LDS Church News, 29 June 1991.

<http://www.Idschurchnews.com/articles/21491/Church-is-recognized-by-Russian-republic.html>

[3] <http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302008006#s=1025:0-1026:207>

[4] <http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E>

[5] http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=missiology_articles&story_id=212

[6] "Congregation Meeting Search," <http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT>

[7] <http://www.operationworld.org/russ>

[8] <http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=RS&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=>