



# People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## LDS Outreach among the Ngäbe People of Panama

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### Overview

Numbering between 200,000<sup>[1]</sup> and 250,000, the Ngäbe, or also called the Guaymí, are an Amerindian people native to western Panama and rural areas along the Costa Rica-Panama border. The Ngäbe had little contact with European colonists and Mestizo Panamanians until the twentieth century. Today Ngäbe communities exhibit varying degrees of acculturation into Mestizo society.<sup>[2]</sup> Most Ngäbe continue to speak their indigenous language called Ngäbere. In 1997, the Panamanian government formed a semi-autonomous reservation for the Ngäbe and Buglé peoples from the Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, and Veraguas Provinces called the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca. In 2000, Ngäbere speakers totaled 169,000 in Panama and 5,100 in Costa Rica.<sup>[3]</sup> Evangelical groups estimate that Christians currently constitute 92% of the Ngäbe population.<sup>[4]</sup>

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church among the Ngäbe. Past church growth and missionary successes are discussed and opportunities and challenges for future growth are examined. The growth of the Church among other Amerindian peoples in Panama is summarized and the size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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### LDS Background

The Church likely baptized its first Ngäbe converts in the 1980s or early 1990s as there were only a few thousand members nationwide and a limited LDS presence prior to 1980. In the 1980s, the first missionaries began serving in locations with sizable numbers of Ngäbe in cities such as Changuinola and David. In 1995, the Church organized its first and only district in Bocas del Toro Province with headquarters in Changuinola. In early 2002, the Church operated branches in at least five locations where sizable numbers of Ngäbe are known to reside including Almirante, Bajo Boquete, Changuinola, El Empalme, and Tolé. In late 2013, the Church operated branches in four of these locations (Almirante, Bajo Boquete, Changuinola, and El Empalme). It is unclear whether these branches have sizable numbers of Ngäbe members or whether Mestizos constitute the majority of membership in these congregations.

As the Ngäbe comprise approximately 5.5% of the national population, there may be as many as 2,500 Ngäbe Latter-day Saints if the demographics of LDS membership in Panama is representative of the Panamanian population. However, it appears that the estimated number of nominal Ngäbe members in Panama may be as low as a few hundred considering there is no LDS presence in the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca and mission leaders have never appeared to extend Ngäbe-specific outreach. There are likely only a handful of Ngäbe individuals, if any, in Costa Rica who have joined the Church. The Church has not translated any LDS materials or scriptures into Ngäbere.

### Successes

The Church has likely baptized hundreds of Ngäbe members over the past three decades notwithstanding no specialized missionary outreach extended and no LDS presence in the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca. This success has occurred despite no LDS units operating in sparsely populated rural communities where the majority of the Ngäbe population resides. The presence of Ngäbe members in wards and branches can facilitate the integration of Ngäbe investigators and new converts and, over time, help establish a sense of community among this demographic.

Although most areas of Panama have experienced significant congregational decline within the past decade, the Church has only

discontinued one congregation within the Ngäbe homeland during this period (Tolé). This finding suggests that higher member activity and convert retention rates, more developed and self-sufficient local leadership, and greater investment by mission leaders to maintain current congregations instead of consolidating smaller units may occur in these locations compared to other areas of Panama.

## Opportunities

Current conditions suggest that the Church may experience good receptivity and steady growth among the Ngäbe if specialized outreach occurs. No other Amerindian people in Panama or Costa Rica has as large of a population as the Ngäbe. A comparatively large target population improves the likelihood of missionaries finding interested individuals and efficiently utilizing limited mission resources. Other missionary-focused Christian groups have established a sizable presence among the Ngäbe and report good levels of receptivity and growth. Similar results may occur if premeditated, purposeful, and coordinated full-time missionary and member-missionary efforts occur. The LDS Church has already established a long-term presence in Bocas del Toro and Chiriqui Provinces where sizable numbers of Ngäbe reside. Holding Ngäbere-speaking Sunday School classes may be an effective step towards reaching the Ngäbere and assessing conditions for greater outreach expansion. Not only may the Church begin concentrated outreach among the Ngäbe in these provinces where branches operate and missionaries proselyte but the Church may also utilize these locations for expanding outreach into surrounding rural communities where there are often higher percentages of Ngäbe. Ngäbe members are a valuable resource to church leaders and full-time missionaries orchestrating Ngäbe-specific outreach due to familiarity with local language and culture. Bocas del Toro and Chiriqui Provinces also border the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca, providing opportunities for expanding missionary activity into this semi-autonomous administrative division where the Ngäbe dominate society and culture.

The Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca presents some of the greatest opportunities for premeditated and specialized outreach among the Ngäbe. Locations that appear especially favorable for outreach include Peninsula Valiente and areas of extreme southern Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca bordering Chiriqui Province as these areas appear to have higher population densities and other missionary-focused denominations have achieved greater growth and outreach penetration in these areas than in other locations. Mission leader, local church leader, and full-time missionary visits present the most practical and efficient method to assess local conditions, find isolated members and investigators, and hold cottage meetings. Holding cottage meetings in various Ngäbe communities presents a low-cost and effective method to gather any isolated members and investigators, present a simple missionary lesson and a brief introduction to the Church, provide an informal but spiritually uplifting church activity, and foster social relationships between members and investigators. Missionaries and church leaders can organize these meetings to occur in members' homes or in makeshift shelters. Locations with sizable numbers of interested individuals or committed members and investigators can be targeted for consistent missionary outreach in order to establish a member group or branch.

Poverty and low living standards may make the use of humanitarian and development projects as an appropriate, passive proselytizing method that can also improve the living conditions for many Ngäbe. Senior missionary couples and local leaders can help organize and carry out development projects that teach agricultural techniques and principles of proper health and nutrition. Latter-day Saints could employ strategies for economic self-reliance similar to past and current development projects among other Amerindian groups or poverty-stricken areas such as teaching efficient agricultural techniques, organizing garden projects, holding employment and neonatal resuscitation workshops, conducting clean water projects, and providing small business loans or resources to jumpstart local entrepreneurs. The Church has accomplished noticeable success through poultry and plantation projects in Sub-Saharan Africa where individuals receive a "starter kit" of recently hatched chicks or farming supplies that if properly managed can turn into a self-sufficient business. Low levels of economic development and isolation from major cities indicate that small business projects could make a noticeable impact on the local economy. Low literacy rates and poorly developed education infrastructure suggest that the LDS Church may meet local needs and passively facilitate the introduction of the Church through teaching literacy courses.

## Challenges

The Church in Panama currently faces serious difficulties in achieving real growth and acceptable rates of convert retention and member activity. The Church has experienced significant congregational decline in Panama over the past decade as the number of congregations decreased from 112 in 2011 to 72 in 2012; a 36% decline over an 11-year period. Notwithstanding declining numbers of congregations, steady membership growth occurred during this period as membership increased from 38,359 to 48,669; a 27% increase. Local leadership development problems also appear responsible for incommensurate membership and congregational growth. In 2011, the Church in Panama discontinued a stake for the first time in its history due to widespread congregation consolidations in the Panama City area. These findings indicate severe member activity and convert retention problems and insufficient numbers of qualified priesthood holders to staff leadership positions, especially considering more than 10,000 new converts joined the Church during this period yet the number of congregations decreased by a third. Most new converts appear to join the Church without developing habitual church attendance and likely receive little to no post-baptismal support and fellowship. No additional cities or towns have opened for missionary work in many years due to these challenges and declining receptivity to LDS outreach.

A lack of real church growth in Panama within the past decade poses serious challenges for initiating Ngäbe-specific outreach. Mission resources have been principally utilized for strengthening remaining LDS congregations through reactivation efforts and leadership support. As the Panama Panama City Mission has not appeared to open any previously unreached locations to missionary activity within the past decade, the prognosis for mission leadership to seriously consider the implementation of a Ngäbe-specific proselytism program that is complete with Ngäbe-speaking missionaries appears poor. Surplus missionary manpower continues to be designated for reactivation efforts and strengthening weaker church units in order to curtail further unit

consolidations.

The Ngäbe are the most populous Amerindian people in Panama and Costa Rica yet the Church has yet to extend specialized outreach among this population. It is unclear why the Church has not appeared to target this people considering its large population and the size of the Church in Panama. The Church has no known congregations that operate in Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca notwithstanding this administrative division supporting a population of over 150,000. Only Lempira Department in Honduras has a larger population (323,500) and no LDS presence among administrative divisions in Central America. With no urban areas inhabited by more than a few thousand people, Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca has a population that resides in sparsely populated towns and villages that are difficult to access and that are located in remote areas. These conditions require LDS leaders to organize larger numbers of congregations and assign greater amounts of mission resources than urban areas in order to effectively reach the target population. With church growth efforts based on the centers of strength policy, the Church's traditional methods for outreach expansion and official missionary activity face serious challenges if applied to Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca due to virtually the entire population residing in rural areas. There appear no realistic prospects for the Church in Costa Rica to extend outreach among Ngäbe due to the tiny size of the target population and remote location.

Challenges with LDS missionary efforts among the Kuna Amerindians may dissuade mission leaders from seriously considering the opening of a Ngäbe-specific outreach program. The Church in Panama established some of its first congregations among the Kuna Amerindians of the San Blas Archipelago and has since experienced marginal member activity and convert retention rates although seven branches currently operate in the region. Missionaries serving among the Kuna complain that many do not have their basic physiological needs met and cannot adequately focus on spiritual matters due to malnutrition and other societal problems. As the Ngäbe also experience challenges with poverty and economic development, similar frustrations may occur if LDS missionary efforts occur. However, postponing LDS outreach among the Ngäbe may result in reduced receptivity as many individuals receptive to LDS outreach may become shepherded by other proselytism-oriented faiths.

Poverty is a major societal problem among the Ngäbe and may take precedence over overt proselytism. The Church in Panama may not have the resources to conduct humanitarian or development projects among the Ngäbe to help ameliorate malnutrition, unemployment, and illiteracy.

## Comparative Growth

The Church in Panama and Costa Rica has extended specialized outreach among only one Amerindian people: The Kuna. The Church has extended outreach among the Kuna for half a century and has multiple Kuna-speaking congregations and sizable numbers of Kuna members both within the Kuna homeland and in several major cities. The Church has also translated several gospel study and missionary materials into Kuna, including select passages of the Book of Mormon. Other major Amerindian peoples native to these countries such as the Bribri, Cabécar, and Emberá have no translations of LDS materials available in their indigenous languages and have not appeared to have received any specific or intentional LDS outreach.

Most missionary-focused groups with a widespread presence in Panama report a presence among the Ngäbe. Evangelicals claim four percent of the Ngäbe population in Panama<sup>[5]</sup> and six percent of the Ngäbe population in Costa Rica.<sup>[6]</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses have a widespread presence among the Ngäbe. In late 2013, Witnesses reported 30 Ngäbere-speaking congregations in Panama (21 congregations, nine groups)<sup>[7]</sup> and three Ngäbere-speaking congregations in Costa Rica (one congregation, two groups). A map of Ngäbe-speaking Witness congregations can be found [here](#). Witnesses translate a large number of proselytism materials into Ngäbere.<sup>[8]</sup> The Seventh Day Adventist Church also appears to operate a widespread presence among the Ngäbe. In 2012, Adventists reported approximately 52,000 members, 147 churches and 89 companies in the Panamanian provinces of Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, and Veraguas. Adventists report steady growth in the region with approximately 2,000 baptisms a year.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Limitations

Returned missionary reports are limited for those who have served in the Ngäbe homelands. Consequently no data was available regarding membership demographics for branches in these locations and whether many Ngäbe have joined the Church in these locations. No reports were available from Ngäbe Latter-day Saints or local church leaders who reside in the Ngäbe homeland. The Church does not publish the number of members who speak languages that are not within the top 10 most commonly spoken languages by members worldwide. No data is available regarding the number of Ngäbe members in worldwide church membership. The Church does not publish the number and location of member groups. It is unclear whether any member groups operate within the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca or in other locations in the Ngäbe homeland. No data was available concerning LDS-sponsored humanitarian or development work among the Ngäbe.

## Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church commencing Ngäbe-specific outreach appears mediocre for the foreseeable future due to persistent problems with the Church in Panama achieving real growth, a lack of vision and interest by church leaders, and the centers of strength policy discouraging outreach expansion into rural areas distant from established congregations. The reversal of declining congregational growth trends and the improvement of member activity and convert retention rates in Panama will be vital towards mission and area leaders seriously considering the organization of a Ngäbe-specific missionary program in the Panama Panama City Mission. The Church may translate a couple basic proselytism and gospel study materials into Ngäbere within the next decade if there are a sizable number of Ngäbere speakers with limited proficiency in Spanish who are active members of the

Church or if Ngäbe-specialized outreach commences. Opportunities for growth and reaching the Ngäbe appear greatest through investigatory visits into unreached areas within the Ngäbe homeland, organizing Ngäbere-speaking Sunday School classes in congregations with sizable numbers of Ngäbe, and establishing an official missionary presence in the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca.

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