



International Resources for Latter-day Saints

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Aymara of the Andes

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Posted: December 21st, 2013

Overview

Native to the arid Altiplano of South America, the Aymara are one of the most populous Amerindian groups in Latin America with approximately three million people residing primarily in Bolivia and extreme southeastern Peru.[\[1\]](#)

This case study presents a brief summary of the Aymara people followed by a synopsis of the history of Aymara-specific LDS outreach and church growth. Past growth successes are described and opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church among other Amerindian peoples in South America is summarized and the growth and size of other missionary-oriented Christian groups that target the Aymara is provided. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

Aymara Background

The Aymara number among Bolivia's earliest peoples to settle the Altiplano region approximately two millennia ago. In the thirteenth century, the Aymara culture collapsed and the Inca conquered the Aymara. Unlike other peoples integrated into the vast Incan Empire, the Aymara were permitted to retain their own language as opposed to adopting Quechua.[\[2\]](#) In the early sixteenth century, the Spanish defeated the Incan Empire and subjugated the Aymara to Spanish rule. Millions of Aymara died as a result of Spanish colonization and harsh forced-labor conditions working in silver mines. Although Bolivia and other nearby countries achieved independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, the Aymara continue to experience limited autonomy and representation in government. In recent decades, some Aymara have held high ranking government positions in Bolivia.

The Aymara people speak two varieties of the Aymara language: Central Aymara and Southern Aymara. Central Aymara has a total of 2.59 million native speakers that reside in Bolivia (2.1 million), Peru (442,000), Argentina (30,000), and Chile (19,000)[\[3\]](#) whereas Southern Aymara is primarily spoken in Peru and had 219,000 speakers in 2006.[\[4\]](#) Approximately 91% of Aymara are Christian.[\[5\]](#)

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LDS Background

In 1973, the Church indicated that Aymara was an official proselytism language for the Bolivia Mission along with Spanish and Quechua.[\[6\]](#) That same year, the Church reported that the first Aymara Latter-day Saints were ordained as elders in the Melchizedek Priesthood and that there were 20 Aymara-speaking missionaries in Bolivia.[\[7\]](#) In 1974, audio translations of select passages of the Book of Mormon were available in Aymara.[\[8\]](#) A printed edition of the Aymara translation of the Book of Mormon was published in 1977 (selections) and 1986 (full book).[\[9\]](#) In 1980, one church leader reported that an entire Aymara village joined the Church.[\[10\]](#) The Church organized its first predominantly Aymara district in the 1970s and organized its first predominantly Aymara stake in 1981 (El Alto Satelite). Provided with the year organized, the Church currently operates four stakes (El Alto Satelite [1981], El Alto [1991], El Alto Los Andes [2007], El Alto Litoral [2013]) and two districts (Achacachi [1976] and Titicaca [1992]) in locations that are predominantly Aymara. The El Alto Bolivia Los Andes Stake was originally organized as a district in the early 2000s from one of the preexisting stakes.

Stagnant congregational growth has occurred within the past decade. In 2001, the Church had five branches in the Achacachi Bolivia District, five branches in the Titicaca Bolivia District, and 23 wards and branches in El Alto. In late 2013, the Church had six branches in the Achacachi Bolivia District, five branches in the Titicaca Bolivia District, and 24 wards and branches in El Alto.

The Church has conducted humanitarian and development work among the Aymara. In 2010, the Benson Institute provided health and nutrition education to Bolivian Aymara members in the Lake Titicaca region. Most Aymara subsist on a diet of meat and potatoes and lack many essential nutrients for proper health. The Benson Institute instructed members how to construct greenhouses from local materials available to grow vegetables in order to improve nutrition. At the time, approximately 100 greenhouses had been constructed. The Benson Institute also instructed members how to make the use of greenhouses self-sustaining through selling surplus vegetables to purchase seeds for sowing future crops.[\[11\]](#)

Senior missionary couples have provided support and training to local church leadership in rural districts. In 2012, approximately 30 youth from the Achacachi Bolivia and Titicaca Bolivia Districts attended a special activity. Senior missionaries reported that there were few youth leaders that were engaged in teaching and fellowshiping youth. At the time most branches struggled to adequately staff leadership positions in most branches within these two districts. In mid-2012, the remote Suriquiña Cerro Branch had approximately 50 attending church services. Members wore traditional clothing to sacrament meeting and

traveled either by foot or by bicycle for up to an hour to reach the meetinghouse. In fall 2013, missionaries serving in one branch in the Juli Peru District reported that there were only 40 active members out of the 800 members on church records for the branch and that the missionaries served as the counselors to the branch president.

In 2013, church leaders reported that there were approximately 18 congregations that held church services in Aymara or that had significant numbers of Aymara-speaking members; all but one of which operated in Bolivia. At the time, Aymara LDS translations available included the entire Book of Mormon, approximately a dozen gospel study and missionary materials,^[12] and audio translations of General Conference addresses.^[13] Although no official membership statistics on the number of Aymara Latter-day Saints has been released by the Church, there appear to be tens of thousands of Aymara Latter-day Saints in South America.

A map displaying the Aymara homeland and the status of LDS outreach among cities, towns, and villages with 100 or more inhabitants can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Aymara were among the first Amerindian peoples in Latin America targeted by LDS missionaries and today number among the Amerindian peoples with the most Latter-day Saints. The Aymara were among the first Amerindian peoples to have foreign missionaries teach in an Amerindian language and to receive translations of church materials and LDS scriptures. Aymara currently numbers among the few Amerindian languages with a complete translation of the Book of Mormon. The Church has translated all sessions of General Conference into Aymara for at least several years now, providing monolingual Aymara speakers with opportunities to listen and study gospel topics.

The Church has established a presence among the Aymara both in urban and rural communities ranging from the La Paz/EI Alto metropolitan area inhabited by 2.1 million to villages along the shores of Lake Titicaca with only a few hundred inhabitants. The Church has maintained its presence in most small villages for several decades notwithstanding a tiny target population and few convert baptisms in recent years. The Church has successfully developed a small number of priesthood holders in these communities to staff essential leadership positions. Within the past decade, the Church organized a branch for the first time in a community that previously had no LDS presence (Warisata). Approximately half of wards and branches in the El Alto area have sizable numbers of Aymara speakers although these congregations appear to conduct most, if not all, church meetings in Spanish.

Most branches in rural communities meet in church-built meetinghouses located close to where the majority of membership resides. These meetinghouses provide for the basic needs of individual congregations and have contributed to a sense of LDS community.

The Church has provided effective development work to improve the health and living conditions of the Aymara in some locations through teaching skills in greenhouse construction and farming.^[14] This approach can improve the self-sufficiency of members in rural communities and provide passive proselytism opportunities for interested nonmember neighbors, friends, and family.

Opportunities

There remain hundreds of small towns and villages within the Aymara homeland that have no nearby LDS congregations. In La Paz Department, there are approximately 120 small towns and villages with 100 or more inhabitants without an LDS congregation. Many of these locations likely have as many as a couple dozen members that joined the Church elsewhere but have had little to no contact with the Church due to geographic distance. Provided with the population as of 2001, the five towns in the Aymara homeland of Bolivia with the largest populations without an LDS presence include Copacabana (4,161), Sica Sica (3,831), Lahuachaca (2,986), Eucaliptus (2,474), and Colquencha (2,352).

Local branch, district, and stake leaders heading outreach expansion efforts within their jurisdictions provides the most efficient and self-sustaining approach to achieving long-term outreach expansion among the Aymara. Local church leaders can review ward and branch membership directories and identify whether there are any known members in individual towns and villages without a ward or branch. These leaders can then schedule regular visits to these locations and organize cottage meetings for isolated members and investigators to attend in order for these individuals to learn more about the Church, build a sense of LDS community, and prepare conditions for organizing a member group if feasible. Full-time missionaries may be involved during this process to teach the missionary lessons to interested investigators who express a desire to get baptized. Mission leadership, senior missionary couples, and young full-time missionaries can conduct similar efforts for locations outside the geographic boundaries of stakes and districts that pertain to the Bolivia La Paz Mission Branch. The mission could designate a couple young full-time missionary companionships as "traveling missionaries" who spend several days at a time investigating conditions in unreached towns and villages and report back their findings to mission, stake, or district leaders. In districts, the Church may find it effective to organize "district branches" to help district leaders effectively administer members who reside in multiple member groups throughout the district or in locations where there is no type of LDS unit present.

There are good opportunities to revitalize outreach expansion efforts within urban and suburban areas of El Alto. There remain

large areas of the city that have no nearby LDS meetinghouse and where distance to the nearest meetinghouse and a lack of mission outreach have likely resulted in diminished member activity and convert retention rates and few conversions. Organizing branches in lesser-reached areas of the city has excellent potential to revamp church growth efforts in El Alto and reverse the decade-long trend of stagnant congregational growth in the city.

Aymara youth and young adults are increasingly becoming more fluent in Spanish than their parents and grandparents. A lack of monolingual Aymara-speakers among younger generations may reduce the need for Aymara-language resources in the coming decades.

Challenges

Low member activity rates, limited numbers of active priesthood holders capable of holding leadership positions, poverty, and remote location pose significant obstacles for the Church to experience real growth among the Aymara in rural communities. Rural villages and towns are sparsely populated and many are located in remote areas. There has appeared to be little, if any, improvement in augmenting the number of active members in rural communities predominantly inhabited by Aymara within the past decade. Low levels of self-sufficiency in the Church have prompted mission leaders to utilize senior missionary couples and young missionaries to provide leadership and member support in order for branches to properly function. These conditions have likely dissuaded mission and district leaders from considering opportunities to organize additional member groups and expand outreach due to leadership and administration problems consuming available mission resources. Senior missionary couples report that many local church leaders have demonstrated little interest in teaching and preparing youth for lifelong activity in the Church and full-time missionary service. The lack of enthusiasm and vision among local church leaders and ordinary members appears primarily responsible for virtually no measureable progress during the past decade in expanding the Church's penetration of LDS outreach within the Aymara homeland.

The Church has experienced stagnant congregational growth in all areas predominantly populated by the Aymara, including urban areas such as El Alto. Low convert retention rates appear primarily responsible for only a couple new congregations organized within the past decade as there has been little to no increase in the number of active members in the region. This finding raises the concern for insufficient prebaptismal preparation, inconsistent and ineffective member-missionary involvement, and the lack of vision to expand outreach into additional communities. Inactivity and convert retention problems likely contributed to the decision by the Church to originally organize the El Alto Bolivia Los Andes Stake as a district as there were a sufficient number of congregations to organize a stake but these congregations initially did not individually meet the requirements to become wards and collectively meet the requirements to become a stake.

There appear few Latter-day Saints in the Aymara homeland outside of Bolivia. The Church does not appear to have sizable numbers of Aymara speakers in any cities or towns outside Bolivia with the exception of a couple locations in the Juli Peru District. Other missions have never appeared to engage in Aymara-specific outreach and have extremely few, if any, Aymara resources available such as Aymara-speaking missionaries.

Comparative Growth

The Church among the Aymara has experienced similar growth trends as among most other Amerindian peoples in South America, namely that rapid growth occurred during the first decade or two of LDS proselytism followed by stagnant growth thereafter. The percentage of Latter-day Saints among the Aymara appears comparable to most other major Amerindian peoples in the region. The Quechua of Peru and Bolivia appear to have the largest number of Latter-day Saints among Amerindian peoples of South America followed by the Guarani of Paraguay. The Church has achieved its highest degree of self-sufficiency and member activity rates among the Quichua-speaking Otavalo Amerindians in extreme northern Ecuador as the Church operates two Quichua-speaking stakes that have experienced slow albeit steady congregational growth within the past three decades. The Church among Amerindian groups in South America claims the highest percentage of members among the Nivacle of Paraguay and the Otavalo in Ecuador.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a presence among the Aymara comparable in size to the LDS Church or larger. Evangelicals claim 18.4% of the Aymara population.^[15] The Seventh Day Adventist Church maintains hundreds of congregations within the Aymara homelands and there are a sizable minority of Aymara who are Adventist.^[16] Adventists translate materials into both Central and Southern Aymara languages.^[17] Jehovah's Witnesses report 17 Aymara-speaking congregations in Bolivia (most located in the La Paz/El Alto metropolitan area; only a few operate in rural communities), 17 Aymara-speaking congregations in Peru (scattered throughout southern Peru), one Aymara-speaking congregation in Chile in Arica, and one Aymara-speaking group in Argentina in Buenos Aires.^[18] Witnesses translate many proselytism materials into Aymara.^[19] The Church of the Nazarene operates congregations in most cities and large towns within the Aymara homeland.^[20]

Limitations

Qualitative data on the status of the Church among the Aymara originated from missionary reports. No reports were available from Aymara members and church leaders. The Church only publishes statistics on the number of members speaking languages within the 10 most commonly spoken languages among worldwide church membership. It is unclear how many Aymara Latter-day Saints there are in Bolivia, other countries in South America, and the world as a whole. The Church does not

publish information on the location, name, and meeting times for member groups. Consequently no data is available on whether any member groups operate in the Aymara homeland. The Church does not publish information on the number of ethnically Aymara members who currently serve or have previously served full-time missions. The Church does not publish information on language programs for individual missions including what missions have Aymara-speaking missionaries and how many missionaries are assigned to learn and utilize Aymara in proselytism efforts. The Church does not publish official statistics on member activity and convert retention rates for the Church among particular people groups, individual countries or missions, or the world as a whole.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Aymara appears mediocre as the Church has avoided unit consolidations over the past decade due to small numbers of highly devoted local members and leaders and stagnant active membership growth. There is no indication that low member activity and convert retention rates will improve within the foreseeable future. Aymara members and church leaders taking greater responsibility for missionary efforts in greater numbers than in previous years and decades will be most critical for any substantial improvement to occur. The organization of a second mission in the La Paz/El Alto Metropolitan area appears likely within the foreseeable future due to the large number of stakes and districts in the mission, the surge in the number of members serving full-time missions worldwide, and the difficulty of a single mission president effectively administering the La Paz/El Alto Metropolitan area in addition to several other large cities within the mission and the unique challenges and needs in the two Aymara districts. A second mission headquartered in La Paz/El Alto may spur greater interest to expand outreach within unreached communities outside the boundaries of stakes and districts. Depending on trends in literacy in the Aymara language, the Church may translate remaining LDS scriptures into Aymara within the next decade.

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