

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among Haitians in the United States

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Overview

The United States has one of the largest Haitian populations in the world. Currently the estimated number of Haitian Americans residing in the United States is approximately 800,000. In the mid-2000s, there were approximately 620,000 speakers of French-based Creole languages in the United States[1] - the vast majority of whom were Haitian. The number of Haitian Americans has dramatically increased within the past couple decades from 290,000 in 1990 to 830,000 in 2009.[2] In 2009, more than two-thirds of the self-identified Haitian American population resided in Florida (376,000 - 45% of national estimate) and New York (191,000 - 23% of national estimate). In addition to Florida and New York, three more states have a percentage of Haitian Americans that is higher than the national average of 0.3% including Massachusetts (0.9%), New Jersey (0.7%), and Connecticut (0.5%).[3] Additional states with sizable numbers of Haitian Americans (more than 10,000) include Georgia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Compared to the national average, Haitian Americans are more likely to be younger (29.7 years versus 36.8 years), to have a higher percentage of family versus nonfamily households (78.8% versus 66.5%), to have a smaller percentage of males and females with a bachelor's degree or higher (18.3% versus 28.4% for males, 18.2% versus 27.4% for females), to live in poverty (19.6% versus 14.3%), and to earn less income according to median annual family income ($45,626 versus $61,082). Over four-fifths of Haitian Americans speak a language other than English in the home and most are Roman Catholic or Protestant.

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LDS Background

Initial LDS proselytism efforts that specifically targeted Haitian Americans began in the early 1980s. Little to no missionary activity occurred among Haitian Americans prior to this time due to the Church's previous priesthood and temple ordinance restrictions on blacks that were not removed until 1978. In Haiti, the Church baptized its first Haitian converts in 1978 and organized its first branch in October 1980[4] but the majority of Haitian American members have appeared to join the Church after immigrating to the United States.

In 1983, the Church published a translation of select passages of the Book of Mormon into Haitian Creole. In 1999, a translation of the entire Book of Mormon was completed.[5] Translations of General Conference addresses into Haitian Creole have occurred since as early as the late 1980s - a time when the Church translated General Conference into only 16 languages via telecast.[6] By 2013, the Church listed 66 materials translated into Haitian Creole.[7]

In 1991, four Haitian-Creole-speaking missionaries served in the Massachusetts Boston Mission.[8] In 1994, there was only one Haitian-Creole-speaking branch (Delray Beach) within the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area based in the Pompano Beach Florida Stake.[9] In early 2002, there was one Haitian-Creole-designated branch in Fort Lauderdale, Florida (Morningside). Additional Haitian-Creole branches were organized in the Fort Lauderdale area sometime in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church shifted its focus from organizing additional Haitian-designated wards and branches to accommodating language needs through English-speaking congregations. Audio translations of English church services were provided via headsets and several wards and branches organized separate language Sunday School classes. With the exception of the Boston 3rd (Haitian-Creole) Branch in the Boston Massachusetts Stake which became a ward in 2011, all other Haitian-Creole-speaking branches were closed by 2013. Haitian-Creole units in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area appeared to close sometime between 2010 and 2012. In 2012 and early 2013, two Haitian-Creole-speaking branches (Celeste and Providence) were closed in Fort Myers, Florida. In mid-2013, the Boston 3rd (Haitian-Creole) Ward had approximately 250

members.

In 2013, missionaries in several missions in the eastern United States reported proselytism programs in Haitian Creole including the Florida Fort Lauderdale, Florida Orlando, Florida Tampa, Massachusetts Boston, and New York New York South Missions.

Successes

Several missions maintain an active Haitian-Creole proselytism program complete with Haitian-Creole-speaking missionaries and translation assistance for several wards and branches notwithstanding no Haitian-Creole-designated wards or branches within their boundaries. These programs have appeared to consistently operate for two decades or longer in most missions. Mission leaders have extended outreach among Haitians more regularly than many other ethnic groups that have larger populations. This has likely been due to high receptivity and the need for language accommodations. The Church has translated a wide body of materials and scriptures into Haitian Creole, providing opportunities for testimony development and gospel scholarship.

Missionaries have successfully utilized several different finding approaches aside from tracting. In 2013, missionaries serving in Florida reported that the Florida Fort Lauderdale Mission aired radio commercials in Haitian Creole offering listeners a free copy of the Book of Mormon. Missionaries have provided translation assistance in several different events such as health fairs.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities for the implementation of strategies that enhance a sense of LDS community among the Haitian population. Family home evening (FHE) and cottage meetings provide excellent opportunities for members to invite nonmember family and friends to activities where they can socialize with members and investigators and learn about the gospel in a less formal and pressured format. Establishing Haitian-Creole-speaking Sunday School classes in wards and branches where there are several Haitian members and investigators can help mitigate the challenges of integrating these individuals into predominantly English-speaking or Spanish-speaking congregations but without exacting limited resources and prematurely establishing separate branches. These interventions can also accommodate a larger range of Haitian Americans within the same congregation including monolingual Creole speakers, bilingual Creole and English speakers, and monolingual English speakers. Emphasis on seminary and institute programs may also improve convert retention, reactivation, and prebaptismal preparation efforts if local leaders and full-time missionaries coordinate. Publishing information on the Church's online meetinghouse locator (lds.org/maps) regarding which wards and branches provide translation services and Sunday School classes conducted in Haitian Creole could accelerate growth.

There are additional locations where the Church has not appeared to engage in Haitian-specific outreach but where there are sizable numbers of Haitian Americans. There has not appeared to be any previous Haitian outreach in Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania notwithstanding Haitian Americans numbering over 10,000 in each of these states. The ongoing surge in the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide and massive increase in the number of missionaries assigned to missions based in the United States indicate that mission leaders in these states have the needed manpower to appoint at least one or two missionary companionships to focus exclusively on Haitian-Creole speakers. Prospects appear most likely to begin Haitian-directed outreach in additional missions if there have been recent successes baptizing sizable numbers of Haitians and if language barriers have posed problems for teaching, worship, and testimony development.

Challenges

The Church has closed all of its Haitian-Creole-designated branches over the past few years and only one Haitian-Creole-speaking ward operates in the entire United States. Data on the individual circumstances for the closure of these branches is extremely limited but member activity and local leadership development problems appear the primary reason prompting the closure of these units. Bilingualism in English permits many Haitian American members and investigators to attend English-speaking wards and branches, requiring no need for maintaining Haitian-Creole-speaking congregations in some locations. However, the lack of wards and branches designated for Haitian Creole speakers poses greater challenges for instilling a sense of LDS community among Haitian American members.

Inactivity and a lack of member-missionary participation is a significant problem in many areas. Reports indicate that many wards and branches that operate in locations with sizable numbers of Haitian Latter-day Saints have hundreds of inactive and less-active members, including both Haitian and non-Haitian individuals and families. Reactivation efforts can detract from proselytism efforts among the nonmember population in some locations. Receptivity among the general Haitian American population has been strong, resulting in some wards baptizing dozens of Haitian converts within a single year. However, the lack of Haitian members in leadership positions and poor member-missionary participation have made convert retention efforts problematic. Missionaries have reported challenges for Haitian investigators preparing for baptism in locations where only one or two active Haitian members reside within their assigned ward or branch. This has led some investigators to express concerns about the lack of Haitian community in the LDS Church. Few Haitian members accompany full-time missionaries for teaching appointments with investigators, creating a disconnect between Haitian converts and active membership in English and Spanish-speaking wards and branches. Missionaries report that some wards are supportive and involved in Haitian missionary outreach whereas others are not, further deepening the social divide between Haitian and non-Haitian members. There have

also been comparatively few Haitian American Latter-day Saints who have served missions, resulting in few returned missionaries to staff leadership positions.

There are some societal and cultural conditions that pose barriers for church growth. Many Haitian Americans have been proselytized by other Christian groups who have a larger and more self-sufficient church infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of Haitian converts. Consequently missionaries indicate that large numbers of Haitians have become socially entrenched into other denominations that maintain a sense of Haitian community. Returned missionaries report that common misconceptions about the LDS Church have created some challenges for missionary activity. Some Haitian Americans syncretize Christianity and Voodoo beliefs and practices which could lead to difficulties helping investigators and members properly understand and adhere to LDS teachings. Transiency, poverty, and underemployment present challenges for achieving self-sufficiency in individual Haitian-designated units.

There is a disconnect between the Church in Haiti and the Church in the United States due to challenges with illegal immigration, poverty, and the current economic and political situation of the two countries. Only Haitian missionaries serve full-time missionaries in Haiti and very few, if any, members residing in Haiti receive mission calls to serve in the United States. The size of the Church in Haiti remains extremely small compared to other major proselytizing Christian groups, resulting in few Haitian Americans who originally joined the Church in Haiti and very little, if any, surplus missionary manpower available to assign Haiti-native members to United States missions if visas can be secured.

Comparative Growth

Haitian Creole numbers among the few languages in which there are several different missions that maintain an active proselytism program. Only Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, Hmong, Portuguese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese appear to have specialized proselytism programs in as many missions as Haitian Creole.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups report a widespread presence among Haitian Americans that significantly surpasses the size of the LDS Church among Haitian Americans based on the number of Haitian-designated congregations reported. In mid-2013, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 101 Haitian-Creole-designated congregations and groups in the United States located in Florida (52 congregations and groups), New York (18 congregations and groups), New Jersey (eight congregations), Massachusetts (seven congregations), Georgia (four congregations), Connecticut (two congregations), Maryland (one congregation, one group), Virginia (one congregation, one group), Pennsylvania (one congregation), Rhode Island (one congregation), Arizona (one group), Illinois (one group), Louisiana (one group), and North Carolina (one group).[10] In mid-2013, Adventists reported at least 36 churches and companies designated for Haitian Americans located in Florida (11), Massachusetts (5), Pennsylvania (4), Georgia (2), Maryland (2), North Carolina (2), Ohio (2), California (1), Colorado (1), Connecticut (1), Delaware (1), Kentucky (1), Rhode Island (1), Texas (1), and Virginia (1).[11] The Church of the Nazarene reports 43 Haitian-designated churches in the United States.[12]

Limitations

No Haitian American member reports were available during the writing of this case study. Data on the personal experiences of individual members and the Haitian Latter-day Saint community as a whole originated from full-time missionary reports. The Church does not publish any data on the country of origin for church membership worldwide or for individual countries and does not publish the number of Haitian-Creole speakers on church records. This has made efforts to estimate the number of Haitian Americans very difficult if not impossible. There are no data available regarding the number of wards and branches that operate Haitian-Creole-speaking Sunday School classes or translation capabilities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth among Haitian Americans appears mixed. Receptivity remains high in many areas as sizable numbers of Haitian Americans join the Church every year but local leadership development problems, the closure of Haitian-Creole-speaking branches, and member activity and convert retention challenges suggest that little "real growth" may occur for the foreseeable future. Increasing numbers of youth serving full-time missions, implementing strategies that foster a sense of LDS community, and greater focus on prebaptismal preparation and convert retention will be required for the Church to experience greater growth in the years to come.

[1] "New Census Bureau Report Analyzes Nation's Linguistic Diversity," U.S. Census Bureau, 27 April 2010. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb10-cn58.html

[2] Buchanan, Angela B.; Albert, Nora G.; Beaulieu, Daniel. "The Population With Haitian Ancestry in the United States: 2009," American Community Survey Briefs - U.S. Census Bureau, October 2010. http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-18.pdf

[3] Buchanan, Angela B.; Albert, Nora G.; Beaulieu, Daniel. "The Population With Haitian Ancestry in the United States: 2009," American Community Survey Briefs - U.S. Census Bureau, October 2010.

http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-18.pdf

[4] Vandenberghe, Elizabeth and Jed. "Haitian Saints See Hope in the Gospel," Ensign, March 1991. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1991/03/haitian-saints-see-hope-in-the-gospel

[5] "Book of Mormon Translations," Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, p. 635

[6] "Conference to be telecast on satellite in 16 languages," LDS Church News, 23 September 1989. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/18813/Conference-to-be-telecast-on-satellite-in-16-languages.html

[7] accessed 12 June 2013, store.lds.org

[8] "Boston: Gospel roles forward in one of nations oldest cities," LDS Church News, 28 September 1991. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20681/Boston-Gospel-rolls-forward-in-one-of-nations-oldest-cities.html

[9] "Revisions affect stakes in Florida," LDS Church News, 19 February 1994. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/24148/Revisions-affect-stakes-in-Florida.html

[10] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 11 June 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[11] "Adventist Church Locator," www.adventist.org, retrieved 11 June 2013. http://www.adventistdirectory.org/findbytype.aspx?EntityType=C

[12] "Nazarene Church Data Search," retrieved 11 June 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=haitian&c=&y=US&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=