

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Inuit of North America

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Overview

Numbering somewhere between 60,000[1] and 150,000, the Inuit or Eskimos are a collection of indigenous peoples native to northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. The Inuit are well-known worldwide for their adaptation to the frigid Arctic by traditionally building igloos for shelter, navigating the seas and rivers by kayak, and surviving on hunter-gatherer agriculture including whale and seal hunting for thousands of years. Anthropologists claim that the Inuit are distinctively different from Amerindian peoples in North America and are closely related to Mongoloid peoples in eastern Asia due to linguistic and genetic studies.[2] Recent Inuit population estimates place the number of Inuit at approximately 51,000 in Greenland,[3] 49,000 in Canada,[4] and 25,000-30,000 in Alaska.[5] The Aleut and Yupik of Alaska and eastern Siberia are closely-related peoples to the Inuit and belong to the Eskimo language family.[6]

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This case study provides a synopsis of the history, culture, and society of the Inuit people and the history of LDS outreach among the Inuit. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth are identified and discussed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth among other indigenous peoples in northern North America and highlights the growth of other missionary-focused groups among the Inuit. A future prospects section predicts an outlook for future LDS growth among the Inuit.

Inuit Background

Anthropologists estimate that the Inuit have populated the North American Arctic for thousands of years and have consequently learned to survive in extreme climatic conditions and a scarcity of food sources. European contact began as early as the tenth century with Viking exploration in Greenland. Contact with Russian fur traders occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. European whalers arrived in the nineteenth century and significantly disrupted local culture and economy such as trade networks established by Inuit for centuries or even millennia between various Amerindian and Paleo-Siberian peoples. Non-Inuit whaling operations were wasteful in harvesting only baleen from whales whereas the Inuit would use the entire carcass for food and tools. Europeans and white Americans also introduced diseases and alcohol to Inuit populations, further contributing to the destruction of local culture, the deaths of thousands of Inuit, and the exacerbation of societal problems incurred as a result of European and American influence.[7] Within recent decades, governments in the region have extended greater care for protecting Inuit culture and rights and have avoided the use of public education as a means of acculturation. The use of modern technology and youth and young adults relocating to cities outside of the Inuit homeland pose challenges for sustaining local culture. Inuit traditionally rely on seal, walrus, and caribou for food. Traditional Inuit religion focuses on shamanism and appeasing the forces of nature.[8]

Alcohol abuse is a major problem among the Inuit. Several towns and villages have outlawed the sale of alcohol due to high rates of alcohol dependency. Alcoholism and other societal and environmental problems has contributed to the Inuit reporting higher rates of suicide, homicide, accident, infant mortality, infant spinal disorders, fetal alcohol syndrome, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) than the overall Alaskan population.[9] Poverty is pervasive among the Inuit due to limited economic opportunities, unemployment, and expensive living costs incurred by remote location.

There are five separate Inuit languages including Greenlandic Inuktitut (47,800), Eastern Canadian Inuktitut (14,000),[10] North Alaskan Inupiatun (6,420), Western Canadian Inuktitut (4,000), and Northwest Alaska Inupiatun (2,420). Approximately 90% of the Inuit people speak an Inuit language. Most Inuit languages are written in Unified Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics. Few Inuit

are literate in their native language but most are literate in a second language such as Danish or English.

LDS Background

The Church established its first congregations within the Inuit homeland several decades ago in northern Alaska and northern Canada. In 1938, the Church organized its first branch in Alaska in Fairbanks[11] and appeared to open its first branches within areas traditionally inhabited by the Inuit during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1963, the Church organized its first branch in Northwest Territories, Canada in Yellowknife but underwent several cycles of closing and reopening the branch until 1983 due to members relocating to and from the city.[12] Although the Church had periodically operated a military-designated branch for Thule Air Force Base for half a century, the Church in Greenland did not organize its first branch for the non-military population until the late 1990s in Nuuk. During the twentieth century, all congregations that functioned in areas with Inuit populations primarily serviced non-Inuit populations who resettled in these communities or temporarily relocated for employment purposes. Branches in northern Alaska appeared to had baptized the most Inuit converts prior to 2000 although they were few in numbers.

In 2004, the Canada Montreal Mission began teaching a self-referred investigator in Iqaluit, Nunavut. A senior missionary couple visited the investigator and baptized him. In September 2004, a young full-time missionary companionship was assigned to Iqaluit. A few less-active members were located in Iqaluit and a group was organized. In 2004, church attendance in Iqaluit was approximately 11. At the time missionaries reported that the population was more receptive than in other areas of the Canada Montreal Mission. Finding activities included staffing a booth at the Mass Registration at the Arctic Winter Games complex, attending other Christian denomination functions such as barbeques, and appearing on local radio.[13] Returned missionaries reported that missionaries were only assigned to Iqaluit during the summer months. A branch in Nunavut, most likely in Iqaluit, functioned between 2006 and 2008. During these years the Church reported between 10 and 13 members in Nunavut. It is unclear whether any LDS presence has continued in Iqaluit since 2009 as no official numbers for membership and congregations have been reported. In the early 2010s, the Church discontinued the Canada Montreal Mission Branch; the administrative congregation that serviced any dependent units in Nunavut and northern Quebec. In the early 2010s, the Church reported 272 members in Yukon Territory, 124 members in Northwest Territories, fewer than 20 members in Greenland, and no members in Nunavut.

There have been scattered instances of missionary activity and church growth occurring among the Inuit within the past five years. In the late 2000s, missionaries in Alaska reported teaching Inuit investigators but noted that they were often unreliable keeping appointments. In 2010, an Inuit Latter-day Saint from Greenland began his mission in the Utah Ogden Mission. Senior missionaries reported that he joined the Church in Denmark 18 months prior to his mission. In the early 2010s, missionaries serving in the Washington Spokane Mission reported teaching and baptizing several Inuit from Alaska.

In early 2013, five missions administered the Inuit homeland including the Alaska Anchorage Mission (Alaska and Yukon Territory), the Canada Edmonton Mission (Northwest Territories), the Canada Halifax Mission (northern Labrador), the Canada Montreal Mission (Nunavut and northern Quebec), and the Denmark Copenhagen Mission (Greenland).

Successes

The establishment and consistent operation of branches in a handful of small cities and towns within the Inuit homeland constitutes the Church's greatest success in extending outreach among the Inuit. Three locations in Alaska (Barrow, Kotzebue, and Nome) and one location in Greenland (Nuuk) have had branches functioning for a decade or more and all appear to have a few Inuit members. The periodic assignment of a missionary companionship to Iqaluit during the mid-2000s indicates some effort by mission leaders to expand outreach into the Inuit homeland. This stands as a major achievement considering the often tiny size of LDS membership in individual branches, limited numbers of full-time missionaries serving worldwide available for member and leadership support during the 2000s, and the lack of any specialized proselytism program for reaching the Inuit among the Church's five missions that service Inuit-populated areas. The Church has also established a visible presence in a couple major cities nearby the Inuit homeland with sizable numbers of Inuit, namely Fairbanks, Alaska and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories providing some outreach to Inuit communities outside their traditional homelands.

The Church has baptized small numbers of Inuit both within and outside of their homeland. Within recent years, missionaries have baptized Inuit converts in the continental United States and Denmark. The recent full-time missionary service of a Greenlandic Inuit convert is another noteworthy success in establishing the Church.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities for nontraditional mission outreach including traveling missionaries and virtual branches. Assigning traveling missionaries to the Canadian Arctic and Greenland may be the most practical solution to extending outreach due to tiny populations scattered over large geographic areas. Traveling missionaries can be headquartered in one city such as Iqaluit or Nuuk and travel to outlying towns and villages to investigate proselytism opportunities, build positive relations with local government and community leaders, and visit isolated members and investigators. Recently developed internet technologies allow for the formation of virtual branches that holds church services via internet video and permits local priesthood holders in various locations to hold individual sacrament meeting services. The Church has established virtual branches in mainland China for foreigners and church leaders in the Asia Area have reported that this has been a successful method for meeting local member needs. Virtual branches to service towns and villages with too few members to justify the creation of branches may

help strengthen isolated members by providing some socialization through conferencing but without exacting significant, and usually unfeasible, travel times and costs. A map displaying all populated areas with at least 1,000 inhabitants within the Inuit homeland can be found here.

Alaska presents some of the most feasible Inuit-specific outreach at present due to established congregations within relatively close proximity to many Inuit. The Church has a significant presence in Alaska and ranks as the second largest Christian denomination after Catholicism among specific denominations.[14] A relatively pervasive presence in Alaska has instilled the Church with greater local resources that can be potentially channeled into Inuit outreach if organized by mission and local church leaders. In 2000, speakers of Inuit languages accounted for approximately 43%[15] and 40%[16] of the populations North Slope and Northwest Arctic Boroughs, respectively, where three congregations operate. Inuit Latter-day Saints in Barrow, Kotzebue, and Nome would prove invaluable in heading member-missionary efforts among their own people within these communities and in other communities that remain unreached.

There are some societal and cultural conditions that may enhance receptivity to the Church. The barring of the importation and sale of alcohol complements LDS teachings of abstaining from alcohol use. The centrality of family in Inuit culture resonates with LDS teachings that stress the importance of the family in society.

There are good opportunities for ethnic-specific outreach in Denmark among Inuit who have relocated for educational and employment purposes. In 2007, there were an estimated 7,000 Greenlandic Inuktitut speakers in Denmark.[17] The Church has previously baptized a small number of Inuit converts in Denmark and may benefit from designating a missionary companionship for specialized outreach.

The Church has extensive translations of materials into the commonly spoken second languages of Inuit, namely English, Danish, and French. Basic proselytism materials and LDS scriptures can be feasibly utilized by most Inuit considering literacy rates for a second language are higher among the Inuit than for their native language.

Challenges

Remote location and tiny populations scattered across millions of square kilometers of the frozen Arctic constitute the primary challenge to LDS outreach among the Inuit. Harsh weather conditions and difficulty accessing isolated communities in the winter pose health and safety concerns for assigning nonnative missionaries. There are no nearby missions to areas traditionally populated by Inuit. LDS congregations operate in locations populated by only 42% of the population of the three boroughs in northern Alaska within the Inuit homeland and 27% of the population of Greenland. No current outreach appears to occur in Nunavut although past outreach in Iqaluit reached up to 20% of the territorial population. There has never appeared to be any outreach in locations populated by Inuit in northern Labrador, northern Northwest Territories, northern Quebec, and northern Yukon. In Greenland, there are over 30 villages with between 100 and 1,000 inhabitants without a congregation; all of which are homogenously Inuit.

The Church has not developed a self-sustaining community among the Inuit. All leadership and congregations within areas traditionally populated by the Inuit appear to be principally, if not entirely, staffed by nonnative members of European descent. No translations of LDS materials into Inuit languages are available and no congregations appear to hold church services in any Inuit languages. Although higher rates of bilingualism in the four locations with branches has reduced the need for separate language needs and translations of church materials, a lack of language resources such as translations of sacrament prayers may create challenges opening units in locations where there are small numbers of bilingual Inuit. Most speakers of Inuit languages are fluent and literate in a second language but are not literate in their native language, reducing the need for translations of gospel study materials. However, the translation of basic materials into Greenlandic Inuktitut may be beneficial due to its status as a national language and higher literacy among Greenlandic Inuktitut speakers than other Inuit languages.

Five missions service areas populated by the Inuit people notwithstanding the Inuit numbering no more than 150,000 worldwide. The fragmentation of the Inuit homeland between so many missions creates administrative and logistical challenges for mission leaders to effectively strategize outreach if any outreach occurs in Inuit-populated areas at all. The assignment of Inuit-language speaking full-time missionaries to locations with indigenous Inuit populations is a major challenge due to a lack of outreach, small target populations, difficulty obtaining resources for learning these languages, and so many missions administering the same people.

Some societal and cultural conditions create challenges for outreach. The tight-knit culture of the Inuit may create challenges for converts to join the Church and remain active instead of returning to their previous churches. The syncretism of indigenous Inuit beliefs with Christianity may create challenges to maintain doctrinal purity. Alcoholism and illicit drug use pose major obstacles for prospective converts to completely overcome as LDS teachings forbid these substances. Poverty and low economic development are additional challenges for the Church address in proselytism activity, leadership development, and local church self-sufficiency.

Comparative Growth

The Church does not report any specialized outreach among any of the indigenous peoples of northern North America. The

Church has baptized small numbers converts from some Amerindian peoples native to Alaska and northwestern Canada. A few of these converts have served missions. For example, in the early 2010s an Aleut member was serving a mission in Taiwan. However, it is unclear how many indigenous "First Nation" or Alaskan Native converts have joined the Church and remain active today. In the early 2000s, the Church operated a "Lamanite"-designated branch in Lethbridge, Alberta but had closed the branch by the late 2000s. It is unclear what ethnicities were serviced by the former branch.

Most worldwide missionary-focused Christian groups report a presence among the Inuit. Evangelicals are the largest nontraditional faith but report varying degrees of growth among separate Inuit subgroups. Evangelicals claim as few as two percent of some Inuit subgroups are Evangelical such as Northwest Alaska Inupiat but claim up to 35% of other subgroups such as the Western Canadian Inuktitut.[18] Jehovah's Witnesses operate congregations in several locations traditionally populated by Inuit including six in Greenland (Ilulissat, Manitsoq, Nuuk, Paamiut, Qaqortoq, and Sisimiut) and one in Nunavut (Iqaluit) but do not report any Inuit-speaking congregations.[19] Witnesses publish a couple proselytism materials into Greenlandic Inuktitut [20] but have not appeared to translate materials into any other Inuit languages. The Seventh Day Adventist Church publishes translations of basic church literature into Greenlandic Inuktitut. Adventists report two congregations in Inuit-populated areas of Alaska (Barrow and Nome),[21] only one church group in Nunavut in Iqaluit,[22] and no presence in Greenland.[23]

Limitations

There is no information available by the Church pertaining to the operation of dependent units such as dependent branches and groups. No recent member or returned missionary reports were available to confirm whether any LDS units operate in Nunavut Territory or in other locations. The location of any dependent units functioning in the Inuit homeland remain unknown to researchers and the general public as this information is only available to individuals with personal connections to local church and mission leaders. The Church does not publish official statistics on the ethnicity of membership and language use of membership aside from the ten most commonly spoken languages by church membership. Information regarding the translation of the sacrament prayers and a few select administration materials into other languages is unavailable for public view. Consequently, it is unknown whether a few of these materials have a translation into Inuit for church administration.

Future Prospects

The outlook for LDS Church growth among the Inuit is poor for the foreseeable future due to tiny populations spread over enormous geographical areas, the division of the Inuit homeland between five missions, a lack of LDS community among the Inuit, and inconsistent mission outreach efforts. The appointment of Inuit-designated missionaries based in the largest cities or towns that travel to outlying communities may be the most effective means of extending formal proselytism, but remote location, limited missionary manpower to missions that service Inuit areas, and modest receptivity will likely deter outreach for many years to come. Member-missionary activity will be required to make greater inroads among the Inuit due to these challenges and will be the most effective means to establishing a self-sustaining church among the Inuit that expands to additional communities. The translation of the sacrament prayers and basic church materials into Greenlandic Inuktitut may be beneficial for expanding outreach and strengthening the Church in Greenland.

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