

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Garifuna of Central America

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Overview

Descended from Carib and Arawak Amerindians and black African slaves that once inhabited the Lesser Antilles, the Garifuna or Black Carib primarily populate Caribbean coastal areas in Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. The estimated number of Garifuna varies from as low as 200,000[1] to as many as 500,000.[2] The LDS Church has not extended any concentrated missionary efforts among the Garifuna notwithstanding a widespread presence in Central America. This case study presents a historical and cultural overview of the Garifuna and examines successes, opportunities, and challenges for church growth. A comparative growth section compares LDS outreach among the Garifuna to other indigenous peoples in Central America and provides a synopsis of church growth among other nontraditional Christian groups among the Garifuna. A future prospects section provides an outlook for future LDS growth.

Garifuna Background

The Caribs inhabited the Lesser Antilles at the time of European discovery and colonization of the islands. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Caribs intermarried with black African slaves on Saint Vincent but were removed from the island by the British and resettled to the island of Roatan near the coast of present-day Honduras. During the following two centuries, the Garifuna settled throughout the coastal areas of mainland Central America nearby Roatan stretching as far north as Belize to as far south as northern Nicaragua. Today Garifuna predominately reside in Caribbean coastal areas of Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. Small numbers of Garifuna also reside in several major cities in the United States, northern Nicaragua, and a few islands in the Lesser Antilles including Saint Vincent, Trinidad, and Dominica. The Garifuna have retained many of their original customs, beliefs, and practices notwithstanding scattered populations in Central America, the United States, and the Caribbean.[3] Approximately 100,000 Garifuna reside in Honduras whereas 17,000 reside in Guatemala, 16,000 reside in Belize, and 1,500 reside in Nicaragua.[4] Garifuna populations are intermittently found along the Caribbean Coast of these nations. Most Garifuna are Catholic but integrate many aspects of indigenous religion into their religious practice and belief system such as shamanism, ceremonial feasts, and ancestor veneration. The Garifuna are a matrifocal society - one in which women are the center of the family.[5] Most women have children outside of legal marriage and there appear few families with a mother and father living together and raising children. In 2002, a Garifuna translation of the Bible was published.[6]

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LDS Background

In the 1950s, the Church began its first proselytism efforts in major cities in Honduras with sizable Garifuna populations. Missionary activity in the traditional locations where Garifuna reside along the Caribbean coast did not begin until the late 1970s and early 1980s at approximately the same time that the Church made the priesthood and temple blessings available to all members regardless of ethnicity or race. The first stakes and districts in traditionally Garifuna locations were organized in the 1980s and early 1990s and were principally comprised of Spanish-speaking Mestizos.

As of early 2013, the Church has not performed any Garifuna-specific outreach. LDS missionaries have occasionally taught Garifuna in some locations such as Dangriga, Belize but few have joined the Church and remained active.

Successes

The Church has a widespread presence in the major cities of Honduras where sizable numbers of Garifuna reside. Tegucigalpa

and San Pedro Sula have multiple stakes and the Church will headquarter two LDS missions in each city by July 2013. Large and medium-sized cities along the Honduran coast where LDS congregations are present likely have a small handful of active Garifuna Latter-day Saints. One congregation in Belize (the Dangriga Branch) operates in a location where the Garifuna traditionally reside and missionaries conduct indiscriminate proselytism efforts among Mestizos and Garifuna.

Opportunities

The Church has a strong presence in many major cities in Honduras that have sizable Garifuna communities such as Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Ceiba, and a small presence in several medium-sized and small cities with Garifuna populations such as Dangriga, Tela, and Trujillo. Most Garifuna in these locations speak Spanish or English as a first or second language, reducing the need for Garifuna-speaking missionaries and specialized outreach. Bilingualism in Spanish and English increases the efficiency of utilizing abundant Spanish and English-speaking missionary manpower in the region. Organizing Garifuna-designated Sunday school classes and groups and holding cottage meetings for Garifuna members and investigators present realistic options for providing specialized outreach among monolingual speakers and meeting unique cultural and societal needs such as addressing the syncretism of Catholicism, indigenous African religion, and indigenous Amerindian religion.

There are several small and medium-sized cities that remain unreached by the Church that present good opportunities outreach among the Garifuna. Some of the most favorable locations include Punta Gorda, Belize; Livingston, Guatemala; and several cities along the Honduran coast such as El Triunfo de La Cruz and Sambo Creek. Establishing LDS groups and branches in these locations would significant increase the penetration of missionary activity among the Garifuna and may lead to specialized outreach extended with Garifuna-speaking missionaries and the translation of basic proselytism materials into Garifuna. Recent missionary reports indicate interest by mission leaders to expand outreach in traditionally Garifuna-populated locations. For example, missionaries serving in the El Salvador Santa Ana/Belize Mission in 2012 reported investigatory visits to the southern Belizean town of Punta Gorda to assess conditions for assigning missionaries as several isolated members and investigators lived in the small city. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach for the most populated cities and towns within the Garifuna homeland and can be found here.

There are good opportunities for development work in some locations with sizable Garifuna populations. Literacy programs are greatly needed and provide a passive proselytism approach. Programs that may be effective in improving living and economic conditions include small business loan programs that help individuals start their own businesses raising and selling livestock, planting and cultivating crops, sewing clothing, and fishing.

Challenges

There appear extremely few Garifuna Latter-day Saints in Central America and the United States. There are no known branch presidents or bishops who are Garifuna and there appear to be few, if any, Garifuna that have experience in leadership positions. Consequently any initial outreach would entirely depend on Mestizo local leadership and full-time missionary manpower.

There are several cultural characteristics and religious practices that oppose LDS teachings or that challenge prospective outreach. Some Garifuna use alcohol for religious purposes[7] whereas the LDS Church prohibits alcohol use. Ancestor veneration slightly resonates with LDS teachings regarding proxy temple work for deceased ancestors but integrates many elements that do not complement LDS teachings such as meal offerings, ancestor worship, and shamanism. Legal marriage and families with both a father and mother in the home are rare in many areas. Women are the center of family life and society determines family lines through mothers rather than fathers.[8] This creates many significant challenges for LDS growth as the Church relies on men to staff most administrative callings in its congregations. It is unclear how male priesthood leadership would affect the matriarchal underpinnings of Garifuna society among church members. Prospective outreach among the Garifuna may face many frustrations relating to these cultural conditions especially pertaining to the word of wisdom and the law of chastity. Unemployment, low living standards, and lack of education are additional difficulties that create financial self-sufficiency problems and may limit the number of individuals who can staff leadership. Any church establishment would strongly rely on nonlocal tithing funds to meet local church financial needs for building and maintaining meetinghouses. Garifuna populations in Honduras and Guatemala exhibit extremely low literacy rates in the Garifuna language (1-5%) and Spanish (5-20%),[9] creating difficulties for testimony development, finding employment, church administration, and leadership training. Some missionaries have reported negative attitudes of the Garifuna due to these challenging societal and cultural issues, resulting in diminished efforts to proselyte this population.

The distribution of Garifuna among several different countries in locations often distant from established LDS centers is a significant barrier to outreach. In Guatemala, there are no LDS units that operate within locations traditionally populated by Garifuna. The closest unit is in Puerto Barrios and there appear to be few, if any, Garifuna in the two branches in this city. In Belize, only one branch functions in areas traditionally populated by Garifuna in Dangriga and there appear to be few, if any, active Garifuna members in the branch. In Honduras, many Garifuna reside in small cities, towns, and rural areas with no nearby LDS units. The centers of strength approach to church growth in Central America has delayed outreach into these locations as resources continue to be channeled into the most populous locations with the most established church presence.

Comparative Growth

The Garifuna are one of the most populous indigenous peoples in Central America that do not have translations of LDS materials and that receive no specialized outreach from missions. Other Amerindian peoples along the Caribbean coast of Central America have received specialized outreach such as the Kuna in Panama and the Miskito in Nicaragua. The Church has translated select passages or the entire Book of Mormon into several Amerindian languages traditionally spoken in Central America such as Kaqchikel, K'iche', Kuna, Mam, Maya, Q'eqchi', and Tzotzil.

Most proselytizing Christian faiths have a presence among the Garifuna. Evangelicals are one of the most prominent groups and claim 10-14% of the Garifuna population in Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras.[10] The Seventh Day Adventist Church has a widespread presence in areas traditionally populated by the Garifuna but does not publish printed materials into Garifuna. Jehovah's Witnesses report a dozen Garifuna-speaking congregations and groups in Honduras (11) and Guatemala (1) and one Garifuna-speaking group in New York City.[11] Witnesses publish several proselytism materials translated into Garifuna that are available online.[12]

Limitations

The Church does not publish data on the language or ethnic breakdown of its membership other than for the ten most commonly spoken languages by church members. There is little data on the number, activity rate, and language usage of Garifuna Latter-day Saints from both official and unofficial sources. Only a handful of reports from full-time missionaries that had served in locations with sizable numbers of Garifuna were available at the writing of this case study. No Garifuna Latter-day Saints were available to relate their conversion to the Church and challenges and opportunities for missionary activity among their people.

Future Prospects

Small populations distributed over several countries, extremely low literacy rates, no past LDS outreach specifically targeting Garifuna, and reluctance from mission and area leaders to commence proselytism efforts among lesser-reached and unreached indigenous peoples in Central America predict a poor outlook for future LDS growth among the Garifuna for the foreseeable future. The future opening of additional cities and towns to proselytism within areas with sizable numbers of Garifuna has the greatest promise for establishing a small LDS community among the Garifuna, especially in southern Belize; Livingstone, Guatemala; and smaller towns along the Caribbean coast in Honduras. The designation of a couple missionary companionships as Garifuna-speaking who are given the task to organize groups or branches that specifically meet the needs of Garifuna may be beneficial. The greatest growth of the Church among the Garifuna will center on Garifuna Latter-day Saints serving missions, marrying within the Church, and remaining in their hometowns to provide leadership and administrative support to take the gospel to their own people and establish the Church.

[1] "Garifuna," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=cab

[2] "Garifuna," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Afghanistan-to-Bosnia-Herzegovina/Garifuna.html

[3] "Garifuna," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Afghanistan-to-Bosnia-Herzegovina/Garifuna.html

[4] "Garifuna," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=cab

[5] "Garifuna," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Afghanistan-to-Bosnia-Herzegovina/Garifuna.html

[6] "Garifuna," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=cab

[7] "Garifuna," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Afghanistan-to-Bosnia-Herzegovina/Garifuna.html

[8] "Garifuna," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Afghanistan-to-Bosnia-Herzegovina/Garifuna.html

[9] "Garifuna," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=cab

[10] "Garifuna," Joshua Project, retrieved 2 February 2013. http://www.joshuaproject.net/languages.php?rol3=cab

[11] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 1 February 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[12] http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=cab