



# People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## LDS Outreach among the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula

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### Overview

Located in southeastern Mexico, the Maya are the indigenous inhabitants of the Yucatán Peninsula also referred to as the Yucateco Maya to avoid confusion with other Mayan peoples in the region.<sup>[1]</sup> Current population estimates for the Maya in Mexico range from half a million<sup>[2]</sup> to over one million.<sup>[3]</sup>

Archaeologists believe that the Maya have resided in the Yucatán Peninsula for millennia. The ancient Mayan civilization reached its zenith between 250 and 900 AD and declined for reasons that are not entirely clear as populations migrated southward and cities were abandoned. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish conquered the Maya and enslaved most of the population. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Maya attempted to secede from Mexico and resisted Mexican rule for decades thereafter.<sup>[4]</sup> In recent years, the Maya have become increasingly more integrated into mainstream Mexican society in the Yucatán Peninsula but are often discriminated by Mestizos. Slash-and-burn agriculture has had a long legacy among the Maya. Today many Maya sustain themselves through a combination of subsistence agriculture and wage labor.<sup>[5]</sup>

In 2000, 8.2% of Maya speakers were monolingual.<sup>[6]</sup> The 2000 Mexican census reported that 77.7% of Maya were Catholic whereas 15.4% identified as another religion and 6.0% reported no religious affiliation.<sup>[7]</sup> Provided with the percentage of the population who speak Maya, the 2010 Mexican census reported that there were 537,618 Maya speakers in Yucatán State (27.5%),<sup>[8]</sup> 177,979 Maya speakers in Quintana Roo State (13.4%),<sup>[9]</sup> and 71,852 Maya speakers in Campeche State (8.7%).<sup>[10]</sup>

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### LDS Background

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Church established congregations and assigned missionaries to the Yucatán Peninsula for the first time. In 1962, there were approximately 40 members in the Yucatán Peninsula<sup>[11]</sup> and only a handful of small branches. The first LDS proselytism efforts among the Maya likely occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, prompting the Church to translate select passages of the Book of Mormon into Maya in 1983.<sup>[12]</sup> In 1975, the Church created the Mexico Merida Mission to service the Yucatán Peninsula. Mission presidents have assigned full-time missionaries to serve in predominantly Maya communities in several locations on the Yucatán Peninsula but have never appeared to officially organize a Maya outreach program or assign missionaries to teach in the Maya language. LDS units have functioned in homogeneously Maya areas since the early 1970s.

The Church created its first stake in Yucatán State in 1977 (Merida), Campeche State in 1984 (Campeche), and Quintana Roo State in 1991 (Chetumal). In late 2012, the Church reported seven stakes and two districts in Yucatán State, four stakes in Quintana Roo State, and two stakes in Campeche State. Maya appear to comprise a majority or a sizable minority in one stake (Tizimin) and two districts (Calkini and Ticul) whereas Maya in other stakes in the region appear to constitute a small minority. There are two mission branches in the Mexico Merida Mission that are not assigned to a stake or district but report directly to the mission president (Carrillo Puerto and Jose Maria Morles) - both of which appear to be primarily comprised of Maya members. In late 2012, the Mexico Merida Mission continued to service the entire Yucatán Peninsula.

Over the past decade, the Church has experienced virtually no congregational growth outside Merida and Cancun. The number of units in the Tizimin Mexico Stake (six wards, four branches) has remained unchanged for 15 years since it was organized in 1998. The Ticul Mexico District has nine branches; only one of which was organized within the past decade (Chapab). The

Calkini Mexico District has five branches - the same number it had in 2002. The only other cities in traditionally Maya areas where the Church organized its first official wards or branches within the past decade were in Cauce, Komchen, and Leona Vicario. In the late 2000s, missionaries reported that a group operated in Acanceh. Only one city had its sole LDS congregation closed within the past decade: Hochtún. The Hochtún Branch did not pertain to a stake or district and operated under the Mexico Merida Mission in the early 2000s. Three-quarters of the wards and branches in the Tizimin Mexico Stake and Calkini Mexico and Ticul Mexico Districts were organized in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The Church does not publish state-by-state membership statistics for Mexico but the 2010 Mexican census reported the number of self-identified Latter-day Saints in each administrative division. The Mexican states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo reported the highest percentages of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints on the 2010 Mexican census at 0.54% and 0.49% of the population, respectively, whereas 0.28% of the national population self-identified as LDS.

By late 2012, the Church had translated five materials into Maya including the Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, a priesthood guidebook, and a Relief Society manual.<sup>[13]</sup> Full-time missionaries reported that the majority of Latter-day Saints in smaller cities and towns spoke Mayan as their first language. Missionaries who serve in major cities like Merida and Cancun report that they only learn Spanish. Current maps displaying wards and branches in the Yucatán Peninsula are available for [Campeche](#), [Quintana Roo](#), and [Yucatán](#) States.

## Successes

The Church in the states of Quintana Roo and Yucatán has established a more widespread presence than in any other Mexican states partially due to success among the Maya. Wards and branches function in small towns with only a few thousand inhabitants; nearly all of which have predominantly Maya populations. Provided with 2010 population figures in parentheses, Kini (1,581) and Ucum (1,495) appear to be the least populated locations in the Maya homeland with official branches operating. The only other states where the Church has established congregations in several small cities and towns with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants are in a few states in northern Mexico such as Chihuahua and in Chiapas State among the Tzotzil Amerindians. According to the 2010 census, the percentage of self-reported Latter-day Saints in Quintana Roo and Yucatán exceeds all other administrative divisions. This finding suggests that the Church appears the most visible and established in Quintana Roo and Yucatán States due to the highest percentage of self-identified members - the majority of whom regularly attend church.

The Church has consistently operated congregations in locations where the population is primarily comprised of ethnic Maya. Most Maya-speaking congregations have operated for decades, many of which achieving good self-sustainability resulting in little reliance on full-time missionaries and resilience to consolidation with neighboring units. Only one independent branch has closed within the past decade in the Maya homeland, suggesting that the number of active members has been stable and that local leadership has minimally met requirements to continue to operate small units. Church leaders have permitted the baptism of monolingual Maya for decades notwithstanding the Church frequently requiring individuals from ethnolinguistic minority groups to exhibit sufficient proficiency in the national language of the country within they reside to be able to pass a baptismal interview in the national language.

Active Maya members demonstrate many excellent qualities that facilitate missionary work and self-sufficiency. Maya members aid translation efforts between Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries and Maya investigators. This has appeared to result in improved member participation in the conversion and retention processes. Several units conduct church services in Maya without support from full-time missionaries considering there is no formal Maya language program, and, with possibly a few exceptions, all missionaries assigned to Maya-speaking locations do not speak the Maya language. Returned missionaries report few ethnic integration challenges with Maya and Mestizos, resulting in Mestizo-majority units providing outreach capabilities to many Maya.

The Church has translated several materials into Maya, including select passages of the Book of Mormon. Translations of some LDS scriptures facilitate testimony development for monolingual Maya speakers and individuals with limited Spanish fluency as well as fulfill the divine commission to translate scriptures into the native language of the various peoples of the world. The translation of several church materials into Maya stands as a noteworthy accomplishment considering the Maya exhibit one of the lowest percentages of monolingualism among the 17 most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico.<sup>[14]</sup> Over 90% of ethnic Maya speak Spanish as a first or second language, reducing the need for Maya-language proselytism and utilization of abundant Spanish language resources and missionary manpower available throughout the region.

## Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities to expand LDS outreach among the Maya due to the large number of lesser-reached and unreached cities and towns, past successes in outreach expansion efforts, the translation of several materials into Maya, and established LDS Maya communities in several locations. The greatest opportunities for church growth center on local Maya members heading efforts to share the gospel within their communities and Maya church leaders maintaining strategic outreach vision to take the gospel further than it has ever gone before among their people. In late 2012, there were 142 cities and towns within the Maya homeland with over 2,000 inhabitants without an LDS presence. Dozens of these locations appear favorable for receiving visits from mission, stake, and district presidencies and full-time missionaries to assess conditions for holding cottage meetings, organizing groups, and, if feasible, assigning full-time missionary companionships. It is likely that some of

these cities and towns have isolated members that have testimonies of the Church and would attend church services if they were closer to their homes. Periodically visiting these locations to meet isolated members, search for unaccounted members, teach investigators, and raise public awareness of the Church can help lay the groundwork for planting additional congregations and maximize the utilization of limited numbers of missionaries. A map displaying cities and towns with over 2,000 inhabitants within the Maya homeland can be found [here](#).

Receptivity remains good in many locations with predominantly Maya populations notwithstanding little growth over the past two decades. Returned missionaries report that one small city primarily comprised of Maya in Quintana Roo (Leona Vicario) experienced rapid growth in the early 2010s with sacrament meeting attendance increasing from 20 to 80 within just a few months. Proper vision and implementation of appropriate finding and teaching methods can result in a revitalization of church growth within a short timeframe.

## Challenges

The Church has experienced stagnant congregational growth in its predominantly Maya stakes and districts over the past two decades notwithstanding favorable political, societal, and economic conditions for outreach expansion. In recent years, returned missionaries report that stake leaders in Merida have exhibited little interest in expanding outreach into small cities and towns with predominantly Maya populations that are within their jurisdictions. A lack of collaboration between local church leaders and the Mexico Merida Mission presidency has appeared to hamper efforts for organizing additional units in unreached locations. The Church has relatively few mission resources dedicated to servicing Maya areas as the Mexico Merida Mission services all three Mexican states on the Yucatán Peninsula. The Church has relied on full-time missionaries to open new locations to proselytism, help established groups, and organize additional branches. Returned missionaries report that this has resulted in the Church expanding and contracting outreach according to the fluctuating size in the number of missionaries assigned to the Mexico Merida Mission. Many, if not most, missionaries are assigned to Merida, Cancun, or Campeche and work among Spanish speakers, many of whom relocated to the Yucatán Peninsula for employment purposes.

The Church does not provide Maya language training in missionary training centers (MTCs) or in the field. Returned missionaries report that they may study Maya during their language study but that a lack of language learning materials challenged their efforts to learn the language. No missionaries have ever been designated as Maya speaking. Increasing bilingualism among the Maya people has reduced the need for Maya-speaking missionaries. The establishment of a Maya-specific missionary program may improve receptivity to the Church as missionaries proficiently converse and teach in the Maya language and help promote the integration of LDS teachings and local culture.

Low convert retention rates and few convert baptisms remain obstacles for achieving greater church growth. In the early 2010s, returned missionaries reported that approximately 30% of converts were retained one year after baptism. Primary reasons for low convert retention rates include inadequate prebaptismal preparation, poor fellowshiping from members, a weak testimony of the Church, and cultural conditions that reduce the importance of weekly church attendance and personal religious habits. These statistics include all converts regardless of ethnicity. Maya converts may experience higher retention rates although no new congregations organized in the most populous cities where Maya comprise a majority suggests that convert attrition has prevented the organization of additional units. Member involvement in missionary work remains highly variable. Returned missionaries report that many local members are willing to accompany missionaries to teach investigators but few are consistently involved and provide referrals. A lack of member referrals and few efforts to open previously unreached locations to missionary work have likely contributed to the annual number of convert baptisms decreasing in the Mexico Merida Mission over the past decade. In the early 2010s, the Mexico Merida Mission appeared to baptize only 200 to 300 converts a year; a small number of convert baptisms for a mission that services approximately 120 wards and branches and four million people.

The small population of many towns renders the assignment of full-time missionaries unfeasible. The Church has experienced challenges staffing leadership in small branches that meet in sparsely populated towns resulting in reliance on full-time missionaries to fill these needs. Assigning a single missionary companionship to serve in multiple cities or towns within close proximity to each other provides a solution to extending formal missionary outreach into these locations while conserving limited mission resources and troubleshooting potential self-sufficiency challenges.

## Comparative Growth

The Maya are the only Amerindian group in Mexico where there are multiple stakes and districts that primarily consist of the same Amerindian people. The Church operates only one other district in Mexico that is primarily comprised of an Amerindian group - the Chojolhó México District among the Tzotzil. No other stakes or districts are primarily comprised of a single Amerindian group. The only other Amerindian peoples native to Mexico with translations of LDS materials are the Tzotzil and Mam.

Other nontraditional proselytism-focused Christian groups report a sizable presence among the Maya. Jehovah's Witnesses number among the most successful groups and operate over 200 Maya-speaking congregations in Mexico in Yucatán State (approximately 150), and Quintana Roo (41), and Campeche (34).<sup>[15]</sup> The Seventh Day Adventist Church does not publish statistics on the number of Maya-speaking churches in Mexico but at year-end 2011 reported 74 churches and 22,864 members in Quintana Roo State,<sup>[16]</sup> 79 churches and 18,562 members in Yucatán State,<sup>[17]</sup> and 62 churches and 18,522 members in Campeche State.<sup>[18]</sup> The Church of the Nazarene reports several congregations in traditionally Maya-speaking areas.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth among the Maya appears mixed as the self-sustainability achieved in locations with congregations will likely continue for the foreseeable future although efforts to open additional locations to missionary work appear sporadic and uncoordinated between local church leaders and mission leaders. Depending on the number of monolingual Maya members, the Church may translate the entire Book of Mormon into Maya as well as other LDS scriptures to meet local needs. The large administrative burden of the Mexico Merida Mission and expected surge in the worldwide full-time missionary force may warrant the organization of a second mission on the Yucatán Peninsula headquartered in Cancun. Districts in Calkini and Ticul may become stakes once they reach the minimum qualifications for a stake to operate, namely 1,900 members and over 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. There remains an urgent need for revitalizing outreach expansion efforts among the Maya before other missionary-focused denominations convert receptive individuals and to capitalize on current levels of receptivity to the LDS Church before the potentially decline. Delaying outreach expansion efforts may result in missing the greatest opportunities for growth among the Maya and reduced success converting and retaining sizable numbers of converts.

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