

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Wayuu Amerindians in Colombia and Venezuela

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Overview

The Wayuu or Guajiro are an Amerindian people native to the Caribbean coast in the border region of Colombia and Venezuela. Most reside on the arid La Guajira Peninsula that is divided between the two countries. Population estimates range between 100,000[1] and approximately 429,000.[2] In Venezuela, the Wayuu number approximately 294,000 according to the most recent population estimate in 2001.[3] They primarily populate coastal areas of Zulia State including Maracaibo where as many as 60,000 Wayuu reside. The Wayuu constitute approximately 10% of the population of Zulia State. In Colombia, the Wayuu number 135,000 according to the most recent population estimate in 1995.[4] The Wayuu comprise approximately one-third of the population of La Guajira Department.

The Wayuu obstinately resisted Spanish rule for centuries, rebelling at least six times during the eighteenth century.[5] Within the past three centuries, the Wayuu have transformed from an egalitarian society based on hunting, fishing, and agriculture to a hierarchical society focused on pastoralism. The Wayuu are divided into approximately 30 clans[6] and are well-known for their colorful weaving and handcrafts.[7] The practice of polygamy is common, especially among wealthy men.[8] Most Wayuu continue to follow traditional religious beliefs although in recent years many have begun converting to Christianity.

This case study reviews past LDS proselytism efforts in areas traditionally inhabited by the Wayuu and analyzes successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth. A comparative growth section compares LDS outreach among the Wayuu to other Amerindian groups and contrasts church growth between the LDS Church and other nontraditional proselytizing faiths. Lastly, future prospects for LDS growth are provided.

LDS Background

Most Wayuu Latter-day Saints appear to reside in Venezuela where the Church has had a presence in Maracaibo since 1967.[9] Today the Church has a widespread presence in Maracaibo as evidenced by over two dozen wards and branches based within the city. Approximately two dozen additional wards and branches function elsewhere in Zulia State, although most operate in locations with few Wayuu. Returned missionaries have reported that several wards in Maracaibo have had Wayuu members for a least a decade, especially in northern areas of the city. One city has an LDS congregation between Maracaibo and the Colombia-Venezuela border; an area with higher concentrations of Wayuu than anywhere else in Zulia State. The Venezuela Maracaibo Mission services all Wayuu-populated areas in Venezuela.

In Colombia, it is unclear whether there are noticeable numbers of Wayuu Latter-day Saints. The Church reported no congregations operating within traditionally Wayuu-populated areas of La Guajira Department until 2010 when church leaders organized a branch in Riohacha. In early 2012, the Church created a second branch in La Guajira Department in Maicao. In late 2012, it was unclear whether any Wayuu had joined the Church in these cities. The Colombia Barranquilla Mission services all Wayuu-populated areas in Colombia.

As of late 2012, there were no translations of LDS materials into Wayuu and no reported ethnic-specific proselytism efforts targeting Wayuu in Colombia or Venezuela.

A map of major cities within the Wayuu homeland and status of LDS outreach can be found here.

Successes

The Church has baptized and retained small numbers of Wayuu converts in Maracaibo, Venezuela for many years notwithstanding no translations of proselytism materials into Wayuu and no known formal mission programs targeting Wayuu populations. Active Wayuu members can provide needed resources for member-missionary activity and improve the consideration for organizing specialized congregations to service Wayuu speakers.

The Church operates congregations in areas traditionally populated by Wayuu in both Colombia and in Venezuela whereas most Amerindian groups in these countries traditionally reside in locations where there are no nearby LDS congregations. In Colombia, two of the five cities with over 20,000 inhabitants in La Guajira Department have an LDS congregation whereas in Venezuela nine of the 12 cities with over 40,000 inhabitants in areas traditionally populated by Wayuu have an LDS congregation. The organization of the first LDS branches in Wayuu-populated areas of Colombia within the past couple years stands as a significant accomplishment that presents excellent opportunities for Wayuu-directed missionary activity. Within the past decade, La Guajira was the only department in Colombia where the Church organized branches in two previously unreached cities.

Opportunities

The Wayuu have exhibited good receptivity to nontraditional Christian groups for decades. Sizable numbers of Wayuu Latter-day Saint converts in Maracaibo, Venezuela illustrate good potential for steady growth if Wayuu-directed proselytism activity were to commence in La Guajira Department in Colombia and along the Colombian border in Venezuela. In Colombia, important unreached cities to target include Fonseca, Manuare, and San Juan del Cesar as they are the most populous unreached cities in La Guajira Department. Cities and towns with smaller populations but higher concentrations of Wayuu such as Uribia, Nazareth, and Puerto Estrella also offer good prospects for prospective outreach but are more difficult to reach due to remote location and distance from currently established outreach centers in Riohacha and Maicao. Opportunities for church planting in Riohacha and Maicao do not appear to have been considered by mission leaders and only one branch functions in each city. The organization of multiple groups or dependent branches in each city increases the saturation of missionary outreach and can accelerate growth as steady numbers of converts are baptized and retained. This process is often more efficient in increasing active membership and accelerating congregational growth rather than waiting for a single branch to reach enough active members to divide.

In Venezuela, there appears to be sufficient numbers of Wayuu Latter-day Saints to organize several Wayuu-speaking branches in Maracaibo. Language-specific units can facilitate church growth among ethnolinguistic minorities due to the promotion of LDS community among a particular ethnic group, improved gospel comprehension in a native language, and local church leaders focusing on particular needs or circumstances unique to that ethnic group. Integration with Spanish-speaking wards and branches has likely facilitated Wayuu members to learn basic church administration and learn the gospel from Mestizo members. The Church may be able to staff separate congregations for Wayuu members as there are likely sufficient numbers of literate Wayuu members with some church experience to hold leadership positions. The Church appears likely to organize language-specific units for Wayuu members in Maracaibo only if Wayuu-speakers cannot effectively communicate in Spanish to meet their needs. Bilingualism in Spanish among Wayuu Latter-day Saints in Maracaibo has likely reduced the need to segregate Wayuu and Mestizos. The Church will need to organize separate language units in locations where fluency in Spanish is too limited to accommodate both ethnicities and if there is a sufficient number of individuals attending church to justify two separate congregations.

There are good opportunities for expanding outreach within the Wayuu homelands of Venezuela. Located within close proximity of Maracaibo along the Caribbean coast, two cities (La Sierrita and San Rafael del Moján) appear to have sizable Wayuu populations and over 40,000 inhabitants each but remain unreached by the Church. The Church could organize groups and assign a couple missionary companionships to these cities with little difficulty. Church leaders and missionaries can visit smaller cities and towns along highways between Maracaibo and the Colombian border in search of unaccounted members and investigators. Holding cottage meetings and rotating a couple missionary companionships to visit smaller communities with high percentages of Wayuu can maximize resources in a prudent manner and accelerate church growth. This process allows for missionaries to identify receptive communities and organize groups when feasible. To date, full-time missionaries have been almost entirely tethered to the most populous cities and Mestizo populations. Consequently the potential for church growth among the Wayuu remains unrealized.

Challenges

Illiteracy constitutes one of the greatest barriers to church growth as less than five percent of Wayuu speakers are literate in their native language and 5-25% of Wayuu speakers are literate in a second language.[10] Extremely low literacy rates limit testimony development as illiterate investigators and members must depend on literate members and missionaries for gospel study and instruction. The Church faces serious challenges developing self-sufficient local leadership if Wayuu church leaders cannot read or write or are only partially literate as they cannot adequately study church manuals and handbooks on their own. The lack of any Wayuu-specific congregations appears attributed to extremely low literacy rates in the Wayuu language and low literacy rates in Spanish. Assimilation with Mestizos in Spanish-speaking congregations has likely provided greater administrative support as mestizos experience high literacy rates and an established LDS presence in major cities. Increased literacy rates will be required for the Church to improve prospects for Wayuu members to serve in leadership positions. Audio translations in Spanish of church materials and the scriptures may provide some solutions to illiteracy problems among bilingual Wayuu.

The division of the Wayuu homeland between Colombia and Venezuela diffuses responsibility between missions in Colombia and Venezuela for reaching the Wayuu. It is unclear whether mission leaders in these two missions have collaborated in their efforts to proselyte the Wayuu, especially with the recent introduction of the Church in the Wayuu-populated areas of Colombia. The division of sizable numbers of a particular ethnolinguistic minority between two or more missions has been shown to decrease initiative in extending outreach if any ethnic-specific missionary activity occurs at all. For example, the Church in Mexico does not conduct any Nahua-specific outreach notwithstanding over one million Nahuas and more than half a dozen missions administering areas with sizable Nahua populations.

The Church has yet to make greater progress establishing congregations in scores of large and medium-sized cities in both countries. Colombia and Venezuela number among the least-reached Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America by the LDS Church. In Colombia, there are approximately 100 cities with over 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation whereas in Venezuela there are approximately two dozen cities with over 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation. To contrast, there are a couple dozen cities in Argentina, six cities in Peru, five cities in Costa Rica and Guatemala, four cities in Ecuador, two cities in Bolivia and Nicaragua, and one in El Salvador with over 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation. All cities with over 20,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation in Chile, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay. There has been no progress toward initiating proselytism efforts in rural areas where many Wayuu reside in small villages.[11] Effective missionary approaches will require some form of outreach in sparsely populated rural areas that is frugal and cost-effective in allocating missionary manpower.

Some cultural practices challenge proselytism efforts such as polygamy. Polygamous individuals cannot join the LDS Church unless they divorce all but one spouse. Few polygamous individuals have joined the Church from other ethnic groups that practice polygamy and in countries where polygamy is commonly practiced due to the social and financial difficulties incurred from divorcing polygamous spouses.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church does not perform any ethnic-specific outreach among Amerindian groups in Colombia or Venezuela. The lack of outreach among Amerindian groups in these two countries appears rooted in the comparatively small presence of the Church and no congregations operating within close proximity of areas traditionally populated by Amerindians. In Colombia, the Church operates congregations within the traditional homelands of only two of the approximately 70 Amerindian groups (Guambiano and Wayuu) whereas in Venezuela the Church operates congregations within the traditional homelands of only four of the 28 Amerindian groups (Carib, Macushi, Warao, and Wayuu).

Other outreach-focused Christian groups report a larger presence among the Wayuu than the LDS Church. Evangelicals reported a well-established presence among the Wayuu and estimate that 14% and 9% of the Wayuu population is evangelical in Venezuela and Colombia, respectively.[12] Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced steady growth among the Wayuu. In the early 1980s, there were only seven Wayuu Witnesses and 20 Spanish-speaking Witnesses in La Guajira Department.[13] Currently Witnesses report 33 congregations in La Guajira Department, including 12 Wayuu-speaking congregations (Barrancas, Fonseca, Hato Nuevo, Maico, Manaure, Media Luna, Nazareth, Paraiso, Puerto Estrella, Punta Gallinas, Riohacha, and Uribia). Witnesses also operate 23 Wayuu-speaking congregations and groups in Venezuela, including eight congregations in Maracaibo alone. Witnesses maintain a website in the Wayuu language[14] and publish proselytism materials into Wayuu notwithstanding few literate speakers. In the past decade, Seventh Day Adventists began church planting and proselytism among the Wayuu in both Colombia and Venezuela. In 2011, there are a few Wayuu-designated congregations in Colombia and approximately 45 Wayuu Adventists in the city of Maicao.[15] Adventists do not appear to have translated any materials into Wayuu.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future expansion of LDS missionary activity in traditionally Wayuu-populated areas appears good for the foreseeable future due to increases in the worldwide missionary force, the recent opening of Riohacha and Maicao to proselytism, and several congregations in the region reporting small numbers of Wayuu members. The consultation of mission presidencies in Colombia and Venezuela regarding Wayuu-directed outreach offers opportunities for improving strategic vision and administrative responsibility for baptizing and retaining converts. Prospects for initiating Wayuu-specific outreach complete with missionaries teaching in Wayuu appears unlike for many years due to low literacy rates, the absence of LDS materials in Wayuu, and deterrence from mission and area leaders to conduct proselytism activity in Amerindian languages that have few members. Church leaders should consider the potential benefits of engaging in formal proselytism efforts among Amerindian groups like the Wayuu while receptivity remains good in order to maximize growth.

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[4] "Wayuu," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 12 November 2012. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=guc

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[6] "Guajiro - Kinship," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 19 November 2012. http://www.everyculture.com/South-America/Guajiro-Kinship.html

[7] "Guajiro - Economy," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 19 November 2012. http://www.everyculture.com/South-America/Guajiro-Economy.html

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[9] "Venezuela," Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 594

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