

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Navajo

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Overview

Ranking as the most populous federally-recognized Native American tribe with over 300,000 members, the Navajo or Diné are a Native American people that reside in the Southwestern United States in a semi-autonomous territory known as the Navajo Nation which encompasses northeastern Arizona, extreme southeastern Utah, and in northwestern New Mexico. No other Native American-designated territory is geographically as large as the Navajo Nation which encompasses approximately 71,000 square kilometers. The Navajo share many cultural, linguistic, and historical similarities with other nearby Native American tribes such as the Apache and the Pueblo peoples. The Navajo language pertains to the Athapaskan language family. Many other Athapaskan languages are native to the Pacific Northwest and western Canada suggesting that the Navajo people prehistorically originated from this region.[1] Most Navajo reside in rural areas, villages, and small towns. The 2010 census identified 57 populated places within the Navajo Nation with over 400 inhabitants. The Navajo have long resisted proselytism efforts from Catholic and Protestant missionaries, but Catholicism has been one of the more traditional Christian denominations to take root.

Aside from their large numbers in comparison to other Native American tribes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Navajo gained greater recognition in mainstream American society due to their invaluable contributions in World War II. The United States military trained over 400 Navajo as "Navajo Code Talkers" to rely and transmit secret messages in the Pacific, [2] helping the United States to ultimately defeat Imperial Japan in 1945. Notwithstanding numbering in the hundreds of thousands and regaining some aspects of political and government autonomy, the Navajo have experienced severe hardships since coming under the rule and authority of the United States. The Navajo were socially marginalized, isolated from many other ethnic groups, and pressured to abandon their language and many aspects of their culture to facilitate integration with predominantly white American culture. Some of these ethnic relations issues have been since ameliorated by federal and tribal government but poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, and education remain serious challenges.

This case study reviews LDS historical background relating to missionary activity and church growth among the Navajo. Successes, opportunities, challenges, comparative growth with other missionary-focused Christian groups, and future prospects for growth are analyzed and discussed. Population figures are provided in parentheses after location names throughout this case study.

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LDS Background

Close proximity to Latter-day Saint settlements in the Intermountain West and beliefs that Native Americans descend from Book of Mormon peoples have driven LDS proselytism efforts for nearly 150 years. In the nineteenth century, Native American tribes were among the first non-European American peoples to receive a Latter-day Saint gospel witness. The Navajo were no exception. In 1879-1880, establishing friendly and peaceful relations with Native Americans constituted one of the primary goals for Latter-day Saint colonists assigned to settle extreme southeastern Utah under the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition.[3] More organized and overt missionary efforts among the Navajo came to realization in March 1943 when the Church created the Navajo-Zuni Mission.[4] It is unclear when the greatest LDS growth and outreach expansion precisely occurred in the twentieth century, but the Church experienced strong growth between 1960 and 2000. Elder Washburn of the Second Quorum of the Seventy reported that there were only a handful of Navajo Melchizedek Priesthood holders and few members in Page, Arizona in 1960. However, 30 years later one of the wards in Page was 95% Navajo and Navajo held many prominent leadership positions in the area such as in the stake presidency and as stake patriarch.[5] The first stakes to be headquartered in cities adjacent to the Navajo Nation were the Farmington New Mexico (1912), Flagstaff Arizona (1956), Holbrook Arizona (1970), Page Arizona (1974), Gallup New Mexico (1975), Blanding Utah (1978), Winslow Arizona (1978), and Kirtland New Mexico

(1982) Stakes. However, church membership within these stakes appeared to be predominantly white with a small to large Navajo minority. The first stakes to be organized within the Navajo Nation were the Chinle Arizona (1990) and Tuba City Arizona (1995) Stakes. A current map of LDS stakes, wards, and branches within the Navajo Nation can be found here. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach for each location populated by at least 400 people and other locations with a ward or branch can be found here.

Advancements were made in meeting language needs in the latter-half of the twentieth century. In 1967, the Church began providing formal language training to missionaries in Navajo.[6] In the early 1980s, Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo organized several language study houses to provide language immersion to students wanting to learn a second language. BYU had one Navajo-speaking house at the time.[7] In 1980, the Church published a Navajo translation of select passages in the Book of Mormon.[8] Audio translations of General Conference have been available since as early as 1988.[9] The Church has continued to meet Navajo-language needs for temple patrons. In 2012, the Albuquerque New Mexico Temple held a special endowment session for Native Americans once a month[10] and the Snowflake Arizona Temple held endowment sessions for Navajo speakers twice a month.[11] In mid-2012, Navajo translations were available for select passages of the Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Articles of Faith, and Gospel Principles. Navajo translations of General Conferences sessions are available online here.

International LDS leaders such as General Authorities, Apostles, and members of the First Presidency have exhibited special interest in the Navajo for decades. Many church leaders have suggested that Navajo number among the descendents of Book of Mormon peoples. Some church leaders - including General Authorities - have used the terms "Navajo" and "Lamanite" interchangeably.[12] However in recent years, the Church has advocated for using terms like "children of Lehi" and "descendents of Lehi" instead of Lamanites.[13] In 1997, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley became the first Church President to visit the Navajo Nation. Over 5,000 Navajo from throughout the region attended a special meeting in Window Rock where President Hinckley spoke and encouraged members to pursue education.[14] In 2006, over 2,600 Native American Latter-day Saints attended several meetings with General Authorities in northeastern Arizona.[15] In 2011, Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly met with Church leaders in Salt Lake City.[16]

Generally speaking, the Church initially struggled to develop self-sufficient Navajo leadership in the various wards and branches in the Navajo Nation but over time achieved greater progress reducing reliance on non-Navajo church members. For example, stake presidencies have been staffed either by Navajos or white members with strong Navajo ties for a couple decades.[17] However, there remain serious issues in several locations relating to low member activity rates and poor member participation in church callings. In 1994, church leaders reported that three-fourths of church membership in the Bluff Branch in extreme southeastern Utah were Navajos. However, stake leaders assigned five couples from Blanding to provide leadership and administrative support due to insufficient numbers of active and qualified members to serve in branch callings. Sacrament meeting attendance averaged around only 35 out of approximately 180 members listed on branch records,[18] indicating a member activity rate as low as 20%. Church programs like home teaching appeared totally dependent on outside church members to function. In 1994, priesthood holders in the Blanding area were appointed as home teachings and assigned six to nine families; many of which were located on the reservation.[19]

Some of the initial non-proselytizing efforts conducted by the Church and its members centered on providing housing for Navajo youth in LDS families off of the reservation to improve accesses to higher quality public education. In recent years, the Church has focused on development projects to help improve self-sufficiency through efficient agricultural techniques and gardening projects. Dozens of church services missionaries have facilitated these efforts.[20] Church members in many Western states have provided humanitarian and development work to help address poverty and other economic challenges in areas primarily populated by Navajo. Missionary activity remains a major priority. In 2010, the Church organized the New Mexico Farmington Mission to include the entire Navajo Nation and surrounding areas. The organization of the new mission appeared at least partially motivated to help revitalize mission outreach among the Navajo considering virtually all stakes included in the new mission serviced at least one ward or branch headquartered on the Navajo Nation. Senior missionary couples have served in various units in the Navajo Nation as "member support missionaries."

Successes

The Church has a more widespread presence among the Navajo than any other major Native American group and numbers among the most successful proselytizing Christian denominations. Some estimates indicate that Latter-day Saints may nominally outnumber Catholics.[21] Two stakes are headquartered within the Navajo Nation and seven additional stakes are based outside the Navajo Nation but have at least one ward or branch on the reservation. The size of the Church among the Navajo stands in major contrast to the Church among other Native American tribes considering there are only a handful of church units elsewhere in the United States that service predominantly Native American populations. Furthermore, the organization of the New Mexico Farmington Mission channels outreach resources specifically for the Navajo population. There are no other missions in the United States that primarily service Native American populations at present.

The Church has consistently extended outreach in many rural areas for decades. 36 locations within the Navajo Nation have a ward or branch operating; 25 of which have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Aside from Utah and other areas with high percentages of Latter-day Saints in the general population, the Navajo Nation numbers among the most well-reached rural areas in the entire world by the LDS Church. The Church has sustained its penetrating outreach for decades notwithstanding member activity challenges, remote location, and few qualified local priesthood holders in smaller communities. Between mid-2002 and mid-2012, only one location had its sole LDS congregation closed, Tonalea (549), and only one location had a ward or branch closed but continued to have at least one congregation operating, Ramah (370).

The Church has addressed language issues among the Navajo. The Navajo are one of the only Native American groups that have at least some LDS materials and scriptures translated into their native language. The Church has established Navajo-speaking congregations outside of the Navajo Nation providing for some ethnic and language-specific outreach abroad. In 2008, there were two Navajo-speaking branches off the reservation in the Flagstaff Arizona Stake and the Blanding Utah Stake. By mid-2012, there was only one independent branch that was designated as Navajo-speaking outside the Navajo Nation that operated in the Los Lunes New Mexico Stake. Additional Navajo-speaking groups and Sunday School classes appear to operate in additional locations but lack sufficient numbers of members to form independent wards or branches.

Opportunities

The Navajo are the most populous Native American people in the United States and consequently exhibit some of the most promising opportunities for LDS Church growth. There remain good opportunities to expand outreach. The Church does not have a presence in 21 locations with populations over 400 as identified by the 2010 census. Seven of these locations (Fort Defiance [3,624], Navajo [1,645], Tsaile [1,205], Whitecone [817], Low Mountain [757], Oljato-Monument Valley [674], and Rock Point [642]) appear most favorable for church planting due to distance from the nearest LDS outreach center and sizable populations compared to other unreached locations. The Church can initiate outreach by ascertaining whether any Latter-day Saints live in these locations, holding cottage meetings, organizing service projects, and organizing carpools or shuttles to transport members and investigators to the nearest LDS congregation if transportation challenges has prevented higher church attendance. Over time, groups or branches may be organized in these locations at the discretion of local church leaders.

There are opportunities to reach communities through a LDS ward or branch located nearby. There is little need to organize a separate congregation in some locations populated by over 400 people within close proximity of an LDS congregation. For example, both Window Rock (2,712) and St. Michaels (1,443) are serviced by the same ward (the Window Rock Ward) which meets in a meetinghouse located in St. Michaels. With a combined population of slightly more than 4,000, only a few kilometers distance between the two locations, and enough members in both locations combined to maintain a ward instead of a branch make the organize of two separate congregations for each location unnecessary. Provided with the names of nearby communities in parentheses and population figures in brackets, other locations with LDS congregations that are within close proximity of other small towns with more than 400 inhabitants include Bluesalt (Shonto [591]), Lupton (Houck [1,024]), Tohlakai (Twin Lakes [1,052] and Yah-ta-hey [590]), and Tuba City (Moenkopi [964]).

The sizable number of Navajo-speaking Latter-day Saints provides resources to translate church materials, publications, and scriptures into Navajo. The entire Book of Mormon, other LDS scriptures, and many study guides and references have yet to be translated. Translation of additional materials and scriptures may provide for improved self-sufficiency of local leadership and testimony development. Furthermore, the development of more language resources would convey respect and value for the Navajo language and resonate with the concerns of community leaders of maintaining use of the Navajo language in an era of declining fluency in younger adults and children.

Challenges

The Church has experienced stagnant congregational growth for at least a decade. No additional locations in the Navajo Nation have had an LDS congregation planted or organized between mid-2002 and mid-2012. Both of the stakes headquartered within the Navajo Nation have only four wards each but stakes generally administer between five and 12 wards. The small number of wards attests to low member activity rates, comparatively few active priesthood holders, and the predominantly rural population spread over large geographic areas making the organization of wards impractical. These conditions often make the operating of stakes challenging. Furthermore, older adults comprise the majority of active membership in some smaller branches. Few younger and middle-aged adults in these congregations threaten the stability of the Church in these areas when these members pass away. It is likely that some smaller branches may close due to the aging population and population decline caused by younger members moving elsewhere. Between 2000 and 2010 most locations experienced population decline; virtually all others reported stagnant or slight population growth. In the coming years and decades, opening additional locations to proselytism will pose an even greater challenge for mission leaders than at present considering more mission resources may designated for member support in dwindling congregations.

Dependence on non-Navajo church leaders and missionaries to buttress active members and head reactivation efforts is a serious concern. The Church has readily supplied mission resources to meet these needs for decades but has likely inadvertently reduced the self-sufficiency of missionary activity and the general functioning of the church in some locations. Self-sufficiency in local leadership persists as a major problem in many branches. The Church remains heavily reliant on non-Navajo members residing in neighboring stakes such as in Kirtland to provide administrative support. For example, in the mid-2000s a stake high councilman from Kirtland, New Mexico provided special support for the Teec Nos Pos Branch in Arizona. There is little likelihood that the Church will make any headway expanding mission outreach to lesser-reached and unreached communities until Navajo membership can provide sufficient leadership manpower to staff currently functioning congregations without outside assistance from senior missionary couples and non-Navajo church leaders residing off the reservation.

There are many societal conditions and cultural practices that opposite LDS teachings or reduce receptivity to outreach. Alcoholism is a major concern that has plagued the Navajo and many other Native American peoples, further exacerbating low living standards and poor economic conditions. Domestic violence and child abuse and neglect is largely unreported and a

controversial issue due to the semi-autonomous political status of the Navajo Nation and differing belief systems and cultural values with mainstream American culture. Missionaries report that some couples have children but were never legally married. The Church requires couples to be legally married to be baptized resulting in some challenges for investigators and their children to join the Church. Some Navajo perceive the LDS Church as a white, European American institution incompatible with traditional Navajo culture and beliefs. Like other Christian groups, some Navajo and other Native Americans view affiliation with the LDS Church as submission to United States government oppression. Overall these more radical political views held by some do not appear as a major barrier for missionary activity and church growth considering the widespread presence of the LDS Church for many decades, generally positive relations between the Navajo people and the Church as a whole, and the emergence of Navajo Latter-day Saint leadership in stakes, wards, and branches.

Poverty constitutes one of the greatest barriers to self-sufficiency in the Church among the Navajo. Approximately one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, or the minimally sufficient income required to meet basic life needs. Located in the heart of the Navajo Nation in Arizona, Apache County ranks as the tenth poorest county in the United States in terms of lowest per capita income; a mere $8,986.[22] Many urban locations in the Navajo Nation number among the poorest nationwide. The Church has addressed these poor living and economic conditions through various programs over the past several decades. However, these conditions persist despite these efforts.

Generational differences present another daunting challenge for Latter-day Saints. Younger adults and children speak English more frequently and with greater command than Navajo. On the other hand, older adults speak Navajo more regularly than English and several thousand do not speak English at all. Younger generations have opted to relocate off of the reservation in search for employment, higher living standards, and integration into mainstream American society. The entire Book of Mormon has yet to be translated into Navajo as well as other LDS scriptures such as the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price. Reduced Navajo language usage among children, youth, and younger adults may be responsible for no additional translations of LDS scriptures into Navajo.

Comparative Growth

The Church has extended outreach among many Native American peoples in the western United States but has established a permanent presence among few. LDS congregations operate in locations near the following Native American peoples: The Aleut, Apache, Arapahoe, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Chippewa, Choctaw, Cocopa, Comanche, Crow, Dakota, Hidatsa, Hopi, Inupiatun, Keres, Kiowa, Lakota, Maricopa, Nez Perce, Okanagan, Paiute, Salish, Shawnee, Skagit, Tewa, Tiwa, Tlingit, Tohono O'odham, Tsimshian, Ute, Yakima, Yaqui, Yupik, and Zuni. Most of these tribes appear to have few if any Latter-day Saints however. The Church has no written materials available in any of these languages and has at times provided audio translations of General Conference in Apache and Shoshoni. Click here for a map of the United States providing all native ethnolinguistic groups that have at least 100 speakers.

The LDS Church numbers among the most widespread and established Christian faiths among the Navajo. Seventh Day Adventists operate a few churches in locations near the Navajo Nation such as Page, Arizona and Waterflow, New Mexico but report only two official churches headquartered on the Navajo Nation in Monument Valley, Utah (227 members)[23] and Chinle, Arizona (109 members).[24] Adventists operate church groups in two additional locations on the reservation in Kayenta, Kinlichee (23 members),[25] and Window Rock (nine members).[26] Adventists have attempted to expand outreach in recent years through programs such as the Diné Outreach Ministries.[27] There are few Jehovah's Witness congregations in the Four Corners region; only a couple of which appear to meet on the Navajo Nation. Chinle appears to be the only location with a Witness congregation. Baptists organizations have dedicated outreach resources to Navajo populations both on the Navajo Nation and elsewhere. One Baptist group has targeted several communities for church planting such as Cornfields, Jeddito, Kinlichee, and Nazlini.[28] Some Baptists groups have focused on reaching Navajo outside their homelands in locations such as Phoenix, Arizona.[29]

Future Prospects

A widespread and resilient LDS presence in both urban and rural areas for many decades, the relatively recent establishment of the first two stakes headquartered on the Navajo Nation, and the organization of the New Mexico Farmington Mission to service the region suggests that the Church will continue to maintain its presence in many areas of the Navajo nation for at least years or decades to come. However, the aging and shrinking population in many areas of the Navajo Nation may prompt the consolidation of some wards and branches in the coming decade unless a sufficient number of converts join the Church and remain active in these areas. Due to distance from the closest temples and the size and strength of the Church in the Farmington area, the Church may construct a small temple in Farmington to service membership in the Navajo Nation and the Four Corners area.

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