

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Miskito in Nicaragua

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Overview

The Miskito are an Amerindian group native to Atlantic coastal areas of Nicaragua and eastern Honduras. The name Miskito has no relationship to the Spanish word Mosquito and is a Miskito word that Miskito used to refer to themselves.[1] Numbering approximately 200,000, the Miskito are among the most populous Amerindian groups in Central America and most speak the Miskito language.[2] Literacy rates for Miskito speakers are estimated between 52-58%. Christianity is the predominant religion and the entire translation of the Bible is available.[3] Due to intermittent British influence on the Caribbean coast of Central America for several centuries, English and English Creole languages are commonly spoken. Most Miskito are Protestant. Many Miskito in Nicaragua reside in Puerto Cabezas (Bilwi) which is the capital of the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte.

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LDS Background

The first concentrated LDS missionary outreach among the Miskito of Nicaragua began in the late 2000s notwithstanding a branch operating in Puerto Cabezas for many years. Spanish-speaking Miskito and Mestizos appeared to constitute the bulk of original church membership in the area. A second branch was organized in the late 2000s and by 2010 there were four branches (Puerto Cabezas, Bilwi, El Caminante, and Loma Verde). Several of these congregations met the needs of Miskito Latter-day Saints and offered church services in the Miskito language. As of early 2012, all four branches met in the same meetinghouse and principally serviced urban areas. Missionaries reported that a second meetinghouse was announced in mid-2011, but it was unclear whether any progress had been made in opening additional meetinghouses by late February 2012.

Since 2010, the Church has maintained rapid numerical growth in Puerto Cabezas. Most missionary companionships have at least ten investigators at church on an average Sunday. In 2011, one branch had nearly 30 investigators attending sacrament meeting. In January 2011, missionaries in Puerto Cabezas baptized 130 converts in a single month, including 30 families. In mid-2011, missionaries baptized 25 convert families in a single month. In late 2011, missionaries assigned to the Bilwi Branch reported that there were 70 recent converts on branch records. The baptism of large numbers of converts appears linked to augmentation in the number of full-time missionaries assigned. In mid-2010, there were 10 missionaries serving in Puerto Cabezas which increased to 18 a year later. No noticeable outreach expansion occurred in the Puerto Cabezas area between mid-2010 and early 2012 as mission leadership requested missionaries to work on strengthening branches. Some missionaries began to be assigned to communities on the outskirts of Puerto Cabezas such as Kamlah but continued to primarily work in the city. In late 2011, missionaries reported that mission leaders designated some missionaries to work exclusively on convert retention efforts due to the flood of new converts in the four branches that overwhelmed local leadership.

The Church appears to have reached several measures of "real growth" in terms of convert retention, leadership development, and self-sufficiency. In October 2010, the Church created the Puerto Cabezas Nicaragua District. Prior to the creation of the district, all branches reported directly to the mission president. In late 2010, missionaries reported that dozens of youth were preparing to serve full-time missions in the near future. By this time native members appeared to lead all four branches. In mid-2011, one of the branches had over 200 attending church weekly. In 2011, missionaries reported that nearly 40 men were sustained to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood in district conference at the end of the year. In late 2011, missionaries reported that a general authority visited Puerto Cabezas to assess prospects for constructing additional church meetinghouses and prepared the district to become a stake in the future.

Successes

Full-time missionaries have specifically targeted families and male members to provide future resources and leadership manpower. Large numbers of new converts baptized within the past couple years have consisted of entire families and mission leadership has emphasized the importance of this practice. For the past couple years, missionaries appear to have baptized one or two dozen families on a monthly basis. Families provide resources for fellowshipping, leadership, and church programs that establish an LDS community and facilitate convert retention. To meet the needs of increasing numbers of converts, mission leadership initially created additional branches which have provided more opportunities for leadership development and focusing outreach into smaller geographic areas.

Opportunities

The strong receptivity of many Miskito to the LDS Church presents significant opportunities for future growth. Smart and tactful placement of limited full-time missionary resources can maximize prospective outreach and efficiently expand outreach among lesser-reached and unreached Miskito populations. Based on the large number of convert baptisms and high receptivity, it may be feasible for the Church to hold church services in rented spaces or remodeled buildings located within a kilometer of the entire urban population of Puerto Cabezas. Four or five separate meetinghouses could potentially be established to increase accessibility and accommodate one or two branches per building. This church planting approach could foster self-sufficiency, leadership development, and the formation of an LDS community throughout the city during a unique time of high receptivity.

To date, LDS outreach among the Miskito has occurred principally within Puerto Cabezas and surrounding communities. Bilingualism in Spanish appears higher in Puerto Cabezas than in other locations in Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte. The Church has likely benefited from Miskito members who speak Spanish as a second language considering mission leaders primarily conduct missionary activity in Nicaragua in Spanish and translations of most church materials and all LDS scriptures in Spanish are available. Missionaries began learning Miskito for proselytism and teaching purposes in the late 2000s but no formal translations of scriptures or LDS materials appeared to be completed as of late 2011.

Outreach among Miskito outside of Puerto Cabezas has yet to occur. The LDS Church has experienced strong receptivity to mission outreach in every location in the Puerto Cabezas area that full-time missionaries have been assigned to. Siuna is the only other city outside Puerto Cabezas in Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte that the Church has assigned missionaries and extended outreach. The Church in Siuna experienced high receptivity when the first missionaries were assigned in late 2010 and had over 50 attending church services within a matter of weeks. It is likely that others small towns and villages in Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte would exhibit similar levels of receptivity to the Church if mission resources were allocated. However, small populations and remote location present challenges for performing LDS proselytism using a traditional full-time missionary paradigm. Branch missionaries, branch presidents, and local members heading outreach efforts into these communities offer the most practical and efficient means of spreading LDS outreach into additional locations. Appointing a couple of missionary companionships that function as traveling missionaries to periodically visit small towns and villages outside of Puerto Cabezas provides opportunities for expand outreach while conserving limited mission resources should local membership be unable or unwilling to participate. Small towns and villages nearby Puerto Cabezas which may present favorable opportunities for establishing an LDS presence include Huahua, Karata, Krukira, and Tuapi. More distant towns and villages that may present good prospects for church planting include Cabo Viejo, Li Dakura, Santa Marta, Sinsin, and Waspan.

The preparation of male converts to receive the priesthood and the presentation of over 30 male members to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood in a single district conference provides many opportunities for growth if these members remain active. The large number of male members receiving the priesthood suggests that the Church has an ample supply of manpower to provide leadership for operating congregations and that sizable numbers of priesthood leaders can be dedicated toward organizing additional congregations in communities currently without their own branch.

Challenges

The organization of additional branches in the late 2000s in Puerto Cabezas appears strongly correlated to the rapid growth the Church has experienced in the area over the past five years. However, the Church has not opened any additional congregations in approximately two years since the last new branch was organized. The formation of the first district in the region and efforts to strengthen local leadership and increase the number of active members in each branch appears to have deterred expansion of LDS outreach into additional neighborhoods of Puerto Cabezas and in currently unreached towns and villages throughout Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte. With nine full-time missionary companionships assigned to the four branches, each branch appears to have between four and six full-time missionaries assigned. The limited mission resources dedicated to the highly receptive Miskito population are concentrated among a small portion of the population and branches appear close to becoming satiated by full-time missionaries. Past church growth experience in other locations where there have been more than a single full-time missionary companionship assigned have often produced disastrous results on convert retention, self-sufficiency, and growth rates as full-time missionaries undertake leadership, administrative, and ecclesiastical duties. Reliance on full-time missionaries often stems from their availability to fill these duties, often superior gospel knowledge compared to recent converts, and frustrations and impatience with local leaders as they are learning how to become leaders and balance the needs of their church callings, individual gospel study and spiritual development, and family, vocational, and social responsibilities. Like parents who would rather do their children's household chores themselves because they feel they can do it more efficiently, accurately, and correctly than their children, so can missionaries act in locations where the Church is recently established, local leadership is limited, and missionaries have availability in time and energy due to surplus missionary manpower in their assigned congregation. What often began as a sincere effort by mission leaders to strengthen branches through reactivation programs, increased focus on convert retention efforts, and revamped active member teaching and visit campaigns through the assignment of multiple missionary companionships often results in reduced member self-sufficiency and

little or no progress in real church growth.

As of early 2012, all four branches met in the same church meetinghouse. In late 2011, missionaries reported that the meetinghouse was overused and not within close proximity of many members in the four branches. Located in the extreme northeastern area of the city, the meetinghouse was several kilometers away from most urban areas. It is unclear why the Church has not yet opened additional meetinghouses in locations closer to members' homes. The single meetinghouse has restricted outreach potential and may have reduced convert retention and member activity rates due to distance from member homes, overcrowding, and some branches meeting at less-convenient times for worship to accommodate other branches. The lack of additional meetinghouses may have also discouraged church leaders from requesting to create additional congregations due to no available space or time for church services in the current building notwithstanding rapid membership growth over the past few years.

No LDS materials have been translated into Miskito. Missionaries report that some members speak Spanish fluently but struggle reading LDS scriptures and materials in Spanish. New converts have expressed their desire to missionaries for Miskito translations of the Book of Mormon for study. There has been no formal announcement that the Church intends to translate any materials or scriptures into Miskito. Delaying translations of LDS materials into Miskito may result in reduced growth potential as some interested individuals may not develop a personal testimony of the Church and become baptized without access to gospel literature in their native language. The translation of church materials and scriptures may solidify gospel understanding and promote gospel scholarship among many of the newly baptized converts in Puerto Cabezas.

Like many areas in Latin America and the Caribbean, missionaries report that many investigator couples are not legally married but have children and demonstrate a long-term commitment to their partners. Expenses challenge efforts to marry investigator couples so they can qualify for baptism.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Miskito appears favorable due to sizable numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Puerto Cabezas, the increase in the number of priesthood holders, and prospects in the near future for opening additional meetinghouses. The creation of additional branches in the Puerto Cabezas area appears likely in the near future to facilitate convert retention, self-sufficiency of local leadership, and improve accessibility of the Church to new converts and investigators. Assigning several missionary companionships to a single branch may set back growth prospects due to potential satiation of local congregations by full-time missionaries.

[1] "Miskito people," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 24 February 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miskito_people

[2] "Miskito people," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 24 February 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miskito_people

[3] "Miskito," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 24 February 2012. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=miq