

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Tzeltal of Mexico

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Overview

Closely related to the Tzotzil Amerindians, the Tzeltal inhabit central highland areas of the Mexican state of Chiapas and number somewhere between 372,000[1] and 466,000.[2] Ethnographers estimate that the Tzeltal and Tzotzil differentiated their languages sometime around the year 1200 AD. Today the Tzeltal exhibit a high degree of diversity in terms of society, government, crafts, and dialect forms.[3] Most Tzeltal have engaged in subsistence agriculture to support themselves for many centuries. The Tzeltal are traditionally Catholic, although in recent decades Protestant groups have established a pervasive presence. In 2005, 77% of the ethnic Tzeltal population in Mexico was estimated[4] to speak Tzeltal. Although the LDS Church has maintained a presence among the neighboring Tzotzil Amerindians for over two decades, the first concentrated efforts to reach the Tzeltal did not begin until the early 2010s.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments in areas with sizable numbers of Tzeltal people and identifies instances of LDS outreach efforts among the Tzeltal. Missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for growth are predicted. The growth of the Church among other Amerindian peoples indigenous to Mexico and Guatemala is reviewed, and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Tzeltal are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1957, the Church dedicated Chiapas State for missionary work and began formal proselytism efforts in the Tuxtla Gutierrez area.[5] In 1980, the Church organized its first stake in Tuxtla Gutierrez. Additional stakes were organized in Tuxtla Gutierrez Grijalva (1995), Tuxtla Gutierrez Centro (1999; discontinued in 2005), San Cristobal [de Las Casas] (2007), and Tuxtla Gutierrez Mactumatzá (2007). As of mid-2014, there were two districts that serviced areas of the Tzeltal homeland headquartered in Zapata (1990) and Chojolhó (2011).

Aside from proselytism efforts in urban areas of major cities with sizable numbers of Tzeltal such as San Cristobal de Las Casa and Tuxtla Gutierrez, full-time missionaries appeared to begin sporadically visiting traditionally Tzeltal areas nearby San Cristobal de Las Casas during the late 2000s and early 2010s. Small numbers of Tzeltal joined the Church through these efforts, although no additional branches comprised of Tzeltal members appeared to be organized during this period. In 2012, senior missionaries began the first coordinated Tzeltal-specific outreach efforts in the Oxchuc area. Sometime in late 2012 or early 2013, a member group appeared to begin functioning in Oxchuc. A map displaying the location of LDS congregations within or nearby the Tzeltal homelands can be found here.

As of mid-2014, the Church reported no translations of scriptures, gospel study materials, or missionary materials into Tzeltal.

Successes

The Church has established a center of strength in Tuxtla Gutierrez as demonstrated by the operation of three stakes, a mission, and a temple. Centers of strength provide greater resource allocation to the city and surrounding areas in regards to the number of full-time missionaries assigned and vision and financial resources needed to expand outreach within the region. Although the Church's policies regarding centers of strength and national outreach expansion may deter outreach in rural areas inhabited by the Tzeltal within the foreseeable future, Tuxtla Gutierrez will nonetheless play a crucial role in the development of

any specialized mission outreach among the Tzeltal people in a fashion similar to concentrated outreach efforts conducted among the Tzotzil people within the past couple decades. Additionally, the San Cristobal de Las Casas Mexico Stake provides immediate outreach among Tzeltal people who reside in areas within the stake where wards and branches operate.

Although no concentrated missionary work has occurred among the Tzeltal, the Church has had small numbers of Tzeltal join the Church within the past few decades. Many, if not most, wards and branches in the San Cristobal de Las Casas Mexico Stake appear to have some Tzeltal members. The operation of wards and branches in several areas traditionally inhabited by Tzeltal people provides at least some type of immediate outreach, albeit this outreach is currently limited to only Spanish and, in some areas, Tzotzil.

Opportunities

The Church operates congregations in at least 10 locations with sizable numbers of Tzeltal including Tuxtla Gutierrez (20 wards), San Cristobal de Las Casas (three wards), Comitán (two wards), Ocosingo (one branch), Palenque (one branch), San José Obrero (one branch), Tenosique (one branch), Oxchuc (one group), Teopisca (one group), and Yajalón (one group). Many of the congregations that operate in these cities, towns, and villages appear to have at least some Tzeltal members who have joined the Church over the years, presenting immediate opportunities for member-missionary outreach. The establishment of Tzeltal-speaking Sunday School classes in some wards and branches may be effective to meet language needs and convey a sense of compatibility of the Church with Tzeltal culture and society. Additionally, the Church can hold cottage meetings in members' homes or in communities distant from the nearest congregation to provide a basic gospel lesson to interested individuals, assess conditions for assigning missionaries, and prepare the groundwork for organizing a member group if feasible. Utilizing cost-effective approaches that maximize limited full-time missionary manpower allocated to Tzeltal-speaking areas, involve Tzeltal members in the teaching, fellowship, and conversion processes, and meet the needs of church administration in rural areas will be crucial towards capitalizing on current conditions for missionary activity among the Tzeltal.

The massive surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides the unprecedented opportunity for mission leadership to mobilize surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of multiple proselytism areas that specifically target the Tzeltal within their homelands. The assignment of even two or three missionary companionships to exclusively focus on Tzeltal-specific outreach could have a long-term pay off for the Church in establishing a permanent presence, particularly in locations where no LDS outreach currently occurs. Locations in the Tzeltal homelands unreached by the Church that appear favorable for the assignment of missionaries and establishment of member groups include Chilón, Shishintonil, and Tenejapa. Assigning a single missionary companionship to service 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. The assignment of a senior missionary couple to Tzeltal areas to coordinate outreach efforts between full-time missionaries and local church leaders has enormous potential to establish the Church, although the limited number of senior missionary couples serving missions make this course of action a challenge.

Bilingualism in Spanish provides many opportunities for missionaries to utilize Spanish translations of LDS scriptures, gospel study materials, and proselytism tracts during initial proselytism efforts. Spanish translations of the Liahona magazine have been utilized by Tzotzil members and appear to have facilitated gospel understanding despite low fluency and mixed Spanish language comprehension. Similar results may occur among the Tzeltal. However, the translation of basic gospel study and missionary materials into Tzeltal presents good opportunities for enhancing gospel understanding, the effectiveness of missionary activity, and expanding LDS outreach into rural areas within the Tzeltal homeland where the Tzeltal comprise majority. The most recent estimates place the number of monolingual Tzeltal speakers at 50,000.[6] The Tzeltal also number among the Amerindian peoples in Mexico with the highest percentages of people who speak their indigenous language (77%).[7] Mission and area leaders identifying multiple Tzeltal-speaking members who exhibit sufficient proficiency in Spanish and English to translate basic proselytism tracts and gospel study materials into Tzeltal will be an important step towards the development of any language resources. Additionally, returned missionaries who were assigned to Tzeltal-speaking areas may also serve as valuable resources in the translation of gospel materials and the language instruction of new missionaries assigned to serve in Tzeltal-speaking areas.

The establishment of a separate mission headquartered in San Cristobal de Las Casas that not only services major cities in eastern Chiapas State but that also specifically focuses on expanding specialized proselytism efforts among Amerindian peoples has good potential to accelerate growth and implement consistent outreach among the Tzeltal. In addition to the Tzeltal and Tzotzil, Chiapas State supports additional Amerindian peoples with sizable populations who have yet to receive specialized LDS outreach such as the Chol (145,000 speakers)[8] and Tojolabal (34,300 speakers).[9] Although a prospective mission headquartered in San Cristobal de Las Casas would service one of the smallest numbers of stakes and districts among the 34 missions in Mexico, a separate mission would provide needed resources to orchestrate specialized outreach among Amerindian peoples and establish vision to establish a self-sufficient church among these peoples.

Challenges

The Church in Mexico has avoided the expansion of specialized Amerindian outreach within the past two decades. Attitudes and policies held by area, mission, and stake leaders have generally advocated for the integration of Mestizo and Amerindian members into the same congregations and have promoted Spanish usage to hold worship services and teach classes. There has appeared to be a belief by church administration that the establishment of language-specific congregations for Amerindian groups will become too taxing on mission and stake leadership. This appears attributed to historical challenges in self-sufficient

local leadership among Mexican Amerindian peoples, language barriers, socioeconomic divides, and remote location. Although it is not entirely clear why mission and area leaders in Mexico have not placed emphasis on reaching Amerindian peoples due to their large populations and generally high receptivity, it appears that this lack of outreach has been due to self-sufficiency problems for the Church in Mexico as a whole and a conservative approach to the centers of strength policy. Within the past five years, the Church in Mexico has experienced little to no "real growth" due to quick-baptism tactics, local leadership development problems, and low member activity rates. Between year-end 2009 and year-end 2013, the Church added 146,666 members to its roles yet the total number of congregations (wards and branches) decreased during this four-year period from 2,007 to 1,980. As increasing numbers of congregations strongly correlates with increasing numbers of active members, this development is discouraging and predicts that little to no progress will occur in establishing specialized Amerindian outreach among additional peoples until real-growth frustrations are sufficiently rectified as reflected by a return to steady, year-to-year increases in the number of wards and branches nationwide.

The lack of even a single Tzeltal translation of a proselytism tract, let alone gospel study resources and LDS scriptures, poses significant challenges for the Church to convey a sense that it is compatible with Tzeltal culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Tzeltal-speaking branches or member groups in San Cristobal de Las Casas and surrounding communities would be appropriate and feasible to meet local needs, Tzeltal members and investigators have no translations of materials and scriptures from which to teach lessons, prepare sacrament meeting talks, or study the gospel. Without translations of even basic church materials into Tzeltal, the Church cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Tzeltal Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Tzeltal have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts. Although there is little data available on the number of Tzeltal who have joined the Church, reports from missionaries serving in San Cristobal de Las Casas suggest that low member activity rates occur among Tzeltal members. These activity problems may be due to a combination of issues such as a lack of Tzeltal LDS materials, essentially no Tzeltal LDS community, no Tzeltal-speaking congregations, quick-baptism tactics widely employed by full-time missionaries in the region, and historically poor member-missionary participation in the finding, teaching, and retention processes.

Although many Tzeltal reside in areas within close proximity to LDS congregations, most inhabit rural areas distant from current wards, branches, and member groups. Accessibility to these locations is difficult from mission headquarters in Tuxtla Gutierrez. These conditions pose difficulties to implement traditional methods of missionary work due to low population densities spread over large geographical areas. Many Tzeltal reside within the boundaries of the Mexico Villahermosa Mission in remote areas of the Zapata Mexico District. Consequently, effective outreach among the Tzeltal will require coordination between these two missions to pool resources for specialized proselytism efforts and the translations of gospel materials.

Many Tzeltal have a low standard of living and limited employment opportunities. The Perpetual Education Fund provides low interest loans to returned missionaries and may be an effective intervention to help improve living standards and employment opportunities. This program may bolster economic self-sustainability and reduce the number of local members who leave their native communities in search of work elsewhere. Economic conditions have created challenges for the Church to secure suitable spaces to hold church services for larger congregations as there is a lack of large, clean buildings that are easily accessible to target populations.

Syncretism of indigenous beliefs with Catholicism may present some challenges to maintain doctrinal purity for the LDS Church. Mission leaders, full-time missionaries, and local leaders will need to help local members differentiate between cultural practices that can be practiced while adhering to church teachings and those that cannot. Insurgency efforts often supported by Amerindian peoples in Chiapas State present challenges for the Church to encourage local members to be involved in civil matters and simultaneously respect the laws of their country. Political issues may present challenges for congregation unity. The generally nonviolent approach of Zapatista rebels suggests that there is little likelihood these political conditions would disruption of missionary work and pose safety concerns for members and missionaries.

Delays in the establishment of an LDS presence among the Tzeltal may result in reduced receptivity to the Church once concentrated missionary activity occurs on a larger scale. Other proselytism-focused groups have made significant inroads among the Tzeltal and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Tzeltal who have joined other nontraditional churches have become religiously and socially integrated into these denominations. Consequently, many of these individuals and families will likely exhibit reduced receptivity to LDS missionary work.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Mexico has extended specialized outreach among only a handful of Amerindian peoples, most notably the Yucatan Maya and Tzotzil. The Yucatan Maya have received LDS outreach for the past 40 years and number among the best-reached Amerindian people by the Church in Mexico. The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and a handful of gospel study and missionary resources into Yucatan Maya. Currently there is at least one stake, two districts, and several mission branches that appear to be predominantly comprised of Yucatan Maya members.[10] The Tzotzil are the second best-reached Amerindian people by the Church in Mexico and have received outreach since the early 1980s. Today the Church operates one Tzotzil-speaking district and has translated the Book of Mormon and a few basic church materials into Tzotzil. The Huave are the only other Amerindian people in Mexico who receive specialized outreach that have church services held in their native language. Currently only one Huave-speaking branch operates in Oaxaca State. Only small numbers of converts have joined the Church from other major Amerindian peoples in Mexico, such as the Nahuatl and Zapotec.

Some missionary-focused groups report a widespread presence among the Tzeltal, whereas others appear to have only a small numbers of converts. Evangelicals comprise the majority or a sizable minority in most Tzeltal communities. Evangelicals claim 50% of the Oxchuc subgroup and 30% of the Chiapas Bachajon subgroup.[11] Jehovah's Witnesses operate congregations throughout the Tzeltal homeland and have appeared to experience steady growth. In mid-2014, Witnesses operated at least 35 Tzeltal-speaking congregations in the Tzeltal homelands, in addition to several isolated Tzeltal-speaking congregations located in Mexico City, the Yucatan Peninsula, and other areas of Mexico.[12] A map displaying the location of these congregations can be found here. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to have small numbers of Tzeltal members, but Adventists have not translated any printed materials into the Tzeltal or Tzotzil languages.[13] The Church of the Nazarene appears to have extended some limited outreach among the Tzeltal but there appear to be few Tzeltal Nazarenes and no Tzeltal-speaking congregations.

Limitations

The Church does not publish the number of members by language usage for languages not among the 10 most commonly spoken languages by its worldwide membership. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Tzeltal who have joined the Church. The Church does not publish the number and location of its member groups. Consequently it is unclear how many member groups operate among the Tzeltal at present. Although high-quality reports from missionaries pertaining to initial proselytism efforts among the Tzeltal were retrieved in the early 2010s, no current reports were available during the writing of this case study. Additionally, no reports were available from Mestizo or Tzeltal members pertaining to LDS outreach among the Tzeltal.

Future Prospects

Recent challenges for the Church in Mexico achieving real growth, historical emphasis by mission and area leaders in Mexico to avoid specialized missionary efforts among Amerindian peoples, and no translations of LDS materials into Tzeltal suggest that the Church will not implement specialized missionary outreach among the Tzeltal within the foreseeable future notwithstanding good opportunities for growth. The outlook for the Church to open additional cities and towns to missionary activity and establish member groups or branches in these locations appears favorable. This approach appears the most likely course of action in which the Church will provide additional outreach among Tzeltal populations. The decision by mission and area leaders to integrate Amerindian and Mestizo members into the same congregations deserves serious evaluation to determine member needs and capitalize on opportunities for growth. Continued delays in establishing a self-sufficient Tzeltal LDS community may result in diminished opportunities in the coming years and decades as previously receptive individuals become discipled into other missionary-focused groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelicals, both of whom have established self-sufficient churches and a widespread presence among the Tzeltal.

[1] "Tzeltal," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 5 August 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tzh

[2] "Language: Tzeltal," Joshua Project, retrieved 5 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/languages/tzh

[3] "Tzeltal," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 5 August 2014. http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Tzeltal.html

[4] "Indicadores y estadísticas," Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas, retrieved 4 September 2014. http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54

[5] "Springtime ceremony begins temple in southern Mexico," LDS Church News, 27 March 1999. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/35436/Springtime-ceremony-begins-temple-in-southern-Mexico.html

[6] "Tzeltal," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 5 August 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tzh

[7] "Indicadores y estadísticas," Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas, retrieved 4 September 2014. http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54

[8] "Chol," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 18 August 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ctu

[9] "Tojolabal," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 18 August 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/toj

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[11] "Language: Tzeltal," Joshua Project, retrieved 5 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/languages/tzh

[12] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 5 August 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[13] "2014 Annual Statistical Report," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 2 August 2014. http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2014.pdf