



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Zapotec of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering among the most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico, the Zapotec traditionally reside in Oaxaca State, Mexico and speak a total of 57 languages that pertain to the Zapotecan language family.^[1] The most recent estimates place the total number of speakers of Zapotec languages at around 440,000,^[2] although the number of ethnic Zapotec may be as high as 647,000.^[3] In 2005, 60% of the ethnic Zapotec population in Mexico was estimated^[4] to speak Zapotec. Most Zapotec are Catholic, although many continue to follow traditional religious beliefs.^[5] Notwithstanding the LDS Church maintaining a presence in Oaxaca State since as early as 1960,^[6] no specialized outreach has occurred among the Zapotec notwithstanding LDS congregations operating in many locations where Zapotec reside in large numbers and sizable numbers of Zapotec joining the Church in the Juchitán area.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments within Oaxaca State and known instances of Zapotec converts joining the Church. Church growth and missionary successes in providing outreach among the Zapotec are discussed, and opportunities and challenges for LDS growth are explored. The growth of the Church among other Amerindian peoples indigenous to Mexico is reviewed, and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Zapotec are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1960, the Church had at least one branch in Oaxaca State.^[7] In 1981, the Church organized its first stake in the city of Oaxaca, today known as the Oaxaca Mexico Amapolas Stake. Provided with the year of creation in parentheses, additional stakes in Oaxaca State located within areas with sizable Zapotec populations were organized in Oaxaca Monte Alban (1988), Juchitán (1990), Salina Cruz (1995), Oaxaca Mitla (1996), Juchitán Las Flores (1997), and Oaxaca Atoyac (2000). In 1990, the Church organized a new mission headquartered in Oaxaca to service almost the entire state of Oaxaca. In 2014, the Church operated two districts located in Zapotec-populated areas in Huatulco (1999) and Chahuities (2004).

Missionaries who have served in areas traditionally inhabited by Zapotec peoples have reported good receptivity to LDS outreach, although the Church has never appeared to assign Zapotec-speaking missionaries or officially designate certain wards or branches as Zapotec-speaking. In the late 1990s, missionaries serving in the Juchitán area reported good successes reaching Zapotec peoples in the small city of Santa María Xadani. At the time, local members provided translation capabilities to help teach, baptize, and retain Zapotec-speaking members. Within the past two decades, full-time missionaries have indicated that sizable numbers of Zapotec-speaking individuals and families have joined the Church in the Juchitán area. In mid-2014, mission leaders reported that two branches in the Mexico Oaxaca Mission often conducted church services in a Zapotec language.

As of mid-2014, the Church reported no translations of scriptures, gospel study materials, or missionary materials into Zapotec languages. However, some Zapotec-speaking members were reportedly working on an informal translation of the Book of Mormon into a Zapotec language.

A map displaying the location of Zapotec ethnolinguistic groups and LDS congregations within their homelands can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Church has established centers of strength in Oaxaca and Juchitán as evidenced by multiple stakes operating within a single city. Centers of strength provide greater resource allocation in regards to the number of full-time missionaries assigned and the needed vision and financial resources to expand outreach within the region. Although the Church in Mexico's current policies regarding centers of strength and national outreach expansion may deter outreach into rural areas inhabited by the Zapotec within the foreseeable future, the Church in Oaxaca and Juchitán will nonetheless likely play a crucial role in the development of any specialized mission outreach among the Zapotec people. This will likely occur in a fashion similar to concentrated outreach efforts conducted among other Amerindian peoples in Mexico who have received specialized outreach such as the Tzotzil and Yucatan Maya.

Although no concentrated missionary work has occurred among the Zapotec, the Church has baptized small numbers of Zapotec converts within the past few decades and has conducted church services in a couple branches in a Zapotec language. The Church's efforts in the late 1990s to establish a branch in Xadani Santa Maria constitutes the greatest example of local members, stake leaders, and full-time missionaries coordinating to share the gospel and establish the Church in a predominantly Zapotec-populated area. Many wards and branches in Oaxaca State appear to have at least a handful of active Zapotec members. The operation of wards and branches in several areas traditionally inhabited by Zapotec people provides at least some type of immediate outreach, albeit overt proselytism is currently limited to Spanish.

Some Zapotec members who are bilingual in Spanish have also served full-time missions. Returned missionaries provide valuable leadership experience to their congregations. These members often exhibit high devotion to church callings and fulfill member responsibilities.

Opportunities

The Zapotec number among the most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Zapotec languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as great opportunities for LDS growth as the Zapotec due to their large population and close proximity to LDS centers of strength. The Isthmus Zapotec are the most populous Zapotec people with an estimated 128,000 people^[8] and are coincidentally the Zapotec people most accessible to current congregations. The Church has established multiple congregations in many of the most populous cities located within the homelands of the Isthmus Zapotec, including Juchitán (9 congregations), Ixtepec (4 congregations), and Tehuantepec (4 congregations), as well as several smaller cities and towns such as Ixhuatán (one branch), Unión Hidalgo (one branch), Veinte de Noviembre (one branch), and Xadani Santa Maria (one branch). It appears that many of the congregations that operate in these cities and towns have at least some Zapotec members, presenting immediate opportunities for member-missionary outreach. Holding Sunday School classes that provide lessons in Zapotec languages has enormous potential to meet immediate needs to provide specialized outreach but without exacting significant missionary, stake, or district resources. The establishment of Zapotec-speaking Sunday School classes in some wards and branches may be effective to convey a sense of compatibility of the Church with Zapotec 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 or branch if feasible. Utilizing cost-effective approaches that maximize limited full-time missionary manpower allocated to Zapotec-speaking areas, involving Zapotec members in the teaching, fellowship, and conversion processes, and meeting church administrative needs in unreached rural areas will be crucial towards capitalizing on current conditions for missionary activity among the Zapotec.

The success of missionary efforts among the Zapotec will require strong member-missionary and local church leader involvement due to language barriers between full-time missionaries and Zapotec-speaking people, and the lack of interest and vision from mission and area leaders to extend specialized outreach. Holding cottage meetings that present a basic gospel lesson in a Zapotec language could be helpful to activate Zapotec members and encourage member-missionary activity. As these members and investigators become more organized, they may present a greater need to mission and area leaders to translate some basic materials into Zapotec languages and assign full-time missionaries to learn the language for proselytism and teaching purposes. Local church leaders identifying these opportunities and appropriately preparing the needed resources to assist members in these missionary efforts constitutes the most efficient and most likely-to-succeed approach to extend any specialized outreach within the foreseeable future.

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 Zapotec within their homelands. The assignment of even two or three missionary companionships to exclusively focus on Zapotec-specific outreach could have a long-term pay off for the Church in establishing a permanent presence. Small towns in the Zapotec homelands currently unreached by the Church that appear favorable for the assignment of missionaries and establishment of member groups include Guevea de Humboldt, Lachiguirí, and Santiago Laxopa. Assigning a single missionary companionship to serve in multiple cities or towns provides a solution to extend 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 Zapotec 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.

The establishment of a separate mission headquartered in Juchitán may improve prospects for the Church to extend concentrated outreach among the Zapotec due to greater resource allocation into the area. A prospective mission in Juchitán

could potentially service three stakes and four districts in southern and eastern Oaxaca State, whereas the original Mexico Oaxaca Mission could potentially be downsized to only administer the four stakes in the city of Oaxaca as well as areas outside of stakes in northern and western Oaxaca. Smaller jurisdictions for mission presidents to administer has at times coincided with greater interest in reaching ethnolinguistic minority groups due to smaller population-to-missionary ratios and vision to make church operations more accessible.

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 Zapotec 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 Zapotec culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Zapotec-speaking branches or member groups in Juchitán, Oaxaca, and other cities with sizable numbers of Zapotec people would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Zapotec 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 a few basic materials into Zapotec, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Zapotec Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Zapotec have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts. However, reports from returned missionaries suggest that few mission resources designated to areas with sizable numbers of Zapotec, combined with no Zapotec-language materials or proselytism efforts, are responsible for the lack of a defined LDS community.

The enormous number of Zapotec languages poses a major obstacle for translating LDS materials. The number of Zapotec languages is approximately one-third of the total number of languages into which the Church has translated at least one piece of church literature. However, it is infeasible for the Church to translate materials into most Zapotec languages due to a lack of resources, the fact that most Zapotec languages are usually unwritten, and many Zapotec demonstrating fluency in Spanish. The translation of basic proselytism and gospel study materials into the most commonly spoken Zapotec languages would likely be sufficient until there became a greater need to translate materials into additional Zapotec languages.

Although many of the most populous Zapotec peoples reside in areas within close proximity to LDS congregations, most Zapotec ethnolinguistic groups reside in remote, rural areas that are difficult to access. Rugged terrain has helped preserve Zapotec culture and language, but has also contributed to a high degree of linguistic diversity. Due to this combination of remote location and linguistic diversity, it appears that most Zapotec ethnolinguistic groups have never received an LDS gospel witness and have no Latter-day Saint converts at present. Reaching these peoples will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find a method to extend outreach. Successes by the Church among other Amerindian peoples with similar geo-demographic characteristics have required mission leadership to regularly visit these communities, find investigators and isolated members, and consistently visit these individuals to prepare the groundwork to establish a church presence. The amount of energy, time, and vision required to properly establish a long-term LDS presence among Amerindian peoples who reside in remote areas and speak indigenous languages is often regarded as too great of an inconvenience and burden for mission and area leaders to incur on themselves, especially considering the ease of further saturating urban areas with greater numbers of Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries. The extreme linguistic diversity among the Zapotec may discourage mission and area leaders from seriously considering specialized outreach due to the complexity of the task, the challenges inherent in nonlocal missionaries learning Zapotec languages, and difficulties translating materials into Zapotec languages.

Many Zapotec 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.

Delays in the establishment of an LDS presence among the Zapotec 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 Zapotec and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Zapotec 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.^[9] 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 Tzeltal.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups appear to have sizable numbers of Zapotec members, and many of these denominations translate materials and extend missionary activity in Zapotec languages. Evangelicals have established a presence among essentially all 57 Zapotec ethnolinguistic groups. Most Zapotec peoples are between 1% and 15% evangelical.^[10] Jehovah's Witnesses have a widespread presence among some Zapotec ethnolinguistic groups. Witnesses number among the most proactive denominations in translating materials into Zapotec languages. Witnesses appear to comprise the largest nontraditional Christian minority group among some subgroups of the Zapotec people. Provided with the number of congregations designated for each language, Jehovah's Witnesses operate more than 100 Zapotec-speaking congregations within or nearby the Zapotec homelands for nine Zapotec languages including Isthmus Zapotec (31), Lachiguirí Zapotec (13), Villa Alta Zapotec (13), Manantiales Zapotec (11), Ixtlán Zapotec (10), del Valle Zapotec (10), Quiavicuzas Zapotec (7), Guevea Zapotec (6), and Quiatoni Zapotec (3). A map displaying the location of these congregations can be found [here](#). In addition to Zapotec-specific congregations in the Zapotec homeland, Witnesses also operate a handful of Zapotec-speaking congregations in Mexico City. Witnesses translate their official website jw.org into seven Zapotec languages, including del Valle Zapotec, Guevea Zapotec, Isthmus Zapotec, Ixtlán Zapotec, Lachiguirí Zapotec, Quiavicuzas Zapotec, and Villa Alta Zapotec. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church does not translate any materials into Zapotec languages, but appears to have sizable numbers of Zapotec members. The Church of the Nazarene maintains congregations in many cities and towns within the Zapotec homeland such as Guevea de Humboldt, Juchitán, and Lachiguirí. However, all church services appear to be held in Spanish.^[11]

Limitations

The Church does not publish the number of members by language usage for languages not among the 10 most commonly spoken languages among worldwide church membership. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Zapotec 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 in areas with sizable numbers of Zapotec. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists and Nazarenes. Few reports from local members and recently returned missionaries were available during the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

Although the Zapotec number among the most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico, prospects appear mixed for future LDS growth and missionary work among them primarily due to church administration challenges. Small numbers of Zapotec will likely continue to join the Church in Oaxaca State as a result of good receptivity to the Church, full-time missionaries finding and teaching on their own accord, and sporadic member-missionary efforts by Mestizo members. However, these efforts will likely continue to occur only in Spanish, requiring any Zapotec converts to demonstrate fluency in Spanish to learn about the Church and associate with other members, or reliance on bilingual members to translate the missionary lessons. The lack of real growth for the Church in Mexico within recent years will likely continue to channel mission resources and vision into relatively fruitless reactivation efforts among the hundreds of thousands of inactive members, the vast majority of whom were rushed into baptism to reach arbitrary goals. Most inactive Mexican members have experienced little to no meaningful church activity. Any breakthroughs in LDS growth and missionary work among the Zapotec will most likely occur through multiple Zapotec members demonstrating zeal and vision to bring the gospel to their people, and these members properly preparing and organizing interested individuals in order to establish member groups and branches. The Church will likely not translate any materials into Zapotec languages until there are a sufficient number of Zapotec-speaking members who would benefit from these translations.

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