

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mixtec of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering slightly more than half a million,[1] the Mixtec are an Amerindian people in Mexico native to western Oaxaca, extreme eastern Guerrero, and extreme southern Puebla. The Mixtec speak a total of 51 Mixtec languages.[2] In 2005, 63% of the ethnic Mixtec population in Mexico was estimated[3] to speak Mixtec. Most Mixtec are Catholic and infuse elements of indigenous religious beliefs into their worship and practice. Within the last century, Protestants have made inroads in some communities.[4] Although the LDS Church has maintained a presence in some areas traditionally inhabited by the Mixtec for several decades, no specialized missionary activity has occurred among this Amerindian people.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments within areas traditionally inhabited by Mixtec people and examines known instances of Mixtec converts joining the Church. Church growth and missionary successes among the Mixtec 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 Mixtec 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.[5] 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 that service areas with sizable Mixtec populations include stakes in Oaxaca Monte Alban (1988), Oaxaca Mitla (1996), Chilpancingo (1997), Acapulco Costa Azul (2000), 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 four districts that serviced areas with indigenous Mixtec populations headquartered in Ignacio Mejía (1982), Puerto Escondido (1995), Izúcar de Matamoros (2004), and Pinotepa (2008).

Missionaries who have served in areas with sizable numbers of Mixtec people report that the greatest proselytism successes have occurred among those who are bilingual in Spanish. As of mid-2014, the Church has never extended Mixtec-specific outreach in Mexico, although Mixtec-speaking members bilingual in Spanish have provided translation assistance to teach Mixtec investigators who exhibit limited fluency in Spanish.

Missionaries in the United States have regularly reported teaching and baptizing Mixtec members who have immigrated from Guerrero State. Locations where missionaries frequently teaching Mixtec peoples or where there are sizable numbers of active Mixtec members include Washington, California, and Tennessee.

Successes

The Church has established a center of strength in Oaxaca as evidenced by multiple stakes operating within a single city. Centers of strength provide resources in regards to full-time missionary manpower and the needed vision and financial resources to expand outreach within the surrounding 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 Mixtec within the foreseeable future, the Church in Oaxaca will nonetheless likely play a crucial role in the development of any specialized mission outreach among the Mixtec 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 Mixtec, the Church has had small numbers of Mixtec converts within the past few decades both within their homelands and abroad. These converts provide valuable resources for future missionary efforts among this people. The operation of wards and branches in several areas traditionally inhabited by Mixtec people provides some immediate outreach, albeit this outreach is currently conducted in Spanish.

Opportunities

The Mixtec number among the most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Mixtec languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as great opportunities for LDS growth as the Mixtec due to their large population and close proximity to wards and branches. Many of the Mixtec ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to areas within and surrounding Tlaxiaco appear most favorable for specialized outreach due to these Mixtec peoples comprising a higher percentage of the population than in other areas of south-central Mexico, moderate to high levels of intelligibility between most Mixtec languages in this region, and the operation of a mission branch in Tlaxiaco. Missionaries assigned to the Tlaxiaco Branch can visit other cities and towns in the area, identify groups of isolated members and investigators, and learn Mixtec languages as they conduct missionary work to begin initial Mixtec-specific proselytism efforts. Important steps to effective national outreach expansion would include providing basic gospel lessons to interested individuals through holding cottage meetings in members' homes or in communities distant from the Tlaxiaco Branch, assessing conditions for the assignment of missionaries to additional cities and towns, and preparing the groundwork for organizing a member groups and branches in additional locations.

Other cities and towns in south-central Mexico present good opportunities for Mixtec-specific outreach due to the operation of wards and branches in these locations. There are at least nine other cities or towns with a ward or branch located within the Mixtec homelands or where there are sizable Mixtec populations. These cities and towns include Oaxaca [west side of the city] (nine wards), Pinotepa (two branches), Huajuapan de León (one ward), Acatlán (one branch), Cuajinicuilapa (one branch), Huaxpaltepec (one branch), Nochixtlan (one branch), Tlapa de Comonfort (one branch), and Zimatlán (one branch). It appears that many of the congregations that operate in these cities and towns have at least some Mixtec members who have joined the Church over the years, presenting immediate opportunities for member-missionary outreach. Holding Sunday School classes that provide lessons in Mixtec languages has enormous potential to meet immediate needs to provide specialized outreach but without exacting significant missionary, stake, or district resources. The establishment of Mixtec-speaking Sunday School classes in some wards and branches may be effective in conveying a sense of compatibility of the Church with Mixtec culture and society. Utilizing cost-effective approaches that maximize the limited full-time missionary manpower allocated to Mixtec-speaking areas, involving Mixtec 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 Mixtec.

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 Mixtec within their homelands. The assignment of even two or three missionary companionships to exclusively focus on Mixtec-specific outreach could have a long-term pay off for the Church in establishing a permanent presence. Small cities and towns in the Mixtec homelands currently unreached by the Church that appear favorable for the assignment of missionaries and the establishment of member groups include small towns surrounding Tlaxiaco, San Luis Acatlán (Guerrero), and Santiago Juxtlahuaca (Oaxaca). Assigning a single missionary companionship to serve in multiple cities or towns can 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 Mixtec 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 worldwide make this course of action a challenge.

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

The enormous number of Mixtec languages poses a major obstacle for translations efforts. The number of Mixtec 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 Mixtec languages due to a lack of resources, the fact that most Mixtec languages are usually unwritten, and many Mixtec demonstrating fluency in Spanish. The translation of basic proselytism and gospel study materials into the most commonly spoken Mixtec languages will likely be sufficient until there is a greater need to translate materials into additional Mixtec languages.

Although many of the most populous Mixtec peoples reside in areas within close proximity to LDS congregations, most Mixtec ethnolinguistic groups reside in remote, rural areas that are difficult to access. Rugged terrain has helped preserve Mixtec culture and language, but has also contributed to the high degree of linguistic diversity. Due to this combination of remote location and linguistic diversity, it appears that most of the 51 Mixtec 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 in reaching other Amerindian peoples with similar geo-demographic characteristics have required mission leadership to 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 seen 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 Mixtec may discourage mission and area leaders from seriously considering specialized outreach due to the complexity of the task, challenges inherent in nonlocal missionaries learning local languages sufficiently well to teach and proselyte, and the translation difficulties.

Many Mixtec 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 Mixtec 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 Mixtec and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Mixtec 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 as long as 40 years and are 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.[6] 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 and 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, such as the Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Tzeltal.

Some of the most prominent proselytizing-focused Christian groups report a widespread presence among many of the most

populous Mixtec peoples. Evangelicals report an established presence among approximately two-thirds of Mixtec ethnolinguistic groups, indicating that their followers comprise two percent or more of the population of these peoples.[7] Most of the remaining one-third of Mixtec peoples without an established evangelical presence appear to have an evangelical population between 0.25% and 2.0%. Jehovah's Witnesses operate at least 56 Mixtec-speaking congregations within or nearby the Mixtec homelands. Witnesses conduct church services in seven Mixtec languages, including Tlaxiaco Mixtec (14), Huajuapan Mixtec (12), Guerrero Mixtec (11), Tilantongo Mixtec (9), Costa Mixtec (6), Apoala Mixtec (3), and Peñoles Mixtec (1). Witnesses translate their official website jw.org into five Mixtec languages, namely Costa Mixtec, Guerrero Mixtec, Huajuapan Mixtec, Tilantongo Mixtec, and Tlaxiaco Mixtec.[8] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church does not report any translations of printed materials into Mixtec languages, although there appear to be many Mixtec Adventists in Oaxaca State. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have an extremely limited presence among the Mixtec, if any presence exists at all.

Limitations

The Church does not publish the number of members by language usage for languages not among the 10 most commonly spoken languages in its worldwide membership. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Mixtec 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 Mixtec. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists and Nazarenes among Mixtec peoples.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to begin specialized missionary outreach among the Mixtec appears mixed as many Mixtec peoples appear to exhibit good receptivity to LDS outreach and the Church has significantly augmented the number of full-time missionaries available. However, the Church in Mexico as a whole continues to struggle with inactivity problems and a lack of vision to reach indigenous peoples. Spanish-speaking Mixtec will continue to receive outreach in locations where wards and branches operate. However, prospects for language-specific outreach among the Mixtec appear unfavorable within the near future. The Church in Mexico has historically avoided concentrated missionary efforts among Amerindian peoples with the exception of the Maya and Tzotzil. Additionally, challenges for the Church in Mexico to achieve real growth within recent years has occurred due to haphazard quick-baptism tactics and limited member-missionary involvement in the conversion process. Inactivity problems have siphoned surplus missionary manpower into reactivation efforts and supporting local church leaders with the goal to reverse these trends, although little success has thus far been achieved as evidenced by recent congregational growth trends. These conditions indicate that little to no progress will occur in the establishment of a Mixtec LDS community until the overall growth trends for the Church in Mexico improve and stabilize. The complexity and diversity of Mixtec languages is another significant challenge for the Church to address in translating church materials, which may result in many more years or decades until any resources are available. Any breakthroughs in LDS growth and missionary work among the Mixtec will most likely occur through multiple Mixtec members demonstrating zeal and vision to bring the gospel to their people. These members will need to properly prepare and organize interested individuals to capture attention from local leadership and mission and area presidencies so Mixtec-speaking member groups and branches can be established. Based on past experience proselytizing other Amerindian peoples in Central America, the Church will likely not translate any materials into Mixtec languages until there are a sufficient number of Mixtec-speaking members who would benefit from translations of basic gospel materials.

[1] "People Cluster: Mixteco," Joshua Project, retrieved 16 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/236

[2] "Mixtec," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 16 August 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/mixtec

[3] "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

[4] "Mixtec - Religion and Expressive Culture," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 16 August 2014. http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Mixtec-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html

[5] Hart, John L. "Blessed in abundance," LDS Church News, 13 May 2000. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/37757/Blessed-in-abundance.html

[6] Martinich, Matt. "LDS Outreach among the Maya of the Yucatán," cumorah.com, 26 January 2013. Peninsulahttp://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=290&cat_id=7

[7] "People Cluster: Mixteco," Joshua Project, retrieved 16 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/236

[8] jw.org, retrieved 16 August 2014. jw.org