



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Totonac of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering approximately 460,000,^[1] the Totonac are an Amerindian people native to an area of central Veracruz State and extreme northern Puebla State in Mexico called Totonacapan.^[2] In 2005, 61% of the ethnic Totonac population in Mexico was estimated^[3] to speak one of the nine languages that pertain to the Totonacan language family.^[4] Rugged terrain and tropical climate have historically permitted the Totonac to maintain greater autonomy than many other Amerindian peoples within Mexico. Today most Totonac are Catholic, although there is a sizable Protestant minority among some Totonac ethnolinguistic groups. Notwithstanding the LDS Church maintaining a presence in areas with sizable numbers of Totonac for over four decades, no specialized outreach has occurred among the Totonac although LDS congregations have operated in many locations with sizable Totonac populations.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments within areas traditionally inhabited by Totonac people and known instances of Totonac converts joining the Church. Church growth and missionary successes in providing outreach among the Totonac 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 Totonac is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1975, the Church organized a stake in Poza Rica. Additional stakes organized in areas with sizable Totonac populations include Poza Rica Palmas (1977), Papantla (1989), Tulancingo México (2010), and Martínez de la Torre (2011). As of mid-2014, the vast majority of the Totonac population appeared to reside within the boundaries of the two stakes headquartered in Poza Rica, the Papantla Mexico Stake, and a mission branch in Zacatlán under the jurisdiction of the Mexico Puebla North Mission. Currently the Totonac homelands are divided between three missions: the Mexico Pachuca Mission, the Mexico Puebla North Mission, and the Mexico Xalapa Mission.

Missionaries have reported that small numbers of Totonac have joined the Church in Veracruz State and the vast majority of these converts have appeared to be bilingual in Spanish. No LDS materials or scriptures have been translated into any Totonac languages.

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

Successes

The Church has established center of strengths within areas traditionally inhabited by the Totonac as evidenced by two stakes functioning in Poza Rica and one stake functioning in Papantla. 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 Totonac within the foreseeable future, the Church in Poza Rica and Papantla will nonetheless play a crucial role in the development of any specialized mission outreach among the Totonac

people due to good accessibility from outside the region and the operation of stakes.

The Church has extended outreach among the Papantla Totonac for several decades in the Poza Rica and Papantla area, although this outreach has only appeared to have occurred in Spanish. As the Papantla Totonac are the second most populous Totonac people, the Church has had opportunities to teach bilingual Totonac while non-discriminately extending outreach to the entire urban population. This process has thus far appeared to have been the primary method in which the small number of Totonac Latter-day Saints have joined the Church. The Church also operates congregations within the homelands of two other Totonac peoples, namely the Xicotepec de Juárez Totonac and the Yecuatla Totonac.

Opportunities

The Totonac number among the 10 most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Totonac languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Totonac due to their large population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has seven cities where there is at least one ward or branch within areas populated by the Totonac. These cities include the greater Poza Rica area (12 wards), Papantla (4 wards), Agua Dulce (1 ward), Xicotepec de Juárez (1 ward), Cazonas (1 branch), Espinal (1 branch), and Misantla (1 branch). Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Totonac members and investigators to brainstorm and discuss ideas for establishing specialized outreach may be beneficial for church leaders to assess needs and notify membership of plans to establish Totonac-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Totonac-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Totonac-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Totonac translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Totonac may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Totonac members will be crucial to ensure the success of these approaches to establishing an LDS Totonac community as they act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership and Totonac members and investigators.

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 Totonac within their homelands. Other cities and towns clustered along the Veracruz-Puebla border present good opportunities for Totonac-specific outreach due to the high percentage of Totonac people in these areas and the large number of towns and villages concentrated in this area. This area of the Totonac homelands is where the most populous Highland Totonac people traditionally reside who number over 120,000.^[5] The assignment of 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 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 worldwide make this course of action a challenge. Locations that may be favorable to headquarter these outreach expansion efforts within the Highland Totonac homelands include Coyutla, Entabladero, Filomeno Mata, and Zozocolco de Hidalgo.

Good intelligibility between Totonac languages presents opportunities for the Church to utilize fewer resources in meeting language needs than many other Amerindian peoples native to Mexico. There appear to be few major challenges for speakers of Totonac languages to communicate and understand one another,^[6] and the two languages (Highland Totonac and Papantla Totonac) with the most speakers are 40% intelligible.^[7]

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 Totonac 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 Totonac culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Totonac-speaking branches or member groups in Poza Rica, Papantla, or other

cities with sizable numbers of Totonac people would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Totonac 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 Totonac, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Totonac Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Totonac have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Although the second most populous Totonac people (Papantla Totonac) resides in areas within close proximity to LDS congregations, most Totonac ethnolinguistic groups reside in remote, rural areas that are difficult to access, including the Highland Totonac - the most populous Totonac people. Rugged terrain has helped preserve Totonac culture and language, but has also contributed to less acculturation into mainstream Mexican society and bilingualism into Spanish than some other Amerindian peoples. Most of the nine Totonac ethnolinguistic groups have never appeared to receive an LDS gospel witness and likely 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 fact that most Totonac languages are usually unwritten and difficult for nonnatives to learn may discourage mission and area leaders from seriously considering specialized outreach due to the complexity of the task and challenges inherent in learning Totonac languages.

Many Totonac 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 Totonac 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 Totonac and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Totonac 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.

The Totonac homeland is currently divided between three missions, creating challenges for the Church to uniformly extend outreach to the Totonac people.

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 appear to be at least one stake, two districts, and several mission branches that appear to be predominantly comprised of Yucatan Maya members.^[8] 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, and the vast majority of these converts have been bilingual in Spanish. Although no specialized outreach has occurred among the Zapotec, a couple branches in Oaxaca State frequently conduct church meetings in the local Zapotec language although these branches are not officially designated as Zapotec-speaking and there remain no translations of LDS materials in any Zapotec languages.

Some missionary-focused Christian groups report a presence among the Totonac. Evangelicals have experienced significantly differing growth trends by Totonac ethnolinguistic group. The Coyutla Totonac, for example, number more than 61,000 yet are a mere 0.02% evangelical,^[9] whereas the Patla-Chicontla (Upper Necaxa) Totonac number less than 5,000 but are estimated to be 20% evangelical.^[10] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in the Totonac homelands and have translated proselytizing materials into one of the Totonac languages. In mid-2014, Witnesses reported 64 Totonac-speaking congregations within areas where the Totonac traditionally reside. Witnesses have also translated their official website into one of the Totonac languages.^[11] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Totonac members. Adventists do not

translate printed materials into Totonac. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have few, if any, Totonac members.

Limitations

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

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to experience growth among the Totonac appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The Church in Mexico has largely avoided Amerindian-specific outreach within the past couple decades with only a few exceptions. Serious problems for the Church in Mexico to address inactivity and local leadership development problems will likely continue to take the forefront in missionary work and church growth tactics until these issues have been sufficiently rectified. As the Church has no translations of materials into Totonac languages and has not appeared to have ever extended specialized outreach among the Totonac, it is difficult to assess how receptive this people will be to future missionary efforts that specifically target them. Small numbers of bilingual Totonac will likely continue to join the Church in locations where LDS congregations operate. Progress in the establishment of an LDS community among the Totonac will likely hinge on Totonac converts taking the initiative to self-organize and request the organization of language-specific congregations and the translation of LDS materials.

[1] "People Cluster: Central American Indigenous, other," Joshua Project, retrieved 29 August 2014. <http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/257>

[2] "Totonac - Orientation," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 29 August 2014. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Totonac-Orientation.html>

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

[4] "Totonacan," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 29 August 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/totonacan>

[5] "Totonac, Highland," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 3 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tos>

[6] "Totonac - Orientation," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 29 August 2014. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Totonac-Orientation.html>

[7] "Totonac, Papantla," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/top>

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

[9] "Totonaca, Coyatla," Joshua Project, retrieved 29 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/11429/MX

[10] "Totonaca, Patla-Chicontla," Joshua Project, retrieved 29 August 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14339/MX

[11] <http://www.jw.org/jw-tot/>, retrieved 29 August 2014.