



# People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## LDS Outreach among the Otomi of Mexico

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### Overview

Numbering approximately 527,000 in 2005, the Otomi are an Amerindian people native to the central Mexico. Most Otomi reside in Hidalgo State and Mexico State, although sizable numbers also reside in Queretaro State and in areas of Puebla and Veracruz States bordering Hidalgo State. In 2005, 45% of the ethnic Otomi population in Mexico was estimated<sup>[1]</sup> to speak one of the nine languages that pertain to the Otomi language family. Most Otomi adhere to Catholicism or to a Protestant denomination. Notwithstanding the LDS Church maintaining a presence in areas with sizable numbers of Otomi for over four decades, no specialized outreach has occurred among the Otomi although LDS congregations have operated in many locations with sizable Otomi populations.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments within areas traditionally inhabited by Otomi people and known instances of Otomi converts joining the Church. Church growth and missionary successes among the Otomi 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 Otomi are 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 its first stake that administered areas of the Otomi homelands in Tula. Additional stakes that service areas where the Otomi traditionally reside have since been organized in Pachuca (1984), Valle del Mezquital (1987), Toluca (1991), Pachuca Centro (1996), Metepec (2005), Pachuca South (2008), Tulancingo (2010), Tezontepec (2012), and Lerma (2014). Stakes in the Queretaro area also service areas with small numbers of Otomi.

Within the past couple decades, small numbers of Otomi have appeared to join the Church within their homelands. However, the Church in Mexico does not appear to extend any Otomi-specific outreach and has not translated any church materials or LDS scriptures into Otomi languages.

A map displaying LDS congregations within the Otomi homeland can be found [here](#).

### Successes

The Church has established center of strengths within areas traditionally inhabited by the Otomi as evidenced by three stakes operating in Pachuca, three stakes operating in the Toluca area, and one stake each operating in Tepatepec (Valle del Mezquital), Tezontepec, Tula, and Tulancingo. 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 Otomi within the foreseeable future, the Church in these centers of strength will nonetheless play a crucial role in the development of any specialized mission outreach among the Otomi people due to good accessibility from outside the region and the operation of stakes.

Rapid growth has occurred in the Otomi homelands within the past decade. This growth has been attested by the number of

stakes increasing from four to nine, the opening of many new wards and branches, and steady increases in the number of active members. Within the past five years, the Church has regularly organized new congregations and many branches have advanced to ward status. This stands as a significant accomplishment as the Church in Mexico did not experience steady positive congregational growth anywhere else in the country during this period due to inactivity problems and local leadership development difficulties.

The Church has established congregations within locations where two Otomi ethnolinguistic groups traditionally reside, namely the Mezquital Otomi and the Temoaya Otomi. There appear to be at least small numbers of members among both of these Otomi peoples.

## Opportunities

The Otomi number among the 10 most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Otomi languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Otomi due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently operates congregations in at least 14 cities and towns where there appear to be sizable numbers of Otomi. These cities and towns include Pachuca (18 wards), the Toluca area (12 wards, 2 branches), the Tula area (8 wards), Tezontepec (3 wards), Tulancingo (3 wards), Guerrero (2 wards), Santiago Tezontale (2 wards), Tepatepec (2 wards), Actopan (1 ward), Ixmiquilpan (1 ward), Mixquiahuala (1 ward), San Juan (1 ward), Tlahuelilpan (1 branch), and Xonacatlán (1 branch). Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Otomi 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 Otomi-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Otomi-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Otomi-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Otomi translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Otomi may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Otomi members will be crucial for ensuring the success of these potential approaches to establishing an LDS Otomi community as they act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership and Otomi 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 Otomi. In 2013, the Church organized two new missions within areas populated by sizable numbers of Otomi to accommodate larger numbers of missionaries serving. This additional infrastructure and manpower can be used to open additional areas to proselytism and further saturate the Otomi people with LDS outreach. Several cities with an LDS presence appear good candidates from which to base Otomi-specific outreach expansion efforts into surrounding areas. Actopan, Ixmiquilpan, and Xonacatlán present good opportunities for Otomi-specific outreach due to the high percentage of Otomi people in these areas, and the large number of towns and villages nearby these locations. Assigning a single missionary companionship to serve in multiple cities or towns 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 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. Locations where no LDS congregations operate that may be favorable to headquarter additional outreach expansion efforts within the Otomi homelands include Alfajayucan, Santiago de Anaya, Tasquillo, and Temoaya.

The Otomi have one of the lowest percentages of people who speak an indigenous language among the most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico. In 2005, only 45% of Otomi were estimated to speak an Otomi language.<sup>[2]</sup> This finding, combined with extremely low literacy rates for Otomi speakers to read and write their Otomi language, suggest that the utilization of Spanish translations of church materials and scriptures may be adequate to meet local needs. Additionally, high percentages of ethnic Otomi who speak Spanish suggest that integration with non- Otomi Spanish speakers may be appropriate in locations where the establishment of segregated congregations is unfeasible.

## 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 Otomi 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 Otomi culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Otomi-speaking branches or member groups in cities with sizable numbers of Otomi people would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Otomi 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 Otomi languages, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Otomi-speaking Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, that the Otomi have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts, or if Spanish language materials and proselytism have been adequate to meeting local needs within areas that LDS congregations operate.

Most Otomi reside in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. One of the populous Otomi ethnolinguistic groups, the Eastern Highland Otomi number nearly 50,000<sup>[3]</sup> and have no nearby LDS congregations. This Otomi people may have only a handful, if any, Latter-day Saint converts due to no LDS gospel witness within their homelands. Additional Otomi ethnolinguistic groups have appeared to have been totally unreached by the LDS Church, including the Querétaro Otomi (population: 33,000),<sup>[4]</sup> Estado de Mexico Otomi (population: 20,000),<sup>[5]</sup> Texcatepec Otomi (population: 12,000),<sup>[6]</sup> and Tenango Otomi (population: 10,000).<sup>[7]</sup> Reaching these Otomi ethnolinguistic groups will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find an effective 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 Otomi languages are usually unwritten and difficult for nonnative people 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 Otomi languages.

Many Otomi 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.

Delays in the establishment of an LDS presence among the Otomi 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 Otomi and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Otomi 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.

Four missions currently service the Otomi homelands, posing challenges for the Church to uniformly extend outreach to the Totonac people. Provided with the date of organization in parentheses, these missions include the Mexico Mexico City North Mission (1978), the Mexico Mexico City West Mission (2001), the Mexico Pachuca Mission (2013), and the Mexico Queretaro Mission (2013).

## 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.<sup>[8]</sup> 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 Zapotec languages.

Some missionary-focused Christian groups report a presence among the Otomi. Evangelicals maintain a widespread presence among the Otomi as a whole and report a presence among all nine Otomi peoples. The percentage of evangelicals among

Otomi peoples significantly varies from as high as 50% to less than one percent.<sup>[9]</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses operate 37 Otomi-speaking congregations within or nearby the Otomi homelands that hold church services in three Otomi languages, including Mezquital Valley Otomi (22), State of Mexico Otomi (11), and Eastern Highland Otomi (4). Witnesses translate written materials online and their official website into Mezquital Valley Otomi and State of Mexico Otomi.<sup>[10]</sup> The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Otomi members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Otomi. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have few, if any, Otomi members.

## Limitations

Few local member and returned missionary reports were available regarding the number of Otomi 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 Otomi 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 Otomi. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists and Nazarenes among the Otomi.

## Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth and missionary activity among the Otomi appears favorable. The Church has established congregations accessible to two Otomi ethnolinguistic groups and has experienced steady growth in these locations. Additionally, the surge in the number of members serving full-time missions worldwide coupled with the organization of two new missions that administer areas of the Otomi homelands predict that continued outreach expansion will likely occur within areas populated by sizable numbers of Otomi. The Church may expand missionary activity into locations traditionally inhabited by Otomi peoples who have thus far been unreached by LDS missionary activity. Based on past experience, the translation of church materials and the conducting of church services in Otomi languages will hinge on sizable numbers of Otomi-speaking members joining the Church and requesting these accommodations rather than stake, mission, and area leaders providing these services and resources to attract future Otomi-speaking converts.

<sup>[1]</sup> "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](http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54)

<sup>[2]</sup> "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](http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54)

<sup>[3]</sup> "Otomi, Eastern Highland," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 5 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/otm>

<sup>[4]</sup> "Otomi, Queretaro," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 6 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/otq>

<sup>[5]</sup> "Otomi, Estado de Mexico," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 6 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ots>

<sup>[6]</sup> "Otomi, Texcatepec," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 5 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/otx>

<sup>[7]</sup> "Otomi, Tenango," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 5 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/otn>

<sup>[8]</sup> Martinich, Matt. "LDS Outreach among the Maya of the Yucatán," [cumorah.com](http://www.cumorah.com), 26 January 2013. Peninsula [http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view\\_case\\_studies&story\\_id=290&cat\\_id=7](http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=290&cat_id=7)

<sup>[9]</sup> "People Cluster: Otomi," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 November 2014. <http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/263>

<sup>[10]</sup> [jw.org](http://jw.org), accessed 11 November 2014