



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mazahua of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering 283,000 in 2005,^[1] the Mazahua are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in northwestern Mexico State and adjacent areas in Michoacán and Queretaro States. The Mazahua speak two Mazahua languages that pertain to the Oto-Pamean language family, namely Central Mazahua (74,000 speakers in 2000)^[2] and Michoacán Mazahua (26,600 speakers in 2000).^[3] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Mazahua languages is 111,578.^[4] In 2005, 39% of the ethnic Mazahua population in Mexico was estimated^[5] to speak a Mazahua language. In recent years, many Mazahua have relocated to Mexico City and other major cities in central and northern Mexico.^[6] The majority of Mazahua adhere to Catholicism, with sizable numbers following Protestant groups. Notwithstanding the LDS Church maintaining a presence in areas with sizable numbers of Mazahua for over four decades, no specialized outreach has occurred among the Mazahua although LDS congregations have operated in many locations with sizable Mazahua populations.

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

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LDS Background

In 1991, the Church organized the Toluca Mexico Stake - the first stake based within areas that service northwestern Mexico State. However, none of the congregations in the new stake operated within the Mazahua homelands or were located in places with sizable numbers of Mazahua with the exception of Toluca. By 2002, the Church operated two branches in the Mazahua homelands in Atlacomulco and Zitácuaro. Additional stakes were organized in Metepec (2005) and Lerma (2014). In mid-2014, the Church operated one district Zitácuaro (organized in 1966) that serviced areas in Michoacán with sizable Mazahua populations. Currently all of the Mazahua homelands fall within the boundaries of the Mexico Mexico City West Mission, with the exception of extreme southern Queretaro State which pertains to the Mexico Queretaro Mission.

Within the past couple decades, small numbers of Mazahua have appeared to join the Church within their homelands and in major cities in central and northern Mexico. However, the Church in Mexico has never appeared to extend Mazahua-specific outreach. No church materials or LDS scriptures have been translated into Mazahua languages.

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

Successes

The Church has established two wards and three branches within the Mazahua homelands and operates congregations in many areas where sizable numbers of Mazahua have relocated. Congregations have operated for over a decade in Atlacomulco and Zitácuaro although outreach has only appeared to occur in Spanish. Today there five cities within the Mazahua homelands with LDS congregations, including Atlacomulco, El Oro, Ixtlahuaca, Valle de Bravo, and Zitácuaro. The operation of congregations within areas traditionally inhabited by the Mazahua is essential towards the Church conducting missionary activity among them, and there have appeared to be small numbers of bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking Mazahua who have joined the

Church within the past decade or two in these locations.

Rapid growth has occurred in northwestern Mexico State within the past decade. Some of this growth has occurred within the Mazahua homelands. Real growth has been attested by the number of stakes increasing from one to three, the opening of many new wards and branches in the Toluca area, and steady increases in the number of active members. Within the past five years, the Church has regularly organized new congregations in northwestern Mexico State 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.

Opportunities

The Mazahua are the tenth most populous Amerindian people in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Mazahua languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Mazahua due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has nine cities within areas with sizable numbers of Mazahua where there is at least one ward or branch. These cities include the greater Mexico City area (hundreds of wards and branches), the greater Toluca area (12 wards), San Juan del Río (2 wards), Zitácuaro (2 branches), Atlacomulco (1 ward), El Oro (1 ward), Ixtlahuaca (1 branch), Maravatio (1 branch), and Valle de Bravo (1 branch). Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Mazahua 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 Mazahua-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Mazahua-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Mazahua-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Mazahua translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Mazahua may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Mazahua members will be crucial for ensuring the success of these potential approaches to establishing an LDS Mazahua community as they act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership and Mazahua members and investigators. The establishment of a member district headquartered in Atlacomulco due to recent growth in the area and long distance from Toluca may be an effective means of raising awareness and channeling mission resources into Mazahua-specific outreach.

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 Mazahua within their homelands. Cities and towns clustered in the triangular-shaped area between Atlacomulco, Ixtlahuaca, and Zitácuaro present good opportunities for Mazahua-specific outreach due to the high percentage of Mazahua people in these areas and the large number of towns and villages concentrated in this area. Assigning a single missionary companionship to serve in multiple cities or towns within close proximity to one another can extend outreach into these locations while conserving limited mission resources and troubleshooting potential self-sufficiency challenges. Missionaries assigned to the Ixtlahuaca Branch in 2014 reported that some of these efforts were underway as the missionary companionship visited towns and villages within the rural areas surrounding Ixtlahuaca. 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 additional outreach expansion efforts within the Mazahua homelands include San Felipe del Progreso, San Nicolás Guadalupe, and Temascalcingo.

The Mazahua have the lowest percentage of people who speak an indigenous language among Amerindian peoples in Mexico with populations exceeding 30,000. In 2005, only 39% of Mazahua were estimated to speak a Mazahua language.^[7] This finding, combined with extremely low literacy rates for Mazahua speakers to read and write their Mazahua language,^[8] suggest that the utilization of Spanish translations of church materials and scriptures may be adequate to meet local needs. Additionally, high percentages of ethnic Mazahua who speak Spanish suggest that integration with non-Mazahua Spanish speakers may be appropriate in locations where the establishment of segregated congregations is unfeasible.

The Mexico Mexico City West Mission administers the vast majority of Mazahua who reside within their homelands in Mexico State and Michoacán State. A single mission servicing all but the extreme northern portion of the Mazahua homelands may promote greater unity and standardization in extending specialized outreach among the Mazahua than compared to other Amerindian peoples native to Mexico who are serviced by several missions.

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 rolls 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 Mazahua 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 Mazahua culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Mazahua-speaking branches or member groups in Mexico City, Toluca, Atlacomulco, or other cities with sizable numbers of Mazahua people would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Mazahua 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 Mazahua, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Mazahua Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Mazahua have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Most Mazahua who reside within their homelands live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In 2014, only three cities within the Mazahua homelands had over 20,000 inhabitants, namely Zitácuaro, Valle de Bravo, and Atlacomulco.^[9] Reaching populations in towns and villages 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 Mazahua 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 Mazahua languages.

Many Mazahua 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 Mazahua 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 Mazahua and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Mazahua 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 appear to be 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 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 nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups report a widespread presence among the Mazahua, whereas others do not. The greatest progress with these denominations has been with the Central Mazahua. Evangelicals report a small following among the Mazahua as 3.6% of Central Mazahua are estimated to be evangelical. There are extremely few evangelicals among the Michoacán Mazahua.^[11] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence among the Mazahua both within the Mazahua homelands and in most major cities in central and northern Mexico. In mid-2014, Witnesses reported 31 Mazahua-speaking congregations that operated in northwestern Estado de Mexico State (27), Michoacán (3), and Queretaro (1). Additional Mazahua-speaking congregations operated in the greater Mexico City area (11), Altamirano (1), Celaya (1),

Ciudad Juárez (1), Guadalajara (1), Leon (1), Monterey (1), San Luis Potosi (1), Tijuana (1), Torreón (1), Aguascalientes (1 group), Colima (1 group), and Saltillo (1 group). Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Mazahua.^[12] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Mazahua members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Mazahua. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have few, if any, Mazahua members and operates only a couple congregations within the Mazahua homelands.^[13]

Limitations

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

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to continue to expand its presence within the Mazahua homelands appears favorable within the foreseeable future due to recent growth within northwestern Mexico State and greater availability of mission resources. However, prospects appear unlikely for the Church to extend language-specific outreach among the Mazahua due to greater Spanish bilingualism than most Amerindian peoples native to Mexico. Based on past experience, the translation of church materials and the conducting of church services in Mazahua languages will hinge on sizable numbers of Mazahua-speaking members joining the Church and requesting these accommodations rather than stake, mission, and area leaders providing these services and resources to attract Mazahua converts. Due to distance from Toluca and recent growth in northwestern Mexico State, the Church may decide to organize a member district headquartered in Atlacomulco one day.

[1] "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

[2] "Mazahua, Central," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/maz>

[3] "Mazahua, Michoacán," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/mmc>

[4] "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

[5] "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

[6] "Mazahua - Orientation," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 4 September 2014. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Mazahua-Orientation.html>

[7] "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

[8] "Mazahua, Central," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 4 September 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/maz>

[9] "Mexico (Mexico)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 5 September 2014. <http://www.citypopulation.de/Mexico-Mexico.html>

[10] 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

[11] "People Cluster: Otomi," Joshua Project, retrieved 4 September, 2014 <http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/263>

[12] <http://www.jw.org/jw-mzh/>, accessed 3 September, 2014

[13] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 4 September, 2014 <http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch>