

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Purépecha of Mexico

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Posted: December 15th, 2014

Overview

Numbering 162,863 in 2005,[1] the Purépecha or Tarascan are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in northwestern Michoacán State. The Purépecha speak two Tarascan languages that pertain to the Tarascan language family: Purépecha and Purépecha Highland. These two languages have high intelligibility.[2] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Tarascan languages is 105,067.[3] In 2005, 65% of the ethnic Purépecha population in Mexico was estimated[4] to speak a Tarascan language. The Purépecha have continued to reside within their homelands since the arrival of Europeans several centuries ago, although many Mestizos have established cities and towns in the region. Disease introduced by Europeans during the sixteenth century devastated indigenous populations. Significant environmental altercations to the region within the past two centuries have altered culture, the economy, and daily life.[5] Catholicism syncretized with indigenous beliefs constitutes the traditional religion of most Purépecha. Today approximately half the population adheres to Catholicism and half the population adheres to Protestant denominations. No specialized LDS outreach has occurred among the Purépecha although LDS congregations have operated for several decades within or nearby the Purépecha homelands.

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

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LDS Background

In 1996, the Church organized the Zamora Mexico Stake - the first stake to operate within the Purépecha homelands. Additional stakes that operate within or nearby the Purépecha homelands have since been organized in Morelia (1998), Morelia México Aeropuerto (2009), and Uruapan (2009). Some of these stakes previously operated as districts. The Uruapan Mexico Stake, for example, was organized as a district in 1982.

Small numbers of Purépecha have appeared to join the Church within their homelands during the past couple decades. The Church in Mexico has never appeared to extend Purépecha-specific outreach. No church materials or LDS scriptures have been translated into the Tarascan language.

A map displaying LDS congregations within the Purépecha homeland can be found here.

Successes

The Church has established four stakes, 20 wards, and six branches within or nearby the Purépecha homelands. Some of these congregations have operated for over three decades. However, outreach has only appeared to occur in Spanish. The operation of congregations within areas traditionally inhabited by the Purépecha is essential for the Church to conduct missionary activity. There have appeared to be small numbers of bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking Purépecha in these locations who have joined the Church within the past couple decades.

Opportunities

The Purépecha number among the 20 most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Tarascan languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Purépecha due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has 13 cities within or nearby areas with sizable numbers of Purépecha where there is at least one ward or branch. These cities include Morelia (7 wards), Uruapan (5 wards), Zamora (3 wards), La Piedad (2 wards), Apatzingan (1 ward), Pátzcuaro (1 ward), Zacapu (1 ward), Los Reyes (1 branch),

Nueva Italia (1 branch), Sahuayo (1 branch), Tanaco (1 branch), Tanaquillo (1 branch), and Taretán (1 branch). Firesides or devotional meetings where Purépecha members and investigators brainstorm and discuss ideas to establish Purépecha-specific outreach may help church leaders assess needs and notify membership of plans to establish Tarascan-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Tarascan-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Purépecha-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Tarascan translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Tarascan languages, may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Purépecha members will be crucial to ensure the success of these approaches in establishing an LDS Purépecha community as they act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership, and Purépecha 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 Purépecha within their homeland. Cities and towns clustered in the triangular-shaped area of the highlands between Pátzcuaro, Uruapan, and Zamora present good opportunities for Purépecha-specific outreach due to the high percentage of Purépecha people in the population 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, conserve limited mission resources, and troubleshoot 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 additional outreach expansion efforts within the Purépecha homeland include Cherán, Chilchota, Jacona, and Paracho.

The Mexico Guadalajara East Mission administers all of the Purépecha homelands. Rarely is an entire Amerindian people in Mexico with as large of a population entirely serviced by a single LDS mission. These conditions pose good opportunities for mission leaders to target the Purépecha with full-time missionaries.

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 a single Purépecha 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 Purépecha culture and society. The Purépecha have one of the highest rates of literacy for their indigenous language among Mexican Amerindian peoples. Approximately 40% of Purépecha are literate in a Tarascan language.[6] Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Purépecha-speaking branches or member groups would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Purépecha 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 Purépecha, one cannot accurately assess whether the lack of a Purépecha Latter-day Saint community is attributed to no language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Purépecha have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Many Purépecha live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In 2014, approximately a dozen cities

within or near the Purépecha homelands had over 20,000 inhabitants.[7] However, the Church has a limited presence in Michoacán State compared to other Mexican States. Consequently several cities with over 20,000 inhabitants do not have an LDS presence. Outreach expansion will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find effective methods to extend outreach. These methods generally consist of mission leadership visits these communities, finding investigators and isolated members, and consistently visiting 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.

Many Purépecha 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 Purépecha 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 Purépecha and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Purépecha 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 Mexico Guadalajara East Mission also services portions of the city of Guadalajara. The Church in Guadalajara has experienced significant inactivity and local leadership development problems. Guadalajara is the only city in Mexico where the Church has discontinued more than one stake. In 2012, the Church discontinued two stakes within Guadalajara and closed approximately 20 wards and branches. These church administration problems will likely consume many of the Mexico Guadalajara East Mission's resources into reactivation and members support efforts. This may result in few resources and little interest in expanding LDS missionary activity within Michoacán State or initiating specialized outreach among the Purépecha.

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 Zapotec languages.

Most nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups report a small presence among the Purépecha. Evangelicals have experienced limited growth and claim only one percent of the Purépecha population.[9] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in the Purépecha homeland. In late-2014, Witnesses reported 31 Tarascan-speaking congregations that assembled in the Purépecha homeland. There are small numbers of Tarascan-speaking Witness congregations that operate elsewhere in Mexico such as Guadalajara (2), Culiacán (1), Tijuana (1), and Lázaro Cárdenas (1 group).[10] Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Mazahua.[11] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Purépecha members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Tarascan languages. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence among the Purépecha community as evidenced by only a handful of congregations that operate nearby the Purépecha homeland.[12]

Limitations

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

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to expand its presence within the Purépecha homeland and conduct missionary activity in the Purépecha language appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The Church in Mexico has never had as large of a full-time missionary force at its disposal but most of this surplus missionary manpower has been channeled into reactivation efforts in the most populous cities. Additionally, the Purépecha homelands are serviced by a single mission and there are good opportunities to expand missionary activity into this region. However, disinterest by Mexican mission and area leaders to extend additional Amerindian-specific outreach may delay more concentrated missionary efforts for years or even decades to come. No translations of LDS materials and no Purépecha-speaking full-time missionaries will likely continue to reduce the Purépecha's receptivity to LDS outreach. Opportunities for the establishment of an LDS community among the Purépecha nonetheless appear favorable due to successes by Protestant groups within the past century. However, these opportunities will likely be time sensitive. Additional delays to reaching the Purépecha may result in missed opportunities and diminished receptivity to the Latter-day Saint gospel witness. Prospects appear most favorable for specialized outreach to occur once Purépecha converts self-organize and petition church leaders for translations of gospel materials into Purépecha, the establishment of language-specific congregations, and the assignment of Purépecha-speaking missionaries.

[1] "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

[2] "Tarascan," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 13 November 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/tarascan

[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] "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

[5] "Tarascans - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Tarascans-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html

[6] "Purepecha, Western Highland," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/pua

[7] "Michoacan (Mexico)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-michoacandeocampo.php

[8] 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

[9] "Language - Purepecha," Joshua Project, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15271/MX

[10] "Finding a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 14 November 2014. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_YBBXHC

[11] http://www.jw.org/ctu/, accessed 13 November, 2014

[12] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 14 November, 2014 http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch