



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Chol of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering 242,278 in 2005,^[1] the Chol or Ch'ol are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in eastern Chiapas State. The Chol speak the Chol language which pertains to the Mayan language family. The Chol language has three dialects but these dialects are not distinct enough to be considered separate languages.^[2] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Chol is 184,677.^[3] In 2005, 76% of the ethnic Chol population in Mexico was estimated^[4] to speak Chol. The Chol have continued to reside within their homelands since the arrival of Europeans several centuries ago.^[5] Catholicism syncretized with indigenous Mayan beliefs constitutes the traditional religion of most Chol. Protestants comprise a large minority in many Chol communities. No specialized LDS outreach has occurred among the Chol although LDS congregations have operated for several decades within or nearby the Chol homelands.

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

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LDS Background

The Church has established a limited presence within the Chol homelands. This presence has been extended from stakes and districts headquartered within the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco.

In 1980, the Church in Chiapas organized its first stake that appeared to include portions of the Chol homeland in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Stakes headquartered in Tuxtla Gutiérrez serviced some southern and western portions of the Chol homeland until the creation of the San Cristobal Mexico District in the mid-2000s. This district became a stake in 2007. The San Cristobal Mexico Stake has since included some congregations nearby the Chol homelands where there are sizable numbers of Chol such as Comitán. The Tzotzil-speaking Chojolhó México District has also included some western areas of the Chol homeland within its boundaries since the organization of the district in 2011.

In 1980, the Church in Tabasco organized its first stake in Villahermosa. Stakes headquartered in Villahermosa have since serviced some areas of the Chol homeland. The Villahermosa México Gaviotas Stake, for example, included the northwestern areas of the Chol homeland within its geographical boundaries as of late 2014. However, most areas of the Chol homeland have fallen within the geographical boundaries of the Zapata México District the Church created the district in 1990. As of late 2014, the Church had one mission branch in the Mexico Villahermosa Mission that did not pertain to a stake or district within the Chol homelands located in Benemerito de Las Americas.

Small numbers of Chol have appeared to join the Church within their homelands within the past couple decades. These converts have appeared to primarily reside within the Zapata México District. However, the Church in Mexico has never appeared to extend Chol-specific outreach. No church materials or LDS scriptures have been translated into the Chol language.

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

Successes

The Church has established two wards and six branches within the Chol homelands or in nearby areas with sizable Chol populations. Some of these congregations have appeared to operate for over three decades. However, outreach has only appeared to occur in Spanish and Tzotzil. Today there are three cities within the Chol homeland with LDS congregations, including Benemerito, Palenque, and Tenosique. The operation of congregations within areas traditionally inhabited by the Chol is essential for the Church to conduct missionary activity. There have appeared to be small numbers of bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking Chol in these locations who have joined the Church within the past couple decades.

Opportunities

The Chol are the eleventh most populous Amerindian people in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in the Chol language. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Chol due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has six cities within or nearby areas with sizable numbers of Chol where there is at least one ward or branch. These cities include Comitán (2 wards, 1 branch), Benemerito (1 branch), Ocosingo (1 branch), Palenque (1 branch), Pantelhó (1 branch), and Tenosique (1 branch). Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Chol 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 Chol-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Chol-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Chol-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Chol translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Chol may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Chol members will be crucial for ensuring the success of these potential approaches to establishing an LDS Chol community as they act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership and Chol 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 Chol within their homeland. Cities and towns clustered in extreme northern Chiapas State that surround Palenque present good opportunities for Chol-specific outreach due to the high percentage of Chol 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 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 additional outreach expansion efforts within the Chol homeland include Chancalá, Salto de Agua, and Tila.

The Mexico Villahermosa Mission administers most of the Chol population that resides within their homelands. However, the mission includes not only Tabasco State within its geographical boundaries but also southern Veracruz State where the major cities of Coatzacoalcos and Minatitlán are located. The creation of a separate mission headquartered in Coatzacoalcos or Minatitlán may improve the mission resource availability and outreach expansion vision in the Mexico Villahermosa Mission. A smaller geographical area, target population, and number of LDS units within the mission may encourage mission leadership to initiate specialized outreach among the Chol people.

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 a single Chol 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 Chol culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Chol-speaking branches or member groups would be appropriate and feasible to

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

Most Chol who reside within their homelands live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In 2014, only four cities within or near the Chol homelands had over 20,000 inhabitants. These cities included Comitán, Ocosingo, Palenque, [6] and Tenosique. [7] 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 limited literary use of the Chol language may discourage mission and area leaders from seriously considering specialized outreach and the translation of written materials.

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

Some areas of the Chol homelands are within the geographical boundaries of the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission. Sizable Chol populations divided between two separate missions poses challenges for mission leadership to collaborate and uniformly extend missionary activity among the same Amerindian 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 Zapotec languages.

Some nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups report a widespread presence among the Chol, whereas others do not. Evangelicals claim between 13% and 33% of the Chol population depending on location and Chol subgroup. [9] Evangelicals appear to operate in most villages and have a pervasive presence in the Chol homeland. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a pervasive presence in most areas of the Chol homeland, although most of these congregations operate in Spanish. In late-2014, Witnesses reported 23 Chol-speaking congregations. All but one of these congregations operate in Chiapas State. Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Chol. [10] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Chol members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Chol. The Church of the Nazarene likely has a small Chol community. Nazarenes operate several congregations within the Chol homelands such as in Palenque and Tila. [11]

Limitations

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

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to expand its presence within the Chol homeland and conduct missionary activity in the Chol 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. The division of the Chol homelands between the Mexico Villahermosa Mission and the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission also poses challenges for effective church administration. 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 Chol-speaking full-time missionaries will likely continue to reduce the Chol's receptivity to LDS outreach. Opportunities for the establishment of an LDS community among the Chol nonetheless appear favorable due to good successes of other nontraditional Christian groups among this people. However, these opportunities will likely be time sensitive. Additional delays to reaching the Chol may result in missed opportunities and diminished receptivity to the Latter-day Saint gospel witness.

[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] "Chol," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 13 November 2014. <http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/chol>

[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] "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] "Chol - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 13 November 2014. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Ch-ol-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>

[6] "Chiapas (Mexico)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 13 November 2014. <http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-chiapas.php>

[7] "Tabasco (Mexico)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 13 November 2014. <http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-tabasco.php>

[8] 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

[9] "Language - Chol," Joshua Project, retrieved 13 November 2014. <http://joshuaproject.net/languages/ctu>

[10] <http://www.jw.org/ctu/>, accessed 13 November, 2014

[11] "Nazarene Church Data Search," [nazarene.org](http://app.nazarene.org), retrieved 13 November, 2014 <http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch>