



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mazatec of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering 294,000 in 2005,^[1] the Mazatec are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in extreme northern Oaxaca State. The Mazatec speak eight Mazatec languages that pertain to the Otomanguean language family,^[2] namely Ayautla Mazatec (3,700 speakers),^[3] Chiquihuitlán Mazatec (1,500 speakers),^[4] Huautla Mazatec (74,600 speakers),^[5] Ixcatlán Mazatec (8,590 speakers),^[6] Jalapa de Díaz Mazatec (17,500 speakers),^[7] Mazatlán Mazatec (12,000 speakers),^[8] San Jerónimo Tecóatl Mazatec (18,900 speakers),^[9] and Soyaltepec Mazatec (27,500 speakers).^[10] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Mazatec languages is 206,181.^[11] In recent years, many Mazatec have relocated to Mexico City and Puebla.^[12] The majority of Mazatec adhere to Catholicism, with small numbers following Protestant groups. The LDS Church reports no Mazatec-specific outreach in the handful of locations where congregations operate within the Mazatec homelands notwithstanding the Mazatec ranking as the ninth most populous Amerindian people in Mexico.

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

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LDS Background

In 1960, the Church had at least one branch in Oaxaca State.^[13] In 1981, the Church organized its first stake in the city of Oaxaca, today known as the Oaxaca Mexico Amapolas Stake. Although stakes headquartered in Oaxaca have included portions of the Mazatec homelands, none of these stakes have ever appeared to operate congregations within the Mazatec homelands. In 1993, the Church organized a stake in Tuxtepec. The Tuxtepec Mexico Stake became the first stake located nearby the Mazatec homelands that operated congregations within cities and towns within the Mazatec homelands. In 2003, the Church organized a stake in Tierra Blanca that included one congregation in the Mazatec homelands (Temazcal Ward). As of late 2014, the Church had two additional stakes (Oaxaca México Amapolas Stake and Juchitán México Stake) and one district (Ignacio Mejía México District) that included portions of the Mazatec homelands within their geographical boundaries.

Reports from full-time missionaries indicate that only two cities in the Mazatec homelands appear to have small numbers of Mazatec Latter-day Saints, namely Temazcal and Tuxtepec. There are likely small numbers of Mazatec members who reside in Mexico City and Puebla that attend Spanish-speaking congregations.

As of mid-2014, the Church reported no translations of scriptures, or gospel study or missionary materials into Mazatec languages.

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

Successes

The Church has established four wards within the Mazatec homelands and operates congregations in many areas where

sizable numbers of Mazatec have relocated. All of these congregations have operated for over a decade although outreach has only appeared to have occurred in Spanish. Today there two cities within the Mazatec homelands with LDS congregations, namely Temazcal and Tuxtepec. The operation of congregations within areas traditionally inhabited by the Mazatec is essential towards the Church conducting missionary activity among them, and there have appeared to be small numbers of bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking Mazatec who have joined the Church within the past decade or two in both locations.

Opportunities

The Mazatec are the ninth most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in Mazatec languages. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Mazatec due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has four cities within areas with sizable numbers of Mazatec where there is at least one ward or branch, including the greater Mexico City area (hundreds of wards and branches), the greater Puebla area (approximately 80 wards and branches), Tuxtepec (three wards), and Temazcal (one ward). Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Mazatec 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 Mazatec-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Mazatec-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Mazatec-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Mazatec translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Mazatec may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Mazatec members will be crucial to ensure the success of these potential approaches to establishing an LDS Mazatec community as these members act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership and Mazatec 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 Mazatec within their homelands. Other cities and towns clustered in the Huautla de Jiménez area present the best opportunities for Mazatec-specific outreach due to the high percentages of Mazatec people within the population and the large number of towns and villages concentrated in this area. The placement of multiple missionary companionships to Huautla de Jiménez and assigning each companionship to multiple nearby 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 may make this course of action a challenge. Locations that may be favorable to headquarter additional outreach expansion efforts within the Mazatec homelands include Jalapa de Díaz and Mazatlán Villa de Flores.

Approximately two-thirds of the Mazatec population speaks Spanish as a second language. The utilization of Spanish translations of church materials and scriptures may adequately meet local needs among Spanish-speaking Mazatec. High percentages of ethnic Mazatec who speak Spanish suggest that integration with non- Mazatec Spanish speakers may be appropriate in locations where the establishment of segregated congregations is unfeasible.

Challenges

The Church in Mexico has largely avoided 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 for holding worship services and teaching 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 due to historical challenges in establishing self-sufficient local leadership among Amerindians in Mexico, language barriers, socioeconomic divides, and often remote location. Although it is not entirely clear on 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 by 27 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 current geographical boundaries of LDS missions within Oaxaca state poses significant challenges for the Church to extend specialized outreach among the Mazatec. The Mazatec homelands are divided between three LDS missions, namely the Mexico Oaxaca Mission, the Mexico Puebla South Mission, and the Mexico Veracruz Mission. These conditions create challenges for mission leaders in all three missions to coordinate their efforts to reach a relatively small population of Mazatec in comparison to the millions of people each of these missions administer.

The lack of even a single Mazatec 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 Mazatec culture and society. In 2005, 70% of Mazatec were estimated to speak a Mazatec language.^[14] As many as one-third of Mazatec appear to be monolingual speakers of one of the eight Mazatec sublanguages. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Mazatec-speaking branches or member groups in Mexico City, Puebla, Temazcal, or Tuxtepec would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Mazatec 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 Mazatec, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Mazatec Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Mazatec have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Most Mazatec who reside within their homelands live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In 2014, Tuxtepec was the one city with over 20,000 inhabitants within the Mazatec homelands.^[15] Mazatec ethnolinguistic groups traditionally reside in remote, rural areas that are difficult to access. Rugged terrain has helped preserve Mazatec culture and language, but has also contributed to the high degree of linguistic diversity. Due to this combination of remote location and linguistic diversity, it appears that most Mazatec ethnolinguistic groups have never received an LDS gospel witness and have no Latter-day Saint converts at present. Reaching these peoples will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find some 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 implement some type of method to consistently visit these individuals and 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 simplicity of further saturating urban areas with greater numbers of Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries. The fact that Mazatec languages are usually unwritten and difficult for nonnative people to learn may discourage mission and area leaders from seriously considering specialized language outreach due to the complexity of the task, challenges inherent in nonnative missionaries learning to teach, and difficulties translating church materials and scriptures.

Many Mazatec have low living conditions and limited employment opportunities. Most heavily rely on agriculture for employment and sustenance. Utilizing the Perpetual Education Fund to provide low interest loans to any returned missionaries may bolster economic self-sustainability and prevent local members from leaving their native communities in search of work outside their homeland. Securing suitable spaces to hold church services for larger congregations may present difficulties due to a lack of sizable, clean buildings easily accessible for members in rural areas of smaller cities and towns.

Delays in establishing an LDS community among the Mazatec may result in reduced receptivity to the Church once concentrated missionary activity occurs. Other proselytism-focused groups have made significant inroads among the Mazatec and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many of these Mazatec who have joined other nontraditional churches will likely see less of a need to investigate the LDS Church once it arrives to their communities as they are religiously and socially integrated into these denominations.

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 is at least one stake, two districts, and several mission branches that appear to be predominantly comprised of Yucatan Maya members.^[16] 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. However, these branches are not officially designated as Zapotec-speaking and there remain no translations of LDS materials in Zapotec languages.

The size and growth of nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups among the Mazatec widely varied by denomination and ethnolinguistic group. Evangelicals report a small following among the most populous Mazatec ethnolinguistic group as 4.0% of Huautla Mazatec are estimated to be evangelical.^[17] Evangelicals report the highest percentage of followers among the Jalapa de Díaz Mazatec (22%)^[18] and the lowest percentage of followers among the Soyaltepec Mazatec (0.40%)^[19] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence among the Mazatec both within the Mazatec homelands and in Mexico City and Puebla. In late-2014, Witnesses reported 35 Mazatec-speaking congregations that operated in Oaxaca State (37), the Mexico City area (21), and Puebla (5). Witnesses operate congregations in five Mazatec languages, including Huautla Mazatec (46), Ixcatlán Mazatec (5), Soyaltepec Mazatec (4), Jalapa de Díaz Mazatec (3), and Mazatlán Mazatec (3). Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Huautla Mazatec.^[20] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to have a small community of Mazatec members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Mazatec. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have few, if any, Mazatec members and does not appear to operate any congregations within the Mazatec homelands.^[21]

Limitations

Few local member and returned missionary reports were available regarding the number of Mazatec 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 by its worldwide membership. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Mazatec 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 Mazatec. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists and Nazarenes among the Mazatec.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to extend specialized outreach among the Mazatec appears poor within the foreseeable future due to the Church in Mexico's reluctance to extend specialized missionary outreach among additional Amerindian peoples, the Mazatec homeland divided between three LDS missions, and no LDS materials translated into Mazatec languages. Progress reaching the Mazatec appears limited to missionary activity conducted in Spanish within Mexico City, Puebla, Tuxtepec, and Temascal. As the Church has no translations of materials into Mazatec languages and has not appeared to have ever extended specialized outreach among the Mazatec, it is difficult to assess how receptive this people will be to future missionary efforts that specifically target them. Small numbers of bilingual Mazatec will likely continue to join the Church in locations where LDS congregations operate. Significant progress in establishing an LDS community among the Mazatec will likely hinge on Mazatec converts taking the initiative to self-organize and petition their church leaders to advocate for the establishment of language-specific congregations and the translation of LDS materials.

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[17] "Mazateco, Huautla in Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 November 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12096/MX

[18] "Mazateco, Jalapa de Díaz," Joshua Project, retrieved 11 November 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13122/MX

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