



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the K'iche' of Guatemala

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

The K'iche' or Quiche, are one of the most populous Amerindian peoples in Guatemala. The number of K'iche' who reside in Guatemala is estimated to range from 750,000^[1] to 2.33 million.^[2] Most K'iche' continue to speak their indigenous language. There are an estimated 300,000 monolingual K'iche' speakers and an estimated 400,000 K'iche' who are bilingual in Spanish.^[3] The K'iche' are predominantly Catholic and many syncretize traditional Maya religion with Christianity. The LDS Church has maintained a continuous presence among the K'iche' for approximately half a century and has achieved significant growth in several locations within the K'iche' homeland.

This case study examines the historical and cultural background of the K'iche', reviews the history LDS proselytism efforts among them, and analyzes successes, opportunities, and challenges for church growth. The growth of the LDS Church among other Amerindian peoples in Guatemala is summarized and the size and growth trends of other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups with a presence among the K'iche' is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The K'iche' numbered among the first Amerindian peoples in Central America to receive LDS outreach. The Church began proselytism efforts in K'iche' during the mid-1960s.^[4] Audio recordings of LDS materials in K'iche' were available as early as 1974.^[5] Select passages of the Book of Mormon were translated into K'iche' by 1979.^[6] An Ensign article published in 1994 noted that two-thirds of the Latter-day Saints in the Momostenango area were monolingual K'iche' speakers.^[7]

The Church reported the following translations available in K'iche' as of early 2015: select passages from the Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and The Latter-day Saint Woman, Part A.^[8] The Church has translated General Conference addresses into K'iche' for several years and audio translations are available for download on lds.org.^[9]

The Church organized its first stake in the K'iche' homelands in Quetzaltenango in 1975 (Quetzaltenango). Additional stakes organized in the K'iche' homelands have included Quetzaltenango West (1984), Quetzaltenango El Bosque (1994), Momostenango (1996), and Totonicapán (2009). There were three districts headquartered in the K'iche' homelands as of early 2015: Santa Cruz del K'iche' (1986), Momostenango West (1993), and Paxajtup (2010).

The Church once operated several additional districts within the K'iche' homelands that no longer operate. These districts include Momostenango North, Momostenango South, Nahuala, and San Carlos Sija. Most of these districts were discontinued as a result of redistricting congregations when new stakes were organized.

The Church reported 54 congregations (25 wards, 29 branches) as of year-end 2001. There was no net change in the total number of congregations within the K'iche' homelands between 2001 and 2014. The Church reported 54 congregations (30 wards, 24 branches) as of year-end 2014. Within this 13-year period, the Church closed the following congregations: the San Francisco Chuatuj Branch (San Francisco Chuatuj) and El K'iche' 2nd Branch (Santa Cruz del K'iche'). During this period, the Church organized the following new congregations: the Bougambilias Ward, Los Altos Ward, Xepón Branch. The following congregations advanced from branch to ward status during this period: Chiquilaja, Chirijox, El Calvario, and Xeraxon. One

congregation was downgraded from ward to branch status during this period: Choqui. In the early 2010s, returned missionaries reported that the number of active members significantly varied by congregation from as few as 25 to as many as 300.

A map displaying the location of the K'iche' homelands and LDS congregations within the area can be found [here](#).

Successes

The Church has aggressively targeted rural areas within the Momostenango area for approximately half a century. Populations in this region have been historically receptive to LDS outreach. Today the K'iche' homelands in Totonicapán Department receive some of the most penetrating LDS outreach among areas predominantly inhabited by Amerindian peoples. One stake and two member districts operate in an area that appears inhabited by less than 100,000 people. The Church maintains a widespread presence in the Momostenango area with the majority of congregations operating in small villages. Several congregations appear to have less than 1,000 people within their geographical boundaries. The Church has established adequate meetinghouses in many locations despite remote location, poor living conditions, and low population densities. Success in the Momostenango area has demonstrated that the Church can achieve significant growth in rural areas despite low population densities, remote location, and focus on the establishment of "centers of strength" in urban areas.

Steady growth in western Guatemala has necessitated the construction of a temple in Quetzaltenango. Consequently the K'iche' are the only Amerindian people with a temple located in their traditional homelands. Dedicated in 2011, the Quetzaltenango Guatemala Temple currently appears moderately utilized by members residing within the temple district as evidenced by at least six endowment sessions scheduled a day on Tuesdays through Fridays and seven endowment sessions scheduled on Saturdays.^[10] The operation of a temple in the K'iche' homelands indicates that the Church has achieved a high degree of self-sufficiency among membership within western Guatemala and that the number of active members has been sufficient to merit a separate temple in the area.

The creation of the Guatemala Retalhuleu Mission in 2010 from a division of the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission has provided greater resources and focus on missionary efforts within areas traditionally inhabited by the K'iche'. The mission has greater ability to develop K'iche'-specific outreach, strengthen member districts, examine opportunities for outreach expansion, and supervise missionary efforts. Although the downsized geographic size of the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission has not appeared to make any noticeable improvements in LDS growth trends since 2010, this administrative decision has good potential to channel greater resources into the area and improve the efficiency of church administration for the long term.

The translation of a handful of LDS materials and select passages of the Book of Mormon into K'iche' constitutes a major success for the Church. The Church adapted its resources to local conditions shortly after initial proselytism efforts began by providing written and audio translations of several gospel study and proselytism materials. These resources have been instrumental in the conversion, baptism, and retention of K'iche' members over the past several decades.

Opportunities

There are good opportunities for the Church to expand its presence into additional areas inhabited by the K'iche' where there are few or no LDS congregations. Rural communities nearby wards and branches in the Momostenango area, the Santa Maria Chiquimula area, and the San Carlos Sija area appear most favorable for outreach expansion due to close proximity to LDS centers of strength and sizable K'iche' populations. The minimally-reached El Quiché Department also offers many good opportunities for outreach expansion such as in Chiche, Sacapulas, San Andres Sajcabaja, San Bartolome Jocotenango, San Pedro Jocopilas, Uspantan, and Zacualpa. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides greater resources available to conduct more coordinated K'iche'-specific outreach and to open previously unreached areas to proselytism.

A 1956 General Conference address by Elder Milton R. Hunter described the potential for missionary work among the K'iche' people. Elder Hunter noted several similarities with K'iche' culture and LDS teachings and he asserted that significant growth may occur if church leaders maintain the proper vision and tactics to promote it. He also alleged that the K'iche' people may share ancestry with Book of Mormon peoples.

The strategies and optimism described by Elder Hunter over half a century ago continue to have potential for success in the twenty-first century. He stated:

In a recent conversation with President Edgar Wagner of the Central American Mission, I stated that it was my opinion that if his missionaries could convert this Quiché Maya guide and several other young men of similar abilities—young men who could speak Spanish, English, and also Quiché and then if they were called to do missionary work among the Quiché Maya people, they perhaps would make a marvelous contribution in taking the gospel to those people. Some of the elders from the United States could be assigned to serve as companions to the Quiché Maya missionaries for the principal purpose of giving them a basic understanding of the gospel. Then these Quiché missionaries, who would undoubtedly be favorably received by their own people, could easily obtain admittance into the homes of the best of the Quiché Maya families.... In this way the gospel of Jesus Christ, with special emphasis on the Book of Mormon, could be taken to the Indians who speak only Quiché. I believe that these Indians would readily recognize that the Book of Mormon was their book, since the traditions which they hold so sacred fit so

well with the teachings of that book.

At the present time we are not able to do missionary work with a vast majority of the Quiché Maya Indians because they do not speak Spanish or English and our missionaries do not speak Quiché. These Indians are a very religious people, practicing their own religion according to their highly cherished traditions. I believe the day will come when missionary work will go forth with much power and success among this people. At that time we shall see results similar to those which we read about in the Book of Mormon when the sons of King Mosiah did such phenomenal work among the Lamanites. Eventually the day of the Lamanites will come when all of the predictions regarding them made by the holy prophets and recorded in the Book of Mormon will be fulfilled. It is my opinion that at that time thousands and thousands of the Quiché Maya Indians will join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and will become valiant in the faith.^[11]

Bilingualism in Spanish has reduced the need for K'iche'-specific outreach in Quetzaltenango and other major cities. The Church has ample Spanish-speaking missionary manpower in the region and can utilize both Central American and North American missionaries to staff its ranks. The Church has more materials translated into Spanish than any other language except English, providing extensive materials to aid gospel scholarship and promote testimony development.

There are good opportunities for development work in many rural areas traditionally inhabited by K'iche'. The Church could implement agricultural and employment programs to improve living conditions and provide passive proselytism opportunities. Examples of projects that may be suitable for these conditions include clean water projects, employment workshops, education on efficient agricultural practices for growing crops, and providing resources for individuals to start their own businesses such as raising livestock and planting specialized crops.

Challenges

The Church has experienced stagnant growth in the K'iche' homeland over the past decade as evidenced by no net change in the number of LDS units operating. Only a handful of branches matured into wards during this period. A lack of congregational growth suggests that there has been little, if any, increase in the number of active members within this period as a result of low convert retention and a lack of outreach expansion vision.

Many K'iche' resides in remote rural areas. Some of these locations have faced difficulties in effective church administration and the creation of stakes due to transportation challenges. Some areas within the K'iche' homelands are among the least-reached by the LDS Church in Guatemala. Quiché Department has a population of nearly one million people but the Church operates only five branches within this administrative division. Traditional proselytism approaches that base missionary activity in urban areas through the placement of full-time missionaries face significant challenges in effectively reaching hundreds of thousands of K'iche' who populate vast rural areas. There are good opportunities for the Church to adapt proselytism efforts to these conditions by assigning a single full-time missionary companionship to multiple villages and raising the importance in member-missionary activity. Traveling missionary companionships that traverse large geographical areas to teach investigators may be the most practical solution to expand outreach in locations with few or no known active members. These specialized missionaries can identify villages that exhibit good receptivity, frequently visit these locations, hold cottage meetings, and organize groups if feasible. The establishment of dozens of dependent units and small branches may be the most practical method of expanding outreach into additional areas populated by the K'iche' but will require significant resources and vision from mission leaders. Due to moderate receptivity in recent years and low population densities, the Church may not experience significant growth for many years to come after initiating outreach expansion efforts. Consistency in these efforts and a gradual reduction on the reliance on full-time missionaries and outsourced leadership personnel to promote local self-sufficiency will be essential for long-term outreach expansion success. Members' homes, makeshift shelters, and rented land or buildings may provide the best options to hold church meetings near target populations and in a culturally appropriate manner.

Language barriers and the lack of a more effective, coordinated K'iche'-proselytism program in the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission have appeared to diminish church growth trends within the K'iche' homelands during the past 15 years. Reliance on local members to translate missionary lessons for monolingual K'iche' speakers has helped engage local members but has also restricted the scope and efficiency of full-time missionary efforts. Full-time missionaries assigned to K'iche'-majority areas have complained that they lack language training to understand church services, let alone being unable to teach the missionary lessons in the K'iche' languages. The Church has yet to develop greater resources to meet the needs of K'iche' speakers. No written translations of K'iche' materials are available online at lds.org and the entire Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures have yet to be translated.

Extremely low literacy rates pose challenges for missionary activity and church growth. Less than one percent of K'iche' are literate in the K'iche' language and 25-35% are literate in a second language.^[12] In the past, the Church has addressed illiteracy challenges by producing audio translations of select passages of the Book of Mormon but as of early 2015 the Church did not have any audio translations available on its official online store for K'iche'. Only audio translations of General Conference addresses are currently available online. The entire Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures are not translated into K'iche' and will likely not be translated for many more years due to extremely low literacy rates.

Corruption in local government and strong ethnoreligious ties have created challenges for growth. Missionaries have reported past challenges with corruption influencing local church leaders, resulting in problems with leadership development and self-sufficiency. The vast majority of K'iche' are nominally Catholic and resistant to proselytism efforts of nontraditional faiths.

Competition for converts is high with other proselytizing Christian groups. Receptivity to LDS proselytism has been modest due to these cultural conditions.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church among the K'iche' is comparable in size to most major Amerindian groups in Guatemala. The Church has established a sizable presence among the Kaqchikel (Cakchiquel) and Mam as the Church has at least one stake and one district that have sizable numbers of all three ethnicities. The Church has extended its most penetrating outreach among the Q'eqchi' as it operates a formal proselytism program in which missionaries teach in Q'eqchi'. In 2015, the Church began Q'eqchi' language training at the Guatemala Missionary Training Center (MTC). The Church also maintains several districts that are principally comprised of Q'eqchi' members. Unlike other Amerindian groups, the Q'eqchi' have all LDS scriptures translated into their native language and in some locations have multiple branches meeting in the same villages due to relatively high percentages of Latter-day Saints in some areas. The Church operates congregations accessible to four additional Amerindian groups in Guatemala (Achi', Jakalteko, Poqomchi', and Tz'utujil) but has no LDS scriptures and few if any materials in these languages. No known outreach has occurred among the Akateko, Awakateko, Ch'orti', Chuj, Gariuna, Ixil, Poqoman, Q'anjob'al, Sakapulteko, Sipakapense, or Uspanteko as no LDS units operate in locations where these ethnic groups traditionally reside and no LDS materials are translated into any of these languages. The Church has experienced virtually no outreach expansion among previously unreached Amerindian groups in Guatemala within the past decade.

Most missionary-focused Christian groups with an international presence extend outreach among the K'iche'. Evangelicals claim 22% of the K'iche' population and report steady growth.^[13] Jehovah's Witnesses operate approximately the same number of congregations in the K'iche' homelands as Latter-day Saints. In early 2015, Witnesses operated 24 congregations in Guatemala that held worship services in K'iche' including approximately a dozen within the K'iche' homelands. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reported 70,794 members, 217 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 21 companies (small or recently established congregations)^[14] at year-end 2013 in the departments of Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, El Quiche, San Marcos, Solola, and Totonicapan. To contrast, the LDS Church operated approximately 120 congregations within the same six administrative departments as of year-end 2014. Adventists have reported steady growth in this region of Guatemala within the past five years as evidenced by between 2,000 and 5,000 new members baptized annually and the organization of several new congregations a year. Seventh Day Adventists do not translate printed materials into K'iche'. The Church of the Nazarene operates several K'iche' congregations in western Guatemala.

Limitations

There were few returned missionary and local member reports available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish data on the number of K'iche'-speaking members. It is unclear whether many members who reside in areas where K'iche' traditionally reside are Spanish-speaking Mestizos, bilingual or monolingual K'iche', or other ethnicities. No local member reports were available in regards to the Church among the K'iche'. Trends on active membership growth were ascertained from congregational growth trends and returned missionary reports as the Church publishes no official figures on active membership numbers.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the K'iche' is mixed. Conditions remain favorable for national outreach expansion within the K'iche' homelands due to moderately receptive populations, the downsized geographic size of the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission since 2010, the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions, and previous successes establishing a pervasive presence in the Momostenango area. However, no net increase in the number of congregations within the K'iche' homelands within the past 13 years, a lack of a more coordinated mission language program to reach K'iche' speakers, low literacy rates, strong ethnoreligious ties to Catholicism, and remote location pose challenges for growth. The Church may redistrict its congregations within the Momostenango area to organize additional stakes or districts. With the recent decision to begin a formal language training program at the Guatemala MTC to teach missionaries Q'eqchi', the Church may begin a formal language training program to teach missionaries K'iche' within the coming years.

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