



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Kaqchikel of Guatemala

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Overview

The Kaqchikel, or Cakchiquel, are one of the most populous Amerindian peoples in Guatemala. Estimates for the number of Kaqchikel in Guatemala range from 451,000^[1] to 741,000.^[2] Most Kaqchikel continue to speak their indigenous language. The Kaqchikel are predominantly Catholic. Many syncretize traditional Maya religion with Christianity. The LDS Church has maintained a continuous presence among the Kaqchikel for approximately half a century and has achieved significant growth in several locations within the Kaqchikel homeland.

This case study examines the historical and cultural background of the Kaqchikel, reviews the history of 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 Kaqchikel is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Kaqchikel numbered among the first Amerindian peoples in Central America to receive LDS outreach. The Church began proselytism efforts in Kaqchikel during the mid-1960s.^[3] Audio recordings of LDS materials in Kaqchikel were available as early as 1974.^[4] The first Kaqchikel member to serve a full-time mission began his service in the mid-1970s.^[5] Select passages of the Book of Mormon were translated into Kaqchikel by 1978.^[6]

The Church organized its first stake in the Kaqchikel homelands in Chimaltenango in 1986. Two additional stakes headquartered in the Kaqchikel homelands have since been organized: Patzicía (organized in 1996) and Antigua (organized in 2013). One district currently functions within the Kaqchikel homelands in Sololá (1979). The Church once operated an additional member district in Patulul. This district was discontinued in the 2000s and consolidated with neighboring districts.

The Church reported 28 congregations (12 wards, 16 branches) as of year-end 2001. The total number of congregations within the Kaqchikel homelands increased to 30 (16 wards, 14 branches) by year-end 2014. Within this 13-year period, the Church closed the following three congregations: the El Mirador Ward (Chimaltenango), Esperanza Branch (Sololá), and the San Juan Bautista Branch. During this period, the Church organized the following five new congregations: the Chimaltenango 3rd Ward, Cojolyá Branch, San Lucas 1st Ward, San Lucas 2nd Ward, and the San Pedro Las Huertas Branch. The following two congregations advanced from branch to ward status during this period: El Tejar and Parramos.

The Church has translated select passages of the Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, hymns and child songs, Gospel Principles (old edition), and The Latter-day Saint Woman, Part A into Kaqchikel.^[7] The Church has several Kaqchikel translations of materials to view or download for free on lds.org such as selections of the Book of Mormon (print and audio) and General Conference addresses. The Church has translated General Conference addresses into Kaqchikel for many years.

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

Successes

The Church has consistently targeted areas traditionally inhabited by the Kaqchikel for approximately half a century. Consequently, the LDS Church has a well-established presence in some Kaqchikel areas. Latter-day Saints may constitute as high as 5-10% of the population in some cities where the Church has historically experienced the greatest growth such as Patzicía and Sololá.

The Church has experienced steady congregational growth in the Chimaltenango and Antigua areas within the past 13 years. Most areas of Guatemala experienced no change or a net decline in the number of congregations during this period. This resulted in the number of congregations within the original boundaries of the Chimaltenango Guatemala Stake increasing from 11 (7 wards, 4 branches) in 2001 to 14 in 2014 (11 wards, 3 branches). The number of new congregations organized coupled with the number of branches that advanced to ward status culminated in organization of a separate stake based in Antigua in 2013.

The translation of a handful of LDS materials and select passages of the Book of Mormon into Kaqchikel 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 Kaqchikel members over the past several decades.

Opportunities

Several of the most populous cities in Guatemala without an LDS congregation are located within the Kaqchikel homelands. These cities are located on the easternmost fringes of the Kaqchikel homelands between the greater Guatemala City metropolitan area and the cities of Antigua and Chimaltenango. The most populous cities within this area that may be effective to target for LDS missionary activity include Santiago Sacatepéquez, Sumpango, and Santa María de Jesús.

There are many locations with Kaqchikel majorities where LDS missionary activity has yet to occur. There are many cities and clusters of villages nearby LDS centers of strength within the Kaqchikel homeland that appear favorable for outreach such as along the eastern shore of Lake Atitlán, areas between Patzún and Chimaltenango, and areas between Guatemala City and Chimaltenango. There are also many municipalities or towns without a nearby LDS congregation that appear favorable for outreach such as Acatenango, Santa Cruz Balanyá, and Yepocapa. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides greater resources available to conduct more coordinated Kaqchikel-specific outreach and to open unreached areas to proselytism.

Bilingualism in Spanish has reduced the need for Kaqchikel-specific outreach in Chimaltenango 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 Kaqchikel. The Church can implement agricultural and employment programs to improve living conditions and provide passive proselytism opportunities. Examples of projects that may be suitable for local 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 essentially stagnant growth in most areas of the Kaqchikel homeland over the past decade as evidenced by no net change in the number of LDS units operating. These locations include Patulul, Patzicía, San Juan Sacatepéquez, San Pedro Ayampuc, and Sololá. A lack of congregational growth suggests that there has been little, if any, increase in active membership within this period as a result of low convert retention and a lack of outreach expansion vision.

Many Kaqchikel reside in rural areas. Unlike other major Amerindian peoples in Guatemala, the Kaqchikel do not have a noticeable LDS presence in rural areas. The Kaqchikel and the Mam are the most populous Amerindian peoples in Guatemala without an LDS mission headquartered within their homelands. Consequently many of the mission resources in the Guatemala Guatemala City Central Mission have been consumed by southern areas of the Guatemala City metropolitan area. Missionaries have reported church administration problems and congregation disunity in some remote branches within the Kaqchikel homeland. These problems have resulted in the inconsistent assignment of full-time missionaries to these locations. Some of these locations have faced difficulties in effective church administration due to transportation challenges. 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 Kaqchikel who populate vast rural areas. There are good opportunities for the Church to adapt proselytism efforts to these conditions by assigning individual full-time missionary companionships to multiple villages and raising the importance in member-missionary activity. Traveling missionary companionships that traverse large geographical areas teaching 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 Kaqchikel 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 Kaqchikel-proselytism program in the Guatemala Guatemala City Central Mission have appeared to deter greater church growth within the Kaqchikel homelands during the past 15 years. Reliance on local members to translate missionary lessons for monolingual Kaqchikel speakers has helped engage local members in missionary activity, but has also restricted the scope and efficiency of full-time missionary efforts. Full-time missionaries assigned to Kaqchikel-majority areas have complained that they lack language training to understand church services, let alone being unable to teach the missionary lessons in the Kaqchikel language. The Church has yet to develop greater resources to meet the needs of Kaqchikel speakers. 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 10% of Kaqchikel are literate in the Kaqchikel language and 25-39% are literate in a second language.^[8] Only audio translations of General Conference addresses are currently available online. The entire Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures are not translated into Kaqchikel and will likely not be translated for many more years due to extremely low literacy rates.

Strong ethnoreligious ties have created challenges for growth. The vast majority of Kaqchikel are nominally Catholic and have exhibited resistance to the 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 Kaqchikel is comparable in size to most major Amerindian groups in Guatemala. The Church has established a sizable presence among the K'iche' (Quiche) 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'. 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 village due to relatively high percentages of Latter-day Saints in some locations. 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 have been translated into these languages. The Church has experienced virtually no outreach expansion among previously unreached Amerindian groups in Guatemala within the past decade.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups with a worldwide missionary presence maintain a presence among the Kaqchikel comparable in size to the LDS Church or greater. Evangelicals claim between 10-20% of most Kaqchikel subgroups and have experienced steady growth. Jehovah's Witnesses operate approximately twice as many congregations within the Kaqchikel homelands as Latter-day Saints. In early 2015, Witnesses operated 15 Kaqchikel-speaking congregations in Guatemala - all but two of which operated in the Kaqchikel homelands. Seventh Day Adventists appear to operate dozens of congregations within the Kaqchikel homelands. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Kaqchikel. The Church of the Nazarene operates congregations in several of the most populous cities in the Kaqchikel homelands.

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 Kaqchikel-speaking members. It is unclear whether many members who reside in areas where Kaqchikel traditionally reside are Spanish-speaking Mestizos, bilingual or monolingual Kaqchikel, or other ethnicities. No local member reports were available in regards to the Church among the Kaqchikel. 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. No statistics were available providing a precise number of Adventist congregations and members within the Kaqchikel homelands.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Kaqchikel is mixed. Conditions remain favorable for national outreach expansion within the Kaqchikel homelands due to moderately receptive populations, the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions, and previous successes establishing a presence in approximately two dozen cities and towns. However, many areas of the Kaqchikel homelands experiencing no net increase in the number of congregations within the past 13 years, a lack of a more coordinated mission language program to reach Kaqchikel speakers, low literacy rates, strong ethnoreligious ties to Catholicism, and remote location pose challenges for growth. The Sololá Guatemala District may become

a stake within the foreseeable future. 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 Kaqchikel within the coming years.

[1] "Kaqchikel," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 28 January 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/cak>

[2] "Kaqchikel," Joshua Project, retrieved 28 January 2015. <http://joshuaproject.net/languages/cak>

[3] Searle, Don L. "Temple Will Bless Saints in Guatemala," *Ensign*, January 1985.
<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1985/01/news-of-the-church/temple-will-bless-saints-in-guatemala>

[4] Ernst, Justus. "'Every Man...in His Own Language'," *Ensign*, July 1974.
<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1974/07/every-man-in-his-own-language>

[5] Harmon, Kirt. "Daniel Choc," *Liahona*, February 1979. <https://www.lds.org/liahona/1979/02/daniel-choc>

[6] "Book of Mormon Editions," *Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac*, p. 635

[7] store.lds.org, retrieved 24 January 2015.

[8] "Kaqchikel," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 28 January 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/cak>