

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Guaraní of South America

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Overview

The Guaraní are one of the most populous Amerindian peoples in South America with approximately five[1] to six million people.[2] The Guaraní are divided into 10 ethnolinguistic groups, most of which have fewer than 10,000 people.[3] Languages spoken by Guaraní peoples pertain to the Tupian language family. Paraguayan Guaraní constitute almost the entire Guaraní population. Paraguayan Guaraní who reside in Paraguay constitute nearly 94% of the Guaraní population in South America.[4] Approximately half of the Guaraní population are monolingual speakers of a Guaraní language.[5] The population is homogenously Christian and nine-tenths of Guaraní adhere to Catholicism.[6] The LDS Church has maintained a presence among the Guaraní for several decades and has achieved several noteworthy accomplishments. However, opportunities for greater growth continue to be unrealized as many Guaraní reside in locations without an LDS presence.

This case study reviews the history of the Church among the Guaraní. Church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church among other major Amerindian peoples in South America is reviewed. The size and growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Guaraní is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

LDS Background

The Church appeared to begin missionary activity among bilingual Spanish-speaking Guaraní as early as the 1950s when full-time missionaries opened Paraguay to missionary work. Efforts to conduct specialized missionary outreach among the Guaraní began in the late 1970s. The Paraguay Asunción Mission indicated that the missionary lessons were translated into Guaraní in 1979.[7] Translations of select passages of the Book of Mormon into Paraguayan Guaraní were published in 1982.[8] The Church published a translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Paraguayan Guaraní in 2009.[9]

The Church organized its first stake in the Guaraní homeland in 1979: the Asunción Paraguay Stake. Additional stakes that have been organized within the Guaraní homeland include Fernando de la Mora Paraguay (1980), Asunción Paraguay North (1992), Posadas Argentina (1992), San Lorenzo Paraguay (1994), Ciudad del Este Paraguay (1996), Fernando de la Mora South Paraguay (1997), Ponta Porã Brazil (1997), Luque Paraguay (2001), Capiatá Paraguay (2004), Ñemby Paraguay (2005), and Luque Paraguay South (2006). Districts that currently operate within the Guaraní homeland include Caacupé Paraguay (1981), Concepción Paraguay (1981), Encarnacion Paraguay (1981), El Dorado Argentina (1990), Pedro Juan Caballero Paraguay (1994), La Paloma Paraguay (1994), Paraguarí Paraguay (1994), Coronel Oviedo Paraguay (1995), Pilar Paraguay (1997), and Mariano Roque Alonso Paraguay (2005). The Church has discontinued one district within the Guaraní homelands in Caaguazú. The Caaguazú Paraguay District was organized in 1988 and discontinued in 2013. As of early 2015, there were 12 stakes, 10 districts, and at least 170 congregations (wards, branches, and member groups) located within the Guaraní homelands. The Church also operates one mission branch within the Guaraní homelands of Bolivia in the city of Camiri. Most congregations within the Guaraní homelands appear to hold church services in Spanish although many members appear to use Guaraní when giving talks, teaching lessons, and associating with other members or investigators. There were five missions that included portions of the Guaraní homelands as of early 2015 including the Paraguay Asunción Mission (1977), the Paraguay Asunción North Mission (1998), the Bolivia Santa Cruz Mission (1998), the Brazil Cuiaba Mission (2006), and the Argentina Posadas Mission (2013).

The Church announced a temple for Asunción in 2000. The Asunción Paraguay Temple was dedicated in 2002. In 2015, the temple scheduled two sessions on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays; three sessions on Fridays; and five sessions on Saturdays.[10]

The Church has translated the following materials into Paraguayan Guaraní: the Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, hymns and child songs, Gospel Principles (old edition), and General Conference addresses (audio and print).[11] The Church has appeared to translate General Conference addresses into Guaraní since the mid-2000s.

A map displaying the Guaraní homelands and the location of LDS congregations within these homelands can be found here.

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Successes

The Church maintains congregations within the Guaraní homelands of all four nations (Paraguay, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil) with indigenous Guaraní peoples. The following Guaraní peoples have at least one congregation that operates within their homelands: the Paraguayan Guaraní (~150 congregations), Ava Guaraní (10 congregations), Pai Tavytera (6 congregations), and Eastern Bolivian Guaraní (1 congregation). The operation of congregations in scores of cities and towns has provided missionary opportunities among a sizable percentage of the Guaraní population. Accelerated membership and congregational growth in Paraguay during the latter portion of the twentieth century appears strongly correlated with the expansion of missionary activity among the Guaraní people. Membership increased from approximately 2,100 in 1977 shortly before translations of Guaraní materials became available to 8,000 a decade later. Receptivity remains good in many locations as evidenced by steady membership growth rates in the 1990s and 2000s. The number of members in Paraguay increased to 37,000 in 1997, 71,531 in 2007, and 86,790 in 2013. The Church has made progress opening several previously unreached small cities and towns to missionary activity and has organized multiple member groups within the past five years in locations such as Curuguaty, Katuete, San Pedro de Ycuamandiyu, Santa Rita, and Tobati.

The Church has established a pervasive presence in Asunción and operates multiple congregations in the most populous cities in Paraguay where there are sizable numbers of Guaraní people. Asunción stands as a major center of strength for the Church in interior south-central South America. Two missions are headquartered within the city providing ample resources to proselyte the urban population. The Guaraní number among the few Amerindian peoples with an LDS temple located within their homelands. The Church has well saturated this major metropolitan area of 2.5 million as evidenced by the operation of 78 wards and branches within the Asunción metropolitan area. The average ward or branch includes 32,100 people within its geographical boundaries, suggesting that the Church has achieved greater saturation of the metropolitan population of Asunción than in most metropolitan areas in South America with one million or more inhabitants.

The Church has translated the entire Book of Mormon into Guaraní. Only a handful of Amerindian languages have had translations of LDS scriptures completed and most of these languages have had only select passages of the Book of Mormon translated. The Church has translated all General Conference addresses into Guaraní within the past several years and has made these addresses available online both in audio and printed formats.

Opportunities

The organization of the Argentina Posadas Mission has provided additional mission resources to administer the Guaraní homelands. Each of the three missions that administers the Guaraní homelands has a comparatively small number of stakes and districts compared to other missions in South America. The Argentina Posadas Mission includes two stakes and three districts whereas the Paraguay Asunción Mission includes four stakes and three districts and the Paraguay Asunción North Mission includes five stakes and four districts. These conditions pose good opportunities for mission leaders to revitalize growth within the most populous cities and expand missionary outreach into smaller cities and towns where no LDS congregations operate. The establishment of Guaraní-speaking member groups, branches, and wards may be effective to provide more penetrating outreach tailored to the needs of the Guaraní, instill a stronger sense of LDS community, and revamp reactivation efforts among the massive number of less-active and inactive Latter-day Saints within the region. The Church in the Guaraní homelands has yet to establish a widespread presence in less-populated cities and towns and rural communities as only a handful of locations with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants appear to have an LDS presence. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides the needed manpower to orchestrate further outreach expansion. The assignment of missionary companionships to multiple cities, towns, and villages appears an effective method to conserve mission resources and efficiently expand missionary work into additional locations. Areas that appear most favorable for opening additional locations to missionary work include small cities, towns, and villages located within southern Paraguay between the cities of Asunción, Ciudad Del Este, and Encarnacion.

The development of a more standardized Guaraní language proselytism program for full-time missionaries assigned to Guaraní-speaking locations has good potential to accelerate growth. Guaraní language instruction at the Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) or at MTCs in Argentina and Mexico can lay the needed foundation to assist full-time missionaries in becoming more fluent and effective in their proselytism efforts. The translation of remaining LDS scriptures, additional gospel study materials, and proselytism tracts into Guaraní will be important for the Church to convey a sense of compatibility with local culture and society.

Challenges

The Church in Paraguay has experienced serious challenges with few active priesthood holders, extremely low member activity

rates, and poor self-sufficiency. Significant convert retention and inactivity challenges have been evidenced by incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates within the past decade. The Church in Paraguay reported 137 congregations (46 wards, 91 branches) and 58,056 members in 2004 whereas the Church reported 139 congregations (60 wards, 79 branches) and 86,790 members in 2013. The discrepancy in membership and congregational growth rates during this period resulted in the average number of members per congregation increasing from 424 to 624. Reports from returned missionaries indicate that the average ward or branch has had less than 100 active members within the past decade. These findings suggest that member activity rates in Paraguay likely do not exceed 15%. The Asunción Paraguay Temple appears poorly utilized notwithstanding nine stakes within the Asunción metropolitan area.

Rushed prebaptismal preparation driven by pressured baptismal tactics appear primarily responsible for these concerning trends. The Church has had challenges reaching the minimal number of active priesthood holders to organize new branches in cities where member groups have been recently organized. This has resulted in challenges developing a self-sufficient core of membership capable of meeting its own ecclesiastical needs without dependence on full-time missionaries to properly operate. Many of the principles and policies of the Preach My Gospel program have been inconsistently implemented in many areas.

Extremely low member activity rates create major challenges for effective church administration as the vast majority of nominal church members are inactive or less-active. Most wards and branches are overwhelmed with hundreds of inactive members who have had little to no history of meaningful church activity. Consequently a sizable amount of resources have been channeled into reactivation efforts that have yet to yield significant, tangible results. This has resulted in fewer resources designated for more productive missionary activities such as the organization of additional congregations or the opening of previously unreached locations to missionary work.

Multiple LDS missions administer large portions of the Guaraní homelands. The Guaraní homelands are primary divided between the Paraguay Asunción Mission, the Paraguay Asunción North Mission, and the Argentina Posadas Mission. Although several missions provide greater missionary manpower and resources to achieve growth, these conditions pose challenges for implementing a uniform approach in extending specialized missionary outreach. Coordination between the mission leadership of these missions will be necessary in the development of additional translations of LDS materials into Guaraní, updating membership records, opening additional locations to proselytism, and, if necessary, developing culturally-specific teaching and finding techniques.

Limited progress has occurred within full-time missionaries becoming sufficiently proficient in the Guaraní language to find investigators and teach missionary lessons. The Church does not appear to provide language instruction in Guaraní for missionaries destined to serve in missions with sizable Guaraní populations. North American missionaries must typically learn Spanish while in the Missionary Training Center and later learn the Guaraní language while serving in the mission field. The Church has never appeared to implement a standardized language instruction program for missionaries to learn Guaraní.

The Church has yet to translate all LDS scriptures into Paraguayan Guaraní. No translations have been completed for the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price. The Church has also an extremely limited number of gospel study and missionary materials translated into Paraguayan Guaraní. The official missionary guidebook Preach My Gospel has yet to be translated into Paraguayan Guaraní. The translation of additional scriptures and materials appears essential for the Church to make greater headway in establishing a pervasive presence among the Guaraní considering approximately half of Guaraní speakers are monolinguals.[12] The Church has yet to translate materials into additional Guaraní languages. Bolivian Guaraní peoples remain minimally reached by only one branch that operates within their homelands.

No LDS outreach has appeared to occur among four Guaraní peoples including the Kaiwá (pop: 18,000),[13] Mbyá Guaraní (pop: 15,050),[14] Ñandeva (pop: 1,830),[15] and Western Bolivian Guaraní (pop: 7,000).[16] These peoples typically reside in rural areas distant from major cities. Remote location and low population densities will likely delay LDS outreach among these peoples for many years or decades to come.

Comparative Growth

The size and growth trends of the Church among the Guaraní appears comparable to other major Amerindian peoples in South America. The Quechua of Peru and Bolivia and the Aymara of Bolivia appear to have experienced the greatest growth and to have received the most widespread LDS outreach among Amerindian peoples of South America. Both the Quechua and Aymara have many stakes and districts within their respective homelands. The Church among Amerindian peoples in South America has achieved the greatest self-sufficiency in local church administration and member activity rates among the Quichua-speaking Otavalo Amerindians in extreme northern Ecuador. The Church operates two Quichua-speaking stakes that have experienced slow albeit steady congregational growth within the past three decades. Amerindian peoples in South America with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints include the Nivaclé of Paraguay and the Quichua-speaking Otavalo of Ecuador.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups with an international presence note a presence among the Guaraní that is comparable in size to the LDS Church or larger than the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim seven percent of the Guaraní population.[17] Jehovah's Witnesses operate a total of 119 congregations in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia that conduct worship services or have outreach capabilities in Paraguayan Guaraní or Bolivian Guaraní. Approximately two dozen of these congregations are located in the Asunción metropolitan area. Witnesses translate their official website, jw.org, into

Paraguayan Guaraní and Bolivian Guaraní.[18] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 13,347 members, 61 churches (larger or well-established congregations), and 65 companies (small or recently-established congregations) in Paraguay as of year-end 2013.[19] Adventists translate printed materials into Paraguayan Guaraní.[20] The Church of the Nazarene appears to maintain a minimal presence among the Guaraní. Nazarenes report 31 congregations in Paraguay.[21] Nazarenes do not appear to print materials into Paraguayan Guaraní.

Limitations

The Church does not publish statistics on its membership for the number of speakers of each language with the exception of the 10 most commonly spoken languages among worldwide membership. No data was available regarding the number of wards and branches that hold church services in Guaraní. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Guaraní who have joined the Church. The Church does not publish the number or location of its member groups. Consequently it is unclear how many member groups operate in areas with sizable numbers of Guaraní. Limited information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists or Nazarenes among the Guaraní.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Guaraní appears mixed for the foreseeable future. The Church has achieved considerable growth among the Guaraní within the past several decades. Notable accomplishments include the organization of nearly two dozen stakes and districts, the dedication of a temple, the establishment of five missions to service the Guaraní homelands, and the translation of the Book of Mormon and General Conference addresses into Guaraní. Significant numbers of full-time missionaries have also been assigned to the Guaraní homelands and the worldwide surge in the full-time missionary force presents additional opportunities for outreach expansion. However, the Church in Paraguay suffers from severe member inactivity and convert attrition problems, poor leadership self-sufficiency and sustainability challenges, and a limited presence in rural areas. There remains no standardized Guaraní language proselytism program for full-time missionaries and there are very few Guaraní translations of LDS materials available. Prospects for greater LDS growth among the Guaraní will depend on improvements in member activity and convert retention rates, the development of a more standardized Guaraní language program for full-time missionaries, and the translations of remaining LDS scriptures and additional gospel study materials.

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