

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

>

LDS Outreach among the Toba of Argentina

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: March 14th, 2015

Overview

The Toba are an Amerindian people that traditionally reside in the Argentine provinces of Chaco and Formosa. Toba population estimates range from 69,500[1] to 129,000.[2] Approximately 40,000 speak the Toba language; the most commonly spoken language in the Guaykuruan language family.[3] All Toba speakers are bilingual in Spanish. Most Toba adhere to Protestant denominations.[4] The LDS Church has maintained a presence within the Toba homelands for over two decades and has converted sizable numbers of Toba. However, opportunities for greater growth continue to be unrealized due to no translations of LDS materials into Toba, no Toba-specific missionary outreach, and a limited LDS presence in rural areas where many Toba reside.

This case study reviews the history of the Church among the Toba. 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 trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Toba 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 within the Toba homelands as early as the 1970s. The Church organized its first stake in the Toba homeland in 1981: the Resistencia Argentina Stake. Additional stakes that have been organized within the Toba homeland include Resistencia Argentina South (1996) and Formosa Argentina (2004). Districts that currently operate within the Toba homeland include Ibarreta (1990), Roque Sáenz Peña (1990), Corrientes (1991), and Clorinda (1992). The Church has discontinued one district within the Toba homelands in General José de San Martin. The General José de San Martin Argentina District was organized in 1993 and discontinued in 2011. As of early 2015, there were three stakes, four districts, and approximately 50 congregations (wards, branches, and member groups) located within the Toba homelands. Missionaries reported in the late 2000s and early 2010s that essentially all congregations in the Toba homelands had fewer than 100 active members.

The Church has discontinued 12 branches in the Toba homelands within the past five years including four branches in the Formosa Argentina Stake (Centenario 2nd, Laishi, Luján, and Parque), three branches in the Ibarreta Argentina District (Las Lomitas, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Ensanche), two branches in the former General José de San Martin Argentina District (Campo and Campo Medina), one branch in the Resistencia Argentina Stake (Puerto Vilelas), one branch in the Clorinda Argentian District (Primavera), and one branch in the Argentina Resistencia Mission (Argentina Resistencia Mission Branch). The Church discontinued branches in additional locations during the 2000s in Charata (Chaco) and Quitilipi (Chaco). No new wards or branches have appeared to be organized within the Toba homelands during the past five years although a couple member groups have begun to operate in locations such as Laguna Naick (Formosa).

There are sizable numbers of Toba Latter-day Saints within congregations in Chaco and Formosa Provinces. However, the Church has never appeared to translate LDS materials or scriptures into Toba. Missionaries serving within the Toba homelands during the early and mid 2010s indicated that some congregations held portions of sacrament meeting services and Sunday School classes in Toba. Missionaries reported some of the greatest successes augmenting the number of members attending church were in locations where Toba constitute the majority of the population such as Laguna Naick. Missionaries have indicated they have used many methods to find investigators and conduct proselytism efforts such as appearing on local radio. Missionaries indicate that local members generally provide translation assistance if needed for missionaries to teach Toba

investigators and less-active members. Missionaries also noted in the mid-2010s that some Toba-speaking members have served full-time missions.

A map displaying the Toba homelands and the location of LDS congregations within or nearby the Toba homelands can be found here.

Successes

The Church maintains one mission and operates approximately 50 congregations in at least 21 cities and towns within the Toba homeland. The Argentina Resistencia Mission is the only mission that administers the Toba homelands and all of its stakes and districts are within the Toba homelands with the exception of two districts (Pasos de los Libres and Rio Paraná). The Church divided the mission in 2013 to organize a separate mission headquartered in Posadas. These conditions pose good opportunities for specialized outreach and may attract greater attention from mission leadership to concentrate on Toba-specific outreach in the future due to the reduced geographic size of the mission. The operation of congregations in many cities and towns has provided missionary opportunities among a sizable percentage of the Toba population. Bilingualism among the Toba has permitted use of Spanish-speaking missionaries and the utilization of Spanish translations of LDS scriptures and materials. Consequently many congregations have a sizable minority, or in a few case a majority, of Toba members.

Opportunities

The reduced geographic size of the Argentina Resistencia Mission and the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions presents good opportunities for further saturating the Toba homeland with LDS resources. There remain many small cities and towns that have no nearby LDS congregations and where there appear to be handfuls of Latter-day Saints who have relocated to these locations over the years. The assignment of full-time missionary companionships to some of these locations and periodic visits from missionaries or mission leaders may be effective methods to assess receptivity, organize members and investigators, and hold cottage meetings as a means to lay a foundation for future growth. Three of the 10 most populous cities in Argentina without an LDS congregation are located in the Toba homelands, including Fontana, Juan José Castelli, and Charata. The establishment of member groups in these locations has good potential for growth as long as adequate prebaptismal preparation is implement, members fill callings and responsibilities in congregations, and measures are taken to avoid members from becoming dependent on missionaries to properly operate their congregations.

The development of a Toba language proselytism program for full-time missionaries assigned to Toba-speaking locations has good potential to accelerate growth. Although there appears little need to use the Toba language for members and investigators to properly learn the gospel and develop testimonies, use of the Toba language in proselytism efforts and church services would likely improve the sense of compatibility of the Church with Toba culture. The translation of a basic missionary materials or tracts and the Book of Mormon also appear likely to be successful in fostering a sense of LDS community among Toba members and vitalize member-missionary efforts.

Challenges

The Church in Chaco and Formosa Provinces has experienced serious challenges with few active priesthood holders, extremely low member activity rates, and poor self-sufficiency. These challenges have been attested by the closure of a dozen branches within the past five years despite many new converts joining the Church during this period. Member activity rates may be as low as 10-20% in most congregations within the region as a result of rushed pre-baptismal preparation, inadequate convert retention efforts, conflict between members, dependence on full-time missionaries for congregations to properly operate, shortages in local leadership manpower, and lackadaisical societal attitudes regarding participation in religious activities on a consistent basis. 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 limited resources allocated for more productive missionary activities such as the organization of additional congregations or the opening of previously unreached locations to missionary work.

The Toba constitute a tiny minority within their homeland. The combined population of Chaco and Formosa Provinces is 1.7 million people whereas the entire Toba population appears no more than 129,000. This indicates that the Toba comprise no more than 7.6% of the population in these two provinces. Pressing challenges with inactivity and leadership development in major cities and struggles maintaining the operation of some branches has appeared to siphon many of the mission's resources into attempting to rectify these challenges instead of expanding outreach and conducting more specialized outreach among ethnic minority groups such as the Toba.

The Church has yet to translate LDS materials or scriptures in Toba. A lack of promotion by the Church to hold entire worship services, organize specialized units in major cities, and translate materials and scriptures may create challenges for some Toba to believe that the Church is compatible with Toba culture and society. Cultural differences between Toba and non-indigenous Argentine may pose difficulties for assimilating these different ethnicities into the same congregations.

Comparative Growth

The size and growth trends of the Church among the Toba has appeared to outpace progress among nearly all other Amerindian peoples in South America with populations of less than 200,000. However, the Church has translated materials into other indigenous languages in the region spoken by smaller populations such as Nivaclé. The Quechua of Peru and Bolivia, the Aymara of Bolivia, and the Guaraní appear to have experienced the greatest growth and have received the most widespread LDS outreach among Amerindian peoples of South America. The Quechua, Aymara, and Guaraní have many stakes and districts within their respective homelands and have translations of some LDS scriptures and gospel study materials available. 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 percentages 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 Toba that is comparable in size to the LDS Church or larger than the LDS Church. Evangelicals are the largest religious group among the Toba and claim 50% of the Toba population.[5] Jehovah's Witnesses have extended specialized outreach among the Toba and operate 10 congregations that conduct worship services or have outreach capabilities in Toba. Witnesses translate their official website, jw.org, into Toba.[6] The Seventh Day Adventist Church appears to operate many congregations in the Toba homelands although Adventists do not print materials into the Toba language. The Church of the Nazarene appears to maintain presence comparable in size among the Toba as the LDS Church. Nazarenes appear to operate at least 38 congregations in the Toba homelands.[7] Nazarenes do not appear to print materials into Toba.

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership statistics 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 Toba. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Toba 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 Toba. Limited information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists or Nazarenes among the Toba.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Toba appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The Church has achieved some growth within the Toba homelands during the past couple decades. Accomplishments have included the establishment of approximately 50 congregations, the operation of three stakes and four districts, and a reduction in the geographic size of the Argentina Resistencia Mission. Significant numbers of full-time missionaries have also been assigned to the Toba homelands and the worldwide surge in the full-time missionary force presents additional opportunities for outreach expansion. However, the Church in the Argentine Provinces of Chaco and Formosa suffers from severe member inactivity and convert attrition problems, poor leadership self-sufficiency and sustainability challenges, and a limited presence in rural areas. Additionally, the Toba comprise a small minority within their homeland and have been less of a priority for proselytism than the non-indigenous Argentine population. There remains no Toba language proselytism program and no translations of LDS materials into Toba. Prospects for greater LDS growth among the Toba will likely depend on improvements in member activity and convert retention rates, the extension of specialized outreach that specifically targets Toba populations to strengthen a sense of LDS community, and the translations of at least a few basic LDS materials into the Toba language to promote cultural compatibility.

[1] "Toba," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 27 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/tob

[2] "Toba Qom," Joshua Project, retrieved 27 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15517

[3] "Guaykuruan," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 27 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/guaykuruan-0

[4] "Toba Qom," Joshua Project, retrieved 27 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15517

[5] "Toba Qom," Joshua Project, retrieved 27 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15517

[6] jw.org, retrieved 27 February 2015. http://www.jw.org/tob/

[7] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 21 February 2015. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=formosa&y=AR&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=