



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Wichi of Argentina and Bolivia

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

The Wichí, or Mataco, are an Amerindian people who traditionally reside in extreme northern Argentina and adjacent areas in extreme southern Bolivia. Most estimates for the size of the Wichí population are approximately 40,000.^[1] There are 40,000 Wichí who speak one of three Mataco languages that pertain to the Matacoan language family.^[2] Provided with the number of speakers in parentheses, these languages include Wichí Lhamtés Vojok (25,000 speakers),^[3] Wichí Lhamtés Güisnay (15,000 speakers),^[4] and Wichí Lhamtés Nocten (1,910 speakers).^[5] Most adhere to Protestantism although a sizable minority follow indigenous beliefs.^[6] The LDS Church maintains no presence within the Wichí homelands although LDS congregations have operated in cities nearby the Wichí homelands for at least two decades. The Church has also experienced significant successes reaching the Nivacle of Paraguay - an Amerindian people with a smaller population than the Wichí who exhibit similar linguistic and cultural characteristics.

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

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LDS Background

No LDS congregations at present operate within the Wichí homelands. Provided with the year of organization, stakes or districts that currently include portions of the Wichí homelands within their geographical boundaries include the Resistencia Argentina Stake (1981), the Ibarreta Argentina District (1990), the Orán Argentina District (1992), the Yacuiba Bolivia District (1995), and the Tartagal Argentina District (1996). The Wichí homelands were divided between the following three missions as of early 2015: Argentina Resistencia, Argentina Salta, and Bolivia Santa Cruz.

There have appeared to be few, if any, Wichí who have joined the LDS Church. No reports have been obtained regarding Wichí Latter-day Saints in Argentina or Bolivia. A map displaying the Wichí homelands and nearby LDS congregations can be found [here](#).

Opportunities

Two of the three missions that administer portions of the Wichí homelands were significantly reduced in geographic size in 2013 as a result of the organization of new missions. These administrative changes has lessened the administrative burdened of mission presidents in affected missions and permits greater saturation and resource allocation within their jurisdictions. A smaller geographical area combined with larger numbers of missionaries serving these areas may prompt mission leaders to explore opportunities for LDS outreach expansion with the Wichí homelands.

The greatest opportunities for initiating LDS outreach among the Wichí exist in Tartagal. There are a sizable number of Wichí within or nearby the Tartagal area, presenting immediate opportunities for missionary outreach. The Church operates one branch in Tartagal and two additional branches in neighboring General Mosconi where there also appear to be sizable Wichí populations. Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite any known Wichí members or investigators to brainstorm and discuss ideas to establish specialized outreach may be beneficial for church leaders to assess needs and notify

membership of plans to establish Wichí-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Wichí-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards or branches to provide specialized outreach in the three branches located in Tartagal and General Mosconi. Providing Wichí translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Wichí, may be appropriate if approved by mission and area leadership. Bilingual Wichí members will play a crucial role in ensuring the success of specialized outreach as these members act as a liaison between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership and Wichí 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 Wichí within their homelands. Ingeniero Guillermo N. Juárez, Formosa Province is the only city located in the Wichí homelands with more than 10,000 inhabitants.^[7] The city is located along a major highway connecting the city of Formosa to cities in extreme northern Argentina, suggesting few transportation difficulties for Argentina Resistencia Mission leadership to visit the city. The assignment of a couple missionary companionships to Ingeniero Guillermo N. Juárez, the organization of a member group, and the designation of missionaries serving in the area as Wichí-speaking present an efficient and effective plan to initiate outreach while conserving limited mission resources. 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. The reassignment of the Wichí homelands to the direct supervision of mission branches may also be effective in maintaining adequate mission president oversight during initial proselytism efforts. Additional locations within the Wichí homelands where outreach expansion efforts may be favorable are located in Salta Province and include Coronel Juan Solá, La Unión, and Rivadavia as all of these locations have at least 2,000 inhabitants and sizable Wichí populations.^[8]

Many Wichí appear to speak Spanish as a second language. The utilization of Spanish translations of church materials and scriptures may adequately meet local needs among Spanish-speaking Wichí, especially in the most populous cities such as Ingeniero Guillermo N. Juárez. Sizable numbers of bilingual Wichí suggest that integration with non-indigenous Argentine Spanish speakers may be appropriate in locations where the establishment of segregated congregations is unfeasible.

Humanitarian and development projects appear as one of the most meaningful and effective methods to establish an initial LDS presence due to low living standards. Latter-day Saints could employ strategies for economic self-reliance among the Wichí similar to past and current development projects among other Amerindian groups or poverty-stricken areas such as teaching efficient agricultural techniques, organizing garden projects, holding employment and neonatal resuscitation workshops, conducting clean water projects, and providing small business loans or resources to jumpstart local entrepreneurs. The Church has provided extensive humanitarian and development resources to the neighboring Nivaclé in Paraguay and these efforts have appeared to strengthen the local church and alleviate temporal needs. Promoting similar efforts among the Wichí may be effective. The Church has accomplished noticeable success through poultry and plantation projects in Sub-Saharan Africa where individuals receive a "starter kit" of recently hatched chicks or farming supplies that if properly managed can turn into a self-sufficient business. Low levels of economic development and long-term societal marginalization indicate that small business projects could make a significant economic improvement for many.

Challenges

The current political boundaries and configuration of LDS missions within the Wichí homelands presents a significant challenge for initiating outreach. Two different nations, three separate missions, and two different administrative areas (South America South and South America West) administer the sparsely populated Wichí homelands. These conditions pose challenges for the Church to perceive a need to reach the Wichí people due to their small populations in individual missions, extend coordinated outreach between multiple mission and area leaders, and develop a Wichí language proselytism program.

No LDS congregations operate within the Wichí homelands. The lack of an LDS presence appears rooted in only one city within the homelands supporting a population over 10,000 people. The Church has avoided rural outreach in South America as urban areas present greater opportunities to reach large numbers of people without traversing long distances. Additionally, some densely populated urban areas in Argentina and Bolivia receive limited LDS outreach and therefore have presented greater opportunities for the additional saturation of LDS missionaries and congregations. The centers of strength policy has also discouraged the steady expansion of missionary activity in rural areas. This has been due to perceived difficulties meeting administrative and ecclesiastical needs for small numbers of Latter-day Saints spread over large geographical areas where access from mission headquarters can be challenging. There appear to be no feasible opportunities for LDS outreach among Wichí in Bolivia due to their tiny populations located in rural areas where there are no cities or towns.

The Church has historically experienced serious challenges with few active priesthood holders, extremely low member activity rates, and poor self-sufficiency within northern Argentina and southern Bolivia. Member activity rates may be as low as 10-20% in some 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 and goal setting 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 their 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. 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 Wichí.

The Church has yet to translate LDS materials or scriptures in Wichí. No Wichí translations of materials or scriptures may pose challenges for the Church to convey a sense that its teachings and organization are compatible with Wichí culture and society. Cultural differences between Wichí and non-indigenous Argentine may pose difficulties for assimilating these ethnicities into the same congregations.

Comparative Growth

Nearly all Amerindian peoples in South America with populations less than 50,000 receive no LDS outreach and have no LDS congregations that operate within their homelands. The Church has established a presence among some of these peoples but has generally avoided the translation of LDS scriptures or church materials, the holding of entire worship services and meetings in indigenous languages, and the development of language proselytism programs that use full-time missionaries to teach in indigenous languages. The Church has translated materials into a handful of indigenous languages native to the region spoken by less than 50,000 people such as Nivacle. The Quechua, Aymara, and Guaraní have experienced the greatest growth and have received the most widespread LDS outreach among major Amerindian peoples in South America. Many stakes and districts operate within their respective homelands and each of these peoples have translations of some LDS scriptures and gospel study materials available in their native languages. 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 Nivacle of Paraguay and the Quichua-speaking Otavalo of Ecuador.

Multiple missionary-focused Christian groups with an international presence maintain a presence among the Wichí. Evangelicals number among the largest religious groups and claim 28% of the Wichí population.^[9] Jehovah's Witnesses have extended specialized outreach among the Wichí and operate seven congregations that conduct worship services or have outreach capabilities in Wichí. Witnesses translate their official website, jw.org, into Wichí.^[10] The Seventh Day Adventist Church may operate congregations in the Wichí homelands as Adventists have a widespread presence in northern Argentina. Adventists do not print materials into the Wichí language. The Church of Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence among the Wichí as there are few, if any, Nazarene congregations within or nearby the Wichí homelands.

Limitations

No reports were available regarding whether any Wichí have joined the LDS Church. 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. The Church does not publish the number and location of its member groups. Consequently it is unclear whether member groups operate in areas with sizable numbers of Wichí. Limited information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists or Nazarenes among the Wichí.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Wichí appears poor within the foreseeable future. The Church has yet to establish a single congregation within the Wichí homeland and few, if any, Wichí have appeared to join the Church in congregations nearby their homelands such as in the Tartagal area. Member inactivity and convert attrition challenges in northern Argentina and southern Bolivia will likely continue to dissuade the consideration of specialized outreach among the Wichí until greater progress in ameliorating these difficulties is accomplished. The Church in southern South America has also discouraged specialized outreach among Amerindian peoples with the exception of the Guaraní in Paraguay. This indicates that there will likely be little effort or vision to take the gospel to peoples such as the Wichí. Despite these conditions, there are good opportunities for growth if mission leaders open cities to proselytism within the Wichí homelands, make diligent efforts for full-time missionaries to learn the Wichí language when they are assigned to these locations, maintain adequate standards for baptism, and focus on local leadership development.

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- [3] " Wichí Lhamtés Vejoz," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 27 February 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/wlv>
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- [5] " Wichí Lhamtés Nocten," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 27 February 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/mtp>
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- [7] "Argentina: Formosa," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 28 February 2015.
<http://www.citypopulation.de/php/argentina-formosa.php>
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- [10] [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 27 February 2015. <http://www.jw.org/jw-wch/>