

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Achi of Guatemala

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Posted: March 14th, 2015

Overview

The Achi are a Mayan people who number among the 10 most populous Amerindian peoples in Guatemala. The Achi homeland is located in Baja Verapaz Department. Estimates for the number of Achi in Guatemala range from 85,600[1] to 92,000.[2] Approximately one-third of the population in Baja Verapaz is Achi. The majority of Achi speak the Achi language. Only 20% of Achi speakers have some Spanish conversational abilities. Achi has two dialects: Cubulco Achi and Rabinal Achi.[3] The Achi are predominantly followers of Catholicism and Protestant denominations. Many syncretize traditional Maya religion with Christianity. The LDS Church has maintained a continuous presence within the Achi homeland for nearly four decades and has achieved limited church growth and missionary success.

This case study examines the historical and cultural background of the Achi, 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. The size and growth trends of other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups with a presence among the Achi is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The Church has operated congregations within the Achi homeland since the mid 1970s. The Church organized its first branch in Salama (1976). Additional branches were organized in Rabinal (1990) and San Jerónimo (1992). In 1992, the Church organized a district in Salama. In 2013, the Achi homelands were reassigned from the Guatemala Guatemala City North Mission to the newly organized Guatemala Coban Mission.

The Church reported three congregations in the Achi homelands as of year-end 2001. In late 2014, the Church organized a member group in Cubulco. In early 2015, the Church reported three branches in the Achi homelands (Rabinal, Salama, and San Jerónimo). The number of active members in each of these branches appeared to be less than 100. Missionaries serving in the area during early 2015 reported that the Cubulco Group was close to reaching the qualifications to become a branch.

Most, if not all, Latter-day Saints in the Achi homelands appear to be Mestizos or Amerindians who are bilingual in Spanish and Achi. The Church reported no translations of LDS materials or scriptures into Achi as of early 2015. Missionaries have reported no formal proselytism efforts conducted in Achi, although some missionaries have attempted to learn Achi informally to help facilitate proselytism work.

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

Successes

The Achi number among the few Amerindian peoples in Guatemala with populations less than than 100,000 who have LDS congregations operating within their homelands. The Church has maintained a continuous presence within multiple locations in the Achi homeland for 25 years. A separate district administers the three branches and one group in this area. Unlike many other locations in Guatemala, no branches have appeared to have closed within the Achi homelands. This suggests that the

Church has been consistent in extending outreach despite distance from mission headquarters, few active members, and the lack of an Achi-speaking LDS community.

There have been some limited efforts to expand outreach within the Achi homelands. The opening of Cubulco to proselytism in 2014 has yielded several successes within the past year. Many formerly inactive members have been reactivated and new converts have been regularly baptized. Missionaries reported that the number of active members increased from zero in early 2014 to more than 20 in early 2015. Missionaries reported that there were three active families by the end of 2014. The decision to organize a member group in Cubulco has also constituted a major success in providing more effective and penetrating outreach within the Achi homelands.

Opportunities

The organization of the Guatemala Coban Mission in 2013 has provided greater mission resource allocation and outreach expansion vision to northeastern Guatemala and Amerindian peoples within the new mission's jurisdiction. These resources have potential to expand missionary outreach into previously unreached areas, further saturate areas with LDS congregations that exhibit good opportunities for growth, and prepare for districts to become stakes. Missionaries serving in 2014 noted preliminary plans to open several previously unreached locations in the Q'eqchi' homelands to formal missionary efforts during 2015. Opportunities exist for similar outreach expansion campaigns in the Achi homelands. Locations that appear most favorable for future missionary efforts include Canillá, El Chol, San Gabriel, San Miguel Chicaj, and Xococ. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides greater resources available to coordinate Achi-specific outreach and open many of these unreached areas to proselytism.

There are current opportunities for the Church to initiate formal Achi-specific outreach. The organization of Achi-speaking Sunday School classes in the Rabinal Branch may be an effective mechanism to attract Achi speakers and provide minimal outreach among monolingual Achi speakers. District or branch leaders holding special firesides to gather known Achi members and investigators may be a thrifty and effective method to lay the groundwork for specialized outreach and develop an LDS Achi community.

There are good opportunities for development work in rural areas traditionally inhabited by the Achi. The Church can implement agricultural and employment programs to improve living conditions and provide passive proselytism opportunities. Examples of projects that may be suitable 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 or planting specialized crops.

Challenges

Full-time missionaries who have recently served in the Achi homelands indicate that the three branches have few active members. Missionary efforts within the past couple decades have yielded few results. The Rabinal Branch had less than 50 active members in late 2013. Slow growth has been attested by no new branches organized since 1992. 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 converts baptized within the past two decades were likely pressured to be baptized with little preparation and post-baptism fellowship. Consequently activity rates appear low throughout the Achi homelands. The number of active members in Rabinal appears insufficient to support a second Achi-speaking branch. Branches in the Achi homelands may struggle to sufficiently meet their own leadership and administrative needs as the Salama Guatemala District has only three branches and each of these branch appear to have less than 100 active members.

Other Amerindian peoples in Guatemala support substantially larger populations than the Achi and have presented greater opportunities for growth. Many of these peoples have experienced significantly greater LDS growth. Consequently mission resources have been more readily allocated to these peoples rather than to smaller Amerindian peoples such as the Achi. This has resulted in missed opportunities for growth. Other missionary-focused Christian groups have allocated more resources into Amerindian-specific outreach in Guatemala than the LDS Church. Thus, many previously receptive Achi have likely become shepherded into other proselytizing Christian groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of the Nazarene.

Many Achi resides in small towns and villages. Traditional proselytism approaches that base missionary activity in urban areas through the placement of full-time missionaries face significant challenges in effectively reaching tens of thousands of Achi who populate rural areas. There are good opportunities for the Church to adapt proselytism efforts to these conditions by assigning full-time missionaries to multiple villages and raising the importance in member-missionary participation in the finding and retention processes. 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 dependent units or small branches may be the most practical method to expand outreach into additional areas populated by the Achi 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 in rural areas. Consistency in these efforts and gradually reducing local members' reliance on full-time missionaries and outsourced leadership personnel will be essential to promote local self-sufficiency. Members' homes, makeshift shelters, and rented land or buildings may provide the best options

to hold church meetings near target populations in a culturally appropriate manner.

Language barriers and the lack of an Achi proselytism program in the Guatemala Coban Mission have appeared to deter greater church growth progress within the Achi homelands during the past 15 years. No LDS materials have been translated into Achi despite an LDS missionary presence within the Achi homelands for several decades. Any missionary efforts among monolingual Achi speakers requires assistance from members or investigators who are fluent in Achi and Spanish. Full-time missionaries assigned to Achi-majority areas have complained that they lack language training to proselyte Achi populations.

Low literacy rates pose challenges for missionary activity and church growth. Approximately 15-20% of Achi are literate in their native languages whereas 25-40% of Achi are literate in a second language.[4] Low literacy rates may prompt the development of audio translations of church materials and scriptures once the Church determines that Achi translations are needed to accommodate member and missionary needs.

Comparative Growth

The penetration of LDS outreach within the Achi homelands is comparable to other Amerindian peoples in Guatemala that support populations between 50,000 and 100,000. The Church has established a significantly more widespread presence among the major Amerindian peoples of Guatemala such as the Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, and Q'eqchi' as evidenced by the operation of stakes within their homelands, the translation of LDS materials and scriptures into indigenous languages, and multiple congregations conducting church services in indigenous languages. Missionaries reported in early 2015 that some missionaries assigned to the Guatemala Coban Mission will begin receiving Q'eqchi' language training at the Guatemala Missionary Training Center (MTC) starting in mid-2015, making Q'eqchi' the first Amerindian language native to Guatemala to be taught at a MTC. The Church operates congregations accessible to three additional Amerindian groups in Guatemala (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.

Other missionary-focused Christian groups with a worldwide missionary presence either maintain a minimal presence within the Achi homelands or have established widespread presence among the Achi people. Evangelicals claim 15% of the Achi population[5] and have appeared to experience steady growth. Jehovah's Witnesses operate approximately 15 congregations within the Achi homelands. In early 2015, Witnesses operated three Achi-speaking congregations in Baja Verapaz Department. Witnesses have translated their official website jw.org into Achi.[6] Seventh Day Adventists appear to operate multiple congregations within the Achi homelands. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Achi. The Church of the Nazarene appears to maintain a widespread presence among the Achi. Nazarenes reported eight congregations within the Rabinal vicinity and seven congregations within the Cubulco area.[7] Nazarenes conduct worship services for several of these congregations in the Achi language.

Limitations

There were few returned missionary reports available during the writing of this case study. The Church does not publish data on the number of Achi-speaking members. It is unclear whether many members who reside in traditionally Achi-populated areas are Spanish-speaking Mestizos, bilingual or monolingual Achi, or other ethnicities. No local member reports were available regarding LDS outreach among the Achi. No official church data on member activity or convert retention rates were available during the writing of this case study. No statistics were available providing a precise number of Adventist congregations and members within the Achi homelands.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Achi appears unfavorable within the foreseeable future. Conditions remain favorable for national outreach expansion within the Achi homelands due to moderately receptive populations, the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions, the organization of the Guatemala Coban Mission in 2013, and recent successes in regards to the opening of Cubulco to missionary work. However, no new branches organized within the Achi homelands since 1992, no Achi language proselytism program in the Guatemala Coban Mission, no translations of LDS materials into Achi, low literacy rates, and focus from the mission on Q'eqchi'-specific proselytism efforts predict that little growth will occur for many years to come. The Cubulco Group may become a branch within the near future and additional groups may be organized in lesser-reached communities near Rabinal where there are sizable numbers of inactive members. With the recent decision to begin a formal language training program at the Guatemala MTC to teach missionaries Q'eqchi', church leaders may become more receptive to explore opportunities for Achi language outreach with full-time missionaries.

[1] "Achi," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/acr

[2] "People Cluster: Central American Indigenous, other," Joshua Project, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/257

[3] "Achi," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/acr

[4] "Achi," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/acr

[5] "People Cluster: Central American Indigenous, other," Joshua Project, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/257

[6] http://www.jw.org/acr/, accessed 2 February 2015

[7] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch