

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

>

LDS Outreach among the Poqomchi' of Guatemala

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: March 16th, 2015

Overview

The Poqomchi' are a Mayan people who number among the 10 most populous Amerindian peoples in Guatemala. The Poqomchi' homeland is located in southern Alta Verapaz Department. Estimates for the number of Poqomchi' in Guatemala range from 60,000[1] to 135,000.[2] The majority of Poqomchi' speak the Poqomchi' language and many speak Spanish or Q'eqchi' as a second language. Poqomchi' has three dialects: Eastern Poqomchi', Santa Cruz Verapaz Poqomchi', and Western Poqomchi'.[3] The Poqomchi' are predominantly followers of Protestant denominations although there is a sizable Catholic minority. The LDS Church has maintained a continuous presence within the Poqomchi' homeland for over three decades and has achieved limited church growth and missionary success.

This case study reviews the history of LDS proselytism efforts among the Poqomchi' 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 Poqomchi' is reviewed. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

//

LDS Background

The Church has operated congregations within the Poqomchi' homeland since the late 1970s. The Church organized its first two branches in 1979 in Tac-Tic and Tucuru/Panchilha. Additional branches were organized in San Cristóbal (1988) and Valparaíso (1998). Three branches in the Poqomchi' homeland (San Cristóbal, Tac-Tic, and Valparaíso) have pertained to the Coban Guatemala Stake since 1995 whereas one branch (Tucuru/Panchilha) has pertained to the Sacsuha Guatemala District since 1990. In 2013, the Poqomchi' homelands were reassigned from the Guatemala Guatemala City North Mission to the newly organized Guatemala Coban Mission.

Most, if not all, Latter-day Saints who reside the Poqomchi' homelands appear to be Mestizos, Q'eqchi', or Poqomchi' who are bilingual in Poqomchi' and Spanish. The Church has translated one material into Poqomchi' as of early 2015: Gospel Fundamentals. Missionaries have reported no formal proselytism efforts conducted in Poqomchi', although some missionaries have attempted to learn Poqomchi' informally to help facilitate proselytism work. All branches within the Poqomchi' homelands appeared to have less than 100 active members as of early 2015.

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

Successes

The Poqomchi' number among the few Amerindian peoples in Guatemala who have populations of less than 100,000 and LDS congregations operating within their homelands. The Church has maintained a continuous presence within multiple locations in the Poqomchi' homelands for over 35 years. Unlike many other locations in Guatemala, no branches have appeared to have closed within the Poqomchi' 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 Poqomchi'-speaking LDS community. The Church has also translated one gospel study material into Poqomchi' despite few Poqomchi'-speaking members.

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 where there are good opportunities for growth, and prepare 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 Poqomchi' homelands. Locations that appear most favorable for future missionary efforts include Purulha, Santa Cruz Verapaz, Tamahú, and villages surrounding the Tac-Tic area. The worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions provides the needed manpower to coordinate Poqomchi'-specific outreach and to open many previously unreached areas to proselytism.

There are current opportunities for the Church to initiate formal Poqomchi'-specific outreach. The organization of Poqomchi'-speaking Sunday School classes in the Tac-Tic Branch may be an effective mechanism to attract Poqomchi' speakers and provide minimal outreach among monolingual Poqomchi' speakers. Other branches within the Poqomchi' homelands also appear favorable for the organization of Poqomchi'-speaking Sunday School classes if there are members who speak Poqomchi'. District or branch leaders holding special firesides to gather known Poqomchi'-speaking members and investigators may be a thrifty and effective method to lay the groundwork for specialized outreach and create a plan to develop an LDS Poqomchi' community.

There are good opportunities for development work in rural areas traditionally inhabited by the Poqomchi'. The Church can implement agricultural or 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 initiatives that provide resources to individuals for them to start their own businesses such as raising livestock or planting specialized crops.

Challenges

Full-time missionaries who have recently served in the area indicate that the four branches within the Poqomchi' homelands have few active members. Missionary efforts within the past 15 years have yielded few results. Slow growth has been attested by no new branches organized since 1998. 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 15 years were likely pressured to be baptized with little preparation or post-baptism fellowship. Consequently activity rates appear low throughout the Poqomchi' homelands. The number of active members in individual branches appears insufficient to support separate Poqomchi'-speaking branches to service the same cities. Branches in the Poqomchi' homelands may struggle to sufficiently meet their own leadership and administrative needs as indicated by none of the branches meetings the qualifications to become wards since the organization of the Coban Guatemala Stake in 1995.

Other Amerindian peoples in Guatemala support substantially larger populations than the Poqomchi' 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 instead of less populous Amerindian peoples such as the Poqomchi'. Consequently, opportunities for growth have been missed. Other missionary-focused Christian groups have allocated more resources into Amerindian-specific outreach in Guatemala than the LDS Church. Thus, many previously receptive Poqomchi' have likely become shepherded into other proselytizing Christian groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of the Nazarene.

Many Poqomchi' 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 Poqomchi' 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 of 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. The establishment of dependent units or small branches may be the most practical method to expand outreach into additional areas populated by the Poqomchi', 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 the gradual reduction of local members relying on full-time missionaries and outsourced leadership personnel to properly administer the church 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 Poqomchi' proselytism program in the Guatemala Guatemala City North Mission and the Guatemala Coban Mission have appeared to deter greater church growth progress within the Poqomchi' homelands during the past 15 years. Only one LDS material has been translated into Poqomchi' despite an LDS missionary presence within the Poqomchi' homelands for several decades. Any missionary efforts among monolingual Poqomchi' speakers requires assistance from members or investigators who are fluent in Poqomchi' and Spanish. Full-time missionaries assigned to Poqomchi'-majority areas have complained that they lack the needed language training to proselyte Poqomchi' populations.

Low literacy rates pose challenges for missionary activity and church growth. Approximately 1-10% of Poqomchi' are literate in their native language whereas 21-35% of Poqomchi' 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 Poqomchi' translations are needed to accommodate member and missionary needs.

Comparative Growth

The penetration of LDS outreach within the Poqomchi' 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 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 (Achi, Jakalteko, and Tz'utujil) but has no LDS scriptures and few, if any, materials translated into 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 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 Poqomchi' homelands or have established widespread presence among the Poqomchi' people. Evangelicals claim 15-19% of the Poqomchi' population[5] and have appeared to experience steady growth. Jehovah's Witnesses operate approximately seven congregations within the Poqomchi' homelands. In early 2015, Witnesses operated one Poqomchi'-speaking congregation and three Poqomchi'-speaking groups. Seventh Day Adventists appear to operate multiple congregations within the Poqomchi' homelands. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Poqomchi'. The Church of the Nazarene appears to maintain a widespread presence among the Poqomchi'. Nazarenes reported seven congregations within the Tac-Tic area, five congregations within the Tamahú area, four congregations in the Purulha area, and four congregations within the Tucurú area. [6] Nazarenes conduct worship services for many of these congregations in the Poqomchi' 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 Poqomchi'-speaking members. It is unclear whether many members who reside in traditionally Poqomchi' -populated areas are Spanish-speaking Mestizos, bilingual or monolingual Poqomchi', or other ethnicities such as Q'eqchi'. No local member reports were available in regards to the Church among the Poqomchi'. 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 or members within the Poqomchi' homelands.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Poqomchi' appears unfavorable within the foreseeable future. Conditions remain favorable for national outreach expansion within the Poqomchi' homelands due to moderately receptive populations, the worldwide surge in the number of members serving full-time missions, and the organization of the Guatemala Coban Mission in 2013. However, no new branches organized within the Poqomchi' homelands since 1998, no Poqomchi' language proselytism program in the Guatemala Coban Mission, only one translation of an LDS material into Poqomchi' available, 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. Additional groups or branches may be organized in lesser-reached communities near Tac-Tic with sizable numbers of members who travel inordinate distances to church. 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 Poqomchi' language outreach with full-time missionaries within the foreseeable future.

[1] "Poqomchi'," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Poqomchi.html

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

[3] "Poqomchi'," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/poh

[4] "Poqomchi'," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/poh

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

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