

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mayo of Mexico

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Overview

The Mayo are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in southern Sonora State and northern Sinaloa State. Population estimates for the Mayo range from 82,000[1] to 173,000.[2] The Mayo traditionally speak the Mayo language - a language that pertains to the Taracahitic branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family[3] and has high intelligibility with Yaqui (11,800 speakers)[4] in Sonora State. The most recent estimate for the number of native Mayo speakers is 32,499.[5] In 2005, 39% of the ethnic Mayo population in Mexico was estimated[6] to speak Mayo. The Mayo have continued to reside within their homelands since the arrival of Europeans several centuries ago despite Mestizos establishing cities and towns in the region. The Mayo have traditionally adhered to Catholicism. Today approximately half the population adheres to Catholicism and half the population adheres to Protestant denominations. No specialized LDS outreach has occurred among the Mayo although LDS congregations have operated for several decades within the Mayo homelands.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments within areas traditionally inhabited by the Mayo people and notes known instances of Mayo converts joining the Church. Church growth and missionary successes among the Mayo are discussed and opportunities and challenges for LDS growth are explored. The growth of the Church among other Amerindian peoples indigenous to Mexico is reviewed and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Mayo are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1976, the Church organized the Ciudad Obregón Mexico Stake - the first stake to operate within the Mayo homelands. Additional stakes that operate within the Mayo homelands have since been organized in Los Mochis (1980), Ciudad Obregón Yaqui (1984), Ciudad Obregón Nainari (1989), and Los Mochis El Fuerte (1989). Two districts currently operate within the Mayo homelands. These districts are headquartered in Huatabampo (1987) and El Fuerte (1996). There has been no net change in the number of congregations (43) operating within the Mayo homelands between mid-2002 and early 2015. Two new congregations have been organized during this period (the Bacobampo and Quechehueca Branches) and two congregations have been discontinued during this period (the Vicam and Pueblo Yaqui Branches). One branch became a ward during this period: Ahome. The Church organized a new mission headquartered in the Mayo homelands in 2013 called the Mexico Ciudad Obregón Mission. Prior to this time, the Mexico Hermosillo Mission administered the entire region.

Small numbers of Mayo have appeared to join the Church within their homelands during the past half century. Most, if not all, of these Mayo Latter-day Saints speak Spanish as a first or second language. The Church in Mexico has never appeared to extend Mayo-specific outreach. No church materials or LDS scriptures have been translated into the Mayo language.

A map displaying LDS congregations within the Mayo homeland can be found here.

Successes

The Church has established five stakes, two districts, 27 wards, and 16 branches within the Mayo homelands. Some of these congregations have appeared to operate for as long as half a century. However, outreach has only appeared to occur in Spanish. The operation of congregations within areas traditionally inhabited by the Mayo is essential for the Church to conduct missionary activity. There have appeared to be small numbers of bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking Mayo in these

locations who have joined the Church within the past couple decades. The establishment of many branches within the towns and villages nearby Huatabampo, Ciudad Obregón, Navojoa, and Los Mochis has provided outreach into areas where Mayo comprise the highest percentages in the population.

Opportunities

The Mayo number among the most populous Amerindian peoples in northern Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in the Mayo language. Few indigenous peoples in the Americas present as good opportunities for LDS growth as the Mayo due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has congregations in 22 cities or towns within the Mayo homelands. These cities include Ciudad Obregón (13 wards), Los Mochis (6 wards), Navojoa (3 wards), Guamuchil (2 wards), Guasave (1 ward, 1 branch), Ahome (1 ward), Esperanza (1 ward), Adolfo Ruíz Cortinez (1 branch), Bacobampo (1 branch), Campo Sesenta (1 branch), Constancia (1 branch), El Carrizo (1 branch), El Fuerte (1 branch), Etchojoa (1 branch), Huatabampo (1 branch), Juan José Ríos (1 branch), Quechehueca (1 branch), Rosales [Mochicahui] (1 branch), San Blas (1 branch), Sinaloa Leyva (1 branch), Topolobampo (1 branch), and Villa Juárez (1 branch). Firesides or devotional meetings where Mayo members and investigators brainstorm and discuss ideas to initiate Mayo-specific outreach may help church leaders assess needs and notify membership of plans to establish Mayo-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Mayo-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards or branches to assess the need and performance of Mayo-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Mayo translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Mayo, may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Mayo members will be crucial to ensure the success of these approaches in establishing an LDS Mayo community as they act as a bridge between the Mayo people and Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership.

The massive surge in the number of members serving full-time missions in the early 2010s provides the unprecedented opportunity for mission leadership to mobilize surplus missionary manpower to orchestrate the opening of multiple proselytism areas that specifically target the Mayo within their homeland. Towns and villages surrounding Huatabampo, Los Mochis, and Navojoa present good opportunities for Mayo-specific outreach due to the high percentage of Mayo people in the population and the large number of towns and villages concentrated in this area. Assigning a single missionary companionship to serve in multiple cities or towns within close proximity of one another can extend outreach into these locations, conserve limited mission resources, and troubleshoot potential self-sufficiency challenges. 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 worldwide make this course of action a challenge.

The Mexico Ciudad Obregón Mission administers the Mayo homelands. The inclusion of the entire homelands of the Mayo people within a single mission provides opportunities for efficient church administration and outreach if the mission determines that Mayo-specific proselytism is warranted. The organization of the mission in 2013 has channeled additional mission resources into the Mayo homelands since this time. The new mission may help accelerate LDS growth in the foreseeable future.

Challenges

The Church in Mexico has avoided the expansion of specialized Amerindian outreach within the past two decades. Attitudes and policies held by area, mission, and stake leaders have generally advocated for the integration of Mestizo and Amerindian members into the same congregations and have promoted use of the Spanish language in worship services and gospel instruction. There has appeared to be a belief by church administration that the establishment of language-specific congregations for Amerindian groups will become too taxing on mission and stake leadership. This appears attributed to historical challenges in self-sufficient local leadership among Mexican Amerindian peoples, language barriers, socioeconomic divides, and remote location. Although it is not entirely clear why mission and area leaders in Mexico have not placed emphasis on reaching Amerindian peoples due to their large populations and generally high receptivity, it appears that this lack of outreach has been due to self-sufficiency problems for the Church in Mexico as a whole and a conservative approach to the centers of strength policy. Within the past five years, the Church in Mexico has experienced little to no "real growth" due to quick-baptism tactics, local leadership development problems, and low member activity rates. Between year-end 2009 and year-end 2013, the Church added 146,666 members to its roles yet the total number of congregations (wards and branches) decreased during this four-year period from 2,007 to 1,980. As increasing numbers of congregations strongly correlate with increasing numbers of active members, this development is discouraging and predicts that little to no progress will occur in establishing specialized Amerindian outreach among additional peoples until real-growth frustrations are sufficiently rectified as reflected by a return to steady, year-to-year increases in the number of wards and branches nationwide.

The lack of a single Mayo translation of a proselytism tract, let alone gospel study resources or LDS scriptures, poses significant challenges for the Church to convey a sense that it is compatible with Mayo culture and society. Extremely low literacy rates also pose challenges for translating gospel study and missionary materials. Only two percent of Mayo are literate in the Mayo language and only 20% of Mayo speakers are literate in Spanish.[7] Audio translations may be an effective solution to meet language needs. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Mayo-speaking branches or member groups would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Mayo members and investigators have no translations of materials or scriptures from which to teach lessons, prepare sacrament meeting talks, or study the gospel. Without translations of even a few basic materials into Mayo, one cannot accurately assess whether the lack of a Mayo Latter-day Saint community is attributed to no language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Mayo have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Many Mayo live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. Outreach expansion will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find effective methods to extend outreach. These methods generally consist of mission leadership visiting these communities, finding investigators and isolated members, and consistently visiting these individuals to prepare the groundwork to establish a church presence. The amount of energy, time, and vision required to properly establish a long-term LDS presence among Amerindian peoples who reside in remote areas and speak indigenous languages is often seen as too great of an inconvenience and burden for mission and area leaders to incur on themselves, especially considering the ease of further saturating urban areas with greater numbers of Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries.

Some Mayo have a low standard of living and limited employment opportunities. The Perpetual Education Fund provides low interest loans to returned missionaries and may be an effective intervention to help improve living standards and employment opportunities. This program may bolster economic self-sustainability and reduce the number of local members who leave their native communities in search of work elsewhere..

Delays in the implementation of specialized LDS outreach among the Mayo may result in reduced receptivity to the Church. Other proselytism-focused groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses have made significant inroads among the Mayo and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Mayo who have joined other nontraditional churches have become religiously and socially integrated into these denominations. Consequently, many of these individuals and families have exhibited reduced receptivity to LDS missionary work since joining other denominations.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Mexico has extended specialized outreach among only a handful of Amerindian peoples, most notably the Yucatan Maya and Tzotzil. The Yucatan Maya have received LDS outreach for as long as 40 years and are the best-reached Amerindian people by the Church in Mexico. The Church has translated the Book of Mormon and a handful of gospel study and missionary resources into Yucatan Maya. Currently there appear to be at least one stake, two districts, and several mission branches that appear to be predominantly comprised of Yucatan Maya members.[8] The Tzotzil are the second best-reached Amerindian people by the Church in Mexico and have received outreach since the early 1980s. Today the Church operates one Tzotzil-speaking district and has Tzotzil translations of the Book of Mormon and a few basic church materials available. The Huave are the only other Amerindian people in Mexico who receive specialized outreach and have church services held in their native language. Currently only one Huave-speaking branch operates in Oaxaca State. Only small numbers of converts have joined the Church from other major Amerindian peoples, such as the Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Tzeltal, and the vast majority of these converts have been bilingual in Spanish. Although no specialized outreach has occurred among the Zapotec, a couple branches in Oaxaca State frequently conduct church meetings in Zapotec languages. However, these branches are not officially designated as Zapotec-speaking and there are no Zapotec translations of LDS materials available.

Most nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups report a small presence among the Mayo. Evangelicals have experienced steady growth and claim 20% of the Mayo population.[9] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in the Mayo homeland. In early 2015, Witnesses reported 30 Mayo-speaking congregations or groups that assembled in the Mayo homeland. Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Mayo.[10] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Mayo members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Mayo. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence among the Mayo community as evidenced by few, if any, congregations that operate within the Mayo homeland.[11]

Limitations

No local member and returned missionary reports were available regarding the number of Mayo converts in Mexico. The Church does not publish the number of members by language usage for languages not among the 10 most commonly spoken languages of its worldwide membership. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Mayo who have joined the Church. The Church does not publish the number and location of its member groups. Consequently it is unclear how many member groups operate in areas with sizable numbers of Mayo. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists and Nazarenes among the Mayo.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to expand its presence within the Mayo homeland and conduct missionary activity in the Mayo language appears mixed within the foreseeable future. The Church in Mexico has never had as large of a full-time missionary force at its disposal as at present but most of this surplus missionary manpower has been channeled into reactivation efforts in the most populous cities. The Mayo homelands are serviced by a single mission and present good opportunities for the expansion of missionary activity into the region. However, disinterest by Mexican mission and area leaders to extend additional Amerindian-specific outreach may delay more concentrated missionary efforts for years or decades to come. No translations of LDS materials and no Mayo-speaking full-time missionaries will likely continue to reduce the Mayo's receptivity to LDS outreach. Opportunities for the establishment of an LDS community among the Mayo nonetheless appear favorable due to successes by Protestant groups within the past century. However, these opportunities will likely be time sensitive. Additional delays to

reaching the Mayo may result in missed opportunities and diminished receptivity to the Latter-day Saint gospel witness. Prospects appear most favorable for specialized outreach to occur once Mayo converts self-organize and petition church leaders for translations of gospel materials into Mayo, the establishment of language-specific congregations, and the assignment of Mayo-speaking missionaries.

[1] "Indicadores y estadísticas," Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas, retrieved 4 September 2014. http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54

[2] "Mayo in Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 4 February 2015 http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13604/MX#religion

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

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

[5] "Indicadores y estadísticas," Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas, retrieved 4 September 2014. http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54

[6] "Indicadores y estadísticas," Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas, retrieved 4 September 2014. http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=54

[7] "Mayo," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 2 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/mfy

[8] Martinich, Matt. "LDS Outreach among the Maya of the Yucatán," cumorah.com, 26 January 2013. Peninsulahttp://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=290&cat_id=7

[9] "Mayo in Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 4 February 2015 http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13604/MX#religion

[10] http://www.jw.org/mfy/, accessed 4 February 2015

[11] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 14 November, 2014 http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch