

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Huastec of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering 215,500 in 2005,[1] the Huastec are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in northern Veracruz State and eastern San Luís Potosí State. The Huastec speak the Huastec language - a language that pertains to the Mayan language family. The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Huastec is 148,829.[2] In 2005, 69% of the ethnic Huastec population in Mexico was estimated[3] to speak Huastec. There are two dialects of Huastec: San Luís Potosí and Veracruz. The Huastec have continued to reside within their homelands since the arrival of Europeans several centuries ago, although many Mestizos have established cities and towns in the region. Most Huastec adhere to Catholicism. Protestant denominations comprise a sizable minority among the San Luís Potosí subgroup. No specialized LDS outreach has occurred among the Huastec although LDS congregations have operated for several decades within or nearby the Huastec homelands.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments within areas traditionally inhabited by Huastec people and known instances of Huastec converts joining the Church. Church growth and missionary successes among the Huastec 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. The size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups with a presence among the Huastec are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

Although no stakes or districts are currently headquartered within the Huastec homelands, the Church has two stakes and one district that administer portions of these homelands including the Ciudad Valles México Stake (organized in 2000), the Tuxpan México Stake (organized in 2009),and the Huejutla de Reyes México District (organized in 1996). The Church organized its first congregations within the Huastec homelands in 1979 in Barrancón and Cerro Azul. Additional congregations were organized in Tempoal (1980), Tantoyuca (1986), Jaguey Chicontepec (1987), and Tanquián (1988). No new congregations have appeared to have been organized within the Huastec homelands since 1988. No congregations have appeared to have been discontinued in the Huastec homelands.

Full-time missionaries serving in the Ciudad Valles area during the early 2010s reported small numbers of Huastec-speaking members in some congregations. Congregations that operate within the Huastec homelands significantly varied in regards to the number of active members as of the mid-2010s. Smaller branches appear to have less than 40 active members whereas larger congregations have more than 100 active members.

No LDS materials have been translated into Huastec.

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

Successes

The Church has established five branches and one ward within the Huastec homelands. Some of these congregations have operated for over three decades. However, outreach has only appeared to have occurred in Spanish. The operation of congregations within areas traditionally inhabited by the Huastec is essential for the Church to conduct missionary activity

among this ethnolinguistic group. There have appeared to be small numbers of bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking Huastec in these congregations who have joined the Church within the past couple decades.

Opportunities

The Huastec number among the 20 most populous Amerindian peoples in Mexico yet the LDS Church has not appeared to extend any specialized outreach in the Huastec language. This Amerindian people presents good opportunities for LDS growth due to their sizable population and close proximity to wards and branches. The Church currently has six cities within or nearby areas with sizable numbers of Huastec where an LDS congregation operates. These cities include Cerro Azul (1 ward), Jaguey Chicontepec (1 branch), Tanlajás (1 branch), Tanquián (1 branch), Tantoyuca (1 branch), and Tempoal (1 branch).

Firesides or devotional meetings where Huastec members and investigators brainstorm and discuss ideas to initiate Huastec-specific outreach may help church leaders assess needs and notify membership of plans to establish Huastec-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Huastec-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards and branches to assess the need and performance of Huastec-specific outreach in urban areas with sizable numbers of Mestizos. Providing Huastec translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Huastec languages, may be appropriate and feasible within the immediate future if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Huastec members will be crucial to ensure the success of these approaches in establishing an LDS Huastec community as they act as a bridge between Spanish-speaking stake, mission, and area leadership, and Huastec 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 Huastec within their homeland. 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. Locations that may be favorable to headquarter additional outreach expansion efforts within the Huastec homeland include Aquismón, Naranjos, and Tampamolón.

The Mexico Tampico Mission administers almost all of the Huastec homelands. Rarely is an entire Amerindian people in Mexico with as large of a population as the Huastec serviced by a single LDS mission. A single mission administering an ethnolinguistic people provides more efficient administration and greater consistency in specialized missionary outreach. Thus, these conditions pose good opportunities for mission leaders to target the Huastec with full-time missionaries.

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 Spanish usage to hold worship services and teach classes. 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 Huastec 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 Huastec culture and society. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Huastec-speaking branches or member groups would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Huastec 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 Huastec, one cannot accurately assess whether the lack of a Huastec Latter-day Saint community is attributed to no language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work or if the Huastec have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

The Church has not organized new congregations within the Huastec homelands since 1988. The lack of LDS outreach expansion within the past quarter-century indicates that the Church has either experienced limited receptivity from the local population, the Church has allocated few mission resources to the region, or a combination of the two. The Mexico Tampico

Mission may continue to avoid the opening of additional areas to missionary activity within the Huastec homelands due to greater opportunities for growth and greater ease in expanding missionary work elsewhere within the boundaries of the mission.

Most Huastec live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In 2014, there were three cities in the Huastec homelands that had over 20,000 inhabitants.[4] Outreach expansion will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find effective methods to extend outreach in cities and towns with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. These methods generally consist of mission leadership visiting these communities, finding investigators and isolated members, and consistently mentoring 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 or area leaders to incur on themselves, especially considering the ease of further saturating urban areas with greater numbers of Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries.

Many Huastec 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 establishment of an LDS presence among the Huastec may result in reduced receptivity to the Church once concentrated missionary activity occurs on a larger scale. Other proselytism-focused groups have made significant inroads among the Huastec and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Huastec 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.[5] 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 minimal presence among the Huastec. Evangelicals have experienced extremely limited growth and claim less than one percent of the Huastec population.[6] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence in the Huastec homeland. In late-2014, Witnesses reported 19 Huastec-speaking congregations that assembled within or nearby the Huastec homeland. Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Huastec.[7] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Huastec members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Huastec languages. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence among the Huastec community as evidenced by no reported congregations that operate within or nearby the Huastec homeland.[8]

Limitations

No local member or returned missionary reports were available regarding the number of Huastec 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 Huastec 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 Huastec. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists or Nazarenes among the Huastec.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to expand its presence within the Huastec homeland and conduct missionary activity in the Huastec 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 but most of this surplus missionary manpower has been channeled into reactivation efforts in the most populous cities. Additionally, the Huastec homelands are serviced by a single mission and there are good opportunities to expand missionary activity into this 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. The Church has not organized any new congregations within the Huastec homelands in over 20 years, suggesting modest receptivity and few mission resources allocated to the region. No translations of LDS materials and no Huastec-speaking full-time missionaries will likely continue to reduce the Huastec's receptivity to LDS outreach. Opportunities for the establishment of an LDS community among the Huastec nonetheless appear favorable due to some limited successes by Protestant groups within the past century. However, these opportunities will likely be time sensitive. Additional delays in reaching the Huastec 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 Huastec converts self-organize and petition church leaders for translations of gospel materials into Huastec, the establishment of language-specific congregations, and the assignment of Huastec-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] "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

[3] "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

[4] "Mexico: Veracruz de Ignacio," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 7 February 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/Mexico-Veracruz.html

[5] 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

[6] "Country - Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 7 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/MX

[7] http://www.jw.org/hus/, accessed 7 February 2015

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