

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Chinantec of Mexico

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Posted: March 16th, 2015

Overview

Numbering 188,000 in 2005,[1] the Chinantec are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in extreme northern Oaxaca State. The Chinantec speak 14 Chinantecan languages that pertain to the Otomanguean language family.[2] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Chinantecan languages is 124,977.[3] The majority of Chinantec adhere to Catholicism, with small numbers following Protestant groups. The LDS Church maintains no congregations within the Chinantec homeland and has reported no Chinantec-specific outreach despite a population of nearly 200,000.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church within areas nearby the Chinantec homelands. Opportunities and challenges for LDS growth among the Chinantec 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 Chinantec are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1960, the Church had at least one branch in Oaxaca State.[4] In 1981, the Church organized its first stake in the city of Oaxaca, today known as the Oaxaca Mexico Amapolas Stake. Although stakes headquartered in Oaxaca have included portions of the Chinantec homelands, none of these stakes have ever appeared to operate congregations within the Chinantec homelands. In 1993, the Church organized a stake in Tuxtepec. The Tuxtepec Mexico Stake became the first stake located nearby the Chinantec homelands although none of its congregations operated within the Chinantec homelands. In early 2015, the Chinantec homelands were divided between the Mexico Oaxaca Mission and the Mexico Veracruz Mission and the Tuxtepec México Stake and the Oaxaca México Amapolas Stake.

As of mid-2014, the Church reported no translations of scriptures or gospel study or missionary materials into Chinantec languages.

A map displaying LDS congregations located in the Chinantec homeland can be found here.

Opportunities

The greatest opportunities for initiating LDS outreach among the Chinantec exist in Tuxtepec due to good accessibility from other major cities in the region, close proximity to the Chinantec homelands, its sizable population, and the presence of one LDS stake and three wards. Tuxtepec is inhabited by over 100,000 people[5] and is the second most populous city in Oaxaca State. In addition to close proximity to the Chinantec homelands, Tuxtepec has a sizable number of Chinantec inhabitants. Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Chinantec members and investigators to brainstorm and discuss ideas for establishing specialized outreach may be beneficial for church leaders to assess needs and notify membership of plans to establish Chinantec-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Chinantec-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards to provide specialized outreach in Tuxtepec. Providing Chinantec translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Chinantec, may be appropriate if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Chinantec 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 Chinantec 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 Chinantec within their homelands. Small cities and towns southwest of Tuxtepec such as San Felipe Usila, San Juan Bautista Valle Nacional, and San Lucas Ojitlán present the best opportunities for Chinantec-specific outreach due to the high percentages of Chinantec people within the population of these cities, each of these cities supporting populations of 5,000 or more, and the cultural and societal significance of these cities among specific Chinantec subgroups. The placement of multiple missionary companionships in each of these locations and the assignment a single missionary companionship to multiple nearby cities and towns provides a solution to extending formal missionary outreach into these locations while conserving limited mission resources and troubleshooting 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 may make this course of action a challenge. The reassignment of the Chinantec homelands to the direct supervision of missions instead of stakes may also be effective in maintaining adequate mission president oversight during initial proselytism efforts. Additional locations within the Chinantec homelands where outreach expansion efforts may be favorable include San Juan Lalana and San Juan Quiotepec.

More than two-thirds of the Chinantec population speaks Spanish as a second language. The utilization of Spanish translations of church materials and scriptures may adequately meet local needs among Spanish-speaking Chinantec. High percentages of ethnic Chinantec who speak Spanish suggest that integration with non-Chinantec Spanish speakers may be appropriate in locations where the establishment of segregated congregations is unfeasible.

Challenges

The Church in Mexico has largely avoided 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 for holding worship services and teaching classes. Mexican church administration has appeared to believe that the establishment of language-specific congregations for Amerindian groups will become too taxing on mission or stake leadership due to historical challenges in establishing self-sufficient local leadership among Amerindian groups, 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 by 27 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. A return to commensurate membership and congregational growth trends will also evidence progress maintaining acceptable convert retention rates as larger numbers of active members require the organization of additional congregations.

The current geographical boundaries of LDS missions within Oaxaca State pose significant challenges for the Church to extend specialized outreach among the Chinantec. The Chinantec homelands are divided between two LDS missions, namely the Mexico Oaxaca Mission and the Mexico Veracruz Mission. These conditions create difficulties for mission leaders to coordinate their efforts to reach the relatively small Chinantec population as both missions have millions of people who reside within their geographical boundaries.

The lack of a single Chinantec 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 Chinantec culture and society. In 2005, 67% of Chinantec were estimated to speak a Chinantec language.[6] Monolingual speakers of Chinantec languages appear to comprise approximately 10% of the Chinantec population. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Chinantec-speaking branches or member groups in Tuxtepec or within locations in the Chinantec homeland would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Chinantec 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 Chinantec, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Chinantec Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Chinantec have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Most Chinantec who reside within their homelands live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. In 2014, Tuxtepec was the only city with over 10,000 inhabitants nearby the Chinantec homelands.[7] Chinantec ethnolinguistic groups traditionally reside in remote, rural areas that are difficult to access. Rugged terrain has helped preserve Chinantec culture and language, but has also contributed to the high degree of linguistic diversity. Due to this combination of remote location and linguistic diversity, it appears that most Chinantec ethnolinguistic groups have never received an LDS gospel witness and have no Latter-day Saint converts at present. Reaching these peoples will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and identify suitable methods to extend outreach. Successes by the Church in reaching other Amerindian peoples with similar geo-demographic characteristics have required mission leadership to visit these communities, find

investigators and isolated members, and implement some type of method to consistently visit these individuals and 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 and simplicity of further saturating urban areas with greater numbers of Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries. The fact that Chinantec languages are usually unwritten and difficult for nonnative people to learn may discourage mission and area leaders from seriously considering specialized language outreach due to the complexity of the task, challenges inherent in nonnative missionaries learning to teach in Amerindian languages, and difficulties translating church materials and scriptures.

Many Chinantec live in low living conditions and have limited employment opportunities. Most heavily rely on agriculture for employment and sustenance. Utilizing the Perpetual Education Fund to provide low interest loans to returned missionaries may bolster economic self-sustainability and prevent local members from leaving their native communities in search of work outside their homeland. Securing suitable spaces to hold church services for larger congregations may present difficulties due to a lack of sizable, clean buildings easily accessible for members in smaller cities, towns, or villages.

Delays in the establishment of an LDS community among the Chinantec may result in reduced receptivity to the Church once concentrated missionary activity occurs. Other proselytism-focused groups have made significant inroads among the Chinantec and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Chinantec who have joined other nontraditional churches have become religiously and socially integrated into these denominations. Consequently, many of these individuals and families will likely exhibit 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.

The size and growth of nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups among the Chinantec widely varies by denomination and ethnolinguistic group. Evangelicals report a significant following among many Chinantec ethnolinguistic group as half of the Tlacoatzintepec Chinantec, Usila Chinantec, and Valle Nacional Chinantec are Evangelical.[9] Evangelicals claim a small following among some Chinantec peoples as less than two percent of the Comaltepec Chinantec and Quiotepec Chinantec are Evangelical.[10] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a limited presence among the Chinantec. In early 2015, Witnesses reported nine Chinantec-speaking congregations that operated in Oaxaca State. Witnesses operate congregations in five Chinantec languages, including Ojitlan Chinantec, San Juan Lalana Chinantec, San Juan Quiotepec Chinantec, Uslia Chinantec, and Valle Nacional Chinantec. Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Ojitlán Chinantec.[11] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to have a small community of Chinantec members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Chinantec. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have few, if any, Chinantec members and does not appear to operate congregations within the Chinantec homelands.[12]

Limitations

Few local member and returned missionary reports were available regarding the number of Chinantec 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 by its worldwide membership. There are no reliable estimates available regarding the number of Chinantec 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 Chinantec. No information was available regarding the recent growth trends of Seventh-Day Adventists or Nazarenes among the Chinantec.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to extend specialized outreach among the Chinantec appears poor within the foreseeable future due to the Church in Mexico's reluctance to extend specialized missionary outreach among additional Amerindian peoples, the Chinantec homeland divided between two LDS missions, the vast majority of Chinantec residing in rural areas, and no LDS materials translated into Chinantec languages. Progress reaching the Chinantec appears limited to missionary activity conducted in Spanish within Tuxtepec or other major cities where Chinantec have relocated. As the Church has no translations

of materials into Chinantec languages and has never appeared to extend specialized outreach among the Chinantec, it is difficult to assess how receptive this people will be to future missionary efforts that specifically target them. Small numbers of bilingual Chinantec may join the Church in Tuxtepec within the foreseeable future. Significant progress in establishing an LDS community among the Chinantec will likely hinge on Chinantec converts taking the initiative to self-organize and petition church leaders to establish language-specific congregations, translate LDS materials, and assigned missionaries to specifically target Chinantec peoples.

[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] "Chinantecan," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/chinantecan

[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] Hart, John L. "Blessed in abundance," LDS Church News, 13 May 2000. http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/37757/Blessed-in-abundance.html

[5] “Mexico: Oaxaca,” www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 13 February 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-oaxaca.php

[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] "Oaxaca (Mexico)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 10 November 2014. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-oaxaca.php

[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] "Country: Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 13 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/MX

[10] "Country: Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 13 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/MX

[11] http://www.jw.org/chj/, accessed 6 February 2015.

[12] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 13 February 2015 http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch