

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mixe of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering 161,000 in 2005,[1] the Mixe are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in north-central Oaxaca State. The Mixe speak eight Mixe languages that pertain to the Mixe-Zoquean language family.[2] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Mixe languages is 115,265.[3] In recent years, many Mixe have relocated to the city of Oaxaca and other cities near the Mixe homelands such as Matías Romero and Tlacolula de Matamoros. The majority of Mixe adhere to Catholicism although a sizable number adhere to Protestant denominations. The LDS Church reports no Mixe-specific outreach notwithstanding the Mixe constituting one of the most populous Amerindian peoples in Oaxaca State and the Church operating congregations in several locations where there are sizable Mixe populations.

This case study reviews the history of the LDS Church within or nearby the Mixe homelands. LDS successes reaching the Mixe are identified and opportunities and challenges for future 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 Mixe is 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 that is today known as the Oaxaca Mexico Amapolas Stake. Although stakes headquartered in Oaxaca have included portions of the Mixe homelands, none of these stakes have ever appeared to operate congregations within the Mixe homelands. The Juchitán Mexico Stake (organized in 1990) is the only stake that operates a congregation that assembles within the Mixe homelands. The San Juan Guichicovi Branch was organized in 1999 and has appeared to have sizable numbers of Mixe members since its establishment. Some members have provided Mixe translation assistance to Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries. In 2005, there were approximately 200 Latter-day Saints in San Juan Guichicovi.[5] Cities outside the Mixe homeland where there is an LDS presence and sizable numbers of Mixe include Oaxaca (26 wards), Matías Romero (3 wards), Tlacolula (1 ward), and Mogoñe (1 branch).

In early 2015, Mexico Oaxaca Mission administered the Mixe homelands. Two stakes include portions of the Mixe homelands within their geographical boundaries: the Juchitán México Stake and the Oaxaca México Mitla Stake.

As of early 2015, the Church reported no translations of scriptures or gospel study or missionary materials into Mixe languages.

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

Successes

The Church operates one branch within the Mixe homelands and maintains congregations in cities where sizable numbers of Mixe reside. These congregations have provided minimal outreach to the Mixe people and present opportunities for the extension of specialized missionary activity among them. The operation of congregations in these locations has resulted in small numbers of Mixe joining the Church within the past couple decades. The Church has extended outreach specifically targeting

Mixe populations in San Juan Guichicovi although these proselytism efforts have depended on local members to provide translation assistance for Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries.

Opportunities

The greatest opportunities for initiating specialized LDS outreach among the Mixe exist in San Juan Guichicovi as it is the only city within the Mixe homelands where an LDS congregation operates. Mixe appear to account for the majority of Latter-day Saints in the San Juan Guichicovi Branch. However, it is unclear whether the Church has made accommodations to translate meetings into Mixe or if church services are conducted in Spanish. Additional cities also present good opportunities for Mixe-specific outreach such as Oaxaca and Matías Romero. Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite Mixe members and investigators to brainstorm and discuss ideas to begin Mixe-specific outreach may be beneficial for church leaders to assess the need for the development of language resources and the opening of additional congregations within the Mixe homelands. Providing Mixe translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Mixe, may be appropriate if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Mixe 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 Mixe members and investigators. Bilingual Mixe Latter-day Saints provide valuable opportunities to translate the Book of Mormon and basic gospel materials into Mixe such as The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, Gospel Principles, General Conference addresses, and the missionary lessons.

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 Mixe within their homelands. Small cities and towns within the heart of the Mixe homeland such as San Juan Juquila Mixes, San Miguel Quetzaltepec, San Lucas Camotlán, and Santa María Tlahuitoltepec present good opportunities for Mixe-specific outreach due to the high percentages of Mixe people within the population of these locations and the cultural and societal significance of these cities and towns among specific Mixe subgroups. The placement of multiple missionary companionships in each of these locations and the assignment of individual missionary companionships to target multiple nearby towns and villages provides a solution to extending formal missionary outreach into rural areas 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 Mixe homelands to the direct supervision of the Mexico Oaxaca Mission instead of stakes headquartered in Juchitán or Oaxaca may also be effective in maintaining adequate mission president oversight during initial proselytism efforts.

Many Mixe speak Spanish as a second language. The utilization of Spanish translations of church materials and scriptures may adequately meet local needs among Spanish-speaking Mixe. The integration of Spanish-speaking Mixe with non-Mixe Spanish speakers may be appropriate in locations where the establishment of segregated congregations is unfeasible due to a small target population, limited mission resources, or few qualified local priesthood holders.

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 lack of a single Mixe 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 Mixe culture and society. In 2005, 72% of Mixe were estimated to speak a Mixe language.[6] Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Mixe-speaking branches or member groups in Oaxaca, Matías Romero, or locations in the Mixe homeland would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Mixe 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 Mixe, one cannot accurately assess whether the lack of a Mixe Latter-day Saint community is attributed to no language resources

available for testimony development and missionary work, or whether the Mixe have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Most Mixe who reside within their homelands live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants. In 2010, San Juan Guichicovi was the most populous city in the Mixe homelands with a mere 4,284 inhabitants.[7] Mixe ethnolinguistic groups traditionally reside in remote, rural areas that are difficult to access from major cities such as Oaxaca and Juchitán. Rugged terrain has helped preserve Mixe 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 Mixe 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 Mixe 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 Mixe 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 small cities, towns, and villages.

Delays in the establishment of an LDS community among the Mixe may result in reduced receptivity to the Church once concentrated missionary activity occurs. Other proselytism-focused groups have made significant inroads among the Mixe and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Mixe 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 Mixe widely varies by denomination and ethnolinguistic group. Evangelicals report a significant following among several Mixe ethnolinguistic groups as at least 20% of the Coatlan Mixe, Istmo Mixe, and Tlahuitoltepec Mixe are Evangelical.[9] Evangelicals claim a small following among some Mixe peoples as less than five percent of the Juquila Mixe and Quetzaltepec Mixe are Evangelical.[10] Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a widespread presence among the Mixe. In early 2015, Witnesses reported 21 Mixe-speaking congregations that operated in Oaxaca State. Witnesses have also translated their official website jw.org into Mixe although it is not clear into which Mixe sublanguage the website has been translated.[11] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church appears to have a small community of Mixe members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Mixe. The Church of the Nazarene appears to have few, if any, Mixe members and does not appear to operate any congregations within the Mixe homelands.[12]

Limitations

Few local member and returned missionary reports were available regarding the number of Mixe 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 Mixe who have joined the Church. The Church does not publish the number or locations of its member groups. Consequently it is unclear how many member groups operate in areas with sizable numbers of Mixe. No information was available regarding the recent growth

trends of Seventh-Day Adventists or Nazarenes among the Mixe.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to extend specialized outreach among the Mixe appears bleak within the foreseeable future due to the Church in Mexico's reluctance to extend specialized missionary outreach among additional Amerindian peoples, the vast majority of Mixe residing in rural areas, and no LDS materials translated into Mixe languages. Progress reaching the Mixe appears limited to missionary activity conducted in Spanish within San Juan Guichicovi, Matías Romero, Oaxaca, and or other major cities where Mixe have relocated. As the Church has no translations of materials into Mixe languages and has extended limited outreach to this Amerindian people, it is difficult to assess their receptivity to future LDS missionary efforts. Significant progress in establishing an LDS community among the Mixe will likely hinge on Mixe converts taking the initiative to self-organize and petition church leaders to establish language-specific congregations and translate LDS materials.

[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] "Oaxaca Mixean," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 13 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/oaxaca-mixean

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[5] Clark, Jonathan. “LDS church charting rapid growth in Mexico,” El Universal / The Herald , 29 November 2005. http://www.religionnewsblog.com/12937/lds-church-charting-rapid-growth-in-mexico

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[7] "Oaxaca (Mexico)," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 18 February 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-oaxaca.php

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[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/mco/, accessed 14 February 2015.

[12] "Nazarene Church Data Search," nazarene.org, retrieved 18 February 2015 http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch