People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Tojolabal of Mexico

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Overview

Numbering 58,094 in 2005,[1] the Tojolabal are an Amerindian people in Mexico who traditionally reside in eastern Chiapas State. The Tojolabal speak the Tojolabal language - a language that pertains to the Mayan language family.[2] The most recent estimate for the number of native speakers of Tojolabal is 43,168.[3] In 2005, 74% of the ethnic Tojolabal population in Mexico was estimated[4] to speak Tojolabal. Monolingual Tojolabal speakers constitute 22% of Tojolabal speakers.[5] Catholicism syncretized with indigenous Mayan beliefs constitutes the traditional religion of most Tojolabal. There is a sizable number of Protestants in some Tojolabal communities. No specialized LDS outreach has occurred among the Tojolabal although LDS congregations have operated for several decades nearby the Tojolabal homelands.

This case study reviews LDS growth developments nearby areas traditionally inhabited by the Tojolabal people. 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 Tojolabal are summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

In 1980, the Church in Chiapas organized its first stake in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Stakes headquartered in Tuxtla Gutiérrez serviced the Tojolabal homeland until the creation of the San Cristobal Mexico District in the mid-2000s. This district became a stake in 2007. The San Cristobal Mexico Stake has since included some congregations nearby the Tojolabal homelands where there are sizable numbers of Tojolabal such as Comitán and San José Obrero. No LDS stakes or districts have been headquartered within the Tojolabal homelands. The Tojolabal homelands fell almost entirely within the boundaries of the San José Obrero Branch in the San Cristóbal México Stake as of early 2015. Few, if any, Tojolabal have appeared to join the Church. The Church reports no translations of scriptures or gospel study or missionary materials into the Tojolabal language.

A map displaying LDS congregations near the Tojolabal homeland can be found here.

Opportunities

The greatest opportunities for initiating LDS outreach among the Tojolabal exist in Comitán due to good accessibility from other major cities in the region, close proximity to the Tojolabal homelands, a sizable population, and the presence of multiple LDS congregations. Comitán is inhabited by nearly 100,000 people[6] and is the fourth most populous city in Chiapas State. In addition to close proximity to the Tojolabal homelands, Comitán has a sizable number of Tojolabal inhabitants. Holding special firesides or devotional meetings that invite any known Tojolabal members or 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 Tojolabal-speaking units. There are immediate opportunities for stake and mission leadership to establish Tojolabal-speaking Sunday School classes in Spanish-speaking wards or branches to provide specialized outreach in the two Comitán wards and the San José Obrero Branch. Providing Tojolabal translations of sacrament meeting services, or organizing member groups or branches that conduct all church services and classes in Tojolabal, may be appropriate if approved by stake, mission, and area leadership. Bilingual Tojolabal 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 Tojolabal 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 Tojolabal within their homelands. Las Margaritas presents the greatest opportunity for the Church to commence Tojolabal-specific outreach as the city is the only city within the Tojolabal homelands with over 20,000 inhabitants. Distance is less than 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Comitán, permitting easy access for stake and mission leaders. The assignment of a couple missionary companionships, the organization of a member group, and the designation of missionaries serving in the area as Tojolabal-speaking present an efficient and effective plan to initiate outreach while conserving limited mission resources. 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 Tojolabal homelands to the direct supervision of the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission may also be effective in maintaining adequate mission president oversight during initial proselytism efforts. Additional locations within the Tojolabal homelands where outreach expansion efforts may be favorable include the San Juan del Pozo area, Rafael Ramírez, and San Arturo las Flores.

More than two-thirds of the Tojolabal 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 Tojolabal. High percentages of ethnic Tojolabal who speak Spanish suggest that integration with non-Tojolabal 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 lack of a single Tojolabal 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 Tojolabal culture and society. In 2005, 74% of Tojolabal were estimated to speak Tojolabal.[7] Monolingual speakers of Tojolabal appear to comprise approximately 22% of the ethnic Tojolabal population. Even if the Church were to determine that the establishment of Tojolabal-speaking branches or member groups in Comitán or within locations in the Tojolabal homeland would be appropriate and feasible to meet local language needs, Tojolabal 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 Tojolabal, one cannot accurately assess whether the absence of a Tojolabal Latter-day Saint community is attributed to a lack of language resources needed for testimony development and missionary work, or that the Tojolabal have been less receptive to mission outreach compared to their Spanish-speaking Mestizo counterparts.

Most Tojolabal who reside within their homelands live in cities, towns, and villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. In 2010, Comitán and Las Margaritas were the only cities with over 10,000 inhabitants within or nearby the Tojolabal homelands.[8] The Tojolabal traditionally reside in remote, rural areas. Reaching populations in towns and villages will require intuitive planning by church leaders to conserve limited resources and find an effective method 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 consistently visit 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.

Many Tojolabal 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 Tojolabal may result in reduced receptivity to the Church once

concentrated missionary activity occurs. Other proselytism-focused groups have made significant inroads among the Tojolabal and have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have previously been receptive to LDS outreach. Many Tojolabal 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.[9] 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.

Some nontraditional missionary-focused Christian groups report a widespread presence among the Tojolabal, whereas others do not. Evangelicals claim 20% of the Tojolabal population.[10] Evangelicals have a pervasive presence in the Tojolabal homeland and appear to operate in most villages. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a pervasive presence in the Tojolabal homeland and appear to number among the largest nontraditional Christian groups in the area. In early 2015, Witnesses reported 28 Tojolabal-speaking congregations in Chiapas State.[11] Witnesses have translated their official website, jw.org, into Tojolabal.[12] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church likely has at least a small community of Tojolabal members. Adventists do not translate printed materials into Tojolabal. The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to have a presence among the Tojolabal.

Limitations

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

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to expand its presence within the Tojolabal homeland and conduct missionary activity in the Tojolabal language appears poor 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. 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, no Tojolabal-speaking full-time missionaries, and no LDS units within the Tojolabal homeland will likely continue to delay the establishment of an LDS Tojolabal community. Opportunities for the establishment of an LDS presence among the Tojolabal nonetheless appear favorable as evidenced by the successes of other nontraditional Christian groups among this people. However, these opportunities will likely be time sensitive. Additional delays in reaching the Tojolabal may result in missed opportunities and diminished receptivity to the Latter-day Saint gospel witness.

[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] "Tojolabal," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 23 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/toj

[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] "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

[5] "Tojolabal," ethnologue.com, retrieved 21 February 2015. http://www.ethnologue.com/language/toj

[6] “Mexico: Chiapas,” www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 23 February 2015. http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-chiapas.php

[7] "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

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

[9] 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

[10] "Country: Mexico," Joshua Project, retrieved 23 February 2015. http://joshuaproject.net/countries/MX

[11] "Find a Meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses," jw.org, retrieved 23 February 2015. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_YBBXHC

[12] http://www.jw.org/toj/, accessed 21 February 2015