



# People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## LDS Outreach among the Hmong in the United States

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### Overview

Native to the mountainous areas of southern China and northern Indochina, the Hmong (Miao) are generally known as the Miao in China and Hmong in northern Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma. Both terms Hmong and Miao can be generally used interchangeably but not all Miao in China pertain to the same ethnic group as the Hmong native to outside of China. The Hmong are among the few ethnic minority groups of Southeast Asia that have received concentrated LDS outreach in immigrant communities in the United States, but have no missionaries or congregations operating in their homeland. Ironically, no other Southeast Asian ethnic group in the United States has as large of a Latter-day Saint community as the Hmong. The Church operated 10 Hmong-speaking congregations (two wards, eight branches) in mid-2015 whereas the Church operated significantly fewer congregations among other prominent Southeast Asian groups in the United States notwithstanding these ethnolinguistic groups possessing similarly-sized or larger immigrant populations than the Hmong.

This case study provides background information on the Hmong people. The history of LDS missionary activity among the Hmong in the United States is summarized and church growth successes are identified. Opportunities and challenges for future growth are analyzed. The growth of the Church among other Southeast Asian peoples in the United States is reviewed and the size and growth trends of other missionary-focused Christian groups among Hmong Americans are examined. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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### Hmong History

The Hmong appear to have populated the mountains of southern China for millennia. Expansion by Imperial China under the Qing Dynasty into Hmong homelands and the imposition of taxes resulted in conflict that led to many Hmong resettling in northern Indochina between the seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries. There are 34 Hmong and Miao sublanguages spoken worldwide; over two-thirds of which are native to southern China. Many of the names of these sublanguages originate from the ornate traditional clothing worn by these groups or from the geographical location where they generally reside. In the early twentieth century, the Hmong instigated a revolt in French Indochina which was known as The War of the Insane.<sup>[1]</sup>

Conflict intensified between the Hmong and other ethnic groups or political entities in the twentieth century due to repression of these groups and the involvement of the Hmong in American military operations. In the 1960s, the United States recruited Hmong men in Laos to fight a "secret war" against the North Vietnamese when they made intrusions into Laos. Operations were based in Long Tieng, Laos. Many Hmong fought valiantly and exhibited friendship and loyalty to the United States in its military operations in Southeast Asia during this period. Advancing communist forces in Laos threatened the safety of many Hmong, resulting in the evacuation of tens of thousands of Hmong into Thailand. In late 1975, the communist Pathet Lao forces overthrew the Royal Lao government. The Hmong became an immediate target for aggression and discrimination by the Pathet Lao due to their involvement in American military operations, resulting in a continued flow of Hmong refugees into Thailand. The United States accepted tens of thousands of Hmong refugees between the mid-1970s and early 1980s who were resettled throughout the United States.<sup>[2]</sup> Notwithstanding the United States accepting tens of thousands of Hmong as refugees in several waves of resettlement, thousands of Hmong continued to reside in refugee camps in Thailand in the late 2000s.

The 2010 United States census counted 260,076 individuals who identified as Hmong. Hmong in the United States predominantly originate from the Hmong Daw and Hmong Njua ethnolinguistic groups. The Hmong Daw and Hmong Njua languages are mutually intelligible and primarily vary in pronunciation and lexicon.<sup>[3]</sup> Both peoples predominantly follow ethnic religions. The Hmong Daw are 35% Christian whereas the Hmong Njua are 7% Christian.<sup>[4]</sup>

States with the largest Hmong populations as of 2010 included California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), Wisconsin (49,240), North Carolina (10,864), and Michigan (5,924).<sup>[5]</sup> LDS mission outreach has occurred principally in California (San Joaquin Valley) and Minnesota (St Paul) and to a lesser extent in Anchorage, Alaska; Oklahoma; San Diego, California; and Wausau, Wisconsin.

## LDS History and Background

The Church began missionary efforts among the Hmong people in the late 1970s when tens of thousands of Hmong refugees arrived to the United States. Some missionaries assigned to the Thailand Bangkok Mission served the last several months of their missions in the United States where there were sizable numbers of Hmong refugees.<sup>[6]</sup> The Church appeared to organize the first Hmong-speaking branches in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Church extended Hmong-specific outreach in many American cities by the late 1980s in multiple states such as California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Utah.

The Church operated 10 Hmong-speaking units in the United States as of mid-2015. Eight of these congregations operated in California (Sacramento [2], Fairfield, Fresno, Merced, Oroville, San Diego, and Yuba City). The most recently organized Hmong-speaking branch in the United States is the Linda Branch (Hmong) in the Yuba City area (organized in late 2014). The Church in the United States reported sizable numbers of Hmong speakers in 16 additional congregations as of mid-2015. These congregations were located in the following cities: Anchorage, Alaska; Chico, California; Porterville, California; Yuba City, California [2]; Albemarle, North Carolina; Conover, North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Eau Claire, Wisconsin; Green Bay, Wisconsin [2]; Lake Mills, Wisconsin; Madison, Wisconsin; Sheboygan, Wisconsin; and Wausau, Wisconsin.

The Church has previously operated Hmong-speaking branches in several cities where no Hmong-speaking branches currently operate. Some of these locations include Denver, Colorado in 1981,<sup>[7]</sup> Salt Lake City, Utah in 1990,<sup>[8]</sup> Eureka, California in 1995,<sup>[9]</sup> and Appleton, Wisconsin. The most recently discontinued Hmong-speaking branch in the United States was the Twin Cities 4th Branch (Hmong) in the Minneapolis metropolitan area.

The Church translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Hmong in 1983. The Book of Mormon was translated in its entirety in 2000.<sup>[10]</sup> Translations of General Conference addresses into Hmong have been available since as early as 1988.<sup>[11]</sup>

The Church has reported good progress in regards to the number of active Hmong members in some locations. Over 600 Hmong Latter-day Saints in California gathered for a special conference in 2008 to discuss what members can do to keep Hmong traditions but also stay true to LDS teachings. Members at the conference primarily attended from Fresno, Sacramento, Modesto, Stockton, and Merced.<sup>[12]</sup> Some Hmong congregations have large numbers of active members. The Pioneer Park Ward (Hmong) in Fresno, California had upwards of 300 active members in the late 2000s. Many Hmong-speaking branches have between 50 and 100 active members.

A map of locations in the United States with Hmong-speaking LDS congregations or sizable numbers of Hmong Latter-day Saints can be found [here](#).

## Successes

The LDS Church is one of the largest Christian denominations among the Hmong in the United States. There are at least 26 LDS congregations in the United States that either hold worship services in Hmong or have sizable numbers of Hmong Latter-day Saints. Rarely has the Church in the United States made such impressive inroads among a traditionally non-Christian, immigrant ethnolinguistic group with a comparatively small population scattered across as many states. No other ethnolinguistic people in the United States has as large of an LDS presence that has essentially received no missionary outreach within their homelands. The Church has aggressively proselytized the Hmong in many states where there are sizable Hmong populations such as California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Hmong-speaking full-time missionaries have regularly served in several cities in California and Wisconsin and multiple missions maintain active Hmong proselytism programs. The Hmong language has been consistently taught in the Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) to missionaries destined to serve Hmong-speaking missions. Decades of missionary outreach have yielded good results as evidenced by 10 Hmong-speaking congregations in the United States as of mid-2015. There appears to be good self-sufficiency in many of these congregations as evidenced by a native Hmong bishop or branch president leading most of these units.

Returned missionaries note that member-missionary work has been essential for the growth of the Church. One returned missionary who served a Hmong-speaking mission in California during the late 2000s noted that “members were extremely helpful and willing to participate in missionary work. We would not have experienced the success that we did without our members’ help in finding, teaching, and fellowshiping.” Good member-missionary participation has appeared to precede formal missionary efforts in many locations.

Returned missionaries have noted many creative and intuitive methods to find Hmong investigators. Missionaries have attended Hmong community events and tournaments. Missionaries frequently operate booths at these events to distribute Hmong translations of LDS materials and the Book of Mormon. Missionaries note that they have identified addresses for Hmong families through public directories to assist proselytism efforts. Missionary visits to Hmong grocery stores or markets have resulted in

finding investigators. However, missionaries report that member referrals to teach family members or relatives have yielded the best results.

## Opportunities

There are good opportunities for the Church to expand Hmong-specific outreach into additional cities where there are sizable Hmong communities. The Church has a well-developed body of Hmong proselytism materials and has maintained Hmong language proselytism programs for decades in some areas. Thus, the Church has the resources and materials needed to continue to expand Hmong outreach into additional locations where little or no previous outreach has been extended. Cities where no Hmong congregation operates but where there are a sizable number of Hmong Latter-day Saints in English-speaking wards or branches present good opportunities to hold Hmong-speaking Sunday School classes and organize member groups, if church leaders have not done so already. Many of these cities are located in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Additional locations with Hmong communities may also present good results if Hmong-speaking missionaries are assigned such as Michigan and Denver, Colorado. Social media proselytism efforts may be effective in reaching Hmong populations in locations where no Hmong-speaking missionaries serve and where there are few, if any, Hmong Latter-day Saints.

Hmong Americans have significantly larger families than the average family size of the United States. Larger family size can potentially offer more resources to missionary work than many other ethnic groups with smaller average family sizes. The 1990 census reported that the average Hmong family had twice as many individuals compared to the average white American family (6.38 versus 3.06) and that most Hmong Americans (60%) were under age 18.<sup>[13]</sup> The large number of Hmong youth offer opportunities for full-time missionary service.

The positive relationship between many Hmong Americans and the United States government appears to have improved receptivity to the LDS Church in locations where Hmong-speaking congregations operate. LDS teachings which encourage members to support their governments and be involved in civic matters may have attracted some Hmong to investigate and join the Church. Additionally, the connection between the LDS Church and American society and culture may have also improved receptivity to missionary work.

The size of LDS Church in many Hmong American communities presents unique opportunities to prepare for prospective outreach in Hmong homelands. Many Hmong Americans retain a vivid memory of their traditions and customs and offer valuable opportunities for the LDS Church to make inroads among Hmong in Southeast Asia if legal obstacles that diminish religious freedom in many of these nations are overcome. Hmong American Latter-day Saints regularly serve full-time missions in the United States and provide invaluable resources as translators with English-speaking leadership, cultural experts on traditional beliefs and practices, and language guides to teach the Hmong language to non-Hmong full-time missionaries. The Church benefits from developed Hmong leadership in many locations with Hmong-speaking congregations. Some members with leadership experience can be assigned to Southeast Asia to work with Hmong communities within the confines of the law.

## Challenges

Returned missionaries have identified Hmong culture and traditional religion as the primary barriers to missionary work and LDS growth. The Church has appeared to struggle with helping investigators and members identify what Hmong customs or aspects of traditional religion can be practiced within the confines of LDS teachings and those that need to be abandoned. Deviation from Hmong cultural norms and conversion to Christianity have been viewed by many Hmong as not merely a change in religious affiliation, but an insult to Hmong ethnicity. However, it remains clear that some Hmong customs conflict with LDS teachings such as the custom that a man and woman live together before they marry.<sup>[14]</sup>

The Church appears to experience convert retention and member activity problems in some locations. The Church has appeared to baptize hundreds of Hmong in the Minneapolis metropolitan area yet operates only one Hmong-speaking branch for the entire city. The closure of a second Hmong branch in the early 2010s may be indicative of inadequate numbers of active priesthood holders to operate two branches. Similar member inactivity and convert attrition problems may prevent the organization of some Hmong-speaking branches in locations with sizable numbers of Hmong such as in several cities in Wisconsin and California. The Church has not translated its Hastening the Work of Salvation website or broadcast into Hmong.

Many Hmong have become assimilated into mainstream American society within recent years. This has created challenges with determining whether Hmong-specific missionary work or congregations should operate as many have become proficient in English. Returned missionaries have reported that some Hmong have appeared confused regarding the need for Hmong-specific congregations. These conditions pose challenges for extending specialized outreach among the Hmong due to individual differences in Hmong proficiency, English proficiency, and assimilation into mainstream American society.

The operation of Hmong congregations in some locations has been challenging due to the movement of Hmong populations. Some Hmong communities have moved to different cities within the past several decades, resulting in very few Hmong remaining in some locations where larger Hmong communities previously existed. The Church, for example, used to operate one or more Hmong-speaking branches in Utah during the early 1980s yet in 2010 there were less than 300 Hmong speakers in the entire state.<sup>[15]</sup>

The Church has yet to translate all LDS scriptures into Hmong. It is unclear why the Church has not completed translations of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price into Hmong as the Church has maintained a sizable presence among the Hmong since the late 1980s. The translation of these LDS scriptures into Hmong will be important for promoting testimony development and gospel scholarship among Hmong-speaking members who exhibit limited proficiency in English.

## **Comparative Growth**

The Church in the United States initiated outreach among most Southeast Asian peoples during the 1970s and 1980s. Most outreach began in Utah and California among recently immigrated individuals and families who fled their home nations as refugees. LDS outreach has primarily been extended to Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian communities. Vietnamese-specific outreach began in the late 1970s.<sup>[16]</sup> Many Vietnamese branches have operated over the past three decades although multiple branches have closed during this period such as in Utah and Nebraska. Currently the Church operates four Vietnamese-speaking branches in California (2), Georgia (1), and Texas (1). Cambodian-specific outreach also began in the 1970s/early 1980s in several states. Some Cambodian-speaking branches have closed over the years in locations such as in California. Currently Cambodian-speaking wards or branches operate in California (2) and Utah (1). Laotian-specific outreach has occurred since the late 1970s. Several Laotian-speaking branches have closed within the past two decades in locations such as California, Colorado, and Utah. Current Laotian-speaking wards and branches operate in California (2) and Utah (1). The one Laotian-speaking ward in Utah also administers to Thai speakers.

Several missionary-focused Christian groups have established Hmong-speaking congregations in the United States. Latter-day Saints are one of the largest Christian denominations among the Hmong. Evangelicals claim 3.0% of the Hmong Daw and 1.0% of the Hmong Njua in the United States.<sup>[17]</sup> Some mainstream Christian groups such as Baptists and Evangelicals report sizable followings in some cities with substantial Hmong communities such as Fresno, California. Jehovah's Witnesses report 14 congregations that extend outreach in the Hmong language. However, only three of these congregations (two in California, one in Minnesota) exclusively hold worship services in Hmong as the other 11 congregations only hold some meetings in this language.<sup>[18]</sup> The Seventh-Day Adventist Church reports six Hmong-speaking congregations – all of which are companies (small or recently-established congregations) or groups.<sup>[19]</sup> The Church of the Nazarene does not appear to maintain a presence among the Hmong.

## **Limitations**

The Church does not publish the worldwide number of Hmong Latter-day Saints. The number of Hmong who have joined the Church is unknown. Member activity and convert retention rates among the Hmong are difficult to assess as the Church does not publish these statistics. There were no efforts to estimate these statistics in this case study due to a lack of data. Although many reports from returned missionaries were available during the writing of this case study, no reports from Hmong Americans were utilized.

## **Future Prospects**

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Hmong in the United States appears mixed. The Church may advance some larger Hmong-speaking branches into wards within the foreseeable future. Additional Hmong-speaking branches may be organized in additional cities in California, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. However, the creation of new Hmong-speaking units will likely strongly depend on the availability of priesthood leadership, interest from mission and stake leadership to organize Hmong units, and the receptivity to local Hmong populations to have separate congregations from English-speaking members. The need for specialized Hmong outreach may decline in the coming years due to the integration of many Hmong into mainstream American society and increasing English proficiency. The American LDS Hmong community will likely play a significant role in the expansion of LDS missionary outreach in the Hmong homelands one day when the Church is permitted to proselyte in these nations.



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