



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Unrealized Opportunities for LDS Church Growth Among the Nahua

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Overview

The Nahuas are an agrarian Amerindian group which generally reside in rural communities scattered through central Mexico. Most Nahuas are monolingual or bilingual in their respective Nahuatl language and Spanish. Approximately two dozen Nahuatl languages are spoken by nearly 1.5 million people. The largest populations of Nahuatl speakers are in the highlands of the La Huasteca region, namely the Tamazunchale area of extreme southeastern San Luis Potosi State and northern Hidalgo State (810,000), northern Puebla State (200,000), northern Guerrero State (150,000), and the Orizaba area of Veracruz State (120,000).^[1] Approximately two-thirds of Nahuatl speakers are literate in Nahuatl. The majority of Nahuas are Catholic.

LDS Background

No Nahua-specific LDS proselytism appears to have occurred in Mexico since the first missionaries began outreach in 1875. Nahua Latter-day Saints appear to have joined the Church through a series of fortuitous circumstances in congregations within or nearby areas with concentrated numbers of Nahua rather than through premeditated efforts headed by area, mission, or local church leaders. Sizable numbers of Nahua appear to have first joined the LDS Church in areas with a longer and more established church presence, such as the Orizaba area in Veracruz State where the stake in Orizaba was organized in 1977. The first LDS district in northern Hidalgo and extreme southeastern San Luis Potosi States was not organized until 1996 in Huejutla de Reyes and remains the only stake or district in the region with the highest concentration of Nahuatl-speakers (810,000). Expanding LDS outreach into previously unreached areas accompanied by maturing local Mexican church leadership merited the organization of stakes and districts in the 1990s in additional areas with sizable Nahua populations. The first stakes were organized in northern Guerrero State (Iguala Mexico Stake in 1995, Chilpancingo Mexico Stake in 1997) where 150,000 speakers of Guerrero Nahuatl reside, southeastern Puebla State (Tehuacan Mexico Stake in 1999) where 92,000 speakers of Southeastern Puebla Nahuatl reside, and northern Puebla State (Teziutlan Mexico Stake in 1999) where 125,000 speakers of Highland Puebla Nahuatl reside. Smaller numbers of Nahuatl-speakers and Nahua reside in additional locations with LDS congregations nearby such as in Morelos State (Tetelcingo Nahuatl and Morelos Nahuatl with 3,500 and 18,700 speakers, respectively), extreme northern Oaxaca near Ignacio Mejía (Northern Oaxaca Nahuatl with 9,000 speakers), northern Puebla State outside the Teziutlan Mexico Stake boundaries (Northern Puebla Nahuatl and Zacatlan-Ahuacatlan-Tepetzintla Nahuatl with 60,000 and 17,100 speakers, respectively), and western Puebla State (Central Nahuatl with 40,000 speakers). In late 2011, as many as 91.5% of Nahuatl speakers resided in or within 50 miles of locations with LDS congregations in Mexico. In late 2011, there were no LDS congregations in Mexico that were designated Nahuatl-speaking.

Successes

Several LDS congregations operate in cities and large towns where the majority of Nahuatl speakers reside. It is unclear whether many Nahua have joined the Church in these locations but missionary reports indicate that Latter-day Saints in these congregations are predominantly Spanish speakers.

Opportunities

LDS congregations operate within or nearby areas with the most Nahuatl speakers, such as in Tamazunchale and the Huejutla de Reyes. These cities can serve as bases for LDS outreach endeavors in the less populated surrounding highlands where most Nahua reside and where Nahuatl is widely spoken and bilingualism in Spanish is less common. Most Nahua are Christians, providing a favorable population to apply LDS mission materials that have been tailored to those with a Christian background. It is likely that several Latter-day Saint Nahuas have served missions, speak English fluently, and can translate

LDS materials into their Nahuatl language. The LDS Church in Mexico operates 22 missions, the third most of any country, and has several thousand full-time missionaries serving at present. Assigning just a few dozen missionaries nationwide to work among Nahua populations to become competent in teaching and communicating in Nahuatl languages would significantly increase outreach among the Nahua and may result in long-term results such as the organization of Nahuatl-speaking congregations, the translation of LDS materials in Nahuatl languages, and Nahua Latter-day Saints serving missions in appreciable numbers.

The expansion of LDS outreach has traditionally and often ostensibly relied on full-time missionary manpower notwithstanding several additional avenues which exact fewer resources and reduce several administrative burdens on the international church. The appointment of local member missionaries to distribute church literature, organize and staff humanitarian and development projects, hold cottage meetings, and find and teach investigators presents opportunities for local members to serve and strengthen their testimonies. Over the medium and long term, reliance on local members for these finding and outreach activities can lead to self sufficiency and the development of valuable resources to assign to additional locations. A member-led missionary program in Nahua-populated areas would simplify outreach efforts as difficulties such as assigning full-time missionaries to remote villages with few inhabitants are minimized. Church planting prospects appear favorable and if properly executed could lead to similar church growth results as experienced by the LDS Church in other Central American nations with Amerindian populations residing in rural areas such as in the western highlands of Guatemala.

Challenges

LDS Church has established congregations in several of the largest cities nearby areas traditionally populated by Nahua but these cities are distant and often difficult to reach from mission headquarters. Furthermore, areas with sizable Nahua populations in Mexico are divided among at least five LDS missions resulting in poor coordination of outreach efforts. Larger populations concentrated in geographically-smaller urban areas present more feasible opportunities for mission leaders to assign limited numbers of full-time missionaries compared to the less populated, remote Nahuatl-speaking areas. Compared to the millions of their Mestizo counterparts, Nahua peoples are an insignificant minority who are too difficult and challenging to reach given no translations of LDS materials in any Nahuatl languages, limited numbers of full-time missionaries, relatively small Nahua populations spread over large geographical areas, and distance from mission headquarters. The Mexico Tampico Mission includes approximately five million people within its boundaries and over 800,000 Nahuatl speakers. However, only one LDS district services these remote areas which are located 150 kilometers from Tampico. Serving approximately seven million people, the Mexico Puebla Mission includes approximately 200,000 Nahuatl speakers who primarily reside in the Tehuacan, Ignacio Mejía, and Zacatlán areas; all of which are among the most distant areas from mission headquarters in Puebla over 100 to 150 kilometers away. The Mexico Cuernavaca Mission includes over five million people within its boundaries and 150,000 Nahuatl speakers, most of which reside 150 kilometers away from Cuernavaca in small cities and villages in rural Guerrero State. The Mexico Veracruz Mission includes over five million people within its boundaries and nearly 300,000 Nahuatl speakers who generally populate rural areas near Orizaba and Teziutlan located over 100 kilometers from Veracruz. The México México City East Mission also services Nahua populations in northern Puebla.

Most Nahua reside in small towns and villages in remote, rural locations which are not easily accessible by established LDS outreach centers. The assignment of full-time missionaries to small, isolated communities presents logistical challenges due to transportation issues, low living standards, and limited mission resources. No translations of LDS materials in Nahuatl languages presents barriers for full-time missionaries learning to speak and teach in local languages and reduces the scope of their activities to principally Spanish speakers. Many villages appear to have few inhabitants. In the Tamazunchale and the Huejutla de Reyes area where most Nahuatl speakers reside, there are only a handful of cities with over 20,000 inhabitants. Huasteca dialects of Nahuatl are spoken in an estimated 3,000 villages in this region and none appear to have LDS congregations established at present.

It is unclear how many Nahua have joined the LDS Church as no Nahuatl-designated congregations are organized. LDS missionaries serving in San Felipe Orizatlán, Hidalgo reported in mid-2011 that most Nahuatl speakers living in the city were fluent in Spanish. Spanish is more commonly spoken in the more populous cities and towns where the only LDS congregations operate in Nahuatl-speaking areas, which reduces the perceived need by missionaries and local church leaders for translations of church materials. Similar assumptions could be made by the Church with other Amerindian ethnic groups who unlike the Nahua have translations of some LDS scriptures and materials such as the Maya in the Yucatan and the Tzotzil in the rural highlands of Chiapas.

The linguistic complexity of Nahuatl languages, moderate literacy rates, and the fact that many Nahuatl languages are mutually incomprehensible presents several translation challenges. In order for translations of LDS materials in Nahuatl to be effective, several translations will be required in differing Nahuatl dialects and available both in print and on audio recording. Locating qualified translators who are fluent in English will be required to translate church publications and scriptures to meet church translation standards. Some Nahuatl languages have too few speakers and no known Latter-day Saints, making translations of LDS materials in these languages in the short and medium terms impractical.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has extended ethnolinguistic-specific outreach among at least three Amerindian groups native to Mexico: The Mayan, Tzotzil, and Huave. The Maya receive the most consistent and penetrating outreach. Today several districts and stakes have sizable numbers of Mayan Latter-day Saints on the Yucatan Peninsula. The Tzotzil have received intermittent

outreach over the past two decades and are concentrated in a single district in Chiapas State. LDS outreach among the Huave is limited to a single congregation operating in southeastern Oaxaca State. The Mixtec, Tzeltal, and Zapotec are major Amerindian groups indigenous to Mexico who received no known LDS outreach as of late 2011.

Other missionary-oriented Christian groups have dedicated greater resources to proselytism and church planting among the Nahuatl than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses provide online materials in four Nahuatl languages (Central, Guerrero, Huasteca, and Northern Puebla).^[2] Evangelicals appear to have a strong following among some Nahua groups.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the LDS Church extending Nahua-specific outreach in the short term is bleak due to a lack of Nahuatl-speaking Latter-day Saints nationwide, the absence of congregations in urban areas which are predominantly Nahuatl-speaking, no LDS materials translated in any Nahuatl languages, sizable Nahua populations divided among five LDS missions creating challenges coordinating outreach efforts, limited numbers of full-time missionaries serving worldwide, mediocre member-missionary involvement in outreach expansion efforts, and long distances from mission headquarters to traditionally Nahua regions. The establishment of groups and dependent branches in smaller towns and villages with small groups of Latter-day Saints who were baptized elsewhere appears the most likely method that an LDS presence will be established in Nahuatl-speaking areas if a presence is ever achieved. The translation of basic proselytism materials in the most commonly spoken Nahuatl languages deserves serious consideration from the Church Translation Department, the Mexico Area Presidency, and mission presidents with Nahuatl-speakers in their jurisdictions. Assigning a couple missionary companionships as traveling missionaries in Nahuatl-speaking areas who visit villages, hold cottage meetings, and organize and record pertinent information to future visits and church planting prospects could efficiently and tactfully extend LDS outreach among Mexico's most populous Amerindian group who to date remain among the least reached Amerindian peoples by Latter-day Saints.

^[1] "Languages of Mexico," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 10 November 2011.
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=MX

^[2] "419 Languages," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 5 October 2011. <http://www.watchtower.org/languages.htm>