



LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Outreach Efforts Among the Tzotzil Amerindians

Author: Matt Martinich

Overview

Numbering approximately 300,000 in 2010, the Tzotzil are an Amerindian people native to the highlands of central Chiapas State, Mexico. Meaning "bat people" in the Mayan language, the Tzotzil are known for wearing embroidered black wool clothing and speaking a Mayan language called Tzotzil. Today six Tzotzil sublanguages are spoken in the Tzotzil homeland: Chamula (130,000), Chenalho (35,000), Huixtan (20,000), San Andres Larrainzar (50,000), Venustiano Carranza (4,230), and Zinacantan (25,000).^[1] Spanish conquistadors conquered the Tzotzil in the sixteenth century and introduced Catholicism. During the subsequent centuries the Tzotzil have assimilated traditional religious beliefs with Catholicism. Many Tzotzil are strong supporters of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas State which aims to increase autonomy and land rights from the Mexican government generally through nonviolent protests and defensive tactics. Protestantism has spread in the region within the past several decades and some have converted to Islam.^[2] Related to the Tzotzil, the Tzeltal people number approximately 400,000^[3] and inhabit the central highlands of Chiapas in areas east of Tzotzil communities. Unlike the Tzotzil, the Tzeltal have become more integrated into contemporary Mexican society.

LDS Background

The first Tzotzil joined the LDS Church in the early 1980s and the first LDS missionary efforts among the Tzotzil appeared to occur in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first and only LDS mission in Chiapas State was organized in 1988 in Tuxtla Gutierrez. The translation of the Book of Mormon in Tzotzil was published in 1994 in print and in 2000 on audiocassette.^[4] In the early 2000s, the Church formed the Tzotzil-speaking Huixtlan Ward under the Tuxtla Gutierrez Grijalva Stake but disbanded the congregation when local leaders asserted that Tzotzil members should learn Spanish and integrate into Spanish-speaking congregations. During the mid-2000s, faithful members traveled to Church Headquarters to record the temple endowment in Tzotzil. Congregations in San Cristobal de las Casas and southeastern Chiapas State became branches under the newly-organized San Cristobal de las Casas Mexico District in 2005. In 2007, the district became a stake. At the time, the Chojolho Branch was the only independent branch operating in the highlands to service Tzotzil members in the town of Chenalho, located approximately 20 kilometers north of San Cristobal de las Casas. By the late 2000s, three additional branches were organized under the San Cristobal de las Casas Mexico Stake for Tzotzil members in the central highlands (Pom, Porvenir, and Tepeyac) and full-time missionaries assigned to the area were directed by mission leadership to begin gospel teaching in the Tzotzil language.

The assignment of a new mission president in 2011 who had served among the Tzotzil a couple decades before as a young full-time missionary in the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission significantly refocused LDS outreach among the Tzotzil. Mission leadership assigned a senior missionary couple to work with Tzotzil members in facilitating leadership development, finding new meetinghouses, teaching music skills needed for congregations to adequately sing hymns, setting up the Perpetual Education Fund, and conducting public affairs work. By mid-2011, senior missionaries reported that there were approximately 300 faithful Tzotzil Latter-day Saints. In September 2011, the four Tzotzil-speaking branches were organized into the newly organized Chojolho México District. In late 2011, missionaries were facilitating the organization of a group in the small community of Elambo and the creation of at least two additional congregations in the Chenalho area. At present three LDS materials are translated into Tzotzil and available to order online: The Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, and Gospel Principles. Some LDS materials appear to have been translated for administrative and church use, such as a selection of LDS hymns. It is unclear what Tzotzil language church materials and scriptures are translated into. Chenalho or Chamula Tzotzil appear the most likely possibilities as Chenalho Tzotzil is spoken in areas with established Latter-day Saint congregations and Chamula Tzotzil is the Tzotzil language with the most speakers and is the most commonly spoken dialect in San Cristobal de las Casas where LDS outreach among Tzotzil first began. Less than 1,000 Tzotzil appear to have joined the Church since the first convert baptisms. In 2010, Chenalho had approximately 3,100 inhabitants.

Successes

The Tzotzil are among the only Amerindian groups in Mexico which have received concentrated mission outreach over the past three decades and have translations of some LDS materials in their native language. Mayan (Yucatan) is the only other indigenous Amerindian language with LDS materials translated. The LDS Church appears to possess the second largest following of Amerindian members in Mexico among the Tzotzil although it is unclear how many Nahuatl have joined the LDS Church nationwide. The organization of additional branches since 2007 and a district in 2011 indicate that increasing numbers of Tzotzil are joining the Church, remaining active, and filling leadership positions and that missionary efforts have yielded tangible results. Renewed proselytism and outreach efforts in 2011 were magnified by work from local members performing member-missionary work and public affairs efforts building professional relationships with local government officials. The recent increase in allocated resources and renewed outreach is encouraging notwithstanding past misunderstandings between Tzotzil members and local Spanish-speaking Mestizo leaders, fluctuating interest from previous mission leaders in extending outreach, and limited outreach resources. The translation of the Book of Mormon and a couple LDS resources into Tzotzil is a significant accomplishment as the Book of Mormon is available in print and on audio recording providing the scriptures to both literate and illiterate speakers. Christian groups have translated the New Testament or the entire Bible in five of the six Tzotzil languages.

Opportunities

The assignment of a senior missionary couple in 2011 to the Chenalho area provides extensive opportunities for future growth by experienced members training, supporting, mentoring, and shadowing local church leaders. If missionaries properly delegate church callings and administrative tasks to local members and reduce their role in these matters, increased local leader self-sufficiency and enduring retention, reactivation, and proselytism success may result. Missionaries guiding and shadowing local leaders and members to prepare well-organized church services complete with hymns and teaching in Tzotzil provides a more inviting atmosphere for investigators and interested locals. The coordination of missionaries and local leaders regarding church membership records and the geographic distribution of members and investigators may lead to the establishment of additional congregations within closer proximity to their homes. Maintaining good communication with the mission presidency regarding the needs of local congregations and the district can help improve the efficacy of distributing mission resources in the region. Introducing effective and productive agricultural practices from development projects such as those accomplished by the Benson Institute may make greater progress helping local populations become more economically stable and improve the image of the LDS Church in the region.

In 2011, approximately 20% of Tzotzils appeared to reside within a municipality with an LDS congregation indicating that up to 80% of Tzotzils were unreached by the Church. The successful establishment of three additional branches in Tzotzil-speaking areas within the past five years presents additional opportunities for outreach expansion in highland areas. The four established congregations provide suitable locations from which to plant additional congregations in lesser-reached communities. Larger villages which appear the most suitable for establishing additional congregations include Chamula [8 kilometers northwest of San Cristobal de Las Casas] (3,300 inhabitants), Huixtan [20 kilometers east of San Cristobal de Las Casas] (1,700 inhabitants), San Andres Larrainzar [10 kilometers west of Chenalho] (2,400 inhabitants), and Zinacantan [8 kilometers west-northwest of San Cristobal de Las Casas] (3,900 inhabitants). Many of these most populous unreached villages and towns nearby urban locations with LDS congregations often speak differing Tzotzil languages than those commonly spoken by local Latter-day Saints. Proper church planting efforts may require translations of basic proselytism materials in these languages, namely Huixtan (20,000), San Andres Larrainzar (50,000), and Zinacantan (25,000) Tzotzil.

Many of the most populous Tzotzil towns and villages are not within close proximity of locations with LDS congregations and must be accessed by traveling 65-90 kilometers on road from San Cristobal de Las Casas. Bochil (12,400), Simojovel de Allende (10,800) Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacán (10,000), and El Bosque (5,200) are among the most populous towns and villages without an LDS congregation and are located over 65 kilometers northwest of San Cristobal de Las Casas. Half of these towns are located within the boundaries of the Pom Branch of the Chojolhó México District whereas the other half are located within the boundaries of the Ocozocuahtla Branch of the Tuxtla Gutiérrez México Stake, creating administrative challenges for the Church to reach distant towns within the boundaries of the Ocozocuahtla Branch located 60-80 kilometers away. Realigning congregation boundaries so all Tzotzil-speaking areas are within the Chojolhó México District may be required to channel mission resources into a single district and effectively administer these lesser-reached Tzotzil areas.

LDS congregations operate in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Ocosingo, Yajalon, and Pantelho providing favorable opportunities to begin missionary efforts among the Tzeltal who reside within or nearby these communities. To date, there has been no LDS materials translated into Tzeltal languages and no Tzeltal-specific mission outreach extended notwithstanding monolinguals comprising half of the 200,000 speakers of these languages.^[5] Few Tzeltal have joined the LDS Church and Spanish-speaking Mestizos appear to constitute the majority of Latter-day Saints in cities within or nearby traditionally Tzeltal areas. Successes among the Tzotzil and other Amerindian groups in Central America may indicate that the Tzeltal would be receptive to prospective LDS outreach if extended. Planting congregations in Chilon and Oxchuc would be crucial towards making segue with the Tzeltal as these are among the most populous cities in the region and appear to have more monolingual Tzeltal speakers than in Ocosingo and Yajalon.

Challenges

Literacy rates appear low to moderate among the Tzotzil. Few are bilingual in Spanish resulting in challenges utilizing Spanish translations of LDS materials for teaching, studying, church administration, and leadership. Low living standards and poverty

reduce financial stability and self-sufficiency resulting in many relocating to outside cities to seek employment and higher wages. Local leaders in late 2011 reported that many Latter-day Saint families made less than \$10 a week. Successfully starting 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 has also presented difficulties due to a lack of sizable, clean buildings easily accessible for members.

Many Tzotzil Latter-day Saints appear inactive, especially in the city of San Cristobal de Las Casas. Originally designated as Tzotzil-speaking, the Huitepec Ward continues to operate in the city but is designated as a Spanish-speaking congregation today. It is unclear where the former Tzotzil Latter-day Saints who originally comprised the original Huitepec Ward currently reside in San Cristobal de las Casas and whether many of these members continue to be active today. There have been no reports from missionaries concerning reactivation and Tzotzil-focused mission outreach within the city of San Cristobal de Las Casas. Finding, teaching, and fellowshiping "lost" Tzotzil members in the city may lead to accelerated growth among the Tzotzil throughout Chiapas State. However, misunderstandings and hurt feelings between these members and some Spanish-speaking leadership may frustrate outreach efforts among these inactive members and render any reactivation efforts fruitless. Greater opportunities for growth appear to exist in unreached communities in the highlands.

Few trained and experienced church leaders presents the primary barrier to greater growth among the Tzotzil according to missionaries serving in the area. Failure for local leaders to become self-sustaining in meeting their branch and district responsibilities before the end of the current mission president's tenure which is projected to end in 2014 may jeopardize the continuity of resource allotment to the Tzotzil and other lesser-reached or unreached Amerindian peoples in the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission. Current reports from missionaries are positive in regards to leadership development as district leadership has together worshipped in the Tuxtla Gutierrez Mexico Temple and district leaders regularly visit branches in the district to provide administrative and ecclesiastical support.

The number of translations of church materials and scriptures in Tzotzil remain insufficient in meeting local needs as only two church materials and the Book of Mormon are available. Only a handful of Latter-day Saints appear capable of translating church materials and scriptures as few are fluent in English. Moderate literacy rates challenge the feasibility of translating larger amounts of church materials. Most Tzotzil languages are partially comprehensible with each other which may necessitate the translation of church materials and scriptures into additional Tzotzil languages. The application of a single translation of church materials and scripture among speakers of all Tzotzil languages may lead to challenges maintaining doctrinal purity, understanding of church teachings, and solidifying member testimonies. Local and mission leaders will need to evaluate the current language needs of Tzotzil to determine how to address these language issues. Spanish translations of the Liahona magazine have been utilized by local members and appear to have facilitated gospel understanding despite low fluency and mixed Spanish language comprehension.

Syncretism of indigenous beliefs with Catholicism may present some challenges maintaining doctrinal purity for the LDS Church. Mission leaders, full-time missionaries, and local leaders will need to help local members differentiate between cultural practices that can be practiced while adhering to church teachings and those which cannot. Insurgency efforts often supported by locals presents challenges for the Church to encourage local members to be involved in civil matters and simultaneously respect the laws of their country. Political issues may present challenges for congregation unity. Disruption of missionary work and safety concerns for members and missionaries in the Chiapas highlands do not manifest as major challenges considering the generally nonviolent approach of Zapatista rebels.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has experienced significant growth among the Mayan in the Yucatan Peninsula. In 2011, there appeared to be at least one stake and several districts which were Mayan-speaking. The only other Amerindian group which appears to have an LDS congregation that is not designated as Spanish-speaking is the San Francisco del Mar (Huave) Branch to service the less than 20,000 speakers of Huave languages.[\[6\]](#)

Other missionary-focused Christians appear to have experienced greater church growth and have translated more ecclesiastical materials in Tzotzil. Jehovah's Witnesses have online materials available both in Tzotzil and Tzeltal.[\[7\]](#) Some Protestant groups have online resources in Tzotzil and Tzeltal which describe outreach efforts in their communities.[\[8\]](#) The Joshua Project estimates that two percent of the San Andres Larrainzar Tzotzil, four percent of the Zinacantan Tzotzil, six percent of the Chamula Tzotzil, 10% of the Chenalho Tzotzil, and 12% of the Huixtan Tzotzil are evangelical whereas 25% of the Bachajon Tzeltal are estimated as evangelical.[\[9\]](#)

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS expansion and growth among the Tzotzil appears favorable as some translations of church materials and LDS scriptures are available, full-time missionaries have learned to teach in Tzotzil for several years, a renewed interest among mission leaders into extending outreach has successfully carried over between successive mission presidents and has intensified, a recent focus has been placed on organizing additional congregations, a district was established to meet the administrative needs of Tzotzil-speakers, and receptivity among Tzotzil continues to be favorable. Several additional towns and villages may have congregations established in the near future. The Chojolhó México District appears unlikely to become a

stake for many years until five or more congregations are organized, each congregation possesses at least 15 active, full-tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders, greater numbers of youth and young adults faithfully serve full-time missions and return to their native communities to serve in leadership positions, and the district high council becomes self-sustaining in meeting local administrative matters. Due to close geographic proximity and similar language and customs with the Tzeltal, Latter-day Saint Tzotzils may be instrumental in commencing outreach in Tzeltal communities who remain without specific LDS outreach at present.

[1] "Languages of Mexico," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 5 October 2011.
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[3] "Tzeltal People," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 14 October 2011. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzeltal>

[4] "Book of Mormon Editions," Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, p. 636.

[5] "Languages of Mexico," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 5 October 2011.
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[9] "Tzotzil, Chenalho of Mexico," www.joshuaproject.net, retrieved 14 October 2011.
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