



LDS Growth Case Studies

>

LDS Ethnic Minority Outreach in the United States

Author: Matt Martinich

Overview

The LDS Church extends its most penetrating and coordinated proselytism efforts among immigrant and ethnic minority groups in the United States out of any country in the world. In early April 2011, there were approximately 947 non-English-speaking wards and branches in the United States accounting for 6.9% of LDS congregations in the country. Scores of additional non-English speaking units also functioned in 2011 as dependent branches and groups, likely raising the number of non-English speaking congregations to over 1,000. The number of non-English speaking wards and branches in the United States surpasses the number of total LDS units in every country in the world with the exception of Mexico, Brazil, and the Philippines.

Notwithstanding considerable progress achieved by the LDS Church performing ethnic minority outreach by establishing language-specific congregations, many opportunities for expanding outreach to lesser-reached and unreached ethnic groups are unrealized in the United States. This essay provides background data on foreign language usage and non-English LDS congregations operating in the United States and analyzes the successes, current opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for expanding LDS ethnic minority-focused missionary efforts.

Languages in the United States

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau released demographic information pertaining to language use in the United States between 2006-2008. The report was based on a survey sample of three million households a year and values for the number of speakers were made significant at the 90% confidence level.^[1] The U.S. Census Bureau has linguistic data available for internet users at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/>.

The report found that of the 280 million people over the age of five, 225 million spoke only English in the home (80%). Spanish was the second most commonly spoken language in the home with 34.2 million speakers (12.2%). Provided with the number of speakers, languages with over half a million speakers also included Chinese languages (2.46 million), Tagalog (1.44 million), French (1.36 million), Vietnamese (1.2 million), German (1.12 million), Korean (1.05 million), Russian (0.846 million), Italian (0.807 million), Arabic (0.761 million), Portuguese (0.678 million), Polish (0.632 million), French Creole (0.621 million), and Hindi (0.531 million). Languages with over 100,000 speakers included Japanese, Persian (Farsi), Greek, Urdu, Gujarati, Armenian, Hebrew, Panjabi, Bengali, Hmong, Cambodian, Telugu, Navajo, Yiddish, Serbo-Croatian, Laotian, Romanian, Amharic, Ukrainian, Thai, Dutch, Tamil, Albanian, Pennsylvania Dutch, Malayalam, and Turkish. Hundreds of additional languages were spoken by between 1,000 and 100,000 speakers.

LDS Background

In late 2011, the Church operated non-English speaking wards and branches in 22 languages. Of these 22 languages, 16 have at least 100,00 speakers nationwide (Spanish, Chinese languages, Korean, Hmong, Portuguese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, Haitian-Creole, Tagalog, Japanese, Navajo, French, German, and Russian). Languages with fewer than 100,000 speakers with LDS wards or branches included Swahili (72,404), Samoan (57,368), Tongan (26,322), Marshallese (10,739), Karen (3,924), and Fijian (3,701). The ratio of one LDS congregation to the number of speakers was lowest for Tongan (one unit to 393 Tongan speakers), Samoan (one to 1,434), and Fijian (one to 1,851) and highest for French (one per 1.36 million), German (one per 1.12 million), and Russian (one per 846,000).

Provided with the number of wards and branches, non-English speaking LDS congregations in the United States operating in

April 2011 were as follows: Spanish (765), Tongan (67), Samoan (40), Chinese languages (14), Korean (12), Hmong (9), Portuguese (6), Marshallese (5), Cambodian (4), Laotian and Thai (5), Vietnamese (4), Haitian-Creole (3), Tagalog (3), Fijian (2), Japanese (2), Navajo (2), French (1), German (1), Karen (1), Russian (1), and Swahili (1). In 2011, the Church operated some groups and dependent branches in additional languages such as Armenian. At one time, the Church operated independent branches in additional languages such as Armenian, Nuer, and Polish.

Successes

The LDS Church performs far-reaching outreach among the Spanish-speakers; the most populous linguistic minority group in the United States. Some Oceanic groups such as Tongans and Samoans are self-sufficient in staffing local leadership and regularly experience congregational growth and outreach expansion. Southeast Asian ethnic groups have presented good opportunities for church growth which the LDS Church has taken advantage of by assigning full-time missionaries and organizing language-specific congregations in several locations. The Church has demonstrated a trend of extending outreach to new immigrants and refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, particularly in areas with high to moderate percentages of Latter-day Saints in the general population such as Utah and California.

Opportunities

Several of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in the United States exhibit strong proficiency in English, namely Western European groups. Aside from adapting teaching approaches to their cultural backgrounds, there is little need for language-specific congregations for some of these groups. Italians, French, and Germans number among the most populous ethnolinguistic groups in the United States yet with few exceptions do not warrant their own separate congregations to facilitate gospel comprehension. Similarities with American culture also reduce the need for ethno-specific outreach among many Western European groups.

New immigrant groups pose some of the most favorable opportunities for LDS outreach. Many of these groups emigrate from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia from nations with few or no native Latter-day Saints at present. The Church reported high receptivity among Burmese refugees in the Salt Lake City area in the early 2010s that culminated in the organization of the first Karen-speaking branch in the worldwide Church. Missionaries report high receptivity among Bhutanese refugees in California and among African immigrants nationwide. Carefully coordinated outreach efforts between local members, immigrant populations, and mission leadership is paramount for achieving long-term success and sustainability in self-sufficient congregations.

Close proximity to Church Headquarters, proficiency in English, and often good ecclesiastical support from local and regional church leaders provide unparalleled opportunities to further translation work in languages which have few or no translations of LDS materials available. Within the past several decades, the United States has accepted refugees from many nations which are unreached by the Church such as Somalia, Bhutan, the Middle East, and rural areas of southern Burma. Converts from these ethnic groups who are mentored and prepared for translation work by undergoing English and translation training can significantly expedite translation work in many languages prior to the formal organization of LDS mission outreach in their homelands.

The Church faces no legal restrictions in proselytizing the sizable Muslim minority residing in the United States. Performing traditional proselytism approaches among this ethnic group would generally be inappropriate and ineffective as the societal restrictions on conversion from Islam are retained from traditional cultural values. However, there is room for more passive missionary approaches that would attract greater interest and possibly improve receptivity to the Church over the medium or long term. Examples of such approaches include teaching English, service projects that occur in communities with concentrated numbers of Arabic or Farsi speakers, holding chapel open houses, and performing musical performances.

Returned missionaries who learned a foreign language on their mission and Latter-day Saint immigrants provide resources to initiate outreach among many ethnic minority groups in the United States. However progress attained in finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts from ethnic minority groups can be compromised if a key member relocates to another area and the link between new converts and local church leaders is broken.

Challenges

Many of the most commonly-spoken minority languages in the United States have very few or no LDS congregations designated for speakers of such languages. Chinese languages constitute the second largest linguistic minority after Spanish yet the LDS Church operated only 14 Chinese language wards or branches in mid-2011 to meet the needs of 2.46 million speakers of Chinese languages nationwide. There are no wards or branches designated for Italian, Arabic, Polish, or Hindi speakers notwithstanding each of these languages boasting half a million or more speakers.

With only a few exceptions, the percentage of Latter-day Saints in an ethnic minority group in the United States closely mirrors the percentage of members in their home countries. It is therefore not surprising that ethnolinguistic groups with the lowest ratio

of speakers to LDS congregations in the United States such as Tongans and Samoans have the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the world in their home countries. This phenomenon appears primarily attributed to immigration and the continuity of cultural attributes in home nations and communities the United States which either favor or reduce receptivity.

The LDS Church has faced some of its greatest challenges establishing the Church and fostering self-sufficiency among Southeast Asian groups notwithstanding mission leaders in many areas of the United States focusing on this demographic. Sizable numbers of Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, and Vietnamese have joined the Church within the past three decades and have received concentrated missionary activity and have had language-specific congregations established but poor convert retention, low member activity rates, and language barrier issues with English-speaking local leadership have had disastrous results. In Boston, Massachusetts returned missionaries report that over 1,000 Cambodians are on church records yet no Cambodian-language ward or branch operates in the region. Cambodian-speaking missionaries continue to serve in the Boston area however. In Westminster, Colorado the Church operated a Laotian-speaking branch in the 1990s which was discontinued sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s as most active members became inactive due to a failed business venture involving many of the Laotian members and a local non-Laotian church leader. In Garden City, Kansas large numbers of Laotian migrant workers were baptized with the assistance of a Laotian-speaking returned missionary living in the area. These members were largely not retained as the Laotian-speaking returned missionary moved elsewhere and members lost the primary language resource that coordinated with local English-speaking church leadership.

The Church has discouraged organized missionary efforts among traditionally Muslim ethnic groups. In the late 2000s, the Church extended Farsi-specific outreach briefly in southern California until regional church leadership discontinued the program, citing safety concerns for formerly Muslim converts. Missionaries serving in the area reported that following the closure of the program that they had to receive permission from the mission president to give a copy of the Farsi translation of the Book of Mormon to an investigator.

Members and missionaries report that one of the greatest challenges in the stability and strength of non-English units is generational language differences. Immigrant parents generally require language-specific outreach and worship services for meaningful church activity due to difficulties using English and greater fluency in their native language. However, the children of immigrant parents are often bilingual in English and their home language, with more vigorous English usage than their ethnic language. The third generation is typically not fluent in their ethnic language and is often assimilated into mainstream American society. This rift in language usage trends and attitudes often frustrates efforts by church leaders to develop self-sufficient leadership and retain members as ethnic minority members that are second or third generation struggle to integrate into congregations conducted in their ethnic language and first generation members struggle to integrate into English-speaking wards and branches.

Comparative Growth

Other missionary-focused Christian groups have experienced similar results compared to the LDS Church in regards to outreach among ethnic minority groups that do not speak English as their native language. The Seventh Day Adventist Church appears one of the most successful denominations in reaching ethnic minority groups in the United States. Adventists had language-specific congregations in more than two dozen languages and appear to operate between 1,200 and 1,500 non-English-speaking congregations nationwide. Like the LDS Church, language-specific congregations in the Seventh Day Adventist Church reflect worldwide membership distributions as indicated by Adventists operating 97 French, 19 Indonesian, 13 Russian, nine Romanian, four Twi, and two Tongan-speaking congregations.

Adventists have grasped the complexity of reaching ethnic minority groups as demonstrated by the operation of congregations that meet a variety of generational language needs for some of the most commonly spoken minority languages such as Spanish. Bilingual congregations and congregations that target an ethnicity instead of a specific language appear creative approaches to meeting the needs of second and third generation minorities.

Future Prospects

The outlook for LDS ethnic minority outreach appears mixed. Expansion of missionary activity among Spanish speakers will likely continue due to good receptivity and developed language leadership resources in many areas. However many ethnolinguistic groups with over 100,000 speakers will likely continue to exhibit modest receptivity and no clear, consistent vision by local and mission leaders to perform ethnic-specific outreach. A lack of Latter-day Saints in the homelands of many of the most populous ethnic minority groups such as Hindi, Vietnamese, and Russian speakers will present an ongoing barrier for establishing a stronger church presence among many ethnic minority groups in the United States.

[1] "New Census Bureau Report Analyzes Nation's Linguistic Diversity," U.S. Census Bureau, 27 April 2010. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb10-cn58.html