LDS Growth Case Studies

>

LDS Outreach among the Basque in Spain and France

Author: Matt Martinich

Basque Background

Anthropologists, linguists, and historians have been fascinated by the Basque people for centuries due to their ancient heritage and unique language and culture. Many researchers believe the Basque predated the arrival of other ethnic groups to continental Europe and settled in present-day northern Spain and southern France prior to the spread of Indo-European languages in the region. The Basque homeland consists of three ancient provinces; two of which are located in present-day Spain (Basque Country, or Pais Vasco, and Navarre) and the other in France (a portion of Pyrénées-Atlantiques) that together comprise what is collectively known as the Basque Country. Over 2.5 million Basques reside in their ancestral homelands. Consisting of five dialects, the Basque language is called Euskara by Basque speakers and is a language isolate that is unrelated to any other language documented by linguists. Many linguists consider Basque as one of the most challenging foreign languages to learn due to its complex grammar.

Basque nationalism has remained strong throughout the centuries. Between 1959 and 2011, a paramilitary separatist group called the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) sought to secede the Basque Country from Spain and France through killings, bombings, kidnappings, and robbery. Both the European Union (EU) and the United States label the ETA as a terrorist organization and the ETA reported it had permanently discontinued armed activities in 2011.[1]

The Basque have experienced a major secular transition like most populations in Western Europe. Most self identify Catholic (57.6%) and a tiny minority identify as evangelical (0.5%) or Jehovah's Witness (0.4%) but only about half of Basques profess a belief in God.[2] Many who believe in God and participate in religious activities are older adults.

LDS History

The LDS Church established a permanent presence in Spain in the mid-1960s. The first missionary activity in Basque-populated areas did not occur until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Organized in 1987, the Spain Bilbao Mission was based in the Basque Country and serviced northern Spain until its dissolution in 2010. The vast majority of converts since the commencement of missionary work in Basque areas have been Spaniards; very few Basque have joined the Church. Returned missionaries who served in the Spain Bilbao Mission in the early 2000s reported that when they served their missions there were only eight known Basque members within the boundaries of the mission. At the time some missionary companionships were designated as Basque-speaking. Today, the Spain Barcelona Mission administers Basque areas in Spain and the France Lyon Mission administers Basque areas in France. In 2012, Spain Barcelona Mission leaders reported that all church meetings in the mission were conducted in Spanish. Missionary activity in the Basque Country appears to only occur in Spanish and French. The first translations of LDS materials into Basque appeared to be completed sometime in the 1980s or 1990s.

A map displaying the locations of LDS congregations in the Basque Country can be found here.

Successes

The Church has established congregations in six major cities in the Basque Country, five of which are in Spain. All three provinces of the administrative division known as the "Basque Country" in Spain have a congregation (Álava, Guipúzcoa, and Vizcaya). There do not appear to be any branches created or closed in Basque areas of Spain between 2001 and 2009 notwithstanding the maturation of the Bilbao Spain District into the Vitoria Spain Stake and branch consolidations in many other districts in Spain during the 2000s. Inhabited by 61,000, Irún is the most populous city in the Basque Country that is more than ten kilometers from an LDS meetinghouse.

The Church has translated at least five church materials into Basque: Gospel Fundamentals, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Articles of Faith, The Family: A Proclamation to the World, and The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles. The translation of a handful of LDS materials into Basque constitutes a major success for the Church in language outreach as the Church translates materials into extremely few languages that have few Latter-day Saint speakers. It is unclear whether the translation of a handful of resources into Basque have proven instrumental in the conversion of the small numbers of Basque who have joined the Church to date. Available Basque proselytism materials nonetheless provide opportunities to reach this resistant and highly secular ethnic group in their native language.

Basque-specific missionary activity has occurred in the recent past in Spain notwithstanding low receptivity and the relatively small size of the Basque population compared to other Latin-based ethnolinguistic groups in the region. Limited numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Spain, the closure of the Spain Bilbao Mission in 2010, and poor receptivity have prompted the discontinuation of Basque-specific outreach. Past mission leaders have made active efforts to extend outreach despite challenging conditions.

Opportunities

The organization of the Church's first stake in northern Spain in 2009 offers many opportunities for local leaders to head outreach efforts among the Basque through member-missionary work. Reduced numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to Spain strain available mission resources and challenge Basque-specific outreach executed by young full-time missionaries. Low receptivity and language barriers present additional barriers that reduce the feasibility of employing a professional missionary force to staff a proselytism program among such a resistant and unreceptive target population. Member missionary activity guided by local leaders and overseen by the mission presidency offers the most practical solution to taking the gospel to the Basque in the most efficient manner, particularly by any active and seasoned Basque Latter-day Saints in the region.

Language-specific congregations, Sunday School classes, and cottage meetings present some of the most effective methods to spur growth and reestablish Basque-specific mission outreach. However, implementing any of these strategies without Basque Latter-day Saints would be extremely difficult or impractical. In locations with multiple Basque Latter-day Saints, the organization of small groups for church services held in the Basque language can improve the attractiveness of the Church to some Basque due to the strong and strengthening nationalistic ties of many Basque to the use of the Basque language. Basque language groups also allow for greater cultural accommodation to Basque and reduce any ethnic integration issues in Spanish-speaking congregations that primarily consist of Spaniards and Latin Americans. Groups generally operate under the jurisdiction of a ward or branch and do not require approval from Church Headquarters to begin operating. If administrative support and resources are too limited to justify the organization of a Basque-speaking group, Basque Sunday School classes may be a more appropriate option if there are any Basque Latter-day Saints in a ward or branch. Due to limited numbers of Basque Latter-day Saints, cottage meetings appear the most flexible and practical method for outreach. Cottage meetings generally consist of the presentation a missionary lesson or gospel discussion in a less formal setting and do not require large numbers of members or investigators in attendance.

Challenges

The Basque have resisted proselytism efforts from the LDS Church and other nontraditional Christian groups for decades. Receptivity remains very low and interest in organized religion continues to decline. Many who declare a belief in God exhibit few if any personal religious practices on a daily or weekly basis. Missionaries and church leaders must instill basic Christian practices into many converts such as personal prayer, scripture study, church attendance, and living Biblical teachings. The development of teaching methods and approaches tailored to secularism and cultural Catholicism is warranted to achieve more effective outreach.

There are no Basque translations of LDS scriptures available. The handful of church materials available in Basque provides some language resources for proselytism, but no translations of LDS scriptures pose a major barrier for testimony development and gospel study. Many Basque can utilize Spanish translations of the scriptures and other church materials for study. However, strong Basque nationalism and increasing prominence and acceptance of the Basque language in Spanish society in northeastern Spain indicate that translations of LDS scriptures into Basque will be needed one day to more effectively address these conditions.

Rural areas in the Basque Country remain entirely unreached by LDS missionary activity with the exception of some areas around cities with a ward or branch. Basque populations are more prominent in many rural areas of the Basque Country. Outreach among rural populations will be required to adequately reach the Basque population, particularly where ethnic identity and culture appear strongest.

Comparative Growth

The Basque and Roma appear the most populous unreached ethnic groups in Western Europe by the LDS Church. The Church maintains a widespread presence in many of the most secular countries in Western Europe largely due to previous mission efforts that occurred at a time when populations exhibited higher levels of religiosity such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. The Church has no official presence among Roma communities in Europe and conducts no Roma-specific missionary outreach in Europe.

Nontraditional Christian groups report an extremely limited presence among the Basque. Low receptivity, political instability, and lack of church planting vision appear responsible for limited growth of other Christian denominations. One evangelical group recently reported that there does not appear to be a single Basque-speaking Protestant Church in Spain or France.[3] Jehovah's Witness perhaps constitute the largest, most organized, and most active nontraditional denomination established among the Basque.

Future Prospects

The outlook for renewed Basque-specific missionary activity is poor for the foreseeable future. The recent organization of the first stake headquartered in the Basque Country indicates strengthening local leadership and sufficiently high levels of member activity to meet all of the administrative needs to staff a stake. The stake and its respective wards and branches contain self-sufficient local leadership that can provide the manpower needed to extend at least some Basque-specific outreach in the coming years. However, growth has occurred principally among Spaniards, Latin Americans, and other ethnic groups with few Basque converts. Extremely low receptivity to nontraditional Christian faiths, nominalism in the Catholic Church, and the prominence of secularism in society present major obstacles for growth.

[1] "ETA", en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 23 June 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ETA

[2] "Caracterizacion de los vascos/as ante la Fe y Religion," Forum Radio Eskadi 2006, retrieved 16 June 2012. http://www.eitb.com/argazki/forum_re/caracterizacion.pdf

[3] "Spain - Basque," www.ocieurope.org, retrieved 16 June 2012. http://www.ocieurope.org/WhereWeServe/SpainBasque.aspx