



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among the Tarahumara Amerindians

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Overview

Renowned for long-distancing running and living in log homes and caves, the Tarahumara are an Amerindian people that inhabit rural areas of the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains in Chihuahua, Mexico.^[1] Current population estimates range from as low as 50,000^[2] to as high as 100,000;^[3] more than any other Amerindian group in northern Mexico. In the seventeenth century, the Spanish introduced Christianity but the depth of conversion appeared superficial until the early twentieth century. The population is homogenously Catholic and follows some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs; only about three percent do not affiliate with the Catholic Church.^[4] Protestant missionaries established an initial presence in the late twentieth century.^[5] Virtually all Tarahumara speak one of the five Tarahumara languages that pertain to the Uto-Aztecan language family (Central, Northern, Southeastern, Southwestern, and Western). Most speak Central Tarahumara as a first language and Spanish as a second language.^[6]

This essay explores opportunities, challenges, and future prospects of establishing an LDS presence among the Tarahumara.

Opportunities

Humanitarian and development projects appear the most meaningful and effective method to establish an initial LDS presence due to low living standards and recent receptivity to these services offered by Protestant groups. Seventh Day Adventists have noted that poverty significantly reduces life expectancy among the Tarahumara due to malnutrition and poor hygienic practices. Latter-day Saints could employ strategies for economic self-reliance among the Tarahumara similar to past and current development projects among other Amerindian groups or poverty-stricken areas such as teaching efficient agricultural techniques, organizing garden projects, holding employment and neonatal resuscitation workshops, conducting clean water projects, and providing small business loans or resources to jumpstart local entrepreneurs. The Church has accomplished noticeable success through poultry and plantation projects in Sub-Saharan Africa where individuals receive a "starter kit" of recently hatched chicks or farming supplies that if properly managed can turn into a self-sufficient business. Low levels of economic development and long-term societal marginalization indicate that small business projects could make a significant economic improvement for many. Extremely low literacy rates among the Tarahumara suggest that the LDS Church may meet local needs and passively facilitate the introduction of the Church through teaching literacy courses. The most recent literacy figures available estimate that only one percent are literate in Tarahumara and only 20% are literate in Spanish.^[7]

Spanish and Mexican influence on local culture may lessen challenges initiating formal proselytism activity. The Catholic background of many has provided a basic understanding of organized religion and Christianity. Consequently LDS missionaries may experience less difficulty adapting teaching approaches to meet local needs among the Tarahumara in comparison to other Amerindian groups where indigenous beliefs and practices exert greater influence. The widespread use of Spanish as a second language permits mission leaders to assign Spanish-speaking missionaries to the region and utilize Spanish translations of LDS materials among the literate population.

The LDS Church has established a long-term presence in many small towns in nearby rural areas of Chihuahua State some with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. The continual operation of branches in half a dozen small cities and towns in the nearby the La Sierra Mexico District for over three decades points to good levels of self-sustainability in local leadership in the area. The Church often struggles to maintain a long-term presence in small cities and towns for several consecutive decades, indicating that the Church has achieved some degree of self-sustainability in church leadership, perpetual mission outreach in these areas through successive mission presidents, or a combination of the two. The Church operates one branch in San Juanito; the closest location to the Tarahumara homeland with an LDS presence. The LDS branch in San Juanito may serve as a

steppingstone for opening nearby locations within the Tarahumara homeland to missionary activity, including a few of the most populous unreached cities and towns in Chihuahua such as Guachochi (14,513 inhabitants), Guadalupe y Calvo (5,816 inhabitants), and Creel (5,026 inhabitants).

There has likely been at least a handful of Tarahumara who have joined the Church outside their homeland. Ethnographic researchers indicate that many Tarahumara have relocated to Chihuahua City in recent years to find employment,^[8] where there is a widespread LDS presence including three stakes and 18 wards. Chihuahua City and other major cities in southern Chihuahua State likely have had at least a few Tarahumara join the Church. The return of any active Latter-day Saint converts to their homelands may encourage mission leaders to establish a church presence and organize a congregation.

Challenges

A lack of indigenous members in the Tarahumara homeland and no language resources in Tarahumara constitute the Church's greatest barriers to introducing an official church presence. The Church has never appeared to operate a congregation within areas predominantly populated by the Tarahumara, few if any Tarahumara have joined the Church elsewhere in Mexico, and there are no translations of LDS materials into any Tarahumara languages. These conditions do not legitimize delaying the introduction of mission resources. Widespread religious freedom, fair receptivity to Protestant groups, reasonably close proximity to current mission outreach centers, and no previous outreach attempts by LDS mission leaders warrant the establishment of the Church among the Tarahumara as soon as possible. The Church could possibly experience noticeable success making headway establishing the Church through the assignment of a Spanish-speaking senior missionary couple to primarily provide supervision for humanitarian and development projects funded by the Church in the region. Due to extremely low literacy rates, the Church will need to create audio translations of basic church materials and LDS scriptures in Tarahumara.

The finding that many Tarahumara Catholics became interested in Protestant faiths through receiving humanitarian aid and relief may present problems for the LDS Church achieving real growth if similar tactics are utilized. Due to the recent introduction of non-Catholic Christian groups among the Tarahumara it is too early to tell whether converts develop a long-term personal conviction to a church that exists independent of receiving material and financial benefits. The LDS Church may experience lower receptivity than Protestant groups if similar humanitarian and development projects are not pursued due to low living standards. However, the Church must also exercise caution to avoid conversions motivated to receive materialistic sustenance or support. Perhaps the most effective LDS intervention would center on education and small business projects such as those previously outlined considering these approaches instill self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on the Church to consistently fulfill basic living needs.

Comparative Growth

The Tarahumara number among the scores of Amerindian peoples in Mexico unreached by the LDS Church that have populations over 10,000. The Church conducts ethnic-specific missionary activity in the native language of only a few Amerindian peoples in Mexico such as the Maya and Tzotzil. The LDS Church has not extended ethnic or language-specific proselytism among Amerindian groups in northern Mexico. Other major groups in the region including the Mayo (40,000), Huichol (20,000), and Yaqui (14,000) have no translations of LDS materials although LDS congregations operate within areas traditionally populated by the Mayo and Yaqui.

Both Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses extend outreach among the Tarahumara. Adventists sent the first missionaries to proselyte the Tarahumara in 1993. The first Adventist missionaries learned the Tarahumara language and utilized health education as the vehicle to establish a permanent church presence that currently consists of five churches and several small house churches. Adventists report that Tarahumara translations of basic church literature are currently underway.^[9] Jehovah's Witnesses have translated basic proselytism materials into Tarahumara.^[10] In late 2012, Witnesses reported 28 Tarahumara-speaking congregations in Mexico that functioned in the Tarahumara homeland as well as major cities in southern Chihuahua State.^[11]

Future Prospects

The establishment of an LDS missionary presence among the Tarahumara has good potential for future growth due to cultural conditions and a sizable target population but the outlook for the allocation of mission resources specifically to reach this ethnic group appears bleak as the Church has not initiated formal proselytism directed to a specific Amerindian population with no previous LDS presence in Mexico for several decades. The development of audio translations of basic LDS proselytism materials and scriptures will be greatly needed to facilitate gospel understanding due to low literacy rates and widespread usage of the Tarahumara language. The most likely church growth development that would provide for at least some outreach among the Tarahumara people would be the opening of larger cities within the Tarahumara homeland such as Creel and Guachochi.

^[1] "Tarahumara people," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 18 August 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarahumara>

^[2] "Tarahumara people," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 18 August 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarahumara>

^[3] "Languages of Mexico," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 18 August 2012.

http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=MX

[4] "Tarahumara - Orientation," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 18 August 2012.
<http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Tarahumara-Orientation.html>

[5] "Tarahumara - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 18 August 2012.
<http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Tarahumara-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>

[6] "Central Tarahumara," www.ethnologue.org, retrieved 18 August 2012.
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=tar

[7] "Central Tarahumara," www.ethnologue.org, retrieved 18 August 2012.
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=tar

[8] "Central Tarahumara," www.ethnologue.org, retrieved 18 August 2012.
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=tar

[9] "Profile: Creel Tarahumara Mission," www.outpostcenters.org, retrieved 18 August 2012.
<http://www.outpostcenters.org/ministry/creel-tarahumara-mission/>

[10] "439 Languages," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 18 August 2012. <http://www.watchtower.org/languages.htm>

[11] "Congregation Meeting Search," jw.org, retrieved 15 September 2012.
<http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT>