

LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Kuna Amerindians of Panama

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Overview

The Kuna or Cuna, Guna, orTule are an Amerindian people in Panama that traditionally reside along the Caribbean coastline and adjacent small islands of the San Blas Archipelago in the indigenous region of Kuna Yala. The San Blas Islands run east to west within only a couple kilometers of the mainland and consist of low elevation, densely populated sandy islets. The LDS Church has extended outreach among the Kuna longer than any other Amerindian people outside the United States but has experienced little progress achieving long-term growth. This case study provides background information on the Kuna people and the history of the LDS Church in Kuna Yala and analyzes successes, opportunities, and challenges for church growth. A comparative growth section examines LDS outreach among other Amerindian groups in Panama and compares LDS growth among the Kuna to other nontraditional Christian groups. Lastly, prospects for future growth are explored.

Kuna Background

Coastal areas of present-day Colombia near the Panama Isthmus and Gulf of Urabá constituted the original homelands of the Kuna prior to Spanish conquest in the seventeenth century. During the following two centuries, the Kuna gradually migrated northward into the present-day Darién region of Panama and ultimately resettling in the tiny, sandy San Blas Islands on the Caribbean coast due to hostilities with the invading Spanish. The Kuna chose the small islands instead of the coastal mainland to escape disease-carrying insects and established villages on islands within close proximity to the mouths of freshwater rivers. In the early 1900s, the Kuna opposed efforts by the newly formed Panamanian government to impose a national culture on the Kuna resulting in instability and insurgency for several decades. Relations between local and national government continue to be debated and redefined.[1] Access to the islands and adjacent mainland is limited to boat or airplane. During the past half century, increasing numbers of Kuna have relocated to Panama City and Colon in search of employment and higher living standards.

Kuna communities are tight-knit and led by local chiefs. In the 1980s, the Kuna lived in 54 villages that ranged in population from 70 to over 2,000; 42 of these villages were on small islands, 10 were on the mainland coast, and two were on inland riverbanks.[2] Most Kuna adhere to Catholic and Protestant denominations. Singing and chanting comprise a significant role in local culture as a means to convey myths, history, religion, and political information.[3] One of the most well-recognized symbols of Kuna culture is the mola - an apron-like blouse worn by women that displays traditional geometric designs once painted onto the skin prior to the introduction of clothing by the Spanish.[4] There are 57,100 Kuna according to the most recent population estimate made in 2000.[5]

LDS History

At the time the Central American Mission opened, future LDS Church President Elder Spencer W. Kimball charged the new mission president to take the gospel to the Kuna. In 1953, the son of a Kuna chief received a copy of the Book of Mormon; the same year the mission president visit the San Blas Archipelago. Early proselytism efforts experienced marked success and high receptivity as many Kuna noticed similarities between local myths and oral history and some aspects of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. The Church commenced missionary activity among the Kuna prior to receiving government recognition and extended limited outreach due to persecution. The Church obtained legal recognition in 1965 and the first meetinghouse constructed in Panama was on the island of Ustupu in the San Blas Archipelago. By the early 1970s, all of the Church's branches in the San Blas Islands had closed due to inactivity problems except the Ustupu Branch.[6] The Church began reestablishing branches in the islands in the mid and late 1970s resulting in the formation of the San Blas Panama District in

1979. In 1981, the Church published translations of select passages of the Book of Mormon into Kuna.[7] The translation of the temple endowment did not appear to be completed until the late 2000s.

The oral history of the Kuna shares many remarkable similarities with events in the Book of Mormon. Kuna Latter-day Saints refer to themselves "the People of the Book" due to the similarities between the Book of Mormon and their oral history[8] such as a visit from a long-awaited father after eight days and nights of darkness and burying records to preserve them from a people who were trying to destroy them.[9]

In recent years, missionaries who serve in the San Blas Islands report high rates of inactivity and that the seven branches in the region draw significant amounts of administrative resources. Full-time missionaries report teaching seminary, institute, and English classes in some branches. In late 2012, the seven branches within Kuna Yala were the Carti-Tupile, Irgandi, Nargana, Playon Chico, Ticantiqui, Ukupa, and Ustupu Branches. Two additional congregations, one each in Colon and Panama City, appeared to primarily service Kuna population in these cities.

Successes

The Church has maintained a long-term presence among the Kuna for several decades without any noticeable contraction of LDS outreach or unit consolidations since the early 1970s. This achievement stands as one of the most significant for the Church in Panama as virtually all other areas of the country have experienced major congregation consolidations over the past decade resulting in the number of units declining by one-third nationwide. The resilience and consistency of maintaining congregations among the Kuna demonstrate that it is possible to avoid unit consolidations in an era of reduced national outreach trends, low activity rates, and declining receptivity to missionary efforts.

No other Amerindian group has as small of a population as the Kuna and a translation of any LDS scriptures into their native language. As of late 2012, church materials translated into Kuna included General Conference addresses,[10] a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, several family and genealogy forms, a priesthood guidebook, a guidebook for women in the Church, the 13 Articles of Faith, and the old version of Gospel Principles. At present the Nivacle of Paraguay are the only other Amerindian group with a smaller population than the Kuna with any translations of LDS materials available in their native language.

The Church has established congregations on several of the most populous islands within the San Blas Archipelago, providing good accessibility to church meetings for many Kuna. Most of the Kuna Yala population resides between the Church's easternmost branch (Ustupu) and westernmost branch (Carti-Tupile), resulting in good penetration of outreach within this area. No other nontraditional Christian group appears to have as widespread of a presence in Kuna Yala as the LDS Church.

The continuous operation of a member district since 1979 indicates at least some success in attaining local leader self-sufficiency despite chronic inactivity frustrations. Failure for local leadership to staff both district and branch callings would result in the dissolution of the district and the assignment of all seven branches directly to the Panama Panama City Mission. However, the Church has continued to operate the district notwithstanding the consolidation of branches and dissolution of districts elsewhere in the country.

Opportunities

The long-term presence of the Church in Kuna Yala has given most Kuna an awareness of the Church and its teachings. The large number of less active and inactive members provides good opportunities for reactivation efforts as many appear to retain a memory and knowledge of basic church teachings despite limited periods of church activity. Missionaries report success working with the children and youth of less active and inactive families. Nowadays most convert baptisms among the Kuna consist of the unbaptized children of these families whose member parents no longer attend church regularly. The Church has established seminary and institute programs, providing greater opportunities for youth to study the gospel, gain testimonies, and remain active. Retaining the youth and child converts of part-member families has potential to improve member activity rates and strengthen the Church's administrative self-sufficiency in the long run.

There remain additional prospects to expand outreach in Kuna Yala. There appear to be at least eight settlements with approximately 1,000 people or more without a branch. Exploratory efforts from local leadership and full-time missionaries to these locations will likely yield many individuals who have lost contact with the Church. The Church can establish a presence in many of these locations through holding cottage meetings and later organizing groups if enough investigators desire to attend church and inactive members return to activity. A map of prominent Kuna settlements and status of LDS outreach in these locations can be found here.

Challenges

Missionaries report that low living standards pose a significant challenge for members to meet their basic needs and allege that poverty has influenced high rates of inactivity. Other Christian groups appear to have experienced similar frustrations as the strength and size of many denominations remains weak and small. Many Kuna suffer from malnutrition caused by poor diet and

an insufficient food supply. Fishing remains one of the primary means to obtain food and employment. Missionaries report that many Kuna focus more on getting their basic physiological needs met than attending to spiritual needs and cannot reach the needed amount of focus and dedication to the Church to remain active. The conditions of many villages are unsanitary and crowded due to the small geographic size of the islands. Finding space to hold church services has appeared to be a challenge in some areas.

Kuna Latter-day Saints experience some of the most intense counter-proselytism efforts from other Christian denominations. Newly arrived Protestant groups in Kuna Yala have specifically targeted Kuna Latter-day Saints in church planting efforts. It is unclear whether many Latter-day Saints have joined other denominations or whether double affiliation is a major concern.

Isolation from mission headquarters and a small target population pose difficulties for mission leaders to assign full-time missionaries and balance resources between more populous areas and many of the small branches in Kuna Yala. There are few inhabitants in Kuna Yala compared to other administrative divisions of Panama. In 2010, the population totaled only 33,100; a tiny number in comparison to Panama's 3.4 million people. Not only are there few inhabitants but the population has experienced no growth over the past two decades. Between 1990 and 2010, Kuna Yala was the only administrative division to experience a decline in the population from 34,000 to 33,000 whereas the population of the least populated administrative division (Emberá) increased from 8,000 to 10,000 during this period and the national population increased from 2.3 million to 3.4 million.[11] The lack of population growth appears attributed to many Kuna moving outside Kuna Yala, which has also likely decreased the self-sufficiency of the Church in the area if active members relocate elsewhere.

Comparative Growth

The Kuna are the only Amerindian group in Panama that receive language-specific outreach from the LDS Church. Other major Amerindian groups such as the Emberá (10,500 people)[12] and the Ngäbere (128,000 people)[13] appear to have few if any members, no translations of LDS materials, and have only one or two LDS congregations operating within or nearby areas where these groups traditionally reside.

Jehovah's Witnesses report five Kuna-speaking congregations and two congregations that have a small group of Kuna speakers in Panama. However, only one of these congregations operates in the San Blas Archipelago.[14] Witnesses report 31 congregations that are Ngäbere speaking or have Ngäbere groups. Witnesses do not appear to publish any online literature translated into Kuna. Seventh Day Adventists translate publications into Kuna and appear to have a small presence in Kuna Yala.

Future Prospects

Dependence on full-time missionaries to provide administrative and ecclesiastical support, low member activity rates, and a small target population in Kuna Yala that has experienced no growth over the past 20 years generate a bleak outlook for future LDS growth within the foreseeable future. Some branches may be turned into groups if full-time missionaries are unavailable to provide support and if the number of active members declines due to inactivity or active members moving to larger cities for employment purposes. Long-term frustrations with the lack of real growth in Kuna Yala may dissuade any outreach expansion efforts until established branches become more self-sufficient. Prospects appear most favorable for the Church to reach Kuna communities outside the Kuna homeland where economic and employment conditions are more stable. The Church may translate the entire Book of Mormon into Kuna in the coming years due to the sizable number of Kuna-speaking members.

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[10] http://www.lds.org/general-conference/sessions/2012/04?lang=eng&clang=cuk

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[13] " Ngäbere," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 21 September 2012. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=gym

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