



LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Nivacle Amerindians in Paraguay

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Overview

The Nivacle or Chulupí are an Amerindian group native to the sparsely populated Boquerón Department of northwestern Paraguay. Population estimates range from as few as 5,195^[1] to as many as 25,000.^[2] In 1980, the LDS Church baptized the first converts in Boquerón and today numbers among the most prominent religious groups established among the Nivacle.

This case study provides a brief synopsis of the Nivacle people, the history of the LDS Church among them, and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. A comparative growth section compares and contrasts the growth of the Church among the Nivacle with other Amerindian groups in the region and other proselytizing faiths. Limitations to this case study are identified and the outlook for future growth is predicted.

Nivacle Background

The Nivacle have inhabited Gran Chaco for centuries - a sparsely populated, semi-arid forested plain in south central South America. Contact with other Amerindian groups occurred before and after the arrival of Europeans. The neighboring Toba were traditional enemies. Regular contact with Europeans did not occur until the early twentieth century due to remote location. Fought between Bolivia and Paraguay from 1932 to 1935, the Chaco War severely impacted the Nivacle - many of whom resettled in nearby areas to find employment and safety.^[3] Within the past century, the Nivacle have interacted most with German Mennonite settlements in the region but within the past 30 years many Nivacle have left these settlements to resettle traditional homelands. Traditional religious beliefs remain strong and share many similarities with other Amerindian groups. The Nivacle are divided into five subgroups.^[4] Subsistence agriculture, hunting, and gathering remain common practices.

LDS History

The first known Nivacle Latter-day Saint was Walter Flores. In 1977, Paraguay Asuncion Mission President Mearl K. Bair felt impressed to find Flores and teach him about the Church after viewing a television program where Flores appeared and spoke about efforts to help improve living conditions for Amerindian peoples in Gran Chaco. President Bair corresponded with Flores over a three year period about LDS teachings and the culture of the Nivacle people. In May 1980, President Bair assigned a missionary companionship to teach the Flores family in Asuncion and baptized the family shortly thereafter. In July 1980, Gerald B. Quinn began presiding over the Paraguay Asuncion Mission and by the end of the year assigned the first missionaries to the Nivacle homeland. These missionaries began proselytism efforts in Mistolar - a community on a large piece of rural land near the Argentine border where hundreds of Nivacle recently decided to resettle their homeland after leaving the Mennonite colonies. By year-end 1980, the Church had formed the first Nivacle branch in Mistolar and organized the Chaco District (later realigned and renamed the Nivacle Paraguay District). During the early 1980s, over 200 Nivacle converts joined the Church in the Mistolar area within a period lasting a matter of months.^[5]

The community of Mistolar initially thrived but experienced significant challenges due to natural disasters. Flooding and the changing course of the nearby Pilcomayo River has periodically damaged the community, resulting in periodic rebuilding efforts, poor economic self-sufficiency, and low living standards. The community was initially very isolated from the outside world but in recent years has become more accessible from major cities in Gran Chaco. The strength and activity of members in Mistolar has nonetheless been historically high. In 1987, one church leader reported that there were 39 Melchizedek Priesthood holders in the Mistolar Branch alone.^[6]

In 1989, a group of Nivaculé families traveled to the Buenos Aires Argentina Temple to receive temple ordinances; several of whom originated from the Mistolar Branch.^[7] Very few Nivaculé had visited the temple in the 1980s and 1990s. Prior to the dedication of the Asuncion Paraguay Temple in 2002, only six families had received temple ordinances.^[8]

The Church has achieved slow but steady growth in membership and congregations among the Nivaculé. In 2001, there were three branches in the Nivacle Paraguay District. In July 2008, 420 attended the Nivaculé Paraguay District Conference where 41 convert baptisms were performed. In 2010, the Church created two new branches in Filadelfia and Neuland. In the early 2010s, the Church renamed the district to the Boquerón Paraguay District. By late 2012, there were five branches in Boquerón Paraguay District (Abundancia 1st, Abundancia 2nd, Filadelfia, Mistolar, and Neuland). The Church has also gained greater publicity in recent years. In November 2008, Walter Flores became the first elected president of the Nivaculé people. Although there are no reliable Nivaculé membership statistics and population figures, the percentage Latter-day Saints among the Nivaculé is estimated at 5-10%.

Limited mission resources are dedicated to Boquerón Department and there are few LDS materials translated into Nivaculé. In 2010, there were only two Spanish-speaking full-time missionary companionships assigned to the five branches in the Nivacle Paraguay District. As of 2012, only 10 Nivaculé had served a full-time mission. In late 2011, there were three members serving full-time missions.^[9] Church materials translated in Nivaculé include Gospel Principles Simplified and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet. The first Nivaculé translation of the Bible was completed in 1995 by another Christian group.^[10]

The Church and its members have provided humanitarian and development work to help alleviate suffering and bolster self-reliance. In 2003, the Church provided drought relief to the Chaco region.^[11] In 2005, the Church temporarily assigned a senior missionary couple and a team from Brigham Young University (BYU) - Idaho to assess how the communities of Abundancia and Mistolar could become self-reliant. Some members of the BYU - Idaho team founded the Nivaculé Foundation to provide opportunities for members to extend service to Nivaculé populations.^[12]

Successes

The Church has maintained a presence among the Nivaculé for three decades notwithstanding remote location, a small target population, and destitute living conditions. Many Nivaculé Latter-day Saints exhibit high devotion to the Church despite poverty and hardships. The achievement of establishing partially self-sufficient local leadership and a permanent LDS presence among an isolated Amerindian group like the Nivaculé stands as a testimony to the valuable contributions of outreach expansion efforts carried out by mission presidents with strategic outreach expansion vision. There would likely be no LDS presence among the Nivaculé today without the proactive efforts of Presidents Bair and Quinn in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Successive mission leaders have continued to support Nivaculé members whereas some mission leaders in other areas of Latin America have abandon outreach efforts among some Amerindian groups initiated by the predecessors. Recent mission leaders have expanded outreach through opening branches in Filadelfia and Neuland notwithstanding remote location and small target population.

Nivaculé is the Amerindian language spoken by the fewest speakers with any translations of basic gospel study and proselytism materials. Nearly all Amerindian groups with translations of LDS materials have populations exceeding 100,000. The Church translated materials into Nivaculé within the first decade of baptizing the first converts, providing at least some literature for gospel study and missionary activity. These resources have been valuable for local members to comprehend and study the gospel due to rigorous use of the Nivaculé language.

The Church and its members have performed humanitarian and development work for several decades notwithstanding remote location and a tiny target population. These projects have focused on improving self-reliance instead of fostering dependence on the Church to meet basic needs.

Opportunities

The relatively long-term presence of the Church among the Nivaculé and the prominence of the Church in the region provides favorable opportunities to expand outreach into lesser-reached areas with a Nivaculé presence. Careful coordination between local and mission leaders can help carry the gospel to virtually the entire Nivaculé population within a short period of time and with few resources. Exploratory visits to small, isolated Nivaculé communities throughout Boquerón in search of isolated members and interested individuals would help leaders evaluate needs and opportunities for holding cottage meetings and organizing dependent units if necessary. Traveling branch missionaries to communities distant from Abundancia and Mistolar may repeat past successes bringing large numbers of Nivaculé into the Church but through the use of local resources.

Opportunities to translate additional materials and LDS scriptures into Nivaculé have improved over the past couple decades. Increasing numbers of returned missionaries have served throughout South America and have likely learned some English when serving around North American missionaries - an essential language skill needed for translating church materials and scriptures. The translation of even select passages of the Book of Mormon into Nivaculé could help improve doctrinal understanding among general church membership and provide greater power and strength to local leadership in meeting their responsibilities. Audio translations of scriptures and materials may be warranted to address literacy challenges.

There have yet to be development projects that help Nivaculé acquire skills and resources to manage small family businesses. Most past humanitarian and development projects have provided disaster relief or resources to help meet basic life needs such as a community bread oven. The Church has provided resources and training for starting plantations, raising livestock, and farming in some locations in Sub-Saharan Africa such as Uganda. These projects have significantly helped many start small businesses that produce food, provide more income, and over time can strengthen the local economy. Frequent drought and natural disasters may pose challenges for participants in small business projects to sustain their work through difficult times if crops fail and livestock perish. The Benson Institute may be an appropriate organization to provide assistance for Nivaculé to maximize efficient farming techniques despite harsh environmental conditions. Agriculture projects carried out by the Benson Institute on the Altiplano in Bolivia have improved nutrition and diet for many^[13] and similar projects may be beneficial among the Nivaculé.

Challenges

The lack of economic development and financial self-sufficiency poses the greatest barrier to LDS growth among the Nivaculé as many do not have a sufficient amount of food or adequate housing to meet their basic needs. There are few employment opportunities and harsh living conditions. Life expectancy rates are low and infant mortality rates are high. The past efforts of members to become more economically self-reliant have been short lived due to natural disasters. Financial instability among the Nivaculé requires resources from outside the region for the Church to meet its financial needs. Some full-time missionaries report that some Nivaculé members have become dependent on the Church to meet their basic living needs.

Language issues pose another significant challenge for church growth. The Church has not translated any LDS scriptures into Nivaculé. In 2002, an LDS Church News article referenced that members were awaiting a translation of the Book of Mormon into Nivaculé ^[14] but as of late 2013 there were no reports of any translation work underway. Language barriers between the Nivaculé people and missionaries assigned to the region pose challenges for proselytism and teaching. Some branches like the Philadelphia Branch are conducted in Spanish. Full-time missionaries are not permanently assigned to work exclusively among the Nivaculé but rather serve in more populous areas in the region such as Philadelphia. Missionaries report that their efforts to work among Nivaculé populations occur primarily by request of interested investigators who want to learn more about the Church and get baptized. The lack of full-time missionary finding efforts has likely improved convert retention rates as many converts are brought into the Church through member-missionary efforts. However the lack of assertive missionary efforts by the Church to formally proselyte the area limits outreach. Language issues appear to have at times influenced the purity of LDS doctrine in some branches due to no translations of LDS scriptures and only two translations of other church materials into Nivaculé.

Missionaries report that alcohol use is widespread among the Nivaculé, especially during the weekends. Tobacco consumption is also common. These substances are prohibited by LDS teachings. The Church appears to have experienced some challenges for individuals to quit tobacco and alcohol addictions in order to get baptized or to abstain from these substances after baptism.

Remote location and tiny populations also pose a challenge for church growth. Mission leaders must dedicate significant periods of time to visit Nivaculé-populated areas. Poor road conditions limit visits and pose safety concerns. Access to health care is limited in some areas. Missionaries report that most the population within close proximity of locations with congregations have already received missionary lessons, are already members, or are German Mennonites that express little to no interest. Small populations have prevented the organization of language-specific units. There have been some reports of ethnic tensions in some branches that have a mixture of Nivaculé, Guarani, and other ethnicities.

Comparative Growth

Few Amerindian groups in Latin America have as prominent of an LDS presence as the Nivaculé. The Kuna in Panama number among the most well-reached Amerindian groups in Central and South America and the percentage of Latter-day Saints among the Kuna appears comparable to the Nivaculé. However the Church among the Nivaculé has achieved greater resiliency than the Church among the Kuna as the Church once had to close all but one branch in Kuna-populated areas due to inactivity problems. The Nivaculé are the only minority Amerindian group in Paraguay to receive concentrated LDS outreach.

The LDS Church appears to be the most established nontraditional Christian faith among the Nivaculé. Other missionary-focused Christian groups report a very small presence among the Nivaculé if any presence at all. Jehovah's Witnesses operate two congregations in Boquerón; one Spanish-speaking congregation in Filadelfia and one German-speaking congregation in Loma Plata. It is unclear whether Seventh Day Adventists have a presence in Boquerón. Neither Adventists nor Witnesses publish materials into the Nivaculé language. Evangelicals appear the most established proselytizing Christian group among the Nivaculé after Latter-day Saints but most recent estimates indicate that only two percent of Nivaculé are

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS Church growth among the Nivacle appears mixed due to pervasive poverty, unemployment, and low living standards. Opportunities to strengthen local members and leadership through translating additional materials and LDS scriptures, introducing small-business development projects, and coordinating with mission leaders to visit lesser-reached communities and plant more congregations may help address some current challenges and efficiently expand outreach while receptivity remains good. The establishment of an LDS primary or secondary school in Boquerón Department with an emphasis on developing specific labor skills for students may be an effective method to ensure a long-term presence and to meet local needs without fostering dependence on the international church.

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