



LDS Growth Case Studies

>

LDS Outreach among the Q'eqchi' of Guatemala

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: November 12th, 2012

Overview

Numbering somewhere between 400,000^[1] and 850,000^[2] the Q'eqchi' or Kekchí are one of the most populous Amerindian groups in Guatemala and traditionally reside in central Guatemala between the Gulf of Honduras and the western Guatemalan Highlands. The LDS Church has established a presence among the Q'eqchi' since the 1970s and has experienced some of the greatest growth among Amerindian groups in Latin America. This case study reviews the history of the Church among the Q'eqchi' and analyzes successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth. A comparative growth section compares and contrasts the growth of the LDS Church with other nontraditional Christian denominations in the area.

Q'eqchi' Background

The Q'eqchi' are a Mayan people closely related to other indigenous peoples in Guatemala. In the sixteenth century, the Q'eqchi' resisted efforts by the Spanish to conquer their homelands. Stiff resistance to Spanish rule resulted in a different approach to subjecting and subduing the Q'eqchi' compared to other Amerindian peoples through a Christianization campaign. These efforts by the Catholic Church succeeded but ultimately left many exploited by outside groups such as European and Mestizo government officials. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Q'eqchi' experienced significant hardships as the Guatemalan government privatized plantations in their homelands resulting in many depending on labor wages instead of sustenance agriculture. The resulting poverty that followed promoted political activism among the Q'eqchi' and other Mayan peoples who demanded greater autonomy and human rights. Political unrest between indigenous activists and military officials culminated in as many as 25% of Q'eqchi' emigrating to the United States in the 1980s.^[3] The Q'eqchi' continue to populate their ancient homelands in the Guatemalan departments of Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz but have been dispersed throughout the region due to the past two centuries of political instability and economic challenges. Today many Q'eqchi' are day and migrant labors due to the government privatization of tribal lands.^[4] Catholicism remains the predominant religion of the Q'eqchi' and is syncretized with ancient Mayan cosmology and myth.^[5] Most Q'eqchi' are monolingual Q'eqchi' speakers.

LDS Background

In the 1970s, the Church in Guatemala began missionary activity in areas traditionally populated by Amerindian peoples. The Q'eqchi' were among the first Amerindian groups to receive LDS outreach and have sizable numbers of converts baptized, meriting the Church translating selections of the Book of Mormon into Q'eqchi' in 1979. The Church experienced success establishing an initial presence among other Amerindian groups during the 1970s and early 1980s including the Kaqchikel (Cakchiquel), Quiche (K'iche'), and Mam - all of which had selections of the Book of Mormon translated by 1983. Initial and contemporary proselytism efforts among the Q'eqchi' have been concentrated in the Polochic Valley, the highlands between the Polochic and Cahabon Rivers, and the Cobán area.

The Church appeared to establish its first district among the Q'eqchi' in Cobán sometime in the 1970s or 1980s. The San Benito Guatemala District was organized in 1984. In the early 1990s, there were three districts organized in Sacsuha (1990), Senahu (1990), and Chulac (1992) that continue to operate at present and principally service Q'eqchi' populations. In 1990, the Church created the Puerto Barrios Guatemala District that also serviced some Q'eqchi'-populated areas near the Gulf of Honduras. In 1995, the Church created its first and sole stake within the Q'eqchi' homeland in Cobán. The Church once operated a district in El Estor but consolidated the district with the Sacsuha Guatemala District sometime in the mid-2000s. In early 2002, there were five wards and five branches in the Cobán Guatemala Stake (Carcha, Cobán 1st, Cobán 2nd, Cobán

3rd, and Los Campos Wards and the Chicoj, San Cristóbal, Tac-Tic, Tanchi, and Valaparaíso Branches), six branches in the Chulac Guatemala District (Buena Vista, Chulac 1st, Chulac 2nd, Corralpec, Seasirs, and Sepamac), three branches in the El Estor Guatemala District (Chichipate, El Estor, and Panzos), four branches in the Puerto Barrios Guatemala District (Los Amates, Morales, Puerto Barrios, and Santo Tomás), six branches in the Sacsuha Guatemala District (Canlun, La Tinta, Sacsuha, Santo Domingo, Teleman, and Tucuru/Panchilha), six branches in the San Benito Guatemala District (Libertad, San Andrés, San Benito, Santa Elena, Sayaxche, and Trebol), and seven branches in the Senahu Guatemala District (Chijolom, Senahu 1st, Senahu 2nd, Seamay 1st, Seamay 2nd, Semarac, and Seriquiche). In early 2002, there were 45 congregations (five wards, 40 branches) within the stake and districts that serviced traditionally Q'eqchi' areas.

By late 2012, the number of congregations increased by one in the Cobán Guatemala Stake (San Juan Chamelco Branch) and the Senahu Guatemala District (Yalijux Branch), declined by one branch in the Chulac Guatemala District (Seasirs), the former El Estor Guatemala District (Chichipate), and the Puerto Barrios Guatemala District (Los Amates), and was unchanged in the Poptun Guatemala, Sacsuha Guatemala, and San Benito Guatemala Districts. By late 2012, there were 44 congregations (five wards, 39 branches) within the stake and districts that serviced traditionally Q'eqchi' areas. A map of LDS congregations in the area can be found [here](#).

At present, the Guatemala Guatemala City North Mission administers all the Q'eqchi' homelands with the exception of areas serviced by the Puerto Barrios Guatemala District south and east of Lake Izabal that are assigned to the Guatemala Guatemala City South Mission.

Frequent natural disasters and pervasive poverty are serious challenges. Mudslides constitute one of the greatest safety concerns in the area. In 2005, massive mudslides devastated Senahu resulting in the Church utilizing its two meetinghouses in the city for sheltering 53 families who lost their homes. Approximately 300 attended a special meeting with Elder W. Douglas Shumway of the Seventy who provided comfort to those affected by the mudslides.^[6] In 2007, the Church provided 300 school kits to needy children in Senahu who would be otherwise unable to attend school without study materials.^[7]

The number of active members varies significantly from congregation to congregation. In early 2011, one branch had approximately 600 members on church records but only 60 or 70 attending church regularly. In mid-2012, one branch had as few as 14 active members whereas at least two other branches had as many as 175 active members. At the time the Sayaxche Branch had approximately 60 active members and the Church recently granted approval to construct a meetinghouse. The Yalijux Branch had between 70 and 90 attending church meetings. In mid-2012, the Senahu Guatemala District Conference had nearly 1,000 in attendance; or about 125 people per branch. Member activity rates appear to range from as low as 10% to as high as 40% for individual units throughout the region.

By late 2012, there was one stake and six districts that had at least one branch within the Q'eqchi' homeland. In 2012, the Church published an LDS hymnal in Q'eqchi' and some former members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir toured Q'eqchi' areas and performed hymns from the new hymnal in the Q'eqchi' language.

Successes

The Q'eqchi' number among the most well-reached Amerindian groups by the LDS Church in Latin America as the Church operates Q'eqchi'-speaking congregations, assigns missionaries who learn to teach in the indigenous language, and has sustained its presence since its initial establishment with relatively high self-sufficiency in local leadership. Some districts reporting as many as 1,000 attending district conference is a major achievement considering most stakes in Latin America do not have as many people attend stake conference. All other wards and branches are led by Q'eqchi' church leaders with the exception of a couple wards and branches in Cobán, the San Benito area, and the Puerto Barrios area where there appear to be some Mestizo bishops or branch presidents. The Church has demonstrated greater resilience to avoiding unit consolidations in Q'eqchi' areas than Guatemala as a whole considering the number of congregations declined by only one between 2002 and 2012 (2.5% decline) in Q'eqchi' areas whereas the number of congregations nationwide declined by 36 between 2001 and 2011 (8% decline).

Q'eqchi' translations are available for all LDS scriptures, the 13 Articles of Faith, missionary lesson study guides for investigators, a lesson book tailored to women, a hymnal, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, a genealogy record form, a primary resource for young children, a priesthood lesson book, and the new version of Gospel Principles. Many of these resources are available online and in print. The Church has provided audio translations into Q'eqchi' of all General Conference sessions for several years and the Book of Mormon in 2000.^[8]

The Church has demonstrated some aspects of self-sufficiency in meeting local needs. In 2005, the Church in Senahu was able to house all Latter-day Saint families who lost their homes in mudslides within other LDS families' homes.^[9]

Opportunities

There are abundant opportunities to expand outreach into additional Q'eqchi'-populated areas that currently have no LDS congregations. There are hundreds of small cities, towns, and villages scattered throughout the region without a nearby ward or branch. LDS mission leaders have introduced the Church to only a few locations within the past decade notwithstanding good

opportunities to expand outreach. Recently opened areas to missionary work have exhibited good receptivity to the Church as evidenced by the creation of branches and increasing sacrament meeting attendance such as in Yalijux. Some of the most favorable locations to open new proselytism areas and establish congregations appear to be in towns and villages along the highway between Chulac and Cobán such as Cahabon, Chiacam, Lanquin, and Pajal. Although not intended to provide a complete inventory of populated places in the Q'eqchi' homeland without LDS congregations, a map of approximately 100 villages in the region that may be suitable for LDS outreach can be found [here](#).

The lack of economic development and the high commitment of many Q'eqchi' Latter-day Saints to the Church suggests that small business development projects could greatly improve the lives of many and spur local economic development. The Church has pursued projects in Sub-Saharan Africa and other Latin American countries to help members improve sustenance agricultural practices, offer small business loans, or provide materials and resources needed to start a small business such as providing sewing machines and livestock. These projects would need to be tailored to local conditions, especially considering the privatization of agricultural lands in the area. Seminary and institute may be effective means to improve literacy and gospel scholarship among youth and young adults if there are enough local members to serve as teachers to staff these programs.

Challenges

Remote location, poor road conditions, and difficulty transporting materials to construct meetinghouses pose challenges for expanding outreach. Living conditions are very poor in many isolated locations, deterring the assignment of full-time missionaries as many areas have no running water or close access to medical care. Many meetinghouses are constructed out of makeshift materials. It is difficult for the Church to build sufficiently large and durable chapels due to difficulty trucking in construction materials.

Fluency in Q'eqchi' among full-time missionaries is not widespread in the region. Only missionaries that serve in the Chulac, Sacsuha, and Senahu Guatemala Districts appear to develop sufficient fluency to teach and hold conversations in Q'eqchi'. Missionaries in some areas with sizable Q'eqchi' populations do not study or speak Q'eqchi'. For example, missionaries in Sayaxche only taught in Spanish and most active membership appeared to be Spanish-speaking.

There has been no overt outreach expansion efforts in the Q'eqchi' homelands for at least a decade. During this time, the Church may have missed opportunities to establish congregations in unreached cities and villages when populations were more receptive than at present. Other proselytizing faiths have likely shepherded many previously receptive individuals into their churches, thereby challenging future LDS proselytism efforts to reach these individuals after becoming socially integrated into other churches. The Church has experienced minimal congregational growth within the Cobán Guatemala Stake since its organization over 15 years ago notwithstanding Cobán and other nearby cities constituting the most populous cities within the region. The Church reported five wards and four branches^[10] when the stake was first organized but today there are only five wards and six branches within the same geographical area. The lack of growth in the region since the organization of the stake suggests convert retention challenges and a lack of outreach expansion vision from mission leaders who are based in Guatemala City.

Illiteracy constitutes a major challenge for the growth of the Church. No more than 30% of Q'eqchi' speakers are literate in their first language and only 22% are literate in a second language.^[11] Missionaries report that it has not been until the past half century that Q'eqchi' speakers have begun writing their language. There will be continued challenges and possible ongoing delays to organize additional stakes in the traditionally Q'eqchi' areas of Guatemala until more members become literate as higher literacy rates will help improve prospects for employment, foster gospel learning, and facilitate leadership training.

Poverty stands as another major obstacle for LDS growth. Many Q'eqchi' struggle to meet their own basic living needs due to their marginalization in Guatemalan society and isolation in remote, rural areas. Poor economic conditions appear to have influenced the low percentage of members who pay a full tithe resulting in ongoing delays to organize additional stakes.

Comparative Growth

The Church of the Nazarene numbers among the most successful missionary-focused denominations among the Q'eqchi' and operates a congregation in nearly every city and town within the Q'eqchi' homelands. Nazarenes have focused on building schools and produced a highly successful translation of the Bible^[12] that fueled growth in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Seventh Day Adventists appear established among the Q'eqchi' as indicated by the operation of 91 churches in the four northern departments of Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Izabal, and Peten.^[13] However, Adventists do not appear to translate written church materials into Q'eqchi'. In late 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses reported seven Q'eqchi'-designated congregations and one dependent group in Guatemala. Five of these eight congregations are located in the Q'eqchi' homelands in Cobán, Lanquín, Purulhá, San Pedro Carchá, and Telemán whereas the other three function in the Guatemala City area.^[14] Witnesses also operate a Q'eqchi'-language website and has translations of proselytism materials.^[15]

Future Prospects

Self-sufficient local leaders, sizable numbers of active members in many branches, and continued successes increasing sacrament meeting attendance suggest that the Church will continue to experience steady growth among the Q'eqchi' within

areas that already have a congregation. Prospects for districts based in Sacsuha, San Benito, and Senahu to become stakes appear good within the next decade if the percentage of members paying a full tithe increases. The organization of a separate mission based in Cobán to service the more than two million people living in Q'eqchi' areas and northern Guatemala may be a possibility in the coming years due to anticipated increases in the worldwide full-time missionary force, distance from Guatemala City, and abundant opportunities for outreach expansion that have not been realized in recent memory. The most efficient church planting approaches will need to have local leaders head these efforts with the cooperation and coordination of the mission presidency.

[1] "Q'eqchi'," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=kek), retrieved 3 October 2012. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=kek

[2] "XI Censo Nacional de Población y VI de Habitación (Censo 2002) - Pertenencia de grupo étnico," Instituto Nacional de Estadística, retrieved 8 October 2012. <http://www.inec.gov.gt/Nesstar/Censo2002/survey0/dataSet/dataFiles/dataFile1/var26.html>

[3] "Q'eqchi' - History and Cultural Relations," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 8 October 2012. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Q-ekchi-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>

[4] "Q'eqchi' - Economy," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 8 October 2012. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Q-ekchi-Economy.html>

[5] "Q'eqchi' - Religion and Expressive Culture," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 8 October 2012. <http://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Q-ekchi-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html>

[6] Swensen, Jason. "Welfare principles enlisted following slide," LDS Church News, 2 July 2005. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/47512/Welfare-principles-enlisted-following-slide.html>

[7] Morales, Christopher. "300 school kits," LDS Church News, 10 February 2007. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50121/300-school-kits.html>

[8] "Book of Mormon Editions," Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, p. 635

[9] Swensen, Jason. "Welfare principles enlisted following slide," LDS Church News, 2 July 2005. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/47512/Welfare-principles-enlisted-following-slide.html>

[10] "New stake presidencies," LDS Church News, 16 December 1995. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/26761/New-stake-presidencies.html>

[11] "Q'eqchi'," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=kek), retrieved 3 October 2012. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=kek

[12] Kline, Victoria. "Holy Saints and Fiery Preachers Part II," www.victoriakline.com, 8 December 2004. http://www.victoriakline.com/papers/Mesoamerica582/Week15_Dow.html

[13] "North Guatemala Mission," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 8 October 2012. <http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=NGUA>

[14] <http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrtZGT>

[15] <http://www.jw.org/kek/>