

LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Growth among the Otavalo Quichua Amerindians in Ecuador

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Overview

Numbering somewhere between 45,000[1] and 300,000,[2] the Otavalo Quichua or Imbabura Highland Quichua are an Amerindian group in Ecuador generally referred to simply as the Otavalo. Many Otavalo reside in the city of Otavalo; a medium-sized city located between Quito and the Colombian border just slightly north of the equator. Latter-day Saint leaders have iterated that the Otavalo number among the Amerindian groups most closely related to Book of Mormon peoples and have suggested that this connection has enhanced the growth of the Church.[3] This case study examines the historical and cultural background of the Otavalo people, reviews the history LDS proselytism efforts, and analyzes successes, opportunities, and challenges for church growth. A comparative growth section contrasts the growth of the LDS Church with other nontraditional proselytizing Christian faiths. Lastly, future prospects for growth are discussed.

Otavalo Background

The ancestors of the Otavalo lived in small city-states in the modern-day Ecuadoran Provinces of Imbabura and Carchi. In the late 1400s, these city-states were conquered by the Incan Empire. Prior to assimilation into the Incan Empire, peoples in the region primarily pertained to either the Caranqui or Cayambi tribes and spoke a language classified under the Chibchan family that is now extinct. The Incans and Spanish missionaries introduced Quichua as a trade language in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[4] The Spanish invaded the region and subjected the native population to work on plantations and textile factories. Many Otavalo worked under a debt-servitude system that was not outlawed until 1964.[5]

The Otavalo are well-known for their woven goods that they sell and distribute throughout Ecuador and other countries. Textiles and weaving constitute the primary driving force of the local economy.[6] Otavalo are traditionally Catholic and retain some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints are prominent nontraditional faiths that were introduced into the region in the 1960s.[7] The local economy suffered in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a result in a drop in tourism and high inflation.[8] In 2010, there were approximately 40,00 people residing in the city of Otavalo;[9] the current cultural and economic center of the Otavalo people. Most Otavalo speak Imbabura Quichua as a first language and Spanish as a second language. Imbabura Quichua or Kichwa is classified as a Quechua II B language and possesses similarities with other Quichua and Quechua languages spoken in Ecuador, northern Peru, and extreme southern Colombia.[10]

LDS Background

In the mid-1960s, the Church targeted the Otavalo at the same time it began formal proselytism efforts in Guayaquil and Quito. Church leaders targeted the city of Otavalo in part due to its large Amerindian population and special interest to commence missionary efforts among the suggested descendents of Book of Mormon peoples. The Otavalo Branch became of the first LDS congregations organized in Ecuador as missionaries began baptizing large numbers of converts in the area, resulting in the formation of a district shortly thereafter. In 1980, the Church published translations of the Book of Mormon into Quichua.[11] In 1981, the Church created its first all-Amerindian stake in South America among the Otavalo.[12] In 1992, the Otavalo Ecuador Stake was 75% Quichua.[13] In 1997, the Church split the original Otavalo Ecuador Stake to form a second stake called the Otavalo Ecuador Imbabura Stake. The new stake consisted of the following seven wards: The Carabuela, Cotama, Iluman, Imbaya, Peguche, Pucara, and San Roque Wards.[14] In mid-2000 there were six wards and three branches in the Otavalo Ecuador Stake (Centenario, Imbabura, La Compania, Latino, Otavalo, Ruminahui Wards and the Agato, Punyaro, and Quinchuqui Branches) and seven wards in the Otavalo Ecuador Imbabura Stake.

In late 2012, there were eight wards and one branch in the Otavalo Ecuador Stake (Agato, Centenario, Imbabura, La Compania, Latino, Otavalo, Punyaro, and Ruminahui Wards and the Cayambe Branch) and eight wards and one branch in the Otavalo Ecuador Imbabura Stake (Carabuela, Cotacachi, Cotama, Iluman, Imbaya, Peguche, Pucara, and San Roque Wards and the Quinchuqui Branch). A map of the location of the Otavalo homelands and LDS congregations in the area can be found here. At present, translations of LDS materials and scriptures consist of the Book of Mormon, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, a priesthood guidebook, a guidebook for women, audio translations of some General Conference addresses, Gospel Principles (old edition), and the 13 Articles of Faith.[15]

The Church has performed development work among the Otavalo in an effort to improve self-reliance. The Benson Institute has helped scores of families develop efficient agricultural practices and improve nutrition.[16]

Successes

The Church has developed local leadership in sufficient numbers to operate two strong stakes headquartered in the city of Otavalo. This is a major achievement considering there are only 40,000 inhabitants in Otavalo and that most Amerindian groups with fewer than one million people receive no LDS outreach or have only a handful of small congregations that struggle to function without outside assistance. Returned missionaries report that the two Otavalo stakes number among the most self-sufficient and well-organized stakes in the Ecuador Quito Mission. The Church has not depended on church employees to fill leadership positions but has regularly had a church employee serve in a stake presidency for at least two decades. In 1997, the newly formed Otavalo Ecuador Imbabura Stake had a coordinator for the Church Education System (CES) serving as stake president with a textile worker and a weaver as counselors.[17] In 2004, the Church reorganized the Otavalo Ecuador Stake presidency and its members consisted of a city employee, an architect, and a business owner.[18] In 2006, the Church reorganized the Otavalo Ecuador Imbabura Stake presidency and continued to include one church employee who was a custodian for the Church.[19] In 2012, the Church reorganized the Otavalo Ecuador Stake presidency to include a merchant, a sales manager, and a church employee who worked as a seminary and institute support specialist.[20]

Member activity rates in the two Otavalo stakes appear higher than most stakes in Ecuador and other South American countries as evidenced by seminary and institute enrollment and congregational growth trends. The two stakes in Otavalo report some of the largest numbers of members enrolled in institute among the Church's 34 stakes and nine districts in Ecuador. In late 2012, the Church reported approximately 100 members enrolled in institute in each stake.[21] The city of Otavalo numbers among one of the only cities in Ecuador that have experienced congregational growth since 2000. Also located in Imbabura Province, the neighboring Ibarra Ecuador District has a predominantly Latino population and experienced significant congregational decline from nine branches in 2000 to four branches in 2012. The Church in Ecuador reported a decline of nearly 100 wards and branches between 1997 and 2003 as a result of low member activity rates and local leader sustainability problems whereas there did not appear to be any unit consolidations in the two Otavalo stakes during this period. Good member-missionary participation, long-term outreach among the Otavalo that has fostered self-sufficiency in local leadership, and enhanced receptivity possibly resulting from church leaders suggesting that the Otavalo descend from Book of Mormon peoples appear to have contributed to better member activity rates and local leader self-sufficiency than their Latino counterparts.

The penetration of LDS outreach in Otavalo surpasses any other city in Ecuador. The Church has appeared to convert as much as 10% of the Otavalo population in the city of Otavalo and surrounding rural communities. No other city in Ecuador has as few inhabitants as Otavalo and an LDS stake. The city with the second smallest population and at least one LDS stake is Babahoyo where there are twice as many inhabitants (90,000) as Otavalo and only five wards. Other cities of comparable population size report a minimal LDS presence with only one or two congregations. Located 25 kilometers to the southeast, the city of Cayambe has virtually the same number of inhabitants as Otavalo and a predominantly Amerindian population but the Church operates only one branch. Ibarra has approximately 132,000 inhabitants but only three branches. Many members reside in rural areas nearby the city of Otavalo[22] where approximately half of the wards in the two Otavalo stakes function. The Church has not come close to reproducing the degree of rural outreach among the Otavalo in any other location in Ecuador.

The Church has translated several church materials into Imbabura Quichua notwithstanding comparatively few speakers. In 2011, the Church published a translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Quichua that can be accessed online.[23] Translations of church materials and scriptures into Quichua are a valuable tool that can assist proselytism efforts and improve gospel understanding.

Opportunities

The self-sufficiency of local leadership, local members regularly serving full-time missions, the prominence of the Church among the Otavalo people, and the degree of mission outreach in the Otavalo homelands provide excellent opportunities for continued growth that minimally relies on nonlocal full-time missionary manpower to meet local missionary needs. Favorable opportunities exist for church planting and development work in lesser-reached rural communities.

There remain many villages and small cities and towns in the Otavalo area with no nearby LDS congregations. Organizing dependent units that meet in members' homes, a small, rented facility, or a makeshift structure built from local materials may help spur growth in these lesser-reached areas and eventually result in the creation of new wards and branches. Due to the sizable percentage Latter-day Saints among the Otavalo, the Church may find multiple inactive members in many of these

lesser-reached communities and experience some success reactivate them if a unit is organized closer to their homes. The maturity of local leadership and involvement of some members in member-missionary activity can minimize the burden placed on mission leaders for church planting efforts and help engender steady and coordinated outreach expansion. Locations that appear most favorable for potential church planting efforts include communities between Otavalo and Cayambe, communities west of Otavalo and Cotacachi, and small towns and villages west of Atuntaqui.

Past development work has appeared to target Latter-day Saints rather than the population as a whole. Expanding development projects among the non-LDS population may help improve local economic conditions, reduce suffering, and provide opportunities for passive proselytism approaches.

Challenges

Current full-time missionaries report lower receptivity among the Otavalo than in previous years and indicate greater challenges in proselytism efforts than in many other areas of Ecuador. Missionaries allege this finding to oversaturation of proselytism efforts among a small target population, specifically in the city of Otavalo and communities with a long-term LDS presence. Other nontraditional proselytism groups such as evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses have also competed with the LDS Church for converts. Most the population that lives within or nearby Otavalo city have either joined the Church, previously received missionary lessons but refused baptism, or have resisted proselytism efforts for decades and adhere to another Christian denomination. Reduced receptivity requires greater involvement from ordinary members in finding, teaching, and retention efforts as there are fewer individuals who are receptive to the Church than in past decades.

Language issues pose challenges for growth. In 1992, 25-30% of Otavalo Latter-day Saints in the Otavalo Ecuador Stake could not speak Spanish as a second language. The Church has not translated other LDS scriptures into Quichua notwithstanding Otavalo-specific proselytism efforts lasting for nearly half a century and more than 5,000 Quichua-speaking members in the Otavalo area alone. Only members literate in Spanish can study all LDS scriptures and a greater body of church literature, manuals, and books. Increasing bilingualism in Spanish may reduce the need for additional translations of scriptures and materials into Quichua over the long term.

Latinos exhibit significantly lower activity rates and local leader self-sustainability than their Otavalo counterparts. In 1992, 25% of the stake's members were not Otavalo Amerindians but rather Spanish-speaking Latinos but there was only one Latino-designated branch in the Otavalo area.[24] The closure of half of the Church's branches in the neighboring city of Ibarra over the past decade where there remains only one small district indicates the severity of activity problems likely caused by inadequate prebaptismal preparation, quick-baptism tactics, and reliance on full-time missionaries to help local leadership properly function. The Church appears to experience low member activity rates among Latinos in the area but moderate activity rates among the Otavalo. Some Otavalo congregations experience member activity challenges. Full-time missionaries report coordinating with local leaders in reactivation efforts.

Comparative Growth

The Otavalo number among the only Amerindian groups in Latin America where the Church has successfully established a stake. Other Amerindian groups in Latin America that appear to comprise the majority in at least one stake are limited to the Aymara and Quechua in Bolivia; the Kaqchikel, K'iche', and Q'eqchi' in Guatemala; the Maya in Mexico; and the Quechua in Peru. There appears to be no coordinated efforts to reach other Amerindian peoples in Ecuador including the approximately one million speakers of Chimborazo Highland Quichua.

Other proselytizing Christian faiths report a presence among the Otavalo. The Church of the Nazarene reports two churches in Otavalo.[25] Jehovah's Witnesses report 25 congregations in Imbabura Province, five of which are Quichua speaking and operate in Ibarra, Iluman, Imantag, Otavalo, and Quiroga. A map displaying the location of Imbabura Quichua-speaking Witness congregations can be found here. Witnesses operate nine congregations in Ibarra, six congregations in the Otavalo area, three in the Atuntaqui area, three in small communities northeast and northwest of Ibarra, and four in other locations. Witnesses report three Imbabura Quichua-speaking churches and one group that function outside Imbabura Province in Cayambe, Quito, Sangolqui, and Tulcán[26] whereas the LDS Church does not report any Quichua-speaking congregations outside of the Otavalo area. Seventh Day Adventists appear to have a presence in Otavalo but do not translate materials into Imbabura Quichua.

Future Prospects

The establishment of two strong stakes in the city of Otavalo, the resilience of Otavalo-speaking wards and branches to unit consolidations, and the high degree of devotion and dedication to the Church of many active members indicate that the Church will likely hold its ground in its progress it has achieved over the past half century. The organization of additional congregations in lesser-reached communities that operate as groups or dependent branches may be an effective method to propagate church growth. The small size of the target population and declining receptivity to the Church in recent years among the general population may result in fewer convert baptisms and stagnant congregational growth unless church planting approaches are effectively utilized.

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