

LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mam of Guatemala

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Overview

Estimated to number somewhere between half a million[1] and 650,000, the Mam are a Mayan ethnic group that predominantly reside in western Guatemala. Small numbers of Mam populate areas in Chiapas State, Mexico along the Guatemalan border. In 2002, the Guatemalan census reported 477,717 Mam speakers[2] and 617,171 ethnic Mam.[3] The estimated number of Mam in Mexico is approximately 20,000.[4] Some estimates place the number of Mam speakers as the second highest for Amerindian languages in Guatemala after K'iche'.[5]

This case study examines the historical and cultural background of the Mam, 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.

Mam Background

Little is known about the Mam prior to Spanish contact. Some historical linguists suggest that the Mam fought with the K'iche' for control of their homelands. The Mam retained much of their autonomy following the Spanish conquest of present-day Guatemala largely due to remote location. Economic and agricultural reforms in Guatemala forced many Mam off of their traditional lands to perform wage labor in coffee plantations. In the 1980s, political instability and warfare plagued the Mam although conflict between the Guatemalan government and indigenous separatists was less severe than among other Amerindian groups. Today the Mam remain marginalized in Guatemalan society.[6] Most Mam are traditionally nominal Catholics.[7]

Ethnologue.com reports seven different Mam sublanguages including Central Mam (100,000),[8] Northern Mam (201,000),[9] Southern Mam (125,000),[10] Tajumulco Mam (35,000),[11] Todos Santos Cuchumatán Mam (60,000),[12] Tacanec (21,200),[13] and Tektiteko (5,900)[14] for a total of approximately 550,000 Mam speakers. Very few Mam are literate in any of the seven Mam sublanguages.

LDS Background

The first proselytism efforts among the Mam began in the 1970s. Early missionary efforts among the Mam yielded sizable numbers of convert baptisms and prompted the translation of select passages of the Book of Mormon into Mam in 1982.[15] The Church later produced an audio version of the Mam translation of the Book of Mormon.[16] In early 2013, the Church listed three materials available in Mam including a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and Gospel Principles (old edition).[17]

Most Mam Latter-day Saints reside in areas west and north of Huehuetenango such as Colotenango and Ixtahuacan. In 2004, Mam young women from the Ixtahuacan Branch experienced difficulties communicating with fellow Spanish-speaking members at a young women's camp.[18] In 2012, missionaries reported that membership in the Colotenango Ward was 98% Mam speaking. Returned missionaries who served in the mid-2000s reported that some congregations in western Guatemala primarily comprised of Mam Latter-day Saints have had higher sacrament meeting attendance than congregations primarily comprised of Mestizos. Missionaries also report that member-missionary activity was better in the Western Highlands than in coastal areas.

In early 2013, the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission primarily serviced Mam-populated areas in Guatemala. Other missions that administered locations with small numbers of Mam include the Guatemala Retalhuleu Mission and the Mexico Tuxtla Gutierrez Mission. In Guatemala, there were five stakes and two that operated in traditionally Mam areas including the Huehuetenango Guatemala Calvario Stake, the Huehuetenango Guatemala Zaculeu Stake, the Malacatan Guatemala Stake, the Rio Blanco Guatemala District, the San Marcos Guatemala Stake, the San Pedro Guatemala Stake, and the Serchil Guatemala District). Three mission branches also functioned in the Mam homelands in San Antonio Huista, Santa Ana Huista, and Todos Santos. In Mexico, no units appear to operate in predominantly Mam-populated towns and villages. A map displaying the status of LDS outreach in the Mam homeland can be found here. A map displaying ethnolinguistic groups in Guatemala and status of LDS outreach can be found here.

Successes

The Church began proselytism efforts among the Mam in the 1970s and translated portions of the Book of Mormon into Mam shortly thereafter. Considering a tiny percentage of Mam speakers are literate in their native language and the relatively small number of members who speak the language, the translation of portions of the Book of Mormon into Mam stands as a major accomplishment that has likely facilitated the growth of the Church in some locations. The Mam translation of the Book of Mormon is available on the Church's official website for public use,[19] providing missionaries with proselytism material and literate members and investigators access to the scriptures in their native language without cost.

LDS congregations operate in locations where four of the seven Mam sublanguages are spoken, including all sublanguages with over 100,000 speakers. Provided with the number of wards and branches operating within the traditional homelands of each Mam sublanguage that receives LDS outreach, the Church maintains congregations that operate in locations where Central Mam (21), Northern Mam (4), Southern Mam (1), and Todos Santos Cuchumatán Mam (1) are spoken. Although nearly two dozen units and two stakes and two districts function in the traditional areas where Central Mam is spoken, the vast majority of members are Spanish speaking Mestizos according to missionary reports. Several self-sustaining congregations principally comprised of Mam members operate in areas where Northern Mam is spoken in small towns and villages. For example, the Church has established a ward in Colotenango where there are fewer than 2,000 inhabitants and braches in nearby villages where there are fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Missionary reports indicate that local leadership actively participates in proselytism efforts in Colotenango and has supplied missionaries with Mam translations of the Book of Mormon when translations are unavailable from mission headquarters.

Opportunities

Huehuetenango Department presents the greatest opportunities for Mam-specific outreach as approximately a quarter of a million Mam live in the department and the Church appears the more established among the Mam in Huehuetenango than in other departments in western Guatemala. Rural communities west of the city of Huehuetenango provide excellent opportunities for church planting and outreach expansion due to the long-term establishment of congregations in the Colotenango area and scores of unreached nearby villages. Greater promotion of Mam language study and use by full-time missionaries will be required to make greater inroads than in previous decades as missionaries continue to struggle communicating with the indigenous population.

Bilingualism in Spanish has reduced the need for Mam-specific outreach in major cities such as Huehuetenango. There have been no reports from full-time missionaries of monolingual Mam members in southern areas of the Mam homeland such as in San Pedro and areas west of Quetzaltenango. The Church has ample Spanish-speaking missionary manpower in the region and can utilize both Central American and North American missionaries to staff its ranks. The Church has more materials translated into Spanish than any other language except English, providing extensive materials to aid gospel scholarship and testimony development.

Three Mam sublanguages appear totally unreached by the Church including Tajumulco Mam, Tacanec, and Tektiteko. All three of these dialects are traditionally spoken by Mam in the extreme northern portion of San Marcos Department along the Mexican border. It is unclear how these subgroups of Mam will react to LDS outreach if extended into their traditional areas. The establishment of a congregation and the assignment of missionaries to the city of Tacaná will be needed for reaching these three sublanguages as it is the most populous city in the area.

There are good opportunities for development work in many rural areas traditionally inhabited by Mam. The Church could implement agricultural and employment programs to improve living conditions and provide passive proselytism opportunities. Examples of projects that may be suitable include clean water projects, employment workshops, education on efficient agricultural practices for growing crops, and providing resources for individuals to start their own businesses such as raising livestock and planting specialized crops.

Challenges

The Church has experienced stagnant growth in the Mam homeland over the past decade as evidenced by no change in the number of LDS units operating. No branches matured into wards and no units were opened or closed during this period. A lack of congregational growth suggests that there has been little, if any, increase in active membership within this period as a result

of low convert retention and a lack of outreach expansion vision.

Nearly the entire Mam population resides in rural areas. Approximately 90% of Mam reside in small villages of less than 500 people.[20] Traditional proselytism approaches that base missionary activity in urban areas through the placement of full-time missionaries face significant challenges in effectively reaching hundreds of thousands of Mam who populate vast rural areas. There are good opportunities for the Church to adapt proselytism efforts to these conditions by assigning full-time missionaries to multiple villages and raising the importance in member-missionary activity. Traveling missionary companionships that traverse large geographical areas teaching investigators may be the most practical solution to expand outreach in locations with few or no known active members. Missionaries could identify villages that exhibit good receptivity, frequently visit these locations, and hold cottage meetings and organize groups if feasible. The establishment of dozens of dependent units and small branches may be the most practical method of reaching the Mam but will require significant resources and vision from mission leaders. Due to moderate receptivity in recent years and low population densities, the Church may not experience significant growth for many years to come after initiating outreach expansion efforts. Mission leaders will need to be consistent in these efforts and gradually reduce reliance on full-time missionaries and outsourced leadership personnel to promote local self-sufficiency. Members' homes, makeshift shelters, and rented land or buildings may be the best options for providing space sufficient to hold church meetings in a culturally appropriate manner.

The Church does not extend any formal proselytism specifically tailored to Mam. None of the three missions have official missionary programs for reaching the Mam, including language programs for full-time missionaries. Missionaries serving in predominantly Mam-speaking cities and towns report significant challenges proselytizing and teaching due to language barriers. This has required local Mam-speaking members to provide translation assistance. Missionaries report frustration attempting to learn Mam and none have appeared to become fluent enough to teach and proselyte. Only missionaries who are assigned to the Colotenango area appear to receive Mam language lessons from local members, but missionaries who have recently served in the area report that they are unable to teach in the language. The inability for mission leaders to adequately meet Mam language needs has resulted in missionaries baptizing larger numbers of Spanish-speaking Mestizos and bilingual Mam.

Literacy rates are extremely low for native speakers of Mam. Less than five percent of Mam are literate in a Mam language and between 25-40% of Mam are literate in a second language.[21] In the past, the Church has addressed illiteracy challenges by producing audio translations of select passages of the Book of Mormon but as of early 2013 the Church did not have any audio translations available on its official online store for Mam. The entire Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures are not translated into Mam and will likely not be translated for many more years due to extremely low literacy rates.

Strong ethnoreligious ties have created challenges for full-time missionaries to find investigators. The vast majority of Mam are nominally Catholic and resistant to proselytism efforts from nontraditional faiths. Competition for converts is high with other proselytizing Christian groups. Receptivity to LDS proselytism has been modest due to these cultural conditions. In recent years, the vast majority of convert baptisms were obtained from member referrals.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church among the Mam is comparable in size to most major Amerindian groups in Guatemala. The Church has established a sizable presence among the Kaqchikel (Cakchiquel) and K'iche' (Quiche) comparable to the Mam as the Church has at least one stake and one district that have sizable numbers of all three ethnicities. The Church has extended its most penetrating outreach among the Q'eqchi' as it operates a formal proselytism program in which missionaries teach in Q'eqchi' and maintains several districts that are principally comprised of Q'eqchi' members. Unlike other Amerindian groups, the Q'eqchi' have all LDS scriptures translated into their native language and in some locations have multiple branches meeting in the same villages due to relatively high percentages of Latter-day Saints in some areas. The Church operates congregations accessible to four additional Amerindian groups in Guatemala (Achi', Jakalteko, Poqomchi', and Tz'utujil) but has no LDS scriptures and few if any materials in these languages. No known outreach has occurred among the Akateko, Awakateko, Ch'orti', Chuj, Gariuna, Ixil, Poqoman, Q'anjob'al, Sakapulteko, Sipakapense, and Uspanteko as no LDS units operate in locations where these ethnic groups traditionally reside and no LDS materials are translated into any of these languages. The Church has experienced virtually no outreach expansion among Amerindian groups in Guatemala within the past decade.

Evangelicals report a strong following among the Mam and estimate that as many as 12% of the population is evangelical.[22] Jehovah's Witnesses have a sizable presence among the Mam in Guatemala and a pervasive presence among the Mam in Mexico. Witnesses operate approximately 200 congregations in the three western Guatemalan departments of Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, and San Marcos. 15 of these congregations are Mam speaking; nine of which are in Huehuetenango Department. Witnesses operate 21 Mam-speaking congregations and groups in southern Mexico primarily along the Guatemalan border in Chiapas State. A map of Witness congregations and groups can be found here. The Seventh Day Adventist Church does not report any printed materials translated into Mam and appears to have few Mam members. Adventists operate approximately 200 congregations in western Guatemala and experience modest growth.[23]

Limitations

There are few returned missionary and local member reports available for assessing church growth and local conditions. The Church does not publish specific data on the number of Mam-speaking members. It is unclear how many members living in areas where Mam traditionally reside are Spanish-speaking Mestizos or are Mam. All data on areas with Mam-speaking

members originated from full-time missionary reports. No reports were available from local members in regards to the Church among the Mam. Trends on active membership growth were ascertained from congregational growth trends as the Church publishes no official figures on active membership numbers.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth among the Mam appears modest for the foreseeable future as there has been no expansion of missionary activity in western Guatemala, no formal missionary program that specifically targets Mam, and no known accommodations to proselytism and missionary efforts that address societal and cultural conditions including ethnoreligious ties to Catholicism and rural setting. However, the recent introduction of additional missionary companionships to some Mam-speaking locations may signal increased interest and resource allocation for proselytizing the Mam people. The Church may organize a separate mission in Huehuetenango depending on the sustainability of recent increases in the worldwide full-time missionary force. A potential mission headquartered in Huehuetenango would service the majority of the Mam population and could provide greater specialized outreach for Mam speakers as the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission currently services additional ethnic groups such as the K'iche'. Focus on member-missionary activity that establishes new congregations in additional locations will be crucial towards reversing stagnant growth over the past decade. The Church may organize a separate district headquartered in Colotenango to service Mam speaking areas due to developed local leadership, distance from Huehuetenango, and language barriers.

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[10] "Mam, Southern," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 19 January 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=mms

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[12] "Mam, Todos Santos Cuchumatán," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 19 January 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=mvj

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[14] "Tektiteko," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 19 January 2013. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=mtz

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