



LDS Growth Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Mapuche of Chile and Argentina

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Overview

Numbering approximately 604,000 in Chile and 114,000 in Argentina,^[1] the Mapuche or Araucanians are an Amerindian group indigenous to southern South America. In Chile, the Mapuche traditionally reside in rural areas in the Temuco area but may be found in small numbers throughout the southern half of Chile. In Argentina, Mapuche generally reside in Neuquén Province and in other southern provinces. The Mapuche constitute the largest and only visible Amerindian group in Chile as all other Amerindian peoples have populations less than 10,000.

This case study reviews the history and culture of the Mapuche people and past and current LDS proselytism activity among the Mapuche. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for missionary work and church growth are analyzed and discussed. A comparative growth section summarizes LDS missionary efforts among other prominent Amerindian peoples in Chile and Argentina and contrasts the growth of the Church among the Mapuche to other proselytizing Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are identified. Future prospects for growth are discussed and conclude this case study.

Mapuche Background

Archaeologists estimate that the Mapuche people have likely resided in present-day Chile since as early as 500 BC. In the early fifteenth century, there were three subgroups: The Picunche, Mapuche, and Huilliche. The Incan Empire invaded the Picunche homelands and the invasion was stopped by the Mapuche and Huilliche at Río Maule. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Spanish began colonizing northern and central Chile resulting in the disappearance of the Picunche by the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the Mapuche and Huilliche were not conquered by the Spanish and engaged in guerilla warfare. In the eighteenth century, the Mapuche and Huilliche expanded their resistance to Spanish rule by many relocating to neighboring areas in Argentina and absorbing other Amerindian peoples into their culture such as the Pampa. The Mapuche territory gained independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century but was shortly thereafter subjugated to the countries of Chile and Argentina upon these countries gaining independence from Spain. The Mapuche have been relocated to reservations, or reducciones in Spanish, and have continued to resist Chilean rule for the past two centuries.^[2]

The Mapuche traditionally speak the Mapudungun language; an Amerindian language that pertains to its own language family. Approximately 40% of Chilean Mapuche speak Mapudungun whereas less than 10% of Argentine Mapuche speak Mapudungun. Non-Mapudungun-speaking Mapuche use Spanish as a first language. In Chile, literacy rates for Mapudungun-speaking Mapuche are below one percent for Mapudungun and 21% for Spanish. A Mapudungun translation of the New Testament has been completed.^[3] Recent estimates indicate that 65% of Chilean Mapuche are Catholic and 29% are Evangelical.^[4]

LDS Background

Returned missionaries report that Mapuche have joined the Church in small numbers in both southern Chile and in Patagonia, Argentina. However, most congregations with any Mapuche members are limited to only one or two active individuals. Missionaries who serve in southern Chile and Patagonia have regularly taught Mapuche investigators for many years. As of early 2013, no formal proselytism efforts that specifically target the Mapuche have been conducted by the LDS Church and no translations of LDS materials or scriptures into Mapudungun have been completed.

Successes

The Church has likely baptized hundreds of Mapuche converts in Chile and Argentina within the past several decades notwithstanding no specialized missionary programs and virtually no outreach in small towns and rural areas where there are higher percentages of Mapuche in the general population. Several wards and branches in southern Chile and Neuquén Province have one or two active Mapuche members. The presence of Mapuche members in these units can facilitate the integration of Mapuche investigators and new converts and, over time, help establish a sense of community.

The Church has a widespread presence in large and medium-sized cities throughout areas with sizable Mapuche populations. Most large and medium-sized cities have one or more LDS stakes or districts. LDS units operate in locations populated by 67% and 78% of the populations of Chile and Argentina, respectively, providing outreach the majority of the population in both countries. Many small cities have a ward or branch operating, reducing travel times for individuals who live in towns and rural communities.

Opportunities

There are favorable opportunities in Chile for establishing an official missionary program that targets the Mapuche people. Small numbers of Mapuche members have served full-time missions and can be utilized for formal proselytism efforts. The Church has experienced moderate to high success in missionary efforts among other Amerindian peoples in South America and may experience similar results among the Mapuche if organized outreach is extended. In Santiago, there are tens of thousands of Mapuche that reside in the city that can be easily reached by current mission infrastructure. Many Mapuche that reside in Santiago speak Spanish fluently, reducing the need for language-specific units and Mapudungun-speaking missionaries. The establishment of Mapuche groups and branches in areas with sizable numbers of Mapuche can provide a means for respecting and preserving local culture and language for those who desire to worship and study the gospel in their native language among their own people. This approach may reduce the possibility of ethnic tension occurring in church between non-Mapuche and Mapuche members, especially due to the longstanding conflict-ridden relationship between the Mapuche and European and Mestizo Chileans. However, at present returned missionaries have reported no instances of ethnic integration problems between Mapuche and other ethnic groups at church.

There are good opportunities for proselytism activity in Mapuche communities located on reservations, primarily in La Aruacania, Chile. Growth among the Mapuche has been limited due to no coordinated efforts to reach this population and many Mapuche residing in rural areas with no nearby congregations. With perhaps a few exceptions, there do not appear to be any wards or branches that are based from within towns and villages on Mapuche lands. Assigning several missionary companionships to visit these communities, search for isolated members, find and teach investigators, and hold cottage meetings may be an effective means of establishing a church presence in these areas. Distance from established church centers and small populations spread over large geographical areas may prohibit the delegation of full-time missionaries to service individual Mapuche communities, but regular visits by full-time missionaries to multiple locations may be effective in providing outreach while conserving limited proselytism resources.

Poverty and low living standards may make the use of development projects as an appropriate, passive proselytizing method that can also improve the living conditions for many Mapuche on reservations. Senior missionary couples and local leaders can help organize and carry out development projects that teach agricultural techniques. Latter-day Saints could employ strategies for economic self-reliance similar to past and current development projects among other Amerindian groups or poverty-stricken areas such as teaching efficient agricultural techniques, organizing garden projects, holding employment and neonatal resuscitation workshops, conducting clean water projects, and providing small business loans or resources to jumpstart local entrepreneurs. The Church has accomplished noticeable success through poultry and plantation projects in Sub-Saharan Africa where individuals receive a "starter kit" of recently hatched chicks or farming supplies that if properly managed can turn into a self-sufficient business. Low levels of economic development and long-term societal marginalization indicate that small business projects could make a significant economic improvement for many. Extremely low literacy rates suggest that the LDS Church may meet local needs and passively facilitate the introduction of the Church through teaching literacy courses.

The declining use of the Mapudungun language among the Mapuche provides opportunities for LDS outreach utilizing widely available Spanish language resources and leadership and missionary manpower. However, very low literacy rates for Chilean Mapuche pose difficulties for utilizing printed materials and scriptures. Utilizing audio translations of the scriptures in Spanish^[5] may be appropriate to address gospel learning needs.

Challenges

The dedication of mission resources to reactivation and member support constitute the greatest barrier to establishing an organized, official missionary program among the Mapuche. The Church in Chile has experienced some of the most disastrous and pervasive inactivity problems worldwide as evidenced by no other country currently reporting as high of an average number of members per ward or branch (929). The estimated member activity rate for the Church in Chile is between 10% and 15%; one of the lowest in the world. Past leadership development problems and high convert attrition were the primary factors that prompted church leaders to consolidate 42 stakes in Chile during the early 2000s. Within the past decade, the Church has channeled its mission resources into stabilizing active membership, resuscitating local leadership, and attempting to reactivate

hundreds of thousands of inactive members. This has resulted in an end to unit consolidations but little success achieving growth as evidenced by no new stakes created since the 1990s and no noticeable increase in the number of wards and branches since 1999. The Church in Argentina also reports major inactivity problems, with estimated member activity rates at approximately 20% and congregational decline occurring since 2008. The emphasis of missions in Chile and Argentina on quota-driven, arbitrary baptismal goals that sacrifice quality teaching and prebaptismal preparation for rushing investigators into baptism has eroded the self-sufficiency of the Church in these two countries. Full-time missionaries have consequently been utilized to stabilize leadership and assist in home teaching and other local member responsibilities. Most units have lengthy lists of inactive members who have little recollection of their activity in the Church, if any meaningful period of church attendance was established when they were baptized. This has resulted in few mission resources available to allocate for Mapuche-specific outreach if mission and area leaders were to pursue specialized outreach among the Mapuche one day.

There is no sense of LDS community among the Mapuche people. The Church does not report any Mapudungun-speaking units in Chile or Argentina and there do not appear to be any units that have Mapuche members comprising a majority or large minority. Active Mapuche members are dispersed over large geographical areas administered by multiple LDS missions, resulting in likely little communication between these members and geographical constraints that make the establishment of a Mapudungun-speaking unit staffed by Mapuche members impractical.

The status of the Mapuche in Chilean society is a significant barrier for the Church proselytizing this people. The Mapuche continue to lack official recognition from the Chilean government and efforts to gain greater representation and civil rights have culminated in violence, such as in La Araucanía. Many Mapuche experience low standards of living, especially on reservations. The Mapuche have been marginalized in society since their incorporation into Chile in the late nineteenth century. Efforts to establish greater autonomy and expand the jurisdiction of individual Mapuche communities has yielded few advances in improving economic and living conditions.^[6] Political activism may pose safety concerns for missionaries in some locations.

Administrative regions in Chile with the highest percentage of Mapuche populations have experienced the least LDS growth. The estimated percentage of nominal members in the population is the second lowest for Santiago (3.06%) and third lowest for La Araucanía (3.25%) out of the 15 administrative regions of Chile. It is unclear whether fewer mission resources allocated to Araucanía than other administrative divisions, populations exhibiting lower receptivity than in other administrative divisions, or a combination of the two has resulted in the Church claiming a smaller percentage of the population in Araucanía than other areas.

Comparative Growth

The Church has not established a formal proselytism presence among any Amerindian peoples in Chile or Argentina. The Mapuche appear to have the most Latter-day Saints among Amerindian peoples native to Chile and Argentina. Other Amerindian peoples in South America have had an LDS presence for decades and have translations of scriptures and church materials into their native languages such as some Quechua peoples in Peru and Bolivia, the Imbabura (Otavalo) Quichua of Ecuador, and the Aymara of Bolivia.

Some worldwide proselytizing, nontraditional Christian groups report a presence among the Mapuche. In Chile, Jehovah's Witnesses report four Mapudungun-speaking congregations (Graneros, Santiago Sur, Temuco, and Tremen) and one group (Licanray).^[7] Witnesses have translated basic proselytism materials into Mapudungun.^[8] Evangelicals report that as many as 23% of the Mapuche population in Chile and four percent of the Mapuche population in Argentina is evangelical.^[9] It is unclear whether the Seventh Day Adventist Church has a presence among the Mapuche. Adventists have conducted past humanitarian and development work exclusively among Mapuche communities in Chile.^[10]

Limitations

The Church does not publish data on ethnicity and language usage for church membership in any country, including Chile and Argentina. It is unclear how many Mapuche have joined the Church and what percentage of Mapuche converts remain active today. During the writing of this case study, no member reports were available regarding full-time or member missionary activity among the Mapuche and few returned missionary reports were available from areas with large indigenous Mapuche populations such as Araucanía. The percentage of members by administrative division included in select areas in this case study are estimates ascertained through multiplying the average number of members per congregation for Chile in 2011 by the number of congregations in each administrative division in early 2013.

Future Prospects

The outlook for initiating a Mapuche-specific proselytism program appears bleak due to Mapuche populations residing in multiple LDS missions, chronic and severe member inactivity problems in Chile and Argentina, and no sizable numbers of Mapuche that have joined the Church as of early 2013. Mission and local leaders assessing proselytism prospects on Mapuche reservations and keeping track of active Mapuche members will be vital towards any improvement in outreach among the Mapuche for the foreseeable future. Political activism, marginalization in society, and low living standards will continue to pose challenges for church growth in the years to come. The surge in the worldwide missionary force offers opportunities for mission leaders to dedicate even a couple missionary companionships to focus on Mapuche populations, especially if ethnic Mapuche missionaries who speak Mapudungun as a first language are available.

- [1] "Mapudungun," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 March 2013. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/arn>
- [2] "Araucanians - History and Cultural Relations," [Countries and Their Cultures](http://www.everyculture.com/South-America/Araucanians-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html), retrieved 23 March 2013. <http://www.everyculture.com/South-America/Araucanians-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>
- [3] "Mapudungun," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 7 March 2013. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/arn>
- [4] "Chile," [International Religious Freedom Report 2009](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127383.htm), 26 October 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127383.htm>
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- [10] McGill, Nadia. "ADRA Empowers Mapuche Women in Chile Through Literacy and Skills Training," [Adventist Development and Relief Agency](http://www.adra.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=9589), 14 November 2008. <http://www.adra.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=9589>