

Thoughts on the Navajo Work

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Where We Are Now

Administratively the Navajo reservation is spread across four conferences belonging to three unions. The three unions are Mid-America, Pacific, and Southwestern. The four conferences are Arizona, Nevada-Utah, Rocky Mountain, and Texico. Rocky Mountain Conference has a handful of Navajos in Colorado (perhaps 5000) but administers San Juan County, New Mexico, which accounts for roughly half the Navajos in that state.

Each conference has an established Navajo work. To my knowledge, Arizona has churches at Chinle, Holbrook, Many Farms, and Window Rock; Nevada-Utah has a church at Monument Valley; Rocky Mountain Conference has churches at Waterflow, where Adventists from Shiprock worship, and La Vida Mission; Texico Conference has a church at Gallup.

Actions Available in the Near Term

There are two communities that especially lend themselves to the idea of a church plant. Tuba City (in Arizona Conference) is the reservation's largest town, just ahead of Shiprock. It is almost perfectly equidistant from three established Seventh-day Adventist churches – 72 miles from Flagstaff, 76 miles from Monument Valley, and 79 miles from Chinle – and to my knowledge has no official Adventist presence. The other town to consider is Crownpoint, New Mexico (in Texico Conference), on highway 371 between Thoreau and Farmington. Crownpoint is a hub for Navajos in the area because of its BIA hospital. The population of Tuba City in the 2000 census is 8225; Crownpoint is much smaller at 2360.

In Texico Conference there are opportunities for seed sowing on two small Navajo off-reservation reservations. The Ramah Navajo (www.ramah.ndes.org) have a population of about 1700, the Magdalena Navajo (www.alamo.ndes.org) about 2100.

A church plant is no small undertaking, and doing one on or near the reservation has its own tailor made challenges. But literature is one tool that can be used. We now have a booklet based on *Steps to Christ* (actually *Steps to Jesus*) entitled *Jesus Hoñ Yi'ashgo/Walking With Jesus*. It is written with English on one side of each page opening and Navajo on the other. The copyright holder is the Ellen G. White Estate and 20,000 copies are being printed this month at the Review.

15,000 copies will be offered to the conferences at no cost using a formula based on United States census data. The proposed distribution is Arizona 50% (7500 copies), Rocky

Mountain and Texico 18% (2700 copies each), and Nevada-Utah 14% (2100 copies). After this initial allocation 5000 copies remain (see below).

A web site (www.thebooklet.org) accompanies the booklet. On it we have a church finder, discussion topics drawn from the Navajo Bible, and announcements of upcoming events. Other uses will present themselves as time goes by. The idea is to maintain contact with readers in a way that leads to church growth.

The web site is up now and should be fully ready in time for the Gathering of Nations Pow Wow in Albuquerque, April 24-26.¹ Northeast Heights church will be there with a booth and over three days we hope to distribute 1000 copies. Also at the booth, if things work out right, I would like to have a sound recording of the Navajo portions. We'll be pushing the booklet (that's free). The recording will be available if someone asks for it (that's not free).

There are some contexts in which it doesn't make sense to give the booklet away. Because Navajos are thinly scattered in many states, some copies should be placed in ABCs, while others could be advertised in print publications. In these cases, involving 4000 copies, I have asked NAD/Native Ministries to coordinate sales. Any income after expenses from this or any other part of this project, including the sound recording, will be set aside for NAD/Native Ministries to be used in whatever way benefits Native Americans most.

Actions to Consider in the Long Term

Please let no one consider the following suggestions a criticism of work already in place. There's no next step without a first step. We have what we have, but here are some goals and concepts that we should consider pursuing as we move forward.

Leadership

The single greatest need we have on the reservation is for strong, bilingual leadership. Waterflow needs a Native pastor, both to do evangelism in an area that extends down highway 471 all the way to Sheep Springs² and to facilitate the construction of a representative church building. Bud Joe Haycock, long-time pastor at Chinle, is now past retirement age. Who will replace him? And if church plants are done in Crownpoint and Tuba City, who will pastor these new congregations?

¹ <http://www.gatheringofnations.com>.

² There are three cities and fourteen census-designated places in San Juan County. They aren't all on highway 471. See <http://www.thebooklet.org/Documents/NMSanJuanCounty.pdf>.

The church's need for bilingual leadership on the reservation has implications for the way we do primary education. My concept of Seventh-day Adventist schools is that their purpose is to supply the church with potential leaders – not just potential members. And in this case we're talking about leaders who speak both languages well. If our primary schools, especially in a boarding context, systematically remove Navajo from the lives of their students in the name of giving them English, such a policy is less than helpful.

Bilingual education should be the model used at any primary schools we operate on or near the reservation, but not the kind found in secular schools. Our orientation should be, not toward preserving culture, but toward grooming students for Christian leadership. Another way to say this is that Adventist bilingual education should look, not to the past, but to the future. Some parents reject bilingual programs because they don't want their children to learn cultural practices inimical to their faith. Our purpose must be clearly communicated in order to avoid this sort of misunderstanding. If parents really feel that their children will benefit from such a program, they will come on board.

I wouldn't be too hard on Holbrook Indian School. By academy age, if a person spends four years away from a language, that's not going to do any particular harm. It's the early grades where an English-only policy really works against us.

Evangelism

The crown jewel in any program for Navajo outreach is radio. We badly need a person who can speak the Navajo language well using available media and win souls in public meetings. Our search for such talent can't wait for educational policies to change and for another generation of graduates to come on the scene. We need meaningful evangelistic outreach on the reservation now. If there's no one in the church at present with the right mix of qualifications, we need to convert someone who already has them.

Additional training

The ideal bilingual pastor on the reservation will have gone through one of our four-year colleges to receive theological training. But where this is not possible, a qualified person who lacks a degree can still do perfectly acceptable work. What is not negotiable is that our Native pastors must know their Bibles. They must know an English Bible. There's no substitute for this. But they should also be enabled to read their Navajo Bible (*Diyin God Bizaad*), by which I mean read it publicly without hesitation. This would not take any long course of study – a two-week summer workshop would get a person off to a good start – but it's something they should be able to do. If our pastors rely on extemporaneous translation from English, things are going to get missed. We should not be satisfied with that level of competence.

Additional literature

A bilingual version of something like the Amazing Facts or It Is Written study guides would be a wonderfully practical thing to have on hand. They're not available yet, but could be produced. It's doable.

Summary

More could be said on the matter of primary education, pastoral training, and literature development. It is not my purpose here to be exhaustive, but rather to offer a perspective. I pray that God will help us to catch this vision, or else catch another vision of similar intent, and by whatever means carry forward His work for these dear people.