

The World Church

THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGE

Wesley W. Craig, Jr.

As a part of our continuing interest in Latter-day Saints overseas, the Editors of DIALOGUE intend to publish essays in THE WORLD CHURCH more frequently. This contribution is by Professor Wesley W. Craig, Jr., of the Sociology Department and Latin American Studies Program of Brigham Young University.

Non-Catholic religious groups have been increasing at a rapid rate in Latin America since World War II. For example, during the five-year period, 1952-57, the number of Protestants expanded from 2,866,000 to 4,534,000 — a fifty-eight per cent increase.¹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has prospered at an even more accelerated rate as evidenced by a Latin American (South of the Rio Grande River) membership of 9,921 in 1952 and 24,114 in 1957 — a 143 per cent increase. Even more significantly, the LDS Church grew during the succeeding decade, 1957-67, from 24,114 to 156,313, an increase of 548 per cent in the ten-year period.²

The change in religious conversions by world geographical areas indicates the increasing relative importance of Latin America to the LDS Church. In 1952, Latin American convert baptisms constituted only twenty per cent of the total Church conversions outside of the United States and Canada. European conversions constituted fifty-five per cent of the total foreign conversions

¹Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Vol. V of *The Twentieth Century Outside Europe*, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 168.

²Statistical Information compiled in the LDS Church Historian's Office.

that year. However, by 1964, Latin American conversions had grown to fifty-seven per cent of all foreign conversions, and Europe had fallen to twenty-one per cent. During the same period, Asia slipped slightly, from twenty-seven to twenty-four per cent.³

Underscoring the dramatic growth of conversions in Latin America was a comment made at the Fall 1970 Semi-Annual Conference of the Church in Salt Lake City by one of the General Authorities who stated that within the next seven years it is anticipated that the total LDS Church population will consist of more Spanish-speaking than English-speaking members.

What is contributing to this growth of the Church in Latin America? Who are the new members? What are their needs? How is the Church influencing their lives?

The conventional point of view in the Church attributes the increase of conversions in Latin America, especially among that part of the population known as Lamanite, to the ministration of the Holy Ghost upon the souls in that area. Recent statements by various Church authorities call attention to prophecy (especially in the Book of Mormon) regarding the awakening of the Lamanites in the last days and the restoration of their former rights and blessings.⁴

That recognition of spiritual influences at work in Latin American LDS missionary work does not preclude the consideration of social factors as contributory causes, or intervening variables in the process of conversion. One has but to consider the traditional rigidity of social class in most Latin American countries and the concomitant limitations on social mobility and alternate religious choices to recognize that social change itself facilitates the opportunities for pluralistic religious activity. Using this framework, one might ask, "To what degree does the Holy Ghost stimulate social changes, or work through such changes to accomplish spiritual objectives?"

The increase in non-Catholic religious groups in Latin America is related to profound social changes resulting from four inter-related variables: population growth, migration, urbanization, and industrialization.

The first, a burgeoning population, directly results from the reduction in the death rate. The World Health Organization, a branch of the United Nations, and the Public Health Division of the Organization of the American States have collaborated with Latin American governments in significant public health programs over the past twenty years. These efforts have resulted in millions living beyond the first year of life who otherwise would have died. Furthermore, adults are escaping the grim horrors of many diseases which earlier ravished Latin America. Indeed, the population of

³*Ibid.*

⁴See A. Theodore Tuttle in following articles: "The Gospel Growth in South America," *Improvement Era*, 68 (June 1965), 501-502; "South America . . . Land of Prophecy and Promise," *Improvement Era*, 66 (May 1963), 352-359, 394-396; "The Spirit of Missionary Work in South America," *Improvement Era*, 67 (June 1964), 463-465; "Field White to Harvest — South America," *Improvement Era*, 68 (June 1965), 501-502. Also, the *Improvement Era*, 66 (May 1963), has a special feature on "The Church in South America."

Latin America increased from 126,325,000 in 1940 to 238,310,000 in 1965, and it is now doubling every twenty-five years.⁵

This significant population growth is setting in motion a series of migrations which are funneling millions of rural people into the larger urban centers of Latin America. The hovels around major cities (variously called *favelas*, *chinampas*, and *barriadas*) attest to the logical but unanticipated influx of rural migrants to urban areas. Both local and national governments have been caught unprepared by this inundation of migrants and have failed to meet this challenge.⁶ But come the immigrants do, with limited education and few material possessions. They are convinced that urban life can promise no less than the starvation which threatens them in their overcrowded countryside.

Along with their rural migration, cities in such countries as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela are experiencing industrialization. While the unskilled rural migrant may have difficulty obtaining employment in semi-skilled, industrial positions, they often do make ends meet through work in related jobs such as building construction and in peripheral activities as vendors of minutiae.

A study contrasting Protestant conversions in Brazil to those in Chile indicates that:

Heavy concentration of migrants in areas where the Evangelical churches and sects have recruited most of their followers constitute additional evidence that acceptance of Protestantism is indeed a reaction to changes in the traditional way of life.⁷

Do LDS conversions reflect the influence of these variables? While no empirical study has yet been made of these phenomena, my personal observations based upon residence and travel in a number of these countries lead me to answer, Yes. A substantial number of LDS conversions in Latin America are coming from the lower classes, many of whom are recent migrants from rural areas, especially in those countries with heavy rural Indian populations, such as Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.

These migrants, no longer bound by the rigid social structure of their small rural communities, for the first time in their lives are experiencing relative freedom to make choices about religion.⁸ Somewhat frightened, un-

⁵Carmen A. Miro, "The Population of Twentieth Century Latin America," in J. Mayone Stycos and Jorge Arias (eds.), *Population Dilemma in Latin America*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 1966, p. 2.

⁶In addition to the usual governmental lethargy and budget problems, there is the added fear of national and urban leaders that the initiation of low-cost housing programs to incorporate the immigrants would be an additional stimulus to even greater migratory influxes.

⁷Emilio Willems, "Protestantism and Culture Change in Brazil and Chile," in William V. D'Antonio and Fredrick B. Pike, *Religion, Revolution and Reform: New Forces for Change in Latin America*, N.Y.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964, p. 100.

⁸For a parallel to this phenomenon consider the high conversion rates of the LDS Church in California and the Pacific Northwest — areas which have witnessed a heavy influx of migrants, especially from small towns in the Midwest. People who formerly would have turned the LDS missionaries away from their doors while living in the Midwest,

skilled, and often uneducated, these migrants gain their first impression of the LDS Church through two friendly, obviously middle-class people in their own rural communities. Their initial attendance at an LDS service is increasingly located in a sumptuous (to them) structure which reflects middle-class values. But the people whom they encounter there are mostly like themselves — poor, and desiring new friendships and upward mobility. They often see membership in this congregation as a social step upward. They anticipate that it will help their children to improve their own social position through education and leadership-skill development which might be converted into an improved socio-economic status in the broader society.

The organization of the Church serves as an integrating force for rural migrant converts. The Church, however, competes with a number of other groups which also provide this type of support, including Pentecostal churches which appeal strongly to this same people; regional associations of migrants from the same rural localities; *barriada*, or poor neighborhood associations which have organized in order to protect the small urban plot which they have occupied illegally as squatters; labor unions; credit and housing cooperatives; etc. All of these social organizations offer alternate services and opportunities for social integration into the urban scene.

The preceding view of the rural to urban migratory pattern, while explaining one very important phase of the dynamics of LDS conversion, does not provide a complete picture of the growth of the Church in Latin America. Some countries, especially Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, with much larger percentages of recent European immigrants, reflect more of a lower-class and middle-class conversion to the Church, with an occasional upper-class convert lending strength and support to leadership positions in the Church. Differing in kind from the lower-class rural convert, the analysis of these more prosperous converts merits future separate treatment.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC NEEDS OF THE LDS CONVERTS

In what ways does the LDS Church help meet the social and economic needs of its membership in Latin America? An obvious strength is the facility with which the Church organization seeks to incorporate the newly baptized member into the various spheres of organizational activity, such as the Mutual, Relief Society, and Priesthood. Through these experiences the new member often sees himself engaged in the development of administrative and social skills which he has lacked.⁹ These often help him in his regular occupation, and he can see their material and social benefits.

These, however, are but a few of the perceived needs of the typical convert. He often lives in a slum and has difficulty obtaining any capital through loans to start a small business. He finds that his children often are unable

for fear of what their friends or neighbors would think, now open their doors to the missionaries; their new neighbors could care less, and their old-town friends are far away. *The social pressures for conformity to traditional patterns have been weakened.*

⁹While most missionaries are from the United States, there is a small but growing number of Latin American missionaries serving in Latin America.

to obtain entry into over-crowded and inferior schools, or they are ostracized in Catholic schools. His own livelihood is not based upon his merits, but upon "who he knows," and the people he knows (i.e. Church people) do not open employment opportunities because they are too often like himself. Limited funds for the care of bad teeth, parasites, and tuberculosis are all too often harsh realities for the convert. Discussions in Priesthood meetings often center on such questions as, "Why couldn't we, as church members, work together in developing a housing cooperative, or a credit cooperative, or have church schools for our children so they would not have to attend private Catholic or impoverished public schools?"

Some of the sharpest criticism of the LDS Church in Latin America comes from non-LDS friends, with some familiarity of LDS programs in the United States, who ask, "Why don't you start cooperatives among your people here in Latin America like your Church was famous for during its early struggling days in Utah?" Or, "Why don't you help your members with welfare participation programs, provide jobs like the Deseret Industries does, or develop schools and educational opportunities for your people?" To these pointed queries the North American Mormon defensively replies, "It's true that we are not engaging very much in these material things, but we are helping to change personalities and increasing moral strength in our converts, which will redound not only to their personal advantage and happiness, but also to the general improvement of their country." There then follows a lengthy discussion of the dishonesty of bureaucrats, the bribe (*mordidas*), sexual promiscuity, etc. to show that there is indeed a need for such societal improvements. A second answer to the above question is that the organizational activities of the Church give its members administrative skills and social graces which they can convert into higher social status in their country.

Were other religious organizations carrying out comparable programs of proselyting and organizational activity, the questions might not be so barbed. In recent years, the Catholic Church, however, has responded to the challenges of Protestant and Mormon incursions by developing an aggressive social program designed to regain its precarious hold over nominal Catholics. For example, credit unions under the direction of Catholic priests, exemplified by the successful pioneering efforts of Father McClelland in Peru, have been proliferating throughout Latin America. For the first time local Catholics see the Church as a significant support for their material needs through the availability of low-interest loans. New Mormon converts take a look at this service and ask, "Why don't we do it?"

Seventh-Day Adventists, Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists are responding to the lack of adequate schooling in many Latin American countries through the development of private school systems. Governments, hard-pressed to maintain their existing services in the face of increasing population and inflation, look gratefully upon the support from these private groups in areas where they are not capable of providing enough. Latin American Mormon converts take a look at their new, costly meeting houses (chapels designed

by Americans in Salt Lake City for extremely different conditions in Latin America) and ask, "Why don't we use these lovely buildings as schools — indeed, why aren't they designed in the first place with school-use in mind?" The Church has had difficulty obtaining local support for the construction of the lovely new chapels recently built in Latin America, but local members insist that if these were designed as schools for their children (in addition to regular church activities) that the Church would have no trouble securing local volunteer support. Indeed, what impresses many observers in Latin America is the significant demand of the lower classes for adequate schooling. In many cases, the parents themselves help build government schools, without remuneration. They desperately want their children to have new educational opportunities. One of the most common replies to the question as to how the lower-class peasant perceives his lot in life is, "I don't expect that things will change very much for me, but I'm certainly going to do everything possible to assure that my children have a better chance in life." Better chances are seen as being inextricably linked with educational opportunities. Rural Latin Americans often pay fifty per cent of their annual income (which might be around \$400 per year) to send their children to school, often away from home in larger towns.

The Church has barely begun to respond to this challenge of educating its members in Latin America. From the Rio Grande to Panama, only Mexico has an educational program for LDS children, with slightly over thirty elementary schools and a modern secondary and normal-school educational complex in Mexico City. However, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Salvador, and Panama have no church schools, although they have sizeable and increasing LDS congregations. In all of South America only Chile has LDS schools, and only five elementary schools exist there. In Bolivia, a school has been initiated in one of the chapels, but is operating without formal church support.

Experience of the LDS schools in Chile indicate that the Church not only gains converts through the schools, but that parents of children in the church schools participate more fully in regular church activities.¹⁰

PRIVATE SUPPORT OF NORTH AMERICAN MORMONS TO LDS CHURCH WORK IN LATIN AMERICA

A little-known facet of the LDS Church in Latin America is the presence of an increasing number of non-missionary North American Mormons who are residing there. These range from short tenure U.S. governmental or private business employees to a number of families who have migrated to Latin America on a permanent basis. A few examples will illustrate their varied involvement.

One member, an employee of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, accepted a contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development to

¹⁰Interview with Dale Harding, first administrator of LDS Church schools in Chile. November 1968, Provo, Utah.

help a South American country develop a better tax program. With no previous experience in Latin America and no knowledge of the Spanish language, he was soon called to be a counselor in a branch presidency. Even before he could speak Spanish well, he was made branch president.

Probably more typically, many former missionaries return to Latin America with U.S. corporations in executive positions. They often serve at the branch, district, and mission levels, often as counselors giving guidance to the local leadership of the Church. "Long-termers," including some former missionaries who return to Latin America, marry local girls and settle down to work as permanent employees of U.S. corporations in Latin America.

However, these patterns are giving away to a new type of immigrant — the returned U.S. missionary who seeks to earn his living in Latin America, but, who at the same time wants to "do something to advance the cause of the Lamanites" (especially in the more Indian countries of Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru). One young family has moved to the interior of Guatemala and purchased a farm, complete with over a hundred Indians who "come with the *hacienda*," and has become engrossed in an effort to develop its charges through an amplification of their opportunities on his private farm.¹¹

Another young man, a farmer from Logan, Utah (not a returned Latin American missionary), looking for agricultural business opportunities in Latin America, surveyed possibilities from Mexico to Argentina and then decided to purchase land in the newly developing eastern lowlands of the Andes, near Santa Cruz, Bolivia. His agricultural venture has become somewhat more complicated with the arrival of five Bolivian LDS families from the highlands near La Paz, who have been sent to him through the encouragement of the Mission President. These five families represent the low-income sector of the Bolivian economy and are attracted by the possibilities of an experimental colonization project under the private auspices of this American farmer.

AYUDA

Other church members have wondered if they might not be of service to the Lamanite populations of Latin America by donating their time, professional skills and resources in various ways. A number of these men and women founded an organization entitled AYUDA, Inc. (meaning "help" or "assistance" in Spanish). This non-profit foundation was incorporated in Utah in 1968 with the specified objectives of providing material and technical support to Lamanite members and non-members in Latin America and elsewhere. A medical clinic was established by AYUDA in the Indian town of Cunen, Guatemala on July 4, 1969 — initiating a voluntary service requested by community officials in that community.

Since that time some forty different volunteers have given anywhere from two weeks to twelve months unpaid voluntary service to the Indian and

¹¹See "Sell that Thou Hast . . . and Come and Follow Me," *Church News* (March 9, 1968), p. 11.

Latino population of that community. Volunteers have included medical doctors (specialists as well as general practitioners), nurses, nurses' aids, educators, construction specialists, bankers, etc. They have ranged from single persons to families with as many as seven children. Most of the volunteers have been LDS but a number of non-members have also collaborated. Personnel have come from Arizona, California, Idaho, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, and Utah.

Plans for the community include the training of local para-medical personnel who can themselves meet many of the future needs of their own people. Support is being sought for the construction of a medical clinic with adequate equipment to handle the needs of the region which includes some 30,000 Mayan Indians who speak the Quiché dialect. Another proposal would establish an agricultural, experimental and training station to help local farmers improve their income and general economic condition through the application of more scientific agricultural techniques and practices.

This project has caught the imagination of some LDS members in Guatemala. A young Guatemalan medical intern has donated his services on several occasions and would like to spend full time at the project if a basic stipend for expenses could be provided. Other Guatemalans have donated sheets and baby clothing to the patients in the medical clinic. A nurse from BYU developed a program for expectant mothers during her eight-month sabbatical leave spent in the community. A limited post-primary school has been established in the community by AYUDA (the first school in the community's history with education beyond the sixth grade). The wife of the school director founded a pre-school day-care center in which children receive nutritional increments, most of which are provided by CARE, Inc. with distribution in Cunén being effected by the AYUDA personnel.

The dental component of AYUDA, has recently secured a specially equipped dental mobile-trailer which will enlarge the radius for AYUDA service in the region.

Some twenty-four Friends of AYUDA groups have been established throughout the U.S. and include units in Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Palo Alto, Phoenix-Mesa, Provo, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, and Washington D.C. These groups undertake various activities to develop support for the field projects in Latin America.¹²

CONCLUSIONS

Little question remains as to the initial attractiveness of the LDS Church to many Latin Americans. Increasing numbers of baptisms attest to its centripetal force in drawing converts. More salient at this point is the question, "Can converts become ingregated and find satisfaction materially as well as spiritually?" No formal studies have been carried out on the subject of LDS inactivity in Latin America; however, indications are that in many

¹²Anyone interested in participating in or organizing a Friends of AYUDA group should write to: Director/AYUDA, Inc./1034 North Fifth West/Provo, Utah 84601.

areas there is a high loss of church membership after baptism. Increasingly, the Church must confront the broader challenges relating to the material needs of its membership, including schools, greater skill development, economic opportunities and supportive social arrangements which facilitate material well-being.

The formal structure of the Church already appears to be on the threshold of changing its stance in some areas. The appointment of a new Commissioner of Education for the Church and the comments of General Authorities in recent months attest to a new mood with regard to expansion of LDS education programs in Latin America. The expanding work-missions among U.S. Lamanite populations under the stimulus of the BYU Institute of American Indian Studies reflect a tentative probing of the possibilities for implementation of economic assistance through formal Church channels.

Aside from formal Church response lies another vital question: "To what degree will affluent Mormons in the U.S. personally assume responsibility for brotherly assistance to their less privileged brethren?" The individual activities of a few U.S. members in Latin America and the initial response to AYUDA'S activities may presage substantial interest, desire and willingness to become involved to a significant degree.

Increasingly, the future of Latin American Mormons becomes linked with the faith and dedication of U.S. Mormons.