

# The World Church

## THE CHURCH ABROAD

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In areas distant from the central stakes of Zion, the church may occupy a more important position in the lives of members than it does where Mormons are more numerous. This is particularly true when small numbers of expatriates are relocated in a foreign country where there has been little or no proselyting and where the local group or branch is largely dependent on the presence of temporary residents for its leadership, and indeed its membership.

Members living away from their homes, especially abroad, frequently wish to take their church with them, and the result is often a home Sunday school attended by half a dozen, by two or three, or even by one family. Social patterns in these small groups, in circumstances where members are likely to focus on their distinct religious heritage, may be characterized by a closeness and intimacy not found in a typical ward. Sunday School may be extended to Sunday dinner, outings over the weekend may be planned so that modest Sunday services can be held as part of a picnic or trip to a game park or recreational area. Baptisms of growing children may take place on an outing to a resort or the beach.

Families who have left an active, extended family behind "back in the States" often replace distant relatives with local members, satisfying a social need and at the same time sharing the responsibilities of a satisfactory level of religious observance, as a tie with traditions held dear. Friendships form quickly as members come to realize how much of a cultural and religious background they share and how different they are from other peoples, when so many conditions and institutions are changed or replaced in an unfamiliar environment.

For nearly five years in the late fifties and early sixties my family and I lived in the Philippines. Our church group consisted of four or five families with the option of a home Sunday school or a weekly trip across Manila Bay to Sangley Point, where we could combine forces with two or three American military families at a small naval base. Two larger branches were located at other American military installations located about 70 and 120 miles distant, so it was possible to hold occasional conferences, especially when church visitors were in the country.

The Manila Branch was a small, close-knit group with near full participation in our limited religious activities. There were a few Filipino members, but the word passed on by older residents was that proselyting among Filipinos was not encouraged, since there would be no organization to cater to the special needs of converts once the contacting member was reassigned and departed. Steps had been taken to register the church as an organization legally recognized by the Philippine government, but this was a process that consumed several years of negotiations. Missionary activities were foreseen as an eventual extension of the Southern Far East Mission (headquarters in Hong Kong), and members looked forward to the formal establishment of a local church.

Partly in anticipation of opening a Philippine mission, there were relatively frequent visits by church authorities. While we were there, four apostles came to Manila. Each visit was the occasion of special services and activities, and the local members felt blessed to have these high church authorities in their homes. Indeed, no similar experience could be expected back in the center stakes, where the best that could be hoped for was a quick handshake as the line moved past the visitor at the conclusion of a session of stake conference.

We were direct beneficiaries of one of these visits in the solution of a family problem. Our infant daughter, in her first attempt to climb out of her stroller, had fallen on a ceramic tile floor, a fall which resulted in a serious skull fracture and hemorrhaging. Elder Mark E. Petersen and the Mission President, Brother Grant Heaton, offered to administer on her behalf. The result was peaceful rest for the little girl and a measure of relief for the anxious parents. An impending emergency operation proved not to be necessary, and a subsequent x-ray showed complete healing of the fracture, the earlier effects of which could not even be detected in the picture. Potentially serious brain damage was averted, and today a bright-eyed teenager enjoys a completely normal life, enriched by a special testimony.

Eventually, permission for the entry of missionaries was obtained, and in 1960 formal proselyting began. The field was ripe and ready, and the church grew very fast. The leadership after a decade is largely Filipinized, and expatriate residents probably find a church in many ways like the one they are familiar with at home. It was most interesting to witness the initiation of missionary activities and the results of the dedication of the young elders whose message found so many receptive ears as the church began to grow in Asia.

In the late 1960's another foreign assignment took our family to Africa, first to Ethiopia and later to Kenya. Many of the same impressions characterized our stay: a small, close-knit social group of expatriates, the maintenance of a partial (but this time surprisingly full) program of church activity, the combination of religious and social interests, with baptisms the occasion for outings and with sacrament cups and song books a regular part of the baggage for our occasional weekends out of the city. As we moved from home to home for our Sunday School and other meetings, our devotional singing was accompanied sometimes by a piano, sometimes by an accordion, sometimes by a flute, and occasionally the mode was a cappella. All ages participated, and it was not unusual for the invocation or benediction to be offered by a three-year-old child. The program in Addis Ababa was well organized, reflecting the quality of strong leadership provided by the Branch President, an experienced, devoted, and committed member who served with distinction.

Our occasional baptisms were normally held at Sodere, a hot springs resort about 120 kilometers south and down from Addis Ababa. At one baptism the water was so excessively hot in the small private pool that a baptism by immersion was out of the question; the group was forced to go to an outdoor, olympic-sized swimming pool that was being filled. The water at the deep end was appropriately high so the little girl candidate and her father climbed down the ladder. Onlookers gathered and enjoyed this part of the service with the group, inquiring afterward if that man (the one performing the baptism) was really a priest. The assurance was given that he was — indeed, that he was a high priest.

A weekend outing to Lake Awasa in the Rift Valley nearly became a tragedy. The young son of one of the members became very sick many hours from Addis Ababa. A medical doctor in our group worked desperately to keep the boy alive, asking the rest of us for the support of our faith and prayers until he could be taken to a rural mission hospital. There it was necessary to break into the medical supplies to get a specific drug. The doctor with the key could not be contacted since he was operating on a badly injured victim of a road accident. Calmed by the medication the boy was safely taken to Addis Ababa and eventually out of the country for treatment by a specialist.

Special events provided variety to our religious observances. Our son paid us a visit just before reporting for an assignment to the Language Training Mission. (His was probably the only missionary farewell ever given in the ancient land of Sheba.) We had occasional visits from church authorities via taped speeches. Also, family-planned sacrament meetings helped solve the problem of supplying appropriate programs. One family remarked that none of them had ever performed musically in public before, and probably never would again.

In spite of the varied activities in Ethiopia, one would have to say that where the church grew in Asia, it subsisted in Africa, wholly dependent on short-term residents. There were no visits by church general authorities,

and the mission president came from Switzerland only on very rare occasions (never while we were there). We had a few member visitors, someone incidentally present or passing through, and their presence was an unusual pleasure.

In general the posture of the church in Ethiopia was one of low visibility. Our "welfare" project in Addis Ababa was a monthly contribution of money and supplies to a private school established to care for a few of the thousands of orphans otherwise left to beg on the streets of the city. This project was especially helpful as a salve to the conscience of people who wanted to make some contribution to the alleviation of a grinding poverty (the likes of which few members had never before witnessed), but who were happy to be relieved of the responsibility of distinguishing deserving from dissembled cases of need on the streets. This was especially true since rumors of child-maiming to enhance effective begging were probably not groundless, and giving to the most pitiful case might well be a direct contribution to the deliberate crippling of another unfortunate and helpless child in the near future.

In Addis Ababa the local branch was strengthened by the assignment of a University of Utah AID team to the Faculty of Education at Haile Sellassie I University, contributing three or four families to branch membership. In Nairobi the branch was smaller, consisting at one point of one and a half families. The "Branch President" was asked by a visitor when he planned to return to the United States. As a proud and independent Scotsman he took some satisfaction in informing his guest that he couldn't go back, since he had never been there. The half family in this small branch was German. An example of growing pains in a church striving to become international.

One source of embarrassment in the Nairobi branch was the supervision, modest though it was, of church activities from Johannesburg. Kenyans don't like South Africans, and any very visible communication with South Africa can be the cause of suspicions. (This has since been changed, and Kenya is now, like Ethiopia, part of the Swiss mission.)

Visitors are always welcomed at small outpost branches, but they have the problem of finding the branch. Some visitors plan ahead, get names from church or mission headquarters. Others just come. In Nairobi the means of establishing communication was a weekly ad with a telephone number appearing on the page of religious announcements in Friday's newspaper.

The most memorable of our services in Nairobi was one attended by a Negro member of the church from Salt Lake City. Brother Darius Gray, a technician at KSL and a convert to the church, was the only member (and only Negro) in a group of four Salt Lake visitors to Kenya, who had come to make documentary films. We learned very late on a Saturday night that Brother Gray was in Nairobi. In spite of the hour we called his hotel and spoke to him, learning later that the call had awakened him. He accepted our invitation, but called the next morning to confirm it since, in his words, he wanted to be very sure he hadn't just dreamed about it. Never did we have

a more inspiring devotional than that morning when we thrilled to the account of his conversion and enjoyed the testimony and the sweet spirit of that humble man. All of our group felt honored and privileged to share membership with him in a great church. Somehow Africa was an appropriate place to make his acquaintance.

