

Refugee Converts: One Stake's Experience

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SITUATED ON A PROMINENT KNOLL in the Oakland hills, the Oakland Temple is the most visible symbol of the Church in the San Francisco Bay Area. The temple is located within the boundaries of the Oakland Stake, which, until recently, followed a pattern of growth and membership typical of U.S. urban areas.

This pattern changed abruptly with the influx by 1981 of 50,000 refugees to the East Bay area from Southeast Asia. A substantial number of these people joined the Church, and the Oakland Stake faced the challenge of bringing them into full Church fellowship, a formidable responsibility — and one which still continues.

Established routines and policies could not adequately meet the needs of these new members. The demands on the resources of the stake have frustrated many of the long-time members. Change has been rapid; growth, phenomenal. The Church's goal of becoming worldwide — integrating peoples of diverse languages and cultures into its structure — has been tested on the Church's home ground.

The task differs significantly from the corresponding one in the foreign missions of the Church. The native peoples form the cultural, linguistic, and economic structures of those areas. They are familiar with and have an investment in these structures. The missionaries are guests in another culture. By contrast the refugees in the United States must adapt to a new culture, language, and economic pattern. In many cases, they must adjust to personal tragedy. Those who become Church members must also adjust to a new religious structure. The Church's challenge has been to help ease these adjust-

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ments while maintaining basic Church practices and policies. For example, arranged marriages, acceptable in Southeast Asian cultures, are not acceptable in the American culture. Insisting that arranged marriages be discontinued confuses and alienates the refugees.

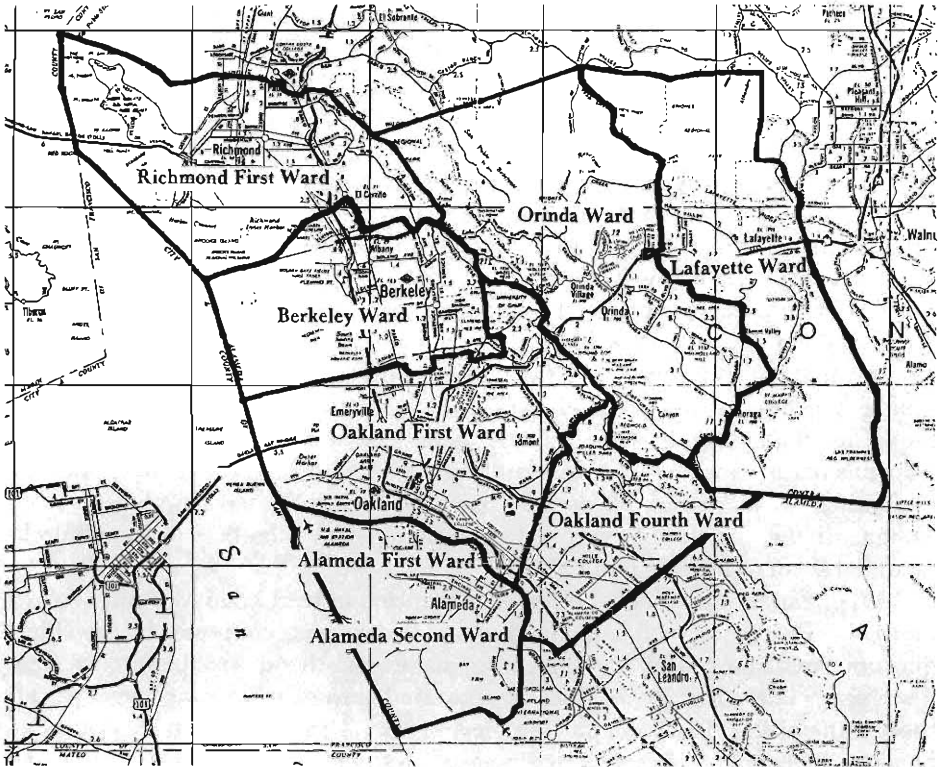
Perhaps others who face similar challenges could learn from the experiences of the Oakland Stake between 1981 and 1986 described in this essay.

Fifteen units comprise the Oakland Stake: ten wards and five branches. All five branches and one of the wards are oriented to the non-English-speaking groups. Even before these units were created, the educational and socio-economic makeup of the stake varied greatly. The Lafayette and Orinda wards in Contra Costa County are typically suburban. They were brought into the stake in 1975 to augment its declining urban population, to provide leadership, and to build youth programs. At the same time, the Oakland Third Ward was created for members over forty-five with no children still living at home. The University Ward is for single adults. The Oakland First Ward draws from both the affluent Piedmont area and from inner-city Oakland. The two Alameda wards have a large population of transient Navy personnel. Berkeley Ward serves UC-Berkeley, and Richmond Ward serves a predominantly working-class community.

One of Oakland's earliest efforts at teaching the gospel in a language other than English was a Sunday School class for Spanish-speaking members in the Richmond-Berkeley area in the early 1960s. Later, in 1965, a Spanish-speaking branch was organized. It was dissolved in 1979, and its members were integrated into their home wards. The branch was discontinued because (1) its branch president planned to leave the area and (2) Church policy discouraged non-English-speaking units in the United States. Information about this policy, said to have been articulated about 1975, is hard to pin down. Stake leaders have differing opinions about its "officialness." A search through the 1970s issues of the *Ensign* magazine and the *Church News* failed to turn up any official announcement. A spokesman from the First Presidency's office "seemed to recall" that non-English-speaking units were "discouraged" so members could learn English and become Americanized. When we pressed him for a source or at least a date, he suggested looking through the stake president file of circular letters for the decade, although he admitted that "if the president followed the instructions in the latest handbook, all those letters would have been destroyed."

When a new Spanish-speaking branch (Oakland Sixth) was created in August 1983, many people, including Branch President Ray Barnes, wondered whether the stake were taking a step backward. Today, however, he has no such misgivings and considers the branch a great success. Its population has doubled, less through reactivation than through convert baptisms. Its members can participate in ways not possible in an integrated ward. An elderly sister, for example, illiterate in both English and Spanish, can participate in classes, pray, and speak in the branch. He counts as other measures of success the steady stream of speakers during testimony meetings, the temple sealing of three older couples, and the temple marriage of a young couple.

Oakland Stake Boundaries, 1985



Wards and Branches With Special Memberships:

Oakland Second Branch: Cambodian and Laotian members living within Oakland First, Oakland Fourth, Alameda First and Second, Orinda, and Lafayette Ward boundaries. The *Oakland Seventh Branch* was later created for Laotian members originally in the Second Branch.

Oakland Third Ward: Families living within Oakland First and Fourth Ward boundaries, with a head of household over 45 years old and no children living at home.

Oakland Fourth Ward: In 1985 this ward was reorganized to serve Tongan members only; non-Tongan members originally in the Fourth Ward became members of the Oakland First Ward.

Oakland Fifth Branch: Vietnamese and Chinese members living within stake boundaries.

Oakland Sixth Branch: Spanish-speaking members living within stake boundaries.

Richmond Second Branch: Laotian members living within Richmond First and Berkeley Ward boundaries.

University Ward: Single members without children living within stake boundaries who are Young Adult or Young Special Interest age.

From the stake's point of view, this branch is a success because it is largely self-staffed. Only President Barnes and one couple have been called from English-speaking wards to assist. Because all the members speak Spanish, translation is unnecessary. The Primary and youth programs are taught in English. Membership in the branch is optional; a few Spanish-speaking members elected to stay in their home wards, and at least one family returned to its home ward after giving the branch a try.

A second non-English-speaking group operating during the 1960s was an American Indian Sunday School class in Oakland. They all spoke English but came from as far as Hayward to participate in the class. This group disbanded when its leader moved away.

The largest and longest-lived group, and ironically the last to receive official status, is the Tongan.

The first Tongan family, that of Lupeni Fonua, came to Oakland in 1968. Unlike the Southeast Asian refugees but like many of the Spanish-speaking immigrants, the family were already members of the Church, and one of Lupeni's reasons for choosing Oakland was its proximity to the temple. Lupeni established a successful gardening business and recruited employees from Tonga. If the families he recruited were not already members of the Church, he urged them to investigate it.

A Tongan Sunday School class was organized in the Oakland Fourth Ward in 1974. That same year a Tongan was called to be a counselor in the elders quorum presidency and a Tongan-language priesthood group was formed. Two years later, the Relief Society separated into two language groups, although they held joint homemaking meetings. A Tongan woman was called to be a "representative" to the Relief Society presidency; in effect she functioned as the Tongan Relief Society president. In 1981 a separate Tongan elders quorum was formed.

Between 1968 and 1985 the Tongan group grew by approximately twenty-five members a year. Because of this slow but steady growth, the Tongans gained experience in leadership positions at the ward and stake levels and were accepted quite easily by the people of Oakland Fourth Ward. Both factors — experience and acceptance — contributed greatly to their success. Former bishop Richard Alder told us: "New people moving into the ward did not know what to expect. But after the first few meetings they were so influenced by the Tongans, it was not a problem. They were so faithful and obedient and showed such a love of the gospel. Today people write to tell me that Oakland Fourth was so special, it was the highlight of their life."

By January 1985 the Tongan members could ably function as leaders and teachers, and the Oakland Fourth Ward was reorganized as a Tongan ward.

The development — almost evolution — of this group contrasts sharply with the rapid growth and organization of the refugee groups.

By 1981 the leaders of the Oakland Stake had become fairly successful at accommodating the cultural diversity of its members. However, the large number of Southeast Asian converts overwhelmed existing mechanisms for meeting the needs of these refugee groups and solving the four major problems

they presented: communication, transportation, staffing, and member retention.

One of the first stake members to become aware of the Asian groups was Norman Hanson, a dentist practicing in Oakland, who began taking welfare patients in 1975 when a major dental clinic opened near his office. By 1979, his practice included a large number of refugees. Hanson was impressed by their courtesy ("It was not uncommon to extract ten or twelve teeth and have them bow and thank me."), gratitude, and apparent readiness to receive the gospel.

His sister Bonnie Robertson, a secretary in the bilingual section of the Lakeland School District near Los Angeles, agreed with his assessment and put him in contact with Mr. Senghin Bit, a Cambodian connected with the Oakland Unified School District. Mr. Bit described the refugees' problems and acquainted Hanson for the first time with their large numbers. Hanson arranged with the Orinda Ward mission leader to invite Mr. Bit to speak at a fireside. Hanson began asking himself, "What could we do as a Church? How could we help people and open doors for missionary work? I was deeply impressed and had a strong desire to do something for them. I was almost consumed by the feeling it must be done."

His wife Jane corroborates, "He could see it, visualize it, and he was obsessed with it."

Hanson devised a program for involving members of the stake in regularly teaching and fellowshipping the Asians. In December 1980 he took his plan to Stake President Bud Billeter, who was encouraging and promised to take the idea to the high council.

In these initial stages communication problems began, not, as might be expected, among peoples who spoke different languages, but among people who had been speaking English all their lives. President Billeter, for example, told us he was "enthusiastic about this opportunity for members of the stake to become involved in community service, with no strings attached." Hanson misinterpreted Billeter's enthusiasm as an endorsement of the missionary plan he presented. Miscommunication created hurt feelings among people involved in the project at all stages.

The members of the high council debated Hanson's proposal with no conclusive results. One of the members, who had sponsored an Asian family through a program run by the Tolstoy Foundation, considered it a "fantastic experience for the family" but pointed out some of the difficulties created by the linguistic and cultural barriers. Some on the council, most impressed by the negative parts of his statements, felt strongly that the missionaries should not proselyte among the refugees.

Hanson was frustrated by the lack of response to his proposal. He had called the stake president after one month and again after another two months. Encountering a member of the stake presidency by chance, he asked about his proposal and was told that the stake presidency felt the matter needed further study and were suggesting beginning with a one-year case study of one family. Hanson's response was, "You don't study missionary work! You go out and do it."

He decided on a second strategy. In March 1981 he arranged for President Charles R. Hansen of the Oakland California Mission to meet with Mr. Bit. President Hansen then scheduled a meeting of the mission leaders at the mission home in Oakland. He reviewed the proposal in more detail and concluded, "If you'll supply the people, I'll supply the missionaries."

Carol Hansen, President Hansen's wife, told Hanson afterward that baptisms in the mission had been very low and that she and her husband had been praying daily for help. Clearly the proposal was an answer to their prayers.

To supply the people, Hanson asked his sister to use her Asian typewriters to type index cards in Cambodian and Lao asking whether Asian families would be interested in learning English in their own homes. The cards were placed in Hanson's dental office. President Hansen assigned two young women missionaries to follow up on the responses. By the end of the first week, they were swamped. Norm Hanson said, "The people and the missionaries fell in love. In a week or two they discarded the English lessons. They weren't necessary."

The missionaries began preaching the gospel, then conceived the Saturday program, a family activity day. Carol Hansen noted, "In just a matter of minutes we put the whole thing together" — quilting for the women, basketball for the teens, and Primary for the children. Approximately ninety Cambodians and Laotians attended the first meeting on 25 April 1981. The stake provided an unused chapel on Virginia Street for the meeting.

Finding a program for the Asian men proved harder. Furniture and appliance repair were considered, but finding materials and supervisors was difficult. One possible solution was thwarted by more miscommunication among stake members. University Ward women trained to teach English as a second language (ESL) offered to teach English to the women. The message sent to them was, "We have a great quilting program going for the women. They are enthusiastic and involved, and they need the quilts. What we need is some kind of program for the men, and English classes might be the answer." The message received was, "The women are learning quilting and that's enough for them. We need to teach English to the men but the teaching should be done by men" even though women missionaries were assigned to the project. The University Ward women perceived this as a feminist issue and withdrew their offer to help.

Norm Hanson, assisted by President Hansen and the missionaries, provided transportation to the meetings. However, as attendance increased, they asked the stake for help.

In June 1981, the stake presidency called Joel and Evelyn Parker, a retired couple from Richmond Ward, to coordinate transportation. They arranged scheduling, assigning wards in rotation to supply drivers and staff. Drivers were told simply to go to an address and pick up people; sometimes they were even unaware of why they were driving. The drivers changed frequently. Evelyn Parker observed, "The thing I admired was the faith the people had. 'Someone will pick you up,' they were told, and they just went out and stood there and got in the car of a perfect stranger. How they appreciated us! What faith they had in us!"

The first converts were baptized on 28 June 1981. "This was a great day for me," Norm Hanson wrote in his journal. "Fifteen Cambodians were baptized after stake conference. It is the first of a whole new generation of the Church." He commented on their motives. "Many of the Asians believed that their lives had been preserved for a reason. When they heard the gospel, they knew what that reason was. There were tears in their eyes."

The newly baptized members were to meet with the Oakland First Ward, where members experienced in teaching English as a second language taught the adult Sunday School class. Originally the children were to be integrated into the Primary, but their English was too limited, and a separate program had to be arranged. Even the simple procedure of reading the names of new Asian members into the membership records presented a gigantic hurdle. The conducting officers stumbled over the strange-sounding names. Since there was no translation, the Asians did not understand the procedure and rarely stood to be recognized. The ward leaders discontinued the practice because it was a waste of meeting time. The ward strained as it tried to provide and staff parallel programs — auxiliaries, Sacrament Meeting, etc.

Murmurings and misgivings circulated, and any initial enthusiasm Oakland First Ward had for the program dissolved. This effort at integration was completely unsuccessful. A member called to tell Mission President Hansen that "missionaries should not proselyte in the Oakland flatlands." This infuriated President Hansen and Norm Hanson, and they resolved to continue.

Although President Hansen and Norm Hanson found the criticism offensive, the caller probably voiced what many others were feeling — that the flatlands of Oakland are unsafe and unsavory, an unfit place for missionary proselyting. The oldest part of Oakland, the flatlands boast dilapidated Victorian houses and deteriorating apartment buildings. Drunks, drug abusers, and prostitutes hang out near the large apartment complex that houses the Asian family we pick up for church each Sunday. Concern was well-founded. Later, when the branches were organized, many of the branch staff began entering the flatland neighborhoods regularly. Their attitude is, "If they can live there, we can go there." However, the current policy is that unaccompanied women staff are not allowed to enter the area, day or night.

One positive development that came out of the attempt to integrate the Asians with the Oakland First Ward was a series of videotapes that combine English lessons with basic gospel principles. Patricia Jensen, one of the ESL teachers connected with the ward effort, originated the idea, first as a means of allowing people who had missed a class to catch up and then as a direct teaching tool. She wrote to Stewart Durrant, director of the Church Lamanite and Minority Committee in Salt Lake City, who told her that the Church had not developed any materials of this type. She went to see him, hoping to use Church facilities to make the tapes. He told her that he had too little information and suggested that she contact her stake president.

Stake President Billeter agreed to underwrite the cost. Jensen met with other ESL teachers to develop vocabulary and core ideas. The others gradually dropped out, but Jensen remained committed to the project. She spent several

months writing the series of lessons, only to realize after filming the first one that they all had to be rewritten.

A friend of Jensen's filmed the lessons using hand-held equipment in the basement of the Inter-Stake Center. Continual interruptions by temple tours and basketball players ruined many segments, forcing Jensen and her friend to spend much time refilming. "We put up signs which said, 'Quiet, Please: Filming,' and people would knock on the door to ask where they were making the movie. On the first film there was one hour of shooting for each minute of film, but we got better," Jensen recalls. When the stake's equipment didn't work, as often happened, they borrowed from relatives. Filming took every weekend for more than six months; the project took two years from conception to completion. The tapes are now being used in some of the branches and have proved to be very popular with the members.

A program paralleling the Cambodian and Lao Saturday program in Oakland was being held in Richmond for Laotians from that area. A number were baptized, and a Sunday School class was organized for them. Experience with the Asians made two things obvious: first, the culture gap, combined with the converts' lack of knowledge not only about the gospel, but about Christianity, was too great to permit their integration into established wards, and second, the stake, rather than the ward, should be responsible for the converts.

Stake leaders responded by organizing branches for the Southeast Asian refugees. They considered this a temporary solution, but one that might last for years. The Richmond Second Branch, formed as a dependent branch of the Richmond Ward, was the first to be organized on 4 July 1982, with Joel Parker as branch president and Evelyn Parker as Relief Society president. Joel Parker soon called Laotian counselors and an executive secretary who had served a mission in Thailand. As Lao is essentially a dialect of Thai, language posed fewer problems in this branch than in others, and within a few weeks all the Laotians in the stake were attending this branch.

On 11 July 1982, the Oakland Second Branch was formed as an independent branch for the Cambodian people. Dale Roe, a retired Red Cross executive with many contacts in Oakland, was called to be branch president. Minutes of the first branch meeting record the subject of the high councilor, Ray Barnes's, talk: "We Will Be Speaking English in Our Meetings." It was not a prophetic statement.

Before it was functioning well, the Cambodian branch had its first major problem. Roe moved unexpectedly, leaving Ray Barnes to serve as interim president in addition to his high council duties. Branch staffing had barely begun, and Roe's good contacts with local agencies were lost.

The missionaries had been having their greatest success with the teenagers, who spoke English more fluently than the adults. The teens were used as interpreters, "even for baptismal interviews." Barnes commented, "We were never sure what the people actually knew."

President Hansen requested that missionaries from Thailand be sent to Oakland to finish their missions. He felt that missionaries just out of the Mission Training Center (MTC) would not be sufficiently fluent in Thai to help

the Oakland program. Fluent missionaries could work with the Laotians and, to a lesser extent, with the Cambodians, since many of the Cambodian refugees had become familiar with Thai in refugee camps. His request was honored, and the transferred missionaries baptized many Cambodian and Laotian families. Carol Hansen commented, "They had had no success in Thailand. In Oakland they baptized one right after the other."

The Church continues to assign missionaries who speak Thai to the Oakland Mission to work with the Laotians, but those who work with the Cambodians must learn the language after they arrive and must rely on members for translation. Although this has been good training for future missionaries, it hampers current efforts. O. Ken Earl, a recently released mission president from Oakland attributes the refusal to teach Cambodian at the MTC to a policy that people should be learning English and should be taught in English. "Some in authority believe that . . . not knowing English makes them second-class citizens."

The Church distributes materials (*Gospel Principles, Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood*, and *The LDS Woman*, for example) in all of the languages of the stake branches. These materials are appreciated; however, the translations are not always accurate. At a baptism in the fall of 1983, a teenaged speaker was reading from the Cambodian translation of *Gospel Principles* when a older woman in the audience stood up and began shouting at her. Whoever had translated the manual had translated "Holy Ghost" as "Holy Monster." Just recently we have discovered that in the same manual "baptism for the dead" has been translated "washing the corpses." This may explain why many teenagers have been reluctant to participate in this activity. Local leaders wonder what else may have been translated incorrectly.

Experience has helped long-term teachers to speak simply, but translation problems still arise. A counselor in the Relief Society reported on a recent lesson given by an experienced teacher who has learned to use simple words and sentences. When she wrote "Mothers play a sacred role" on the blackboard, the interpreter, a most faithful Cambodian member of more than two years asked if "sacred" should be translated "secret" and which "role" was meant. "How many rolls are there?" she asked. "Same or different spelling? There's 'roll call,' 'roll the ball,' and the 'roll you eat.'" After they worked through that, she asked about "play" in the same sentence.

More subtle and difficult to deal with are the communication problems that arise from cultural differences. The Southeast Asians consider it rude to tell someone that they will not or cannot do something that has been requested. They smile and agree, then simply don't show up. Americans, raised to believe that one's word is one's bond, are angered by this behavior. Americans are also imbued with the notion of upward mobility, a concept very different from the Asian notion that one's life work is settled as soon as one takes a job.

In many Asian cultures, looking directly at a person who is considered a superior is rude. Potential employers find this disconcerting and have interpreted it to mean lack of interest. This behavior, combined with the bowing, bending, and humbling so essential to the Asian culture, indicates to many

Americans a lack of self-esteem and “hustle.” In *Culture Clash*, Ellen Matthews describes this perception of Quang, a Vietnamese laborer:

And what is typically Vietnamese? Uncomplaining, but also inefficient. Passive, rather than aggressive, unassumingly nice. . . . If his work was actually on a par with everyone else’s, still he managed to look as if it weren’t — as if he were shuffling while the others were running, working carelessly, not interested in whether he accomplished anything or not. “Most guys psych themselves up for work,” said the carpenter Craig. “Quang psychs himself down” (1982, 89).

A multitude of problems has arisen about work and welfare. Some of the confusion comes from the Mormon community itself, which has difficulty reconciling Christian charity with the Protestant work ethic. In the early proselyting efforts among the Asians, the welfare plan was not taught; leaders feared that people would join the Church in great numbers simply for welfare. The early stages of the Saturday program emphasized that people had to work for goods: you had to quilt to obtain a quilt, for example. At the same time, those who worked with them were touched by the desperate poverty of the people and distributed donated clothing and furniture.

When the Saturday program was abandoned in favor of a more formal Church program, the emphasis on working for material goods was largely abandoned in the Oakland Second Branch. The large number of people with urgent needs led to emphasis on collecting and distributing goods. Members found it difficult to withhold anything from those like the mother who, describing her baby’s death from lack of food and medicine under the Pol Pot regime, said, “They didn’t kill us. They just let us die by ourselves.” Equally poignant was the story of a Vietnamese woman who wept at the plenty of her first meal in West Oakland and begged her benefactors to send more money to the family still in Asia.

Bill Powell, a retired electrical contractor from Orinda, whose wife, Ann, was the first Relief Society president in the new Cambodian Branch, handled storage and distribution. He soon ran into difficulties with Deseret Industries. The branch received Christmas donations from a ward in Sunnyvale, California, some with personal notes to the recipients. Deseret Industries objected; policy dictated that all goods must be processed through them. Bill solved this problem by taking one of the Deseret Industries managers on a tour of Oakland, during which they waded through mud to deliver a sofa bed. “When he left there, anything we said was go,” Powell reported.

Still another problem is caused by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Refugee Cash Assistance programs which, by their all-or-nothing policies, discourage gradual emancipation. Asians are reluctant to take minimum-wage or temporary jobs because they will lose not only their welfare money but also the medical and dental benefits that accompany it. They have learned to ask whether they will be paid in cash or by check. This attitude puts Church members in yet another bind. They would like to offer jobs to the Asians, but not illegally.

The experiences of a young Laotian father illustrates the way cultural differences reinforce problems. An LDS contractor agreed to hire him on a trial

basis and to teach him carpentry. Since both clearly understood that this was to be a trial effort, they agreed that the Laotian would be paid in cash until he could earn the equivalent of his welfare payments. Apparently, he had little aptitude for the work and the contractor complained about his laziness. He injured his back and was unable to work. (How he injured his back, how severely it was injured, and whether it was injured because he was expected to perform tasks that were too much for his smaller physical stature have never been completely determined — partly because if he had sought medical treatment he would have had to admit that he had been working and was, therefore, not eligible for medical treatment.) At any rate the agreement was terminated. The Laotian claimed that he had not received full payment, but whether this was true or just another communication failure was impossible to determine.

A short time later he was offered another job — a temporary but lucrative one. He asked if he could be paid in cash. The American arranging for the job was the same one who had arranged the last one, and he, too, was feeling the effects of that failure. He angrily lectured the man on the evils of cheating the government. The confused Laotian did not understand why payment in cash, previously acceptable, was now a sin. He felt burned by the carpentry experience and still contended that he had been cheated. He was also embarrassed by his failure to measure up. He was angry and hurt and has not returned to church.

In October 1982, Leo Gill, the high councilor formerly assigned to the Richmond Second (Laotian) Branch, was sustained as branch president of the Oakland Second (Cambodian) Branch. He spent most of the first few weeks on the phone trying to arrange transportation. (Because most branch positions were unfilled, he had to do everything himself.)

At the same time, members of the Richmond Ward were complaining about making two trips to Oakland each Sunday to transport Laotian families. The stake decided that Laotians living south of the Berkeley city limits should attend the Oakland Second Branch, which became an Asian rather than a Cambodian branch. Church meetings were conducted in English. One talk was translated into Cambodian and the other into Laotian. Important announcements were translated into both languages.

President Gill and Ray Barnes hit upon the idea of calling people to be “welfare-service” missionaries responsible for driving members to church each Sunday and home teaching the families they drove. They divided the branch into areas, and assigned a coordinator to supervise the driving in each area. All branch staff were also expected to drive. Members of the stake who felt that members should get themselves to church criticized the plan. However, public transportation in Oakland is both inadequate and expensive, and the branch leadership knew that providing transportation was necessary. The importance of regular Church attendance, not a part of the Buddhist religion, had to be taught and reinforced. The stake could provide transportation for 125 to 150 persons each Sunday, and this remained the size of active participation at meetings, regardless of the number of baptisms. The baptism of a new

member almost automatically meant the loss of an old one. As soon as the branches were organized, transportation demands required abandoning the Saturday program. The Relief Society continued monthly homemaking meetings, and transportation to them and to any other special events continues to create major problems.

The stake has studied a number of possible solutions to the transportation problem. One plan was to buy or lease vans, which members would be called, or perhaps paid, to drive. The vans would be used by all the branches meeting at the Interstake Center. That would include Oakland Second, Sixth, and Fifth — Lao/Cambodian, Spanish, and Vietnamese/Chinese. These branches had been meeting there all along, but only Oakland Second and later Oakland Seventh were real problems. The stake agreed to form a transportation corporation and to find funding to underwrite the cost of the venture. If the meeting schedules were adjusted to allow time for pickup and delivery, five vans and the branch staff drivers in their own cars would be needed. The vans would be sent to central points where heavy concentrations of members lived. Staff drivers currently assigned to these areas could be redeployed to pick up outlying families. However, insurance costs under this system would have been astronomical.

A modified plan was adopted. Instead of buying vans, the stake chartered buses, but this solution created some new problems. Groups of eight- to ten-year-old boys began climbing on the bus to use the temple grounds, a nearby orchard, and the Greek Orthodox Church as playgrounds. When members of the branch presidency or the missionaries took turns riding on the bus, the practice stopped.

Leo Gill struggled to staff the rapidly growing Cambodian Branch with what he referred to as "borrowed staff." He was told that he could call on anyone in the stake, but he felt obvious constraints. Many people refused to serve because working in the branch prevented them from attending their home wards. Others were unwilling to enter the flatland areas. Bishops became restive when they lost ward leaders to the branch. Commuting distances were difficult for some. High councilor Ray Barnes was reluctant to call members with children living at home because it would necessitate splitting families between their home ward and the branch. He decided to structure the calls as stake missions. People were called to serve for a definite period (usually eighteen months), which could be extended. While this approach effectively encouraged members to accept callings, it proved troublesome later when they felt they should be released.

A more successful approach was used with the Laotians in Richmond where creating a small branch attached to a ward and integrating the children's and youth programs reduced staffing problems and provided role models. This approach was also taken with a small group of Vietnamese converts who had continued to meet with the Oakland First Ward. In May 1983 a Vietnamese/Chinese dependent branch, Oakland Fifth Ward, was formed and attached to Oakland First Ward. George Hilton, named branch president, called Asian counselors. He contrasted the Vietnamese and the Cambodians:

“Vietnamese are much more cautious about commitment to baptism. While escaping from Vietnam, many people prayed to Buddha and promised that they would serve him if they were saved. They find baptism a disavowment of that promise, yet something draws them to the Church anyway. We have some ‘dry’ members who bear testimony in fast meeting but who are not baptized.”

Following their Buddhist traditions, many had an altar at home and went to the Buddhist temple only on special occasions. One of President Hilton’s objectives was to accustom them to regular Sunday attendance. Another was to train them to run the branch themselves. The branch adopted a double staffing program in which a Caucasian teacher tutors an Asian counterpart. The branch has remained small enough to avoid creating a great drain on the stake either for transportation or for staff.

The tutorial staffing program was successful, and by September 1985, President Hilton had worked himself out of a job, to the envy of the other branch presidents. A Chinese member, Ben Phung, was sustained as the new president of the Vietnamese/Chinese branch.

By the spring of 1984, the encumbrance of three languages on one branch (Oakland Second) — English, Cambodian, and Laotian — was proving too great. A separate unit, the Oakland Seventh Branch, was created for the Laotian members. Emerton Williams, a University of California professor from Berkeley Ward and one of Leo Gill’s counselors, was called to be branch president. The Oakland Second (Cambodian) branch and the Oakland Seventh (Laotian) branches continued to share staff; Primary and youth programs remained combined. Since the adult Sunday School, Relief Society, and priesthood quorums had been meeting as language groups, the only real change was in sacrament meeting.

The Laotian Branch did not grow as anticipated, however, and its members did not leap at leadership opportunities. In the spring of 1985, this branch moved to Alameda where Alameda Ward members could teach and where Primary and youth programs could be combined with existing ones. This move, following the Richmond model, proved beneficial to the Laotian members; and within six months, attendance at meetings doubled.

In spite of a high baptism rate in the Oakland Second Branch (163 in 1983; 151 in 1984), attendance at meetings remained at about 150 members. The branch staff began to complain about the successful missionary effort. The sheer number of converts overwhelmed the staff’s capacity to assimilate new members, and adult males were few compared to the many females and children.

Retaining members in the refugee branches is a serious problem. Mormonism is not an easy religion to live: members have problems with the Word of Wisdom; they find it difficult to come each Sunday; tithing can be a burden. Many local leaders complain that people are baptized before they completely understand and are committed to the gospel. Stake President Billeter stated his willingness to field this criticism because “the mission has full authority to baptize.” He emphasized the missionaries’ right to baptize people “as soon as they are touched by the spirit, whether they have testimonies or understanding of the Word of Wisdom.”

Many new members move, mostly to more rural areas such as the California Central Valley where they can find employment in agricultural work. Many Asian parents share the concerns of Sandra Sphar, Primary president in the Richmond Ward Primary, which has always been fully integrated: "A real challenge is to combat the unrighteous environment in which most of these children live. There is a tendency in our area for the Laotians to become part of a gang in order to survive on the street. I'm concerned that we may lose some of the boys, especially, as they get older. The girls, too, tend to form ethnic cliques with which they might identify more than with the Church." As President Billeter explained, "Oakland may always be a processing station."

Many potential leaders find jobs that require them to work on Sundays. Others buy cars but drive to places other than church.

However, many members do remain active. Muonty Lo Lim, a Cambodian woman, gives these reasons for joining and staying active in the Church, "I want my children to be good and to be special. Go[ing] to church is good for my children and me too. They pray and will grow up to know God. They teach me to be good. When I follow [the teachings], I like; I feel warm inside."

Somsack Vannalath, a Laotian teenager who has adopted the nickname Billy, told us that he knows he will not see his mother or father again in this life because they are too old to leave Laos. The Church has given him hope that he will be with them in the next life.

Hugh M. Cannon, a member of the advertising faculty of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, proposed that four categories of people join the Church: religious truth seekers, fulfillment seekers, help seekers, or religious experimenters. The refugees would appear to fall into the third category: help seekers. Cannon describes them:

"Help seekers" tend to be people who have experienced major disruptions to their lives. . . . They might also be recent divorcees or victims of some other tragedy. They might just be confused youngsters, fighting to make sense of a world that seems cruel and unfeeling. Joining a strange Church is not a risk simply because these people generally have relatively little to lose, psychologically, socially, or physically. They tend not to be embarrassed by missionaries. Rather, their problems sometimes make them overly dependent and manipulative. . . . Often the nature of their problems is so complex that they need specialized help. . . . Often type-3 people will become interested in the Church through psychological, emotional, or temporal help provided by the Church and its members (1983, 7-8).

Cannon proposes that missionary strategies should fit the needs of the people being proselyted. A logical extension of this theory is that fellowshiping strategies should also meet these needs. The key message to help-seekers should be, "The Church is your family," and strategies might include social services (Cannon 1983, 22).

The Oakland Stake has recognized many of these needs. President Billeter pointed out the stake's willingness to "work toward traditional goals through nontraditional conventions," specifically, providing transportation and providing material goods without requiring the recipients to work for them.

Examples abound of individual members' attempts to provide a sense of family for the refugees. Bill Powell has not only spent innumerable hours supplying beds, sheets, and chairs to the members, he has picked up incoming families at the airport, enrolled children in school, and helped adults apply for government aid.

Herb Sontag, a real estate broker in the Lafayette Ward and former executive secretary of Oakland Second, described picking up a couple on Christmas Eve 1982 to celebrate the holiday with his family.

I found them sitting in the dark with an inoperative stove and TV. They had contacted the custodian, but he was not going to be able to fix their electrical problem because of the holiday schedule. He would help them in forty-eight to seventy-two hours. They did have one light working in the hall. When my son Chris and I returned them to their apartment at the evening's end, we brought extension cords and extra lights to take advantage of the electricity available in the hall. Chris searched for the electrical panel. (They didn't know what we were looking for.) It was in the bedroom closet, and with a flick of the switch, all the lights were on again.

Esther and Al Vielbaum, a couple from Lafayette serving in Oakland Second Branch, described a memorable Thanksgiving in 1984. They had invited Nang Nourn, a Cambodian member in Oakland Second, and his family to their house the previous year, but this year Esther had been involved in an accident and was unable to walk. The Nourn family had called several times to check on her recovery. She tells this story,

On the day before Thanksgiving Chantith again called. She said, "My father go to church and you not there. My father say we come see you tomorrow." I explained again that I had had a car accident and in another week or so would feel better. (I was walking with a cane with a hurt knee and hip.) She talked to her family in Cambodian and then came back to the phone. "My father says you no have to cook. We cook. Bring food." They came, fifteen of them. They set the table, cooked, and served. I'm not sure what we ate, but it wasn't turkey.

It has, however, been impossible to maintain this kind of contact with all those who have been baptized; there are simply too many of them. Staff members are released to return to their home wards, missionaries are transferred, and members are left without a support system. The buses that have eased the transportation burden have also removed some of the one-to-one contact that members had with staff.

In March 1984 President Billeter called a meeting of staff from all the branches. The problem, he explained, was that the Oakland core city had the heavy foreign population, but Oakland Stake did not have the resources to continue to increase the size of the staff supporting the branches. The limits were being reached. He proposed creating an international stake based on the model of the university stakes in Provo and other areas. The non-English-speaking units would form a separate stake, drawing staff and funding from the surrounding stakes. He had discussed this idea with the regional representative, who had agreed to take it to the General Authorities. While President Billeter waited for a reply, area presidencies were created, adding another layer of

administration to review the proposal. Rumors floated, and several General Authorities visited (Elder Robert L. Backman of the First Quorum of the Seventy took one of Bill Powell's famous tours), but the final decision was not to create a separate stake. Instead, missionary couples were sent to help with the branches, and the stake presidency was given permission to call people from outside the stake to assist with the non-English-speaking units.

The missionary couples have lifted a great load from the branches. They have served as home teachers and visiting teachers, have come much closer to the goal of a monthly visit to each family, and have located many who have changed addresses. The only drawback is that the bonds, the sense of family, are probably being built with those couples who will be released and sent home, rather than with the branches, a problem more than balanced by their work.

An assistant executive secretary to the stake presidency has been called to oversee all the non-English-speaking units, and a high councilor has been assigned to each unit. In a sense, the separate stake has been created, although it continues to function within the Oakland Stake. The international flavor of the stake was emphasized at the 189th stake conference held in January 1985: the program was printed in Cambodian, Chinese, English, Laotian, Spanish, Tongan, and Vietnamese.

Those of us who work in the refugee branches are sometimes frustrated by seemingly little progress toward President Billeter's long-range goal, "to help the people become self-sufficient and self-supporting, both spiritually and economically." Progress would be more obvious if there were clear-cut, intermediate objectives toward this goal. If such objectives have been formulated, they have not been communicated to the staff. This leaves us in a quandry. For example, whether the buses are intended as a solution to the transportation problem or as a step in building independence makes a difference in the way we react when a member we used to pick up misses the bus.

Americans who join the branch staff could receive better orientation. We need to know more about the cultures in general and about individual differences between members. Hindsight reveals that combining Cambodians and Laotians into one branch was probably a mistake. We also need to be aware of the vast differences in background that exist *within* language groups. One Cambodian whose English is quite fluent recently said he prefers not to translate in church. "Those country bumpkins don't understand my Cambodian," he reported. ("Where did he learn that phrase?" we thought.) Staff could use help learning to build familial bonds without creating dependency. We need to be brothers and sisters, not parents, to the refugee members.

In March 1986 an incident in the Oakland Second (Cambodian) Branch symbolized these cross-cultural differences between the American community, the Cambodian community, and the Church. A nineteen-year-old female Cambodian member, Puthavy Hongky, ran away from home to escape an arranged marriage. A Church member, apparently acting as an individual, gave her shelter.

Events preceding the runaway, however, led both Cambodians and Americans to suspect Church sponsorship. Branch President Samuel Holmes, a prac-

ticing attorney, had become concerned about the morality of arranged marriages, feeling they conflicted with Church teachings on marriage and free agency. On three successive Sundays he instructed all adult branch members about (1) the Church concept of marriage, fidelity, and the prospect of temple marriage "in due time"; (2) California law concerning legal marriage which states that a woman under the age of eighteen cannot obtain a marriage license or marry without the consent of her parents and a judge; and (3) accommodation to Cambodian tradition. An arranged marriage or a Buddhist ceremony is not objectionable, he stressed, but compelling people to marry against their will is.

Adding to the perception of Church sponsorship, in March 1986 a seventeen-year-old Cambodian girl from another area came to a branch meeting. She claimed to be an orphan living with an older woman for the past few years. Now this older woman was arranging her marriage to a thirty-five-year-old man in order to obtain the bride price, some \$2,000. The girl asked the Church to find her a foster home. However, because of her age, the Alameda County Social Service Department intervened and placed her in a foster home in the community. The branch staff supported the girl and were offended that her caretaker would seemingly sell an adopted daughter for money.

Shortly after this the proselyting missionaries discovered an engagement party taking place for Putheavy Hongky. President Holmes and others went to the engagement party to make sure that she was not being forced against her will. The groom's group arrived, dismayed at the interference, and accused the Church group of disregarding Cambodian custom. President Holmes finally asked Putheavy directly, "Do you want to marry him?" She replied, "I guess so." The Church group then withdrew.

Within two weeks Putheavy indicated to others that she did not wish to marry and that she was being closely watched until the wedding date. At the first opportunity she ran away, and a supportive Church member took her in. A segment of the Cambodian community became convinced that President Holmes was harboring Putheavy. They phoned him incessantly demanding that she be returned. The Oakland police became involved but withdrew after talking with Putheavy. President Holmes supported Putheavy's right as an adult to make her own choice, even to return home if she chose to do so. Though the Church obviously influenced her decisions, it is not certain that she would have willingly returned home at this time even if strongly counseled to do so.

When demands that she return home failed, the Cambodians announced that marriage plans had been dropped and that Putheavy's family had been completely embarrassed and would have to move from the community. Church members were suspicious, and further negotiation became impossible. There was no way for the Cambodians to save face. Rumors about Cambodian retaliation began to surface. A group of Cambodians, thinking that Putheavy might attend a seminary class, arrived on a Tuesday night to look for her. A temple tour guide thought that they were armed and called Temple

Security, though arms were never found. Lafayette neighbors claim to have seen a carload of Cambodians looking for President Holmes's house.

Eventually a face-to-face meeting with all concerned parties was arranged. In private, Putheavy and her mother arranged for her to live with a friend several blocks from her home. The rest of the group became acrimonious.

"You are a bunch of evangelical head hunters," an American friend of the Cambodian family accused.

"Whether you know it or not, you are a tool of the devil," a member responded. Another member, feeling the need for negotiation, said that the handling of the incident had ruined the branch.

The branch was affected but not ruined. Missionaries working in the area were threatened, so intimidating the one ethnic Cambodian missionary that he was transferred briefly to another area. Cambodian members living near to Putheavy's family virtually stopped attending church. Branch staff resented the lack of support from the Cambodian Church members. Baptisms in the branch dropped from 151 in 1985 to 97 in 1986, still by far the highest in the stake. Leaders in the Young Women's organization observed the dilemma facing the teenage girls: Would they be self-determined or obedient to parents, both a Church and a Cambodian teaching. Girls older than sixteen, more inculcated with Cambodian custom, tended to side with the Cambodian group. Those younger saw other alternatives in their future. Like their American associates, they looked forward to dating, romance, college — all alternatives to the Cambodian custom.

Putheavy returned home without incident. A missionary couple continues to visit with the family. She is now enrolled in Alameda College on a Pell Grant.

After it was all over, on 27 July 1986 the *Oakland Tribune* ran an inflammatory page one article, "Mormon Recruiting Stirs Up Refugees," which criticized Church members not only for the Putheavy incident, but for service work with the Cambodians as well. The branch staff was highly offended. The many hours spent creating a successful scout troop, running homemaking programs, combatting the bureaucracy on behalf of the Cambodians, finding jobs, providing transportation, and a myriad of youth activities were discredited. One member viewed the "persecution" philosophically: "The Church has always been persecuted for doing the right thing. We are being persecuted, therefore we must be doing some things right."

The runaway had little, if any, impact on the other non-English speaking groups. The Laotian group that separated from the Oakland Second Branch is doing well as a dependent branch in Alameda. A Samoan Branch, which expected fifty members and saw 250 arrive on the morning it was organized, was created in the middle of the troubled period.

A formal system of communication between the branch presidents and bishop of the non-English-speaking units seems desirable. An unofficial understanding in the Southeast Asian branches that tithing will not be stressed because so many of the members are sending money to relatives at home is not consistently practiced. The stake policy is that income from welfare grants is

not subject to tithing but other income is. One branch president will not ordain elders who do not regularly pay tithing. Another recognizes in money sent to Asian relatives the charitable spirit of tithing and does not insist on full tithing before ordination. Problems and solutions are rarely shared. The other branch presidents might be interested in the temple preparation program Richmond Second (Laotian) Branch President Thayle Nielsen has successfully implemented. Other presidents might try the tutorial teaching and leadership program that George Hilton is using in the Oakland Fifth (Vietnamese/Chinese) Branch. The experience of the Tongan and Spanish units in solving a number of these problems — especially staffing — might prove useful to the presidents of the other units. The creation of the position of executive secretary in charge of the units seems to be a logical step toward the creation of a vehicle for sharing.

In spite of the problems that still confront us, most people consider the programs successful. Staff members repeatedly told us that their greatest satisfaction comes from watching the growth of the people. Temple marriages, missionaries sent from the branches, and branch members assuming teaching and leadership roles were cited as indicators of progress. Many also told us that if they could begin their callings over again they would be less concerned with self and what they were giving up and more concerned with giving to the members. The opportunity for Christian service has been an opportunity for personal growth.

Steven V. White, first counselor in the stake presidency, once described the effort in the Oakland Stake as “a microcosm of the Church in a small delimited area.” Perhaps the best summation of the experience in this microcosm was made by Leo Gill: “The most important thing is to be close to the Lord. That’s where the help comes from. It was like walking into the darkness with a miner’s hat; each step in faith opened up the next step.”

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Authors’ Note: We interviewed nineteen individuals or couples who held leadership positions in the non-English-speaking units in the Oakland Stake between December 1984 and March 1985. The interview notes are in our possession. In addition, we made brief contacts with or received written notes from twenty-five individuals. The major interviews were conducted with Richard Alder, R. Raymond Barnes, J. David Billeter, Ken and LuDeen Earl, Sione Fangu, Leo and Martha Gill, Carol T. Hansen, Norman and Jane Hanson, George F. Hilton, Patricia Jensen, Phimmasone Khomsonerasinh, Muonty Lo Lim, Douglas and Mildred Lindley, Thayle and Renee Nielsen, Joel and Evelyn Parker, William and Ann Powell, James Richardson, M. Dee Smith, and Emerton and Margaret Williams.

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