

Building Cultural Bridges

Asian American Mormons: Bridging Cultures. By Jessie L. Embry (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center, 1999)

"In His Own Language": Mormon Spanish Speaking Congregations in the United States. By Jessie L. Embry (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center, 1997)

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AS A MISSIONARY IN DENVER, I served in a Spanish-speaking branch—a rewarding and sometimes frustrating experience. Because of the limited size of the congregation, I wondered about the segregation and whether the Spanish-speaking members might be better served in a regular or geographic ward. Years later, to my surprise, I was called to work in a Black branch in Houston where there is essentially no language barrier. After a year and a half, I again developed a few questions about the advantages or disadvantages of these branches. Jessie L. Embry's books address all of my questions—questions that are essential to understanding the complexity of a worldwide church trying best to serve a diverse ethnic population. The mission of the church is, of course, to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ devoid of cultural idiosyncrasies, but differences in culture, language, and customs make this less than simple. In Embry's words, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has struggled with these questions [regarding ethnic wards] and not found an easy solution" (*In His Own Culture*, 4). More than half of the current church membership resides outside the U.S., and as this trend continues, Embry's research will be of even greater value. Within the U.S., His-

panic-Americans will soon be the largest minority group. According to the 1990 census, 17 million Hispanics speak Spanish at home, and within the church there were 354 Spanish-speaking units in 1997.

Embry, director of the Oral History Program and assistant director of the Charles H. Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University, has distinguished herself as *the* scholar of Latter-day Saint ethnic congregations. In addition to the two books under consideration here, she has also published *Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons* (Signature Books, 1994). These three books, similar in format, are the result of her considerable work with oral history projects in which she and her staff interviewed Latter-day Saints of Black, Hispanic, Asian, German, American Indian, and Polynesian backgrounds. She also studied oral history materials commissioned by the Church Historical Department in 1972.

The complexities of ethnic wards and branches have not always been understood and "official policies" toward these branches have changed from time to time in what Embry calls "a jerky record of abrupt policy changes" (*In His Own Language*, 13). There are so many advantages and disadvantages to ethnic wards that it is easy to argue either side. One positive aspect is that being taught the gospel in one's primary language is essential, but, as this is not part of the rationale for Black branches, there obviously are other important factors. Not only do many immigrants prefer to hear things in their native language, but this also makes it easier for them to participate. Embry quotes a convert, David Mu: "It is much easier for us to express

our feelings in our language. We can bear our testimonies much easier. We can use Chinese examples" (*Asian American*, p. 93).

Many immigrants often feel more comfortable or "at home" in ethnic branches. The smaller congregations are more conducive to activities and potlucks, and there is more sense of closeness and acceptance than might be felt in a larger geographic ward. In some cases these new members are better able to maintain some of their cultural traditions, such as celebrating Chinese New Year or eating traditional foods. The smaller size of branches also allows more members to serve in church callings. Others feel that ethnic branches better prepare the youth to serve missions back in their parents' former homeland by making them knowledgeable about language and customs.

But the disadvantages to ethnic wards are numerous as well. According to Embry's case studies, the biggest complaint is that sometimes the gospel is not taught adequately, but in a simplified form. Often there is not sufficient leadership, experience, or depth among the membership. All of the auxiliary classes or programs are not always available. There may only be one or two Beehives or Laurels; there may not be a scouting program. Ethnic congregations might not help promote English fluency as quickly. These converts are more segregated from mainstream church members, and there is sometimes a perception of segregation, racism, or inequality. Furthermore, the geographical boundaries of ethnic branches are sometimes larger, entailing more travel for worship or activities. Members of these branches occasionally feel that they are not learning as much about American culture as they should. In other words, the ethnic branch could actually be a barrier to full integration.

Moreover, the youth, often perfectly assimilated to America, usually prefer a geographical ward. Other minor difficulties sometimes occur when several distinct groups are lumped together—say a combination of Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Malaysian members in a single branch.

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, there was a trend away from ethnic congregations. Spencer W. Kimball "vigorously protested" ending Spanish-speaking missions in the U.S., concerned that "we would lose ground and many of our members and cease to grow as fast as we have done" (*In His Own Language*, 59). Nevertheless, the church later "stopped organizing new ethnic congregations and even disbanded some" (*Asian American*, p. 67). Regular wards could of course hold special classes in other languages to accommodate non-English speakers. But "[b]y 1977, the General Authorities realized that they were not meeting the needs of all ethnic members," and in response ethnic wards increased particularly on Indian reservations (*Asian American*, p. 68).

In reading Embry's scholarly books, one ultimately comes away with a sense of how complicated the issues are. In running a diverse worldwide church, there are many hurdles and few universal solutions. Embry's research would be particularly useful for church leaders who have some jurisdiction over these wards or branches. These studies might be useful to those who belong to these branches, or might amuse intellectuals who love to question changes in church policy, but overall the books seem highly specialized and of limited audience.

Embry herself acknowledges that these studies are a little limited in scope and locale and that "it is impossible to