



CONVERSION
AND CHANGE IN
Chile

*The first baptisms took place in 1956.
Now the Church has 1 temple, 9 mis-
sions, 74 stakes, and almost 600,000
members in Chile.*

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During the 58 years of their history, members of the Church in Chile have shown their ability to change course, fine-tuning their lives to the direction indicated by the prophets. This spirit has contributed to the extraordinary growth of the Church there during the past half century. Today, Chile has nearly 600,000 members, making 1 out of every 30 Chileans a member of the Church.¹

An Apostle Visits Chile

In 1851, Elder Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles arrived in Valparaíso with the intention of establishing the Church. However, he and his companions did not speak Spanish, they had very few financial resources, and the country lacked religious freedom, so they were unable to establish the Church.

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Teachers and their fourth-grade students at the Church-sponsored school Colegio A. D. Palmer, circa 1966.

Elder Pratt recommended to President Brigham Young (1801–77): “The Book of Mormon and some cheap publications should be translated into Spanish and printed, and then the key be turned to these nations while a living Priesthood is accompanied by something for them to read—even those writings which have the promises of God, the prayers and faith of the ancients, and the power and Spirit of God to work with them in restoring the house of Israel.”²

The Church Is Established

Despite Elder Pratt’s earlier attempt, more than 100 years passed before the Church was permanently established in Chile. In 1956, Elders Joseph Bentley and Verle Allred were sent from the Argentina Mission to preach the gospel in Chile, now enjoying greater religious tolerance. In Santiago, these missionaries had the support of the Fotheringham family, members who had moved from Panama and had been hoping for missionaries to come.

The first baptisms were performed in Chile on November 25, 1956, in a pool at a country club in Santiago. Elder Allred recalls, “We went to the country club before the sun came up and had a service with prayer and short talks. I entered the water with Brother García; I baptized him first, and then eight other people after him. This was a very special occasion. What we all felt was unforgettable. . . . These members would be the pioneers of the Church in Chile and I believe that every one of them remained faithful until death: the Garcías, the Saldaños, and Sister Lanzarotti.”³

Calling Leaders

In February 1959, Elder Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles visited Chile and stressed the need for developing local leadership. One of the first local leaders was Carlos Cifuentes, who was a counselor to the mission president, Robert Burton.

Elder Julio Jaramillo, who later became an Area Seventy and a temple president, related this experience: “I received my first impression of Brother Cifuentes when I was invited to a priesthood meeting after my baptism. When the meeting began, he came up to the pulpit and the only thing I saw was his dirty, black fingernails. I thought, ‘How can this man be conducting a meeting alongside the mission president if he has dirty hands?’ That was until he began to speak and I forgot everything else when I felt his spirit. With simple words he delivered profound concepts to us. He was a heavy machinery mechanic and on Saturdays he worked late, then would

Commenting on the education program, Elder Eduardo A. Lamartine, a former Area Seventy and current Chile Church history adviser remarked, “The schools in Chile were a great influence in the academic and spiritual training of thousands of young people, and they contributed to the preparation of leaders and missionaries during the following years.”⁵

The seminaries and institutes program began in Chile in 1972. At first, students participated in a home-study program with weekly classes. Later on, more frequent classes were organized. These programs blessed the young people of the country and helped them prepare for service as full-time missionaries. Elder Eduardo Ayala, a former member

1851: Elder Parley P. Pratt travels to Valparaíso but is not able to establish the Church in Chile

► 1926: Elder Melvin J. Ballard, during a testimony meeting, prophesies on the future growth and strength of the Church in South America



► 1956: The first missionaries, Joseph C. Bentley and Verle M. Allred, arrive in Santiago; the first baptisms take place



clean his hands, but with the few means available at his shop was unable to remove all the grease. Then and there I learned to not judge people by appearances but rather to value them for what they really are.”⁴

Strengthening the Rising Generation

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Church in Chile was strengthened not only by increasingly experienced local leadership but also by new construction and education programs. These included the construction of chapels along with the establishment of Church schools, seminaries, and institutes.

In March 1964, the first two Church-run primary schools were founded in Chile. Ultimately several schools were opened, and enrollment reached more than 2,600 students. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, adequate public schools became more widely available, and the Church announced closure of the schools in Chile.

The institute of religion in Temuco is one of 50 such institutes in Chile.





President Gordon B. Hinckley addresses 48,000 Chilean Latter-day Saints in 1996 at a conference in Santiago.

of the Seventy, was one of the first seminary teachers and later worked for the Church Educational System in Chile. He said, “The Lord chose the young people who were there at that time and many of them are returned missionaries and great leaders with good families. . . . For me, seminary and institute was a means of salvation during times of so much strife in our country and I’m grateful I was called to work with the education system.”⁶

The First Stake

On November 19, 1972, Elder Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008), then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, organized the Santiago Chile Stake, with Carlos Cifuentes as president.

The preparation for the stake showed the character of the Saints in Chile and their willingness to follow the prophets. Elder Hinckley had arrived in Chile several months earlier to organize the stake. But after holding interviews, it was

postponed. At that time, many people were going through financial problems, and some members were experiencing difficulty in abiding by the law of tithing.

Elder Hinckley explained, “I returned six months later, and while I was interviewing, I found the blossoming of faith; they were once again walking in honesty before the Lord, the stake was organized, and ever since then they have grown and flourished.”⁷

Pioneers on the Borders

Today there are two stakes in Arica, the northernmost city in Chile. The story of Gladys and Juan Benavidez, the first converts in Arica, exemplifies the pioneer spirit and the divine influence in establishing the Church throughout Chile.

Brother Benavidez was introduced to the Church in 1961 when the wind blew some papers in his direction: “These turned out to be pages of *Reader’s Digest Selections* with

an extensive article about “The Mormons,” describing their life and beliefs,” he said.

Shortly after, he contracted a serious illness that required medical treatment in Santiago. “While there, I visited my sister and learned that she had become a member of the Church,” he said. “She invited me to a special conference. As I listened to the opening prayer and mentally followed the words, I felt a great joy throughout my entire body and recognized the influence of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the conference, missionaries took me up to

government. Church members suffered difficulties due to scarcity of food and medicine, frequent harassment of the missionaries, and negative media attention.

In 1973, the financial and social crisis gave rise to a military coup and dictatorship that lasted until 1990. Although Chile is a thriving democracy today, those two decades were a difficult period for members. Groups that opposed the military dictatorship attacked chapels and members because they thought the Church represented the

1957: The Church is officially recognized in Chile

1960: A powerful earthquake occurs in Concepción; the Church sends humanitarian aid

► *1961: The Chilean Mission is organized with Asael Delbert Palmer as president*



1962: Groundbreaking for the first LDS meetinghouse occurs in Santiago

shake hands with the visiting authority, Elder Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994), then of the Quorum of the Twelve.”

Brother Benavidez went back to Arica and shared his experiences with his girlfriend, Gladys Aguilar, who is now his wife. A couple days later, Gladys saw two missionaries pass by her house. “We quickly went in search of them,” Brother Benavidez said. “On July 1, 1961, we were baptized, along with my wife’s family. Today we have children and grandchildren in the Church. I am so grateful to the Lord for that gust of wind that blew the information about the Church into my hands.”⁸

A Trying Period

In the 1970 elections, Dr. Salvador Allende became president and established a Marxist

interests of the United States government. Elder Ayala, a stake president at the time, said, “We would meet with the General Authorities, and they would tell us, ‘Please, apply wisdom, pray a lot, do the right things, so that the members will maintain order in the congregations.’”⁹

Notwithstanding the country’s financial difficulties and the political antagonism that divided Chilean society in the early 1980s, the Church grew rapidly. Between 1970 and 1985, the number of members in Chile expanded from 15,728 to 169,361.

The Santiago Temple

In 1980, the Saints were blessed with the announcement that a temple would be built in Santiago, Chile.



“As a young man 12 years of age, I became acquainted with and immediately came to know that the message of the gospel was true. Forty-six years have now gone by, throughout which I have been blessed, thanks to the dedicated work of so many leaders who did the best that they could. Upon getting to know and sharing with the new generations, I feel happy and trust that the Lord will continue blessing this country as the vision broadens which the prophets have had regarding Chile.”¹²

Elder Jorge F. Zeballos, a member of the Seventy from Chile



When President Spencer W. Kimball dedicated the temple lot, he was very weak; but his presence there demonstrated his love for the Saints of South America, with whom he had worked since 1959. Sister Adriana Guerra de Sepúlveda, who was interpreting for Sister Kimball at the event, said, “When I saw the prophet, a tiny person with an angelic face, I began to weep and could not find words to speak to him. It was the first time for me to be at the side of a living prophet. Seeing the Lord’s mouthpiece here

oversaw the reorganization, discontinuation, and merging of hundreds of wards and dozens of stakes. This reorganization and training were needed because of the rapid growth of the Church in the country. His leadership helped to strengthen the units and prepare the Church in Chile for the future.

In addition, Elder Holland made some important connections in Chile. Elder Carl B. Pratt of the Seventy, a counselor in that Area Presidency, described some of these important relationships: “Elder Holland established

1972: The first stake in Chile is organized in Santiago

1977: In Santiago, the first area conference is held with President Spencer W. Kimball and other General Authorities present



◀ 1981: A missionary training center is established in Santiago



◀ 1983: President Gordon B. Hinckley dedicates the Santiago Chile Temple



upon the earth and in my country was something marvelous.”¹⁰

The temple was dedicated in 1983, becoming the second in South America and the first in a Spanish-speaking country.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland in Chile

In August 2002, the First Presidency assigned two members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to preside over two Church areas: Elder Dallin H. Oaks was assigned to the Philippines, and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland to Chile. Elder Holland’s ministry and influence while in Chile is immeasurable, and its impact will remain for generations.

Elder Holland’s primary emphasis was to provide an example of leading in the Lord’s way. He helped train new leaders and



In response to the earthquake of 2010, Chilean youth and adults, Mormon Helping Hands, put together hygiene kits.



GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN CHILE



THE CHURCH IN CHILE

Wards and branches: 622
 Stakes: 74
 Missions: 9
 Temples: 1 (with 1 more announced)
 Family History Centers: 99



◀ 1990: Elder Eduardo Ayala, from Chile, is called to the Second Quorum of the Seventy



◀ 2002: Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is called as the Chile Area President



▶ 2008: Elder Jorge F. Zeballos, from Chile, is called to the First Quorum of the Seventy

2009: Concepción Chile Temple is announced

a close relationship with Ricardo Lagos [president of Chile] and his wife; they carried out several humanitarian aid projects. Elder Holland got to know the Apostolic Nuncio [a high-ranking Catholic official] and other important personalities in Chile.”¹¹

Trust in the Future

The efforts of Elders Parley P. Pratt and Jeffrey R. Holland, the sacrifices of the first missionaries who arrived in Santiago, the dedication of leaders like Carlos Cifuentes and other early pioneers of Chile, combined with the faith and dedication of hundreds of thousands who have joined the Church during more than half a century have built a strong foundation for the Church in Chile. Today the country is home to a temple (with another announced), a missionary training center, 9 missions, and 74 stakes. The future is unlimited in the spiritual work of inviting all to come unto Christ. ■

NOTES

1. See *Deseret News 2013 Church Almanac*, 454.
2. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor (2000), 504.
3. Verle Allred, in Néstor Curbelo, *LDS in South America: Chile Sur*, vol. 1 (2008), 6.
4. Julio Jaramillo, in Néstor Curbelo, *LDS in South America: Chile*, vol. 1 (2006), 4–5.
5. Eduardo Adrian Lamartine Aguila, historic summary delivered to the author, Nov. 2013.
6. Eduardo Ayala, in Néstor Curbelo, *LDS in South America: Chile*, vol. 1 (2006), 44, 45.
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Rodolfo Acevedo A., *Alturas Sagradas: Templo de Santiago de Chile*, 100.
8. Néstor Curbelo, “Blossoming in the Desert,” *Church News*, Nov. 9, 1996, 8–9.
9. Eduardo Ayala, in Néstor Curbelo, *LDS in South America: Chile*, vol. 1 (2006), 33.
10. Adriana Guerra de Sepúlveda, in Néstor Curbelo, *LDS in South America: Chile*, vol. 1 (2006), 16.
11. Carl B. Pratt, in Néstor Curbelo, *Colombia: investigación histórica*, vol. 1 (2010), 16.
12. Jorge F. Zeballos, in a letter sent to the author, Jan. 2014.