



Mexico Unfurled

FROM STRUGGLE TO STRENGTH

*Latter-day Saints in Mexico build on their heritage of faith
to bring a beautiful future to their country.*

By Sally Johnson Odekirk

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On November 6, 1945, prayers were answered when the first group of Mexican Latter-day Saints arrived at the Mesa Arizona Temple to receive temple ordinances in their native tongue. José Gracia, then president of the Monterrey Branch said, “We have come to do a great work for ourselves and for our fathers. . . . Perhaps some of us have made sacrifices, but those that we have made are not in vain. We are joyous in having made them.”¹

President Gracia and those who traveled to the temple followed in the footsteps of early Mexican Latter-day Saint pioneers, who likewise sacrificed for the restored gospel.

Laying the Foundation

A land of mountains, deserts, jungles, and exquisite coastlines, ancient Mexico was home to peoples who built beautiful temples and cities. Over the centuries, Mexicans built a strong foundation of faith and prayer that has helped them weather difficult times.

While the Saints were establishing the Church in Utah, the Mexican people were working to restructure their society, including writing a new constitution that separated church and state. The gospel message came to Mexico in 1876 with the first missionaries, who carried selections



President George Albert Smith visited Mexico and helped unify the members as he reached out to the Third Convention.

1810: Mexico declares independence and becomes independent in 1821 after 300 years of Spanish rule.

1830: Book of Mormon published and the Church organized in Palmyra, New York, USA.



1846–1848: Mexican-American War; Mormon pioneers settle in the Western United States.



1857–61: President Benito Juárez reforms Mexican government and establishes religious liberty.

from the Book of Mormon, which they mailed to prominent Mexican leaders. Baptisms soon followed.

During a special Church conference held on April 6, 1881, branch president Silvano Arteaga, several local leaders, and Apostle Moses Thatcher (1842–1909) climbed the slope of the volcano Mt. Popocatepetl. Elder Thatcher then dedicated the land for the preaching of the gospel.

At the conference President Arteaga prayed, and Elder Thatcher related: “Tears flowed down his wrinkled cheeks, for the deliverance of his race and people. . . . I never heard any man pray more earnestly, and though praying in a language which I do not comprehend, yet I seemed to understand by the Spirit, all that he was pleading for.”²

During this same time, several Mexican branches were established in the area. Desideria Yañez, an elderly widow in the state of Hidalgo, had a dream about Parley P. Pratt’s pamphlet *A Voice of Warning*. She sent her son to Mexico City to obtain a copy of the pamphlet, which had just been

translated into Spanish. She joined the Church in 1880, becoming the first woman to join the Church in Mexico.³

From that time on many members of the Church in Mexico remained faithful through decades of revolution, persecution, poverty, and isolation.⁴

Examples of Faithful Pioneers

One example of this faithfulness is found in the branch of San Pedro Martir, organized in 1907. Early members met together just south of Mexico City in an adobe building built by newly baptized Agustin Haro, who was called to preside over the branch. During the difficult years of the Mexican Revolution, when at least one million Mexicans were killed, many Saints sought refuge in San Pedro as their states became a battleground. The Relief Society sisters in San Pedro provided these refugees with much compassionate service.⁵

Members were also blessed with dedicated leaders such as Rey L. Pratt. Called as president of the Mexico Mission in



1907, he served in that calling until his passing in 1931. He loved the history, culture, and people of Mexico and gained their love and trust as they worked together to strengthen the Church's foundation there. President Pratt's efforts to build up native Mexican Church leaders proved especially important in 1926 when the Mexican government began enforcing the law that prohibited nonnatives from presiding over congregations in Mexico.⁶ During this time a group of members formed what was

Fielding Smith (1876–1972), then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said, "I see no reason why the English language should monopolize the temple session."⁸ Elder Antoine R. Ivins of the Seventy and Eduardo Balderas in the Church's translating department were asked to translate the temple ordinances into Spanish. This translation set the stage for temples to be built in other lands.⁹

With the temple ceremony available in Spanish at the Mesa Arizona Temple and with



A PEOPLE FAVORED OF THE LORD

"Who can doubt that out of the present struggle will grow a greater and better Mexico. . . . The way [will] be prepared for the teaching of the true Gospel unto the people of that land, the Gospel that is to bring about their redemption and make them a people favored of the Lord."¹⁷

Rey L. Pratt, president of Mexico Mission during the Mexican Revolution

1875: Portions of the Book of Mormon translated into Spanish and printed.

1876: First missionaries journey to Mexico.



1881: Special conference held; Apostle Moses Thatcher dedicates the land for missionary work.



1885: Mormon colonies established in Mexico.

1886: Full text of the Book of Mormon published in Spanish.

called the Third Convention and began calling their own leaders and building meetinghouses.

Building on the Foundation

Arwell L. Pierce was called as president of the Mexican Mission in 1942. Drawing upon his experiences while growing up in Chihuahua and serving a mission in Mexico, President Pierce reached out with love and understanding as he taught, strengthened, and helped unify the members. He also worked with the members of the Third Convention to resolve their concerns.

One of President Pierce's goals was to help members get to the temple.⁷ In 1943 efforts to make temple blessings available to more members were underway. After meeting with local Church leaders in Arizona, USA, Elder Joseph

Early members often sacrificed a great deal for the gospel.





AN ASTOUNDING FUTURE

“I think the future of the Church in Mexico is going to astound everyone, even those who have been involved with it. Mexicans are very familiar with the society they live in, and there are some things in it that they don’t want. They look at what the gospel offers; they want it, and they are willing to pay any price for it.”¹⁸

Elder Daniel L. Johnson,
Mexico Area President

a visit from Church President George Albert Smith (1870–1951) to Mexico in 1946 to help unify the Mexican Saints,¹⁰ the Church began to grow in a way that earlier generations had only imagined. New missions and stakes were created throughout the country, and Church-sponsored schools encouraged education.

In 1964 the Church dedicated El Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas, a school that served the educational, social, spiritual, and leadership needs of the members until

than we would have imagined possible—a conference in our own land.”¹³

The 1970s were an exciting time of growth in Mexico. In 1970 there were nearly 70,000 members in the country; by decade’s end there were close to 250,000. Three years after the area conference, Elder Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) divided three existing stakes to create 15 stakes in one weekend, calling many young Mexican members as leaders.¹⁴

Missionary work also expanded during this

1889: Missionaries withdraw from central Mexico.

1901: Proselyting resumes in Mexico City area.

1910: Start of the Mexican Revolution.



1912: Exodus from Mormon colonies, in northern Mexico.

1913: Missionaries withdraw due to revolutionary activities; mission president Rey L. Pratt leads the Church in Mexico through correspondence and works with Spanish-speaking people in the United States.

becoming a missionary training center in 2013.¹¹ Sister Lorena Gómez-Alvarez, who graduated from the school, says, “Benemérito helped me to discover and develop my talents and to gain a background and a knowledge of the gospel that has blessed my life. It will now help missionaries spread the gospel and will still bless people’s lives, just in a different way.”¹²

An Era of Growth

The 1972 Mexico City area conference was another turning point in Church growth. Members traveled great distances to hear President Harold B. Lee (1899–1973), his counselors, several Apostles, and other leaders. The Tabernacle Choir performed there, adding to the spiritual feast. Conference attendees exclaimed, “It is more

time. The Mexico Mission, officially opened in 1879, was divided for the first time in 1956; now Mexico has 34 missions.¹⁵ Brother Jorge Zamora, who served as a missionary in the Mexico City North Mission in the 1980s, has witnessed the growth. He recalls an area of his mission where members had to travel an hour to attend church; now a stake is there. He says, “It is amazing to me the way the Lord works to build the Church, regardless of what the country or culture is.”

Temples Dot the Land

Mexican members love the temple’s saving ordinances and are willing to make great sacrifices of time and money to worship there. Just over 100 years after Elder Thatcher dedicated the land for the preaching of the gospel, a temple was built in Mexico City. The 1983





Mexican members participate in community projects. These members were helping plant trees in 2007.

AGRÍCOL LOZANO HERRERA: FIRST MEXICAN STAKE PRESIDENT

Agrícol Lozano Herrera was a young member of the Church when he heard President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985), then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, encourage the members in Mexico to get an education in order to help strengthen their country. Brother Lozano decided to become a lawyer and an advocate for the indigenous people of his country. He was also the chief counsel for the Church in Mexico and served as the first Mexican stake president, as a mission president, as a regional representative to the Twelve Apostles, and as president of the Mexico City Temple.¹⁹



1921: Missionaries reassigned to Mexico City area.

1926: Mexican nationalism leads to the expulsion of all foreign clergy.

1930s: Local leaders maintain stability of the Church in Mexico.



1945: Temple ceremony translated into Spanish; beginning of excursions to the Mesa Arizona Temple.



open house helped bring the Church out of obscurity in Mexico as thousands visited the temple and requested more information. Within 30 years, 11 more temples were dedicated throughout the country, and another one is under construction.

Isabel Ledezma grew up in Tampico and remembers when her parents were sealed in the Mesa Arizona Temple. “It took two days to travel to Arizona and was very expensive,” she says. “When the Mexico City Mexico Temple was dedicated, the distance was cut to 12 hours by car. With the temple now in Tampico, we can attend often.”

Limhi Ontiveros, who served as president of the Oaxaca Mexico Temple from 2007 to 2010 says, “Those who have a deep, abiding testimony of the gospel find a way to come, even

with the challenges of distance and finances, and they see the temple as a beacon of refuge.”

Sister Ledezma adds, “We need the Spirit in our cities, and having the temple here helps. When we have problems, when we are sad, the temple is close and we find peace there.”

Overcoming Adversity

Mexican members face common challenges and temptations, but they know that they and their fellow Saints are children of a loving Father; economic status and social status are not factors in how they treat each other.

The Mendez family lives in a small mountain town near the city of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. They say, “There are challenges of time, finances, and distance, but the will to do what our Savior wants us to do



motivates us to overcome any obstacle.”

Gonzalo Mendez, age 15, says, “When you live in a place where there is danger, temptations can be very difficult, but with the help of prayer we don’t partake of the enticements of the world, and we stand as witnesses to a better way of life.”

Looking toward the Future

The gospel has long been established in Mexico, but there are still areas where the

God’s name by serving others and preaching the gospel,” Jaime says.

During a recent visit to Mexico, Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles met with the youth from three stakes in the city of Cancun. Of his time with these youth, he said, “We saw the light in their eyes and the hope in their faces and the dreams they have. I kept thinking about what a beautiful future Mexico has.”¹⁶ ■

1946: President George Albert Smith visits Mexico.



1950s: Districts and branches created in nearly all Mexican states.

1961: The Mexico City Stake created with Harold Brown as president.



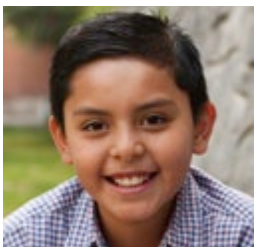
1964: Benemérito School opens in Mexico City.

1967: Second stake in Mexico City organized; Agricol Lozano Herrera called as first Mexican stake president.

1972: Area Conference in Mexico City.



Church is developing. Jaime Cruz, age 15, and his family are the only members of the Church in their small town in the mountains above Oaxaca City. He and his friend Gonzalo work on home-study seminary during the week. Every Saturday they travel two hours by bus to go to the nearest chapel for seminary class with other youth from their ward. Jaime shares what he learns in seminary with his classmates at school and answers their questions. Jaime’s younger brother, Alex, a deacon, is a leader among his friends. Alex says that when he asks them nicely not to use bad language or wear inappropriate clothing, they listen to what he says. Jaime and Alex both know that holding the priesthood is an honor and a responsibility. “I know that the priesthood is given to young men to glorify

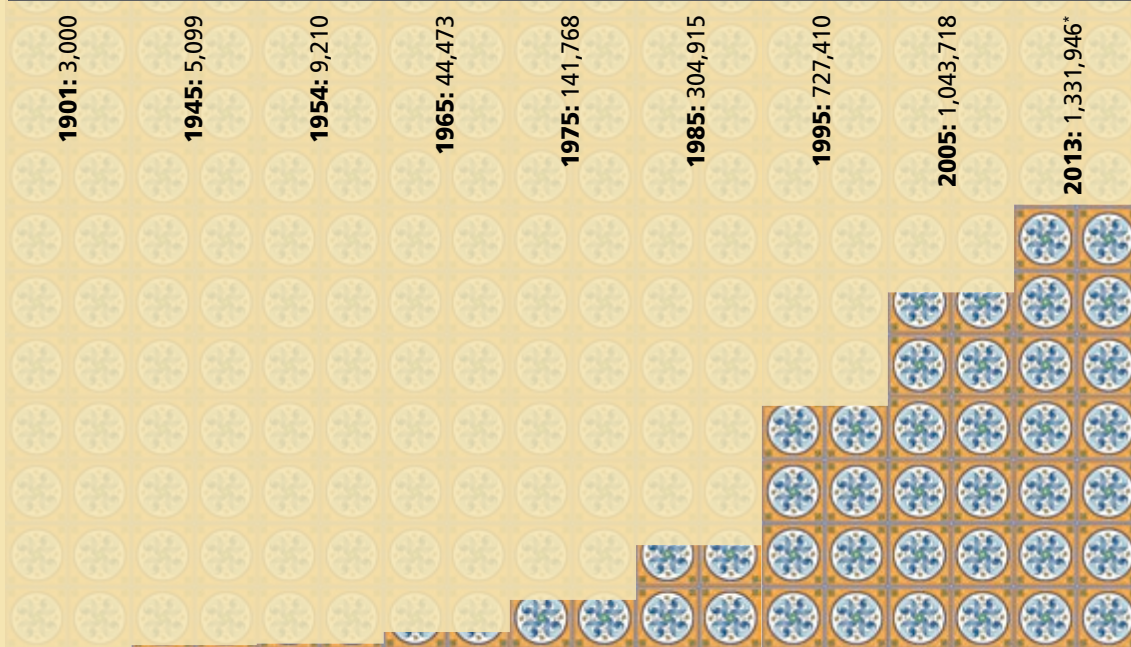


NOTES

1. Henry A. Smith, “200 Lamanites Gather in History-Making Conference, Temple Sessions,” *Church News*, Nov. 10, 1945, 8.
2. Moses Thatcher, in *Moses Thatcher Journal, 1866–1868*, 54.
3. See Brittany A. Chapman and Richard E. Turley Jr., *Women of Faith in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, 1775–1820, 461–470.
4. See Orson Scott Card, “It’s a Young Church in . . . Mexico,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1977, 17–24.
5. See Kirk Henriksen, “Mexican Mormon Pioneers,” a 2010 exhibit in Mexico City Mexico Temple Visitors’ Center.
6. See Gerry R. Flake, “Mormons in Mexico: The First 96 Years,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1972, 20–21.
7. F. LaMond Tullis, “A Shepherd to Mexico’s Saints: Arwell L. Pierce and the Third Convention,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1 (1997): 127–151.
8. See Eduardo Balderas, “Northward to Mesa,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1972, 30.
9. See Eduardo Balderas, “Northward to Mesa,” 30–31.
10. See “The Church Moves On,” *Improvement Era*, July 1946, 446; John D. Giles, “Father Lehi’s Children,” *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1946, 556.
11. See Joseph Walker, “Missionary surge prompts LDS Church to open new MTC in Mexico,” *Deseret News*, Jan. 30, 2013, www.deseretnews.com.
12. This quotation and subsequent quotations from



GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN MEXICO



Temples: 12
with 1 more
announced in
Tijuana

Stakes: 222

Districts: 36

**Wards and
Branches:** 2,000

Missions: 35

*As of June 2013

1975: 12
new stakes
organized in
several areas
of Mexico.



1983: Mexico City
Temple dedicated.

1993: Church
legally rec-
ognized in
Mexico.

2000: Nine small temples
dedicated.



2009: First
all-Mexican
Area Presidency
called.



2013: Missionary training
center opens in Mexico City.

modern members of the Church in Mexico came from interviews with the author on Feb. 7, 2013.

13. In Jay M. Todd, "The Remarkable Mexico City Area Conference," *Ensign*, Nov. 1972, 88.
14. See Eleanor Knowles, *Howard W. Hunter* (1994), 202.
15. See Don L. Searle, "One Million in Mexico," *Ensign*, July 2004, 34; Kristine Miner, "The Church in Oaxaca, Mexico," *Ensign*, Apr. 2001, 78.
16. From an interview with Audiovisual Department, Apr. 2012.
17. Rey L. Pratt, in *The Young Woman's Journal*, vol. 25, no. 9 (1914), 539.
18. From an interview with the author on Apr. 5, 2013.
19. See "Agricol Lozano Herrera: Mexican Mormon Church Leader," <http://mittromneymormon.net/meet-some-mormons-2/meet-some-mormons-2/agricol-lozano-herrera-mexican-mormon-church-leader>.



Seminary students in Oaxaca enjoy
being together.