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## *The Expanding Church* Spencer J. Palmer

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## Book Reviews

PALMER, SPENCER J. *The Expanding Church*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978. 232 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Truman G. Madsen, director of Judeo-Christian Studies Center, Brigham Young University.

"The mills of the Gods grind exceeding fast." In the expanding and even "exploding" Church it is difficult enough to keep up the cadence in action. This new volume by Spencer J. Palmer is a vivid and literate sign of the times: we need to adjust to international horizons. For some of us this may mean radical reconversion, an awakening from the dogmatic slumber of our cultural mores.

The book exhibits Dr. Palmer's unique combination of gifts. His initial chapters uncover historical and doctrinal footings for the mandate to "penetrate every clime," not a paper dream but an exceptionless requirement. His seasoned grasp of world religions and traditions is combined with firsthand up-to-the-minute acquaintance with the Church programs and procedures that are crossing the divides. He has been monitoring carefully the events and trends of the last two decades. (The book is more than an update of his *The Church Encounters Asia*.) Then the book presents two landmark addresses—one by Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Council of the Twelve and the other by the Church's able secretary of state, David M. Kennedy. Both come to grips with the Alps the Church has yet to cross; both are declarations of interdependence, global in scope. Finally the book chronicles moving human stories, paradigms of conversion, selected from western Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the South Sea Islands. Throughout, Palmer intersperses introductory material that sews the book together in an almost seamless way. Abstraction is balanced with concrete data, and both are enlivened by flesh-and-blood recitals.

With documentation as fresh as this year's First Presidency statement on "the great religious leaders of the world" (including Confucius, Socrates, and Plato), Palmer patiently undercuts some confining myths: e.g., that the blood of Israel is Anglo-European, that Zion is "at most" North America, that leadership in the Church is typed by nationality. Instead, as in the vision of early prophets, we now know that the seed of Israel is everywhere (and anyway "latter-day Israel is not a community of blood; it is a



community of faith," [chap. 3, p. 28]); that Zion, as Joseph Smith said in 1834, is to fill "the whole earth"; that leadership, its privileges and its burdens, will descend upon all who fulfill the covenants. Palmer puts an "s" on "Gathering" and shows that communities of gatherers are forming everywhere and are to establish stakes and, just as crucial, temples. (For Elder McConkie illuminates the point of Revelation: those who welcome Christ will not be mere neophyte converts, but "kings and priests.")

The book points to major barriers and breakthroughs. The awesome translation and language-gap, for example, is being met by computerized dictionaries of all the standard works with contextual aids; geographic distance is being overcome by decentralization of Church functions; grinding poverty and illiteracy by efforts as sacrificial and down-to-earth as Cordell Anderson's work in Guatemala. In a Church theoretically and practically unwilling to divorce the spiritual and the temporal, there is wide-ranging expansion of home study, seminary, institute, and health and welfare missions.

Palmer's overview of the life of David M. Kennedy leads one to wonder whether Mormonism prepared Kennedy for executive distinction or vice versa. His evenhanded reach has already brought collaborative response to the Church through curtains heretofore as forbidding as triple-plate steel. His own tracing of recent developments shows our task is two-edged: to become "more active, resourceful and realistic" in facing the melting pot of world conversions and to lift the sights of world leaders to the meaning of the Mormon presence in their countries. On the first point, he asks us to review and put in perspective our own pet political axes, even those we suppose are implicit in our heritage; to recognize that converts are now finding their way into the Church from every social and political and economic "ism" in the world. We must abandon the "have nothing to do with them" philosophy. Likewise, he asks that we desist from "prejudicial publications and speeches" which cause repercussions abroad. A concrete case: the inbuilt sympathy among many Mormons to the Jewish plight is interpreted abroad as an inbuilt antipathy to the Arabs. Present events in the political state of Israel, Kennedy points out, may or may not be their scriptural destiny. In the meantime, well over 600,000,000 Moslems await the gospel. Further, "Americans must be very careful not to give the impression that they are better or more righteous than others simply because they are Americans." (p. 73)

But how do we deal with head-on collisions between our own

habitual customs and preferences and those abroad? One answer is the question of Soren Cox, formerly president of the Singapore Mission, "What is mandated by the Gospel and what is simply Western Culture?" (p. 159) Through "alien" uniforms of people abroad we must see the promise of the white clothing of the temple and the worthiness that is making that real. The scales may not drop from their eyes until they drop from ours.

Autobiographical accounts in the last section strike home the message that today, as ever, receiving Christ—the conversion-transition—is not smooth. The traumas of the infant Church are recapitulated hour to hour in the never-endings of individual converts. Yet one sees what Elder Gordon B. Hinckley of the Council of the Twelve calls the "silver thread in the dark tapestry"—disaster, war, setback and tragedy have been (and therefore can be) dramatically overturned as the very price of gospel receptivity in nations we call "foreign." (It is significant that Elder McConkie's vision of Asian expansion delivered eight years ago is interrupted several times by brackets and footnotes which report that growth, breathtaking in his projections, has come faster still.) To those who expected that the Mormon Church was "winding down," to those who predicted its second hundred years would be a history of its "dying among its own worshippers," to those who see it even now as a local idiosyncratic sect—this is bracing tonic. The Church is a living fountain of solid doctrinal undergirding and inspired flexibility. It is becoming not one of the "broken lights" of God but the power of a world-transforming movement. The moral message is clear: possessiveness must be transformed into open-heartedness in the compassionate manner of Christ.