"In His Own Language:" Mormon Spanish Speaking Congregations in the United States

Jessie L. Embry

Mark L. Grover

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Reviewed by Mark L. Grover, Senior Librarian and Latin American Bibliographer, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

A history of Spanish-speaking language- and ethnic-based units in the Church is presented in this book by Jessie L. Embry, associate director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies and supervisor of its oral history program. Few concerns in contemporary Mormonism elicit more emotion and feeling than the issue of ethnic and language branches and wards. In a church in which unity and equality is emphasized, the concept of dividing into units based on something other than geography seems incongruent. Yet the reality of language and cultural differences among the members has resulted in the organization of various types of language-based meetings from the time non-English-speaking converts first immigrated to the United States. The issue is not solely a concern in the United States, since language-based units exist in many parts of the world and elicit mixed feelings from local leaders.

Embry has explored many of the issues that are essential to gaining an understanding of the Spanish-speaking congregations. To see the organization of these units as the result of only language differences is to fail to understand the significant social issues connected to them. These branches and wards often are as distinct ethnically and culturally as linguistically. Embry and those interviewed point out that "understanding the language [is] 'just the tip of the iceberg'" (80).

"In His Own Language" is divided into essentially two sections. The first discusses the evolution of the Church's position on ethnic unit organization by describing the history of organizations that have served the Latino population. Embry outlines the evolution of missions from a separate Spanish-American Mission to the current missionary organization, which places English-speaking and foreign-language missionaries together under the supervision of the same geographically based mission. The volume also highlights the role of Elder Spencer W. Kimball in establishing separate units and focusing attention on ethnic minority members. Some of the larger Spanish-speaking branches and wards are given brief but separate historical treatments.

The second section focuses on issues related to Spanish-speaking congregations. The documentary sources for this section are the oral histories done by the Redd Center under Embry's direction. (None of the interviews, however, were conducted by Embry.) Personal and organizational
issues related to the units are the focus of the discussion. Of particular interest are chapters six and seven, which discuss the advantages and problems of language-based wards and branches. These chapters help the reader understand some of the ethnic and cultural differences that lie beneath the “tip of the iceberg.” For example, interviewee Samuel Miera points out that in English-speaking wards, choir practice is usually a one-hour Sunday session, after which members hurry home. This desire to return quickly home might be interpreted by Latino members as cold or antisocial. In Miera’s Spanish-speaking branch, the choir met Tuesdays and Fridays, sang for forty-five minutes, and then visited for three hours—an important expression of communal warmth and love in Latino societies (80).

Readers will also leave these chapters with a deeper understanding of the complicated issues involved in the formation of language-based wards and branches and of the feelings of estrangement and perceived prejudice that can be experienced by minority members of a Church community. Anglo and Latino readers alike will leave with resolve to rid themselves of ethnic stereotypes.

However, despite the insights provided in the volume, “In His Own Language” may prove frustrating to those having experience with the history and evolution of these Spanish-speaking units. The oral histories and the author’s use of them as the primary documentation for the book leaves significant omissions, as does a lack of critical analysis of the issues.

There is little question as to the importance of using oral history in the writing of twentieth-century history. However, caution should be taken in how oral interviews are used. All historical documents have problems of subjectivity, but oral histories generally suffer from this problem more than many written records. Oral history’s greatest value in historical research is that it provides feelings and descriptions surrounding the events or issues being examined. Oral histories have to be used with and supplementary to other primary source materials. Though Embry did use other primary sources, particularly in the history of the Spanish-American Mission, there is a significant lack of written sources in other sections. The result is that the book is more anecdotal than substantive.

Moreover, if oral histories are to be a major source for history, it is important to interview a sufficient number of the people involved. Embry’s limited number of oral histories of the leaders and long-term members of Spanish congregations is a serious omission, particularly problematic in the section on branch histories. The history of the El Paso Texas Branch (42–45), for example, gives little more than a hint of the tumultuous history it went through in the 1960s, a time when racial conflicts in the United States sometimes resulted in violence and rioting.
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The most significant of these conflicts occurred in California and Texas where the Chicano movement became the most violent and defiant. Fear on the part of the Anglos and anger on the side of the Latino (primarily Mexican-American) population found its way into some Church communities and activities. In El Paso, some young Latino Church members were leaders in the political struggle. When local stake officials reinterpreted certain Church policies concerning unity and began disbanding language units, the secular militancy of some of the Latino members resulted in a clash with Anglo stake leaders and conflicts occurred. Probably the most serious incidents were in El Paso, where some leaders of the Spanish-speaking unit refused to accept the dissolution of the branch. The result was the excommunication of several leaders and a serious split based on race that in some areas persists to the present.

Embry makes no mention of excommunications of Latino leaders and gives little indication of the influence of outside political movements. In addition, none of the Spanish-speaking leaders of the El Paso branch, for example, past or present were interviewed, leaving the history of the El Paso branch in this book seriously lacking in substance. Other conflicts, though not as dramatic, continue to occur to the present, most recently in California at approximately the time Embry was preparing this book to go to press, and she briefly alludes to “rumors” of the closing of a stake (51). Embry may have omitted details of these problems simply because she chose not to deal with this aspect of the history.

The histories of the Spanish-speaking branches and wards in Provo, Utah, also suffer from insufficient interviews. None of the branch presidents who served between 1960 and 1980 were interviewed, even though they all lived in the area when the interviews were conducted. Little information is given on the evolution of the first branch to a ward, and some factual mistakes are made: Enoc Flores is mistakenly identified as the first bishop. Paul Buckingham was the branch president at the time of the organization of the ward in 1980 and served as bishop for almost a year. Nor does the story suggest the struggles with stake presidents on several occasions to keep the unit from being dissolved.

Examining the list of interviewees, one notices a serious absence of interviews with most of the old, unwavering Hispanic families who have provided much strength and support to branches throughout the United States for so many years. Those faithful Saints, many of whom were baptized in Mexico, should be interviewed to discover the history of these units.

The second part of the book, which is more sociological, suffers from the same problems. The strongest and largest communities of Spanish-speaking members of the Church are in Texas and California, yet over half of the interviews were done in Provo, even though many of those interviewed
had been raised outside of Utah. Nearly half of those interviewed were university students or young members in their twenties. These demographic factors significantly affect the quality of the interviews because of the interviewees’ limited experience in the Church. Again, the faithful older members in the branches in Texas and California who have seen changes and adjustments over the years are the ones best able to provide the information desired.

Despite these problems, Embry’s book does a great service in pointing out the need for attention to the subject. The Church outside of the United States continues to expand, and the numbers of immigrants being baptized in the United States are also increasing. Many members are still immigrating to the United States and creating large groups of non-English-speaking members. The integration of these members into the Church will continue to be a challenge. The issues raised by Embry and the full history of the Church’s response to this challenge in the past can be valuable in understanding how to respond in the future.

1. Rather than being autonomous units, these first language-based meetings were auxiliary to the established geographical congregations—similar to what we now call “firesides.” However, they were formally organized with a presidency and were held on a regular basis. For more information, see William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 200, 250–54; Richard Jensen, “Mother Tongue: Use of Non-English Languages in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United States, 1850–1983,” in New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington, ed. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 273–303.


3. “Oral history is only one form of historical documentation and should be used in conjunction with other relevant records and documents.” This statement is found in the introduction to all oral histories located in the James Moyle Oral History Program of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.