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Establishing the Church Simply

John P. Livingstone

The Church's concern for Native Americans led to the development of guidelines for simplifying curriculum and organization, thereby allowing indigenous priesthood leaders to move the Church forward more quickly and effectively where there are special language or cultural needs. The author, a former district and mission president, explores that development and shares his personal experience with the Church's simplified program.

Fragile ecosystems, such as the sparsely sown Arctic tundra or the delicate deserts of the southwestern United States, require special care and consideration. Visitors can cause significant environmental damage without being aware that their activities are having a long-term impact on the microbes, plants, and animals that have established a habitat over time and developed a calibrated use of scarce resources. Even minimal human activity may result in a significant disturbance to such a sensitive ecosystem. It can tip the balance of resources or cause other damage that requires multiple seasons for restoration.

In numerous areas of the world (including many places in the United States), units of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are human equivalents of such fragile ecosystems. Members of the Church in these areas may suffer from poverty, family separation, and displacement caused by war, racial tensions, or other difficult situations. Under these conditions, some branches have difficulty implementing all the programs of the Church.

Stake and mission leaders in these areas face a significant challenge in training faithful indigenous leaders who understand the delicate nature of their ecosystem and who can move the Church forward at an appropriate pace, offering challenges and setting goals that will best help local members “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moro. 10:32). Units in such sensitive areas may use a simplified program and curriculum instituted by the Church in the late 1970s. The program was created for use where conditions warrant an increased focus on basic gospel doctrines and on personal and family preparedness issues such as education, health, employment, home storage, resource management, and social, emotional, and spiritual strength.

Missionaries and longtime members need to be aware of this simplified program and curriculum. Otherwise, when visiting, moving into, or serving in small branches adapted to the ecology of the local culture, such

members may misunderstand the directives the local leaders are striving to follow. The gospel spirit in those units will be the same as elsewhere, but manuals and materials as well as a reduced organizational structure may feel strange and unfamiliar. Longtime members may inadvertently create anxiety in the local membership by commenting on the unfamiliar materials. When members from fully established areas wonder aloud why the “regular” priesthood and Relief Society manuals are not being used, they may unwittingly send a message that a local unit somehow does not measure up to what is “normal” in the Church. Newcomers sometimes succeed in supplanting the simplified curriculum in favor of more familiar materials. In some situations, curriculum alternates back and forth over several years as leadership changes.

This article is intended to familiarize Latter-day Saints with the history and background of the development of the Church’s basic program and curriculum and to share my positive experience with their use. As the Church expands—and growth outside the United States and Canada outpaces growth within—the need for basic materials becomes ever more evident.

Challenges Faced in Fragile Cultures

As a missionary and later as a mission president, I saw that the realities of life in some cultures create significant challenges for many new members, such as Native Americans and inner-city inhabitants who experience significant poverty due to difficulty integrating into the lifestyle of the majority. For various, and often complex, reasons, many people in these cultures have not experienced consistent school attendance; significant job opportunities, let alone planned career development; or even the practice of scheduling one’s activities with any regularity. Instead, life lurches from one personal challenge or crisis to another. Although problems related to money, education, sexuality, and physical and mental health affect all societies, in fragile cultures such problems are often handled on an emergency basis and in a fragmented way.

When the personal or family money supply dries up and there seems to be no prospect for more, some people are led to desperate acts to obtain the necessities of life. In these exigencies, individuals may lie, steal, or cheat simply to get by. Latter-day Saints living within such a culture understand the problems underlying the misbehaviors of their fellows and frequently are more sympathetic than are outsiders.

I have seen that many people in these trying circumstances have had only limited experience with complex institutions. They tend to see themselves as “little people” with no power or influence relative to businesses, government agencies, or even churches. When they must deal with an institution, they may feel threatened and foolish due to their ignorance of

the structure and function of large concerns and may mask their insecurity with aggression or, conversely, with a blasé demeanor. Bureaucrats often take that posture at face value and respond negatively, further compounding and reinforcing mutual negative impressions.

Family structure is often very loose, with few restrictions relative to sexuality. The paucity of family rules and poor enforcement of laws protecting young adolescents result in early sexual experimentation, exploitation by older teens and adults, and staggering numbers of children born out of wedlock to mothers as young as thirteen years of age. Children bearing children can mean that a mother's mother assumes a major responsibility toward her grandchildren. Leaving their children in a grandmother's care for extended periods, young mothers often attempt to escape or at least get a temporary vacation from the responsibilities of parenthood. The problems are compounded when, with some cleverness and swagger, older males prey on the loneliness of these young mothers, often sending them back home pregnant yet again. That individuals in these circumstances turn to drugs, alcohol, and sexual pleasures to try to "medicate" themselves out of despair is well understood by their peers.

Thirty-five-year-old grandmothers, buried in laundry and crying babies, are bewildered and discouraged by such burdensome family responsibilities. Nevertheless, grandmothers and great-grandmothers become the virtual leaders, mentors, and even sages within such societies, attesting to the pithy wisdom gained through hardship. The matriarchal nature of many crumbling societies is not surprising to those familiar with these kinds of conditions.

Men also feel the discouragement of growing up in such conditions and tend to take consolation in sexuality and in self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. Such behavior lowers their feelings of worth and spins the cycle of despair out of control. Rather than seeking safety and refuge within their families, where fathers may be absent and mothers emotionally overwhelmed, these young men frequently band together in gangs for protection and friendship, dreaming up elaborate rituals and extreme dares to prove loyalty to the gang. These groups, large and small, then begin a savage, desperate quest for money, power, and fame by plundering their fellow beings. As they age, some gang members begin to realize for themselves the wretched conditions fueled by their activities but feel trapped by the very bonds created by membership. The feeling of entrapment creates a powerful psychological dissonance and provokes reactions commonly seen in war zones.

These men's relationships with women become as exploitive as they are medicinal. Incidents of rape are commonplace; it would be difficult, in such circumstances, to find a woman who has not been sexually abused. The resulting feelings of hopelessness and deflated self-worth among

women are undoubtedly telegraphed to offspring, further accelerating the spin of this dismal social cycle. People in these conditions often do not know whether to hang on tighter or simply let go.

Stories of Struggle

Missionaries and leaders from other cultures feel compassion for members caught in circumstances such as those detailed above but usually do not have the personal experience to help them relate to these members' lives. Two of my sister missionaries learned this lesson at church one day. They were asked at the last moment to teach a Relief Society lesson in an inner-city branch. Trying to present the topic of the worth of souls, they asked the member sisters to offer their feelings regarding their own worth. Both missionaries reeled as the women recounted one story of abuse and struggle after another. "President," one missionary reported, "I realized we were not at all on the same wavelength as these member sisters when it came to adversity and feelings of low self-esteem. Their life experiences were traumatic beyond anything I have ever been through. I just don't know how they manage to still carry on in spite of what they have suffered!"

The cases of two individuals* illustrate the depth of need in certain cultures. In such situations, local Church leaders can ease the burdens these people face.

Carlene. Carlene, a sixteen-year-old in inner-city Detroit, argued with her mother over her hairdo before school one day. A "bad hair day" meant Carlene was late for school and very unhappy about her appearance. Her mother finally screamed at her to get out the door and go to school, late or not. Carlene still blames her mother's unkind and impatient behavior for what happened next.

As Carlene walked down the sidewalk crying, a car full of young men pulled alongside. They "sweet-talked" her, as Carlene put it, into letting them give her a ride to school. She soon realized that these men were not taking her to the high school. In a strange neighborhood in a strange house, the young driver yanked her down bare wooden stairs to a lone mattress on the cement floor of the dank basement. There he raped her. Afterward, the young man said the plan was for all the other men to have her too, but because she was young and beautiful he would protect her from the others. Fearing further violence, Carlene believed that trusting this man was her only choice. He kept his word and became her first "boyfriend." She felt obligated by his protection and trapped by his continuing threats.

*Names have been changed.

Carlene's experience with this man was not the end of these kinds of problems. The shame, embarrassment, anger, and loss of self-worth simply compounded her troubles in ways that the young missionaries who knocked on her door years later could not understand. But caring, local priesthood leaders were in position to help with the effects of Carlene's past. Understanding the context and culture in which Carlene lived greatly helped these leaders meet her needs and challenges; Carlene felt neither misunderstood nor unreasonably judged.

Harley. Harley joined the Church as a young father on a Canadian Indian reserve (Canadians prefer this term to *reservations*). Neighborhood friends teased Harley good-naturedly about his joining "a white man's church," but often the teasing turned sour, and a smoldering resentment was manifested by some. He also felt the pressure of the missionaries' expectations that he would become the leader of the Mormons on his reserve. His wife, Anna, had not felt as strongly about the gospel as had Harley, but she was baptized anyway. Every weekend or two, she would go to town with her sisters and drink heavily at the only bar for twenty miles around. While he realized he could not make Anna stop drinking, Harley wished his children did not have to see their mother in such a condition. When she was drunk, Anna would mock him for his beliefs and say cruel things that were meant primarily to diminish the seriousness of her own behavior, but the words rankled. He started to wonder if just joining in with Anna at the bar would bring more peace between them. So Harley broke down and went drinking with Anna and her sisters. Not only did it not help, but Anna chided him for the inconsistency between his professed beliefs and actual behavior. Despite his pain at Anna's reaction, the fact remained that when he was drinking he could forget the pressures of his new religion. Harley followed a pattern over the next few years of taking the teasing for only so long and then heading to the bar to have the alcohol ease his pain and stress. It would take over twenty years for Harley, with the help of priesthood leaders, to overcome his dependency on the self-medicating effects of alcohol.

Carlene and Harley are but two examples of members who live in fragile ecosystems. Their examples could be multiplied, and the list of member difficulties enlarged considerably. Working alone, these Saints often remain lost in darkness. But with the help of caring, culturally aware priesthood leaders, these members can become strong and steadfast.

Challenges of Running the Church in a Fragile Environment

Circumstances and spiritual promptings may dictate that priesthood leadership come from members outside of cultures such as those described above. In my experience, however, outside leadership has often resulted in

cross-cultural misunderstandings. A priesthood leader from a different setting may easily underestimate or misinterpret both the subtleties within a culture and the terrible troubles so familiar to branch members. A non-local leader might not be familiar with government contingencies for inner-city or reservation situations or local regulations and programs such as the one for distributing food stamps. He may also be unaware of scams relative to these programs that a branch president from the local culture would immediately recognize.

Being native to a culture can make a person more effective in counseling and advising other members in that setting. People in every culture have strengths and weaknesses that may not be readily apparent to outsiders. Locals understand the demands and challenges inherent in their own culture, speak the dialect, and understand the motivations of members whose actions would be considered outrageous in another context. Of particular value are those priesthood leaders, whether indigenous or not, who are sensitive to both the culture around them and the promptings of the Spirit.¹

At times Church leaders and missionaries from other locales unintentionally offer their love and support in ways that lead to dependency. While people will always respond to unconditional love and acceptance, help that only meets a need rather than teaches a principle ultimately stifles growth. The risks are demonstrated by President Marion G. Romney's analogy of the flock of seagulls that became dependent on a shrimp fleet and lost the ability to fish for themselves.² Furthermore, displeasure and even animosities may arise when those who are depended upon move on to other things. The situation is similar to one from the scriptures:

It was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the [missionary] and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—[leader] contending against [leader], and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost. (Joseph Smith—History 1:6)

Another challenge arises when leaders desire to implement as much of the full Church program as they can. Sometimes a few members will carry multiple assignments, juggling family, work, and Church activities in an amazing display of devotion and diligence. But such enthusiasm and skill may intimidate new members. Trying to impose the full program of the Church in such cultures before most of the members are ready can result in new members feeling inadequate and unable to meet what they perceive are the Lord's expectations. The challenge especially affects both members converted from churches that require little or no participation and members who are not familiar with the kind of developed organization and structured interaction prevalent in mature Church units. These feelings of inadequacy may reinforce pressures from former friends who chide or tease converts about joining the Church. New members may begin to

regret the decision to convert. When individuals or families feel they cannot keep up or carry the Church load, the likelihood of inactivity and discouragement increases.

In these situations, the lack of confidence displayed by adult members can frustrate leaders and spur them into giving up on the adults in favor of trying to raise a new generation. It is not at all uncommon for a well-intentioned leader to be more concerned with establishing a Boy Scout troop than with developing an elders quorum.

Faced with these organizational challenges as well as a still-developing understanding of Latter-day Saint doctrine and its application, new members (especially those called to leadership positions) need a program suited to their needs. In response to these needs, the Church has outlined a plan that can be used in developing Church units.

History of the Simplified Program

The simplified program now used in many small Church units worldwide was pioneered in the 1970s in response to needs that had long concerned Church leaders. Beginning among native North Americans, this approach now serves the Church in many parts of the world.

Church leaders have always taken an interest in the American Indian peoples, an interest that clearly stems from belief in the Book of Mormon and from the early expansion of the Church into Native American territory. The Church's first missionary efforts included missions to Natives.³ Then the westward movement of the Latter-day Saints placed them in close contact with the native peoples of the plains and the intermountain West. In Utah, President Brigham Young adopted a policy of conciliation and kindness toward the Natives.⁴

In the twentieth century, a renewed awareness of the need to establish the Church among the Indians weighed heavily upon several Presidents of the Church. On September 13, 1946, President George Albert Smith asked Spencer W. Kimball (fig. 1), then an Apostle, to "look after the Indians—they are neglected. Take charge and watch after the Indians in all the world."⁵ Elder Kimball organized and headed the Indian Relations Committee, and Golden Buchanan became the first coordinator of Indian affairs.⁶ Missionary work received new vigor in 1951, when young missionaries were called to serve among the Indians of the Southwest. (Until 1951 only older missionary couples served on Indian reservations.)

About 1949 the Indian Relations Committee conducted a survey that found that nearly half of the stakes in the Church had Native Americans living within their boundaries.⁷ Local committees were then organized to raise members' awareness of the Indians' struggles and to help determine how the stakes could best serve Indian people. This effort helped members and

Courtesy LDS Church Archives



FIG. 1. Elder Spencer W. Kimball, ca. 1945. Much of Elder Kimball's Church service during his years as an Apostle centered on assisting Native peoples.

leaders reach out to another culture with which they were generally unfamiliar and paved the way for more formal programs such as the Indian student placement services and Indian seminary.⁸

Church leaders saw that the materials produced for the whole Church did not always meet the needs of Native American members, whether they lived on or off a reservation. In June 1975, Elder David B. Haight asked Stewart A. Durrant (fig. 2), then executive secretary of the committee over Indian affairs, to begin developing simplified materials for use in the Lamanite branches. In

a letter, Elder Haight outlined the program's priorities: "The *Melchizedek Priesthood Handbook* is one of the first projects we should tackle along with the *Melchizedek Priesthood Study Guide* and a companion course for the Relief Society to help strengthen the homes."⁹

On November 18, 1975, Elders Boyd K. Packer and David B. Haight called a special meeting to discuss the needs of Native American members. The minutes show leaders' support of the simplified program and their intention to use it throughout the "developing areas of the world":

Elder Packer then spoke to the group and said, "President Kimball is restless about the Indian program and does not think enough is being done." Elder Packer said we need to push the program faster. He encouraged us to continue to refine and work on the overall simplified program for the developing areas of the world. This material can then be used in the struggling Lamanite branches. Elder Packer said [drawing an analogy to the Church's practice of constructing buildings in five phases, or steps, to suit the size of the branch or ward], "We build a phase building, but we try to put new members in the full five phase program before they understand the first phase."¹⁰

In February 1976, the initial draft of a simplified Church program was sent for review to the Church Correlation Committee, and in November the final draft was submitted. After reviewing the program, the committee concluded:

The basic idea is a good one. There seems to be an urgent need for simplified information, organization, and materials pertaining to the Church where there is no organized branch. This proposal is certainly a step in the right direction although it will undoubtedly need to be further refined by the Melchizedek Priesthood Executive Committee so that the documents finally approved could be implemented throughout the world and not only for groups of Lamanites.¹¹

One week later, in a meeting held November 18, 1976, the Council of the Twelve Apostles discussed the simplification program and recorded the following:

EMERGING LANGUAGE REPORT: as the Church moves into new lands, the council approved that:

(A) The organizational structure of the Church be simplified beginning with the family as the basic unit. The Church unit[s] should grow towards becoming wards in a systematic process in identifiable stages. These stages could be family, group, small branch, and branch.

(B) Simplified curriculum materials based on the regular Church curriculum, administrative guidebooks, reports, and the GENERAL HANDBOOK OF INSTRUCTIONS should be prepared for these units to help new members assimilate gospel principles and practices. This would help them move forward until they are ready to accept the full Church program.

Care should be taken to see that these units do not continue to use the simplified program after they are organized into stakes. This proposal was referred to the First Presidency recommending approval.¹²

In April 1977, the Council of the Twelve further discussed a simplified reporting system:

SIMPLIFIED REPORTING SYSTEM: The Council approved Elder Boyd K. Packer's presentation made in last week's Wednesday Report Meeting concerning the organizational and reporting guidelines for the family, group, and small branches, known as the Simplified Reporting System, to be used by these small groups. The Council recommended that the Leadership and Priesthood Executive Committees work jointly to decide how to implement this new reporting system without further delay or study.¹³

Then in June 1977, the Council of the Twelve approved a procedure for organizing small new units through appropriate priesthood leadership channels.¹⁴ What started as a program to help struggling Lamanite branches in the United States was now expanded to include developing areas throughout the world. The experience of working with Native Americans had increased Church leaders' understanding of how to meet the needs

of unique cultures worldwide.¹⁵ Josiah W. Douglas, a curriculum writer for the simplified program, later reflected:

I'm convinced that when we began to meet the needs of the Lamanitish people and the handicapped people, then we began to meet the needs of the Church in the world. I think they were a catalyst that caused us to evaluate what we were doing. . . . We could only conceive of the Church with a huge primary, a full sized ward, hundreds of people. . . . And I think that working with Lamanite units began to pull us back and say, wait a minute. That's not working. It will not work in these places, it's too complicated. And so we began to try to address their needs, then immediately we began to address the needs in the Philippines and other developing countries.¹⁶

During the last three decades, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has truly become a worldwide church. Statistics on the growth of the Church outside the United States and Canada between 1970 and 1980 give an idea of the increasing diversity of cultures within the Church during the mid-1970s, when the simplified program was in development. In 1970 there were only 42 stakes headquartered outside the United States and Canada.¹⁷ By the end of 1980, an additional 287 international stakes had been organized.¹⁸ This growing diversity made it necessary to prioritize what materials would be translated first and in what languages. As the Church expanded, it

had become economically unfeasible for all the material being produced by the Church in English to be translated and distributed throughout the world.

To create the new, simplified materials, Durrant enlisted the help of Josiah Douglas and Ronald Knighton, who had lived and taught among Lamanite peoples for several years, as well as Wayne B. Lynn, a pioneer in the Indian seminary program. Douglas and Lynn supervised the production of *Gospel Principles* and the corresponding simplified priesthood and Relief Society manuals. Durrant, who had worked among the Canadian Aboriginal people, supervised the writing of the first guidebooks for family, branch, and priesthood leadership. Others who worked on the project contributed valuable insights from their experiences in the Indian seminary program. The experiences of



Courtesy Stewart A. Durrant

FIG. 2. Stewart A. Durrant, about 1975. Durrant, who worked with Church committees on Indian affairs, was instrumental in developing the simplified guidebooks and introducing them to priesthood leaders.

these leaders among various Lamanite cultures helped them understand the needs of other cultures within the Church.

The simplified program was ready for field testing by September 1977. The South Dakota Rapid City Mission and the Fargo North Dakota Stake were selected to test the simplified organizational and reporting systems and the simplified curriculum.¹⁹ By 1979 the simplified program was available for use in English-speaking areas; by 1980, in Spanish; and by 1985, in at least fifteen languages total.²⁰

The Simplified Program: Phase 1 and Phase 2

Today the simplified program includes a reduced organizational structure, a simplified reporting structure, a reduced curriculum, and simplified manuals. A 1982 pamphlet instructed that the basic unit program be used in the following conditions:

1. In an emerging area of the world.
2. In an area where people are scattered.
3. Where leadership is just beginning to develop.
4. Among minority and cultural groups.²¹

Simplified Organization. The simplified program is designed to accommodate a group as small as a single family, which would meet together without being designated as a branch. A branch may be organized when there are two or more families in the area or in a cultural group (fig. 3).²² In a small group, usually there are enough priesthood holders for only a branch president or presidency to be called. The branch presidency may initially be Aaronic Priesthood holders. When there are enough Melchizedek Priesthood holders for a complete branch presidency plus an elders quorum president, the unit may grow from Phase 1 to Phase 2.

Simplified Meeting Schedule. A Phase 1 unit holds a normal-length sacrament meeting (the branch president may bless the sacrament if he is the only priesthood holder). Sunday School is also full-length, but the members may meet in one group. The priesthood and Relief Society meetings last about fifteen minutes and do not include formal lessons. The branch president conducts priesthood meeting. He may simply review home teaching, discuss other branch business, and announce activities. Priesthood meeting is attended by all priesthood and potential priesthood holders. The Relief Society president meets with women, teenage girls, and Primary-age children; during the abbreviated meeting, she might review visiting teaching assignments and discuss business and activities.

In a Phase 2 unit, a full three-hour block of meetings is held. A larger number of Melchizedek Priesthood holders make it possible for the branch presidency to instruct the Aaronic Priesthood young men while the elders

THE FOUR PARTS OF THE BASIC UNIT PROGRAM

1. Organization

The family is the basic unit of the Church.

Each family should be having individual and family prayer, holding family home evening, studying the scriptures, looking after their temporal and spiritual welfare, and engaging in missionary and genealogy work.



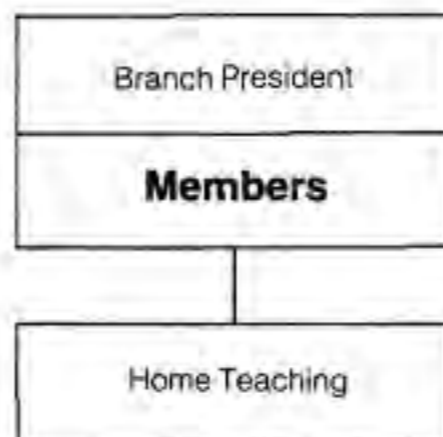
Prayer
Family home evening
Scripture study
Temporal welfare
Spiritual welfare
Missionary
Genealogy

The *Family Guidebook* (PBMP0087) has been prepared to assist families to do these things.

FIG. 3. These pages from an early basic unit program pamphlet (1982) demonstrate the simpleness of the program. Copyright Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

In the *Branch Guidebook* (PBMP0076) we read:
“When there are two or more member families and individuals in an area and at least one of the members is a worthy priest or Melchizedek Priesthood holder, a branch may be organized.”

The branch may begin very simply, with only a branch president who looks after his members using home teaching to encourage families and individuals in their duties.



Sacrament Meeting

In the beginning the branch may hold only a sacrament meeting.

quorum president instructs the adult men, or the adult men and young men may meet together. A full-length Relief Society meeting is held, and where possible, a Young Women meeting and a Primary meeting are also held. Significant priesthood leadership thus enables branch growth and auxiliary development.

Simplified Reporting System. In Phase 1, most reporting may be taken care of by district or stake clerks, or they may have the branch president do what he can. In some cases, the branch president may simply tally attendance and forward donations in their original envelopes to the stake or district president for processing. Leadership capability and experience determine which reports will be completed by branch leaders.

Phase 2 leaders will have more Melchizedek Priesthood holders and will be better able to handle reporting functions. Leaders may be able to take care of donations as well as some membership and activity reports. The availability of computers and men who can operate them determines reporting capacity.

Simplified Manuals. The best known of the simplified curriculum materials is the *Gospel Principles* manual being used throughout the Church today. The book was initially written as an elementary reference text to guide early curriculum development but is now used as a course book in Sunday School classes for new members and investigators. Soon after the inception of *Gospel Principles*, a simplified priesthood manual entitled *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood*, printed in two parts, was produced. Part A is for use one year and Part B the next. The manual offers such straightforward lessons as “Effective Family Leadership” and “Having Fun Together as Families.” *The Latter-day Saint Woman*, Parts A and B, was produced for the Relief Society and Young Women. Lessons, such as “Caring for Our Homes,” “Developing Employment Skills,” and “Effective Family Leadership,” are practical and address the basic needs of members in developing cultures. *Walk in His Ways*, Parts A and B, was written and published for children in basic units. Lessons include “Taking Care of Our Bodies,” “Being Dependable,” and “Forgiving One Another.” These priesthood and auxiliary curriculum materials were prepared between March 1978 and March 1980.²³

Guidebooks for Leaders. Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 leaders are guided by a series of four handbooks. The *Family Guidebook* gives instructions for living the gospel within the family and also provides instructions on how to hold worship services as a family when authorized by area, mission, stake, or district priesthood leaders. The *Branch Guidebook* contains instructions on the organization and operation of a branch with only a few or with many members. The *Priesthood Leader’s Guidebook* explains the responsibilities of holders of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, including instructions for ordinances and blessings. The *Teaching Guidebook*

was not part of the original guidebooks but was added more recently (1994); it counsels on ways to be an effective teacher.²⁴

Rationale. With the simplified program, local priesthood leaders can lead sooner, without having to spend time learning about and running the full Church program. The leaders are then in place to teach correct doctrine while administering to those in their charge. Building on the foundation of their leaders, new members feel more confident in playing a significant role sooner in their religious life than would be possible if they were dealing with the demands of the full program.

As simplified units grow in size, experience, and leadership, they prepare to step into Phase 3, the Church's full program. This is the program that the majority of North American members experience in church nearly every Sunday. Bishops in Phase 3 wards usually have about two hundred leaders and teachers to carry out a majority of the programs and classes described in the *Church Handbook of Instructions*.²⁵

The Program Today. While the simplified program does not receive special attention today, it is still important to the Church. When new Church curriculum programs went into effect in 1995 and 1998, special instructions were included for Phase 1 and Phase 2 units.²⁶

Scriptural Basis for Simplification

The Church has based the simplified program on scripture; for each new principle, instructive scriptural passages are cited in the manuals. For example, the *Priesthood Leader's Guidebook* cites twenty-three passages in its few pages. The *Branch Guidebook* begins with the Savior's promise that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

In addition to its educational uses, scripture also serves as the basis for the simplified program itself. In announcing the basic unit program, the Church issued a pamphlet in 1982 that begins with the following quotations:

And thus did Alma and Amulek go forth, and also many more who had been chosen for the work, to preach the word throughout all the land. And the establishment of the church became general throughout the land, in all the region round about, among all the people of the Nephites. (Alma 16:15)

And now, behold, I say unto you that you shall go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them; and inasmuch as they receive thy teachings thou shalt cause my church to be established among them. (D&C 28:8)

Establishing the Church in new areas requires priesthood leadership. Although in the passage below Joseph Smith does not directly address the issue of leadership, he does counsel missionaries to seek out adults:

And first, it becomes an Elder when he is traveling through the world, warning the inhabitants of the earth to gather together, that they may be built up an holy city unto the Lord, instead of commencing with children, . . . they

should commence their labors with parents, or guardians; and their teachings should be such as are calculated to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of children to the fathers; and no influence should be used with children, contrary to the consent of their parents or guardians; but all such as can be persuaded in a lawful and righteous manner, and with common consent, we should feel it our duty to influence them to gather with the people of God. But otherwise let the responsibility rest upon the heads of parents or guardians.²⁷

The simplified program relies on the strength obtained from converting people who can become leaders locally.

Building the Church and kingdom of God has been the main endeavor of the Lord and his servants through the ages. But in the last days, the Lord seems to follow a particular order that succors those in difficult circumstances:

And also that a feast of fat things might be prepared for the poor; yea, a feast of fat things, of wine on the lees well refined, that the earth may know that the mouths of the prophets shall not fail; Yea, a supper of the house of the Lord, well prepared, unto which all nations shall be invited. First, the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble; And after that cometh the day of my power; then shall the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf, come in unto the marriage of the Lamb, and partake of the supper of the Lord, prepared for the great day to come. Behold, I, the Lord, have spoken it. (D&C 58:8–12)

The phrase “after that cometh the day of my power” is significant because of its promise concerning “the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf.” A reaching out to the downtrodden and less fortunate was apparently anticipated by the Lord. After the Church was established among people who had the necessary resources, the gospel could be more easily spread among those less fortunate. Finding the most efficient means of teaching the gospel and establishing Church units among these people is the essence of the simplified program.

Alma carefully organized his little church into branches of a particular size, an early form of basic Church organization:

And after this manner he did baptize every one that went forth to the place of Mormon; and they were in number about two hundred and four souls; yea, and they were baptized in the waters of Mormon, and were filled with the grace of God. And they were called the church of God, or the church of Christ, from that time forward. And it came to pass that whosoever was baptized by the power and authority of God was added to his church. And it came to pass that Alma, having authority from God, ordained priests; even one priest to every fifty of their number did he ordain to preach unto them, and to teach them concerning the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 18:16–18)

The needs of Alma’s people were unusual, so the Church organization in his day was relatively simple. Alma kept the size of church units to about fifty members. Leaders were priests. Each was commissioned to preach and teach the gospel.

Alma also laid down some policies still applicable to small branches. For instance, a simple correlated curriculum effort is encouraged in Mosiah 18:19: “And he commanded them that they should teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught, and which had been spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets.” In other words, Alma wanted doctrines to be taught as they had been received, without adulteration.

In addition, Alma regulated which doctrines were to be taught initially: “Yea, even he commanded them that they should preach nothing save it were repentance and faith on the Lord, who had redeemed his people” (Mosiah 18:20). Paul and Joseph Smith both taught it was better to keep things simple at first: “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able [to bear it], neither yet now are ye able” (1 Cor. 3:2). “For they cannot bear meat now, but milk they must receive; wherefore, they must not know these things, lest they perish” (D&C 19:22).

Sensitive to the potential difficulties of social proximity in small branches, Alma enjoined members to eliminate contention, be unified, teach each other, and keep the Sabbath day holy:

And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another. And thus he commanded them to preach. And thus they became the children of God. And he commanded them that they should observe the sabbath day, and keep it holy, and also every day they should give thanks to the Lord their God. (Mosiah 18:21–23)

The success of these little branches is shown in the last verse of chapter 18, where we are told the growth reached “in number about four hundred and fifty souls” (Mosiah 18:35).

Personal Experiences and Case Studies

The simplified program lies close to my heart, as I have seen it bless those over whom I have had stewardship. In my younger years, I longed for such a program. I served as a missionary in the Southwest Indian Mission from September 1969 to September 1971. I learned to love the Navajo people and the difficult Navajo language. The people’s gentle, humble ways and slower pace of life were new and interesting to me. Over time, I found that it was relatively easy for the people to understand the foundation principles of the gospel, but it was not so easy to establish the Church in their culture. Institutional complexity seemed to run counter to their ways. The investigators we brought to the baptismal font were sincere, repentant, and ready to make covenants with God. After a few weeks of attending church, however, many of these new Navajo-speaking converts would slowly drift

away and fall back into old habits. They went back to smoking and drinking, almost as if they had never joined the Church in the first place. I felt discouraged and frustrated to see this cycle of inactivity repeated time and again.

The Anglo educators and business people who made up the leadership of many reservation branches spoke only English. Of course, the language difference was a major concern, but an even greater concern was the dearth of Navajo priesthood leaders. We missionaries imagined that Native leaders could eliminate the cultural differences not only by conducting church meetings in their native tongue but also by leading their people and setting an example.

After returning to my home in Canada, I received permission to visit my younger brother in his mission, the Northern Indian Mission, which covered most of Montana as well as North and South Dakota. I wanted to see if he and his fellow missionaries wrestled with similar problems in establishing the Church on the Indian reservations of the northern United States. Though with them for only two days, I could see that they were struggling with many of the same organizational and leadership issues. I wondered if these challenges could ever be met and overcome.

A few months later, I was invited to join the Church Educational System and coordinate the Indian seminary program in Saskatchewan, the breadbasket province of the Canadian prairies. An up-close view of a significant endeavor to establish the Church among Native Canadians was at hand.

The Fort Qu'Appelle Saskatchewan District. I was twenty-seven years old when on March 12, 1978, the Fort Qu'Appelle Saskatchewan District was created in the Canada Winnipeg Mission. It included all of the Native Canadian Indian reserves in the southern part of the province. Only six branches had been organized on those reserves, all of which had previously been part of the South Saskatchewan District. I was called as district president, and two young Native men were called as counselors. I was frightened, as the calling seemed fraught with challenges. Alcoholism rates among Natives in Canada were very high at the time. The resulting personal and familial problems seemed insurmountable. The cross-cultural challenges inherent in efforts to establish the Church among Native people were, from my own experience, obvious.

Our district had few indigenous leaders. When I had first arrived in the Province of Saskatchewan, there were only two Native branches, both part of the South Saskatchewan District. The Carry the Kettle Branch and the Piapot Branch were located on the Indian reserves of the same names in the southern part of Saskatchewan. One Indian man, John Haywahe (fig. 4), served in the branch presidency of the Carry the Kettle Branch. He was the only



Courtesy John P. Livingstone

FIG. 4. Priesthood leaders from the Fort Qu'Appelle Saskatchewan District, the Fort Francis Ontario District, the Winnipeg Manitoba Stake, and the Canada Winnipeg Mission met in 1979 in Winnipeg for training on the basic unit program. *Kneeling*: fifth from left, Ricardo Soto, a Hispanic member of the Regina Lamanite Branch; on the far right, Winnipeg Mission President T. LaVoy Esplin, who succeeded President Howard L. Lund. *Standing, left to right starting with the sixth person*: Gordon Mears, counselor in the Canada Winnipeg Mission presidency; unknown; Earl Stevenson, the first president of the Regina Lamanite Branch; John Haywahe, in the presidency of the Carry the Kettle Branch; Christopher LaFontaine, president of the Fort Qu'Appelle District, then the second president of the Fort Qu'Appelle District, and currently president of the Regina Lamanite Branch; Garry Brittain, counselor in the Fort Qu'Appelle District presidency and later president of the Regina Lamanite Branch; David Sharples, clerk of the Fort Qu'Appelle District; the author, John P. Livingstone, first president of the Fort Qu'Appelle District; and, on the far right, Kenneth L. Cutts, counselor in the Canada Winnipeg Mission presidency.

Native man serving in any leadership position at the time. In branches in the city of Regina, perhaps four or five Natives attended Church regularly.

Full-time missionaries taught seminary lessons to children in homes or in small, improvised church buildings on the Saskatchewan reserves (figs. 5, 6). Senior men on missions with their wives usually served as branch presidents. All the missionaries were new to what Canadians call "First Nations" culture and had a hard time understanding why people did things the way they did. Missionaries were caught off guard by certain customs, such as clasping instead of shaking hands and not looking people in the eye while talking with them. Missionaries were surprised to see women walk down a road several paces behind their husbands. More seriously, the social acceptance of wife beating was incomprehensible to the missionaries.

Courtesy John P. Livingstone



FIG. 5. This converted gasoline station was purchased for the Native branch near the Cote Reserve in eastern Saskatchewan. Small buildings such as this one are often used when branches are just becoming established. Photographed 1978.

trine or principle. Could we get more men into leadership? I marveled that we had so many children involved in the Indian seminary and Indian placement programs and yet so few parents seemed interested in attending church. While these programs were significant for youth, they were not the priesthood quorums the Church needed, nor did they directly contribute to organizing Church units among Native Canadian people. How could we focus more on parents without neglecting the children? How could we help the senior missionary couples understand and assist the people better?

The first meeting with my new counselors was a freewheeling affair with wide-open discussion on how we might organize the district to maximize blessings to local members.

Although the missionaries truly loved the people, they had difficulty relating to the personal and familial problems of reserve members. Most Native members spoke English well, so in this case language was not an issue. But the lack of indigenous, local priesthood leaders was as serious a drawback as it had been among Natives in Arizona and Montana.

Faced with these circumstances, I wrestled during the days prior to our first presidency meeting with the problem of how we might make church meetings more attractive to Native people without compromising doctrine or principle.



Courtesy John P. Livingstone

FIG. 6. Small trailer chapels such as this one near the File Hills Reserves in Saskatchewan give small branches their own building. Photographed 1978.



Courtesy John P. Livingstone

FIG. 7. Members gather for a conference of the Fort Qu'Appelle District in 1978. On the front row are K. C. Thomson, left, and Beatrice Thomson, right, with a cousin sitting between them. Welfare services missionaries sit in the row behind them.

My counselors expressed their mixed feelings about the Indian placement program and Indian seminary as well as the inferiority many Natives felt in their minority status. They commented on the need to provide specific training for various aspects of leadership for men and on how to use the people's practical knowledge and ability to improve difficult situations. A feeling of unity evolved during the presidency meeting, and I felt that we were ready to serve although we were clearly in need of additional direction and guidance.

We planned our first district conference, unsure if many would come. We were touched and exhilarated when close to two hundred attended. Talks focused on strengthening the individual, the family, and the Church. We felt the strength of these Native people. Besides the missionaries and my family, only one other non-Native belonged to the district—the district clerk. (See fig. 7 for a photograph of one of the district conferences.)

Canada Winnipeg Mission President Howard L. Lund was concerned about having called us, young as we were, to the district presidency. He began to scout for materials and programs from Church headquarters that might be of value to the district. Only a few months passed before President Lund introduced us to Stewart A. Durrant, secretary to the Church Lamanite Committee. Durrant presented us with material and ideas that we felt were inspiringly revolutionary.

Durrant described a program that had been developed and approved by general Church leadership and was then called the basic unit program. Still in its infancy, the program was a simplified version of organization, manuals, and reports that would allow inexperienced priesthood leaders and members to function at a pace and level that were more comfortable and appropriate to their situation. He showed us a series of pamphlet-style guidebooks that outlined how a family, a group, or a small branch could administer the Church in a way that was reduced and streamlined compared to established wards and stakes. The guidebooks prescribed basics that were simple enough for a person with little or no Church experience to grasp. For example, the materials taught leaders how to conduct a meeting, how to prepare an agenda, and how to call someone to a Church position. The program was strikingly practical.

As a district presidency, we were thrilled. Each of us agreed that the basic unit program was an answer to our prayers and exactly what we needed. We could now establish the Church among these First Nations peoples. They would now have their own leaders holding priesthood keys to use on behalf of their own people.

A wonderful opportunity to put the program into place existed among Natives in Regina due to the presence of a faithful Native brother. Earl Stevenson (see fig. 4) was in his early sixties and worked as a custodian at the post office building in Regina. He had attended church regularly for many years, usually sitting by himself or with his son, whom he was raising alone. He was at that time quietly serving in the Sunday School superintendency of the Regina First Branch, where he carried out his duties with a singular dignity. Earl's spiritual strength and love for his people qualified him to lead.

In our youthful enthusiasm, we recommended to the mission president that we immediately organize a Lamanite branch in Regina, the capital city of the Province of Saskatchewan. While only a handful of First Nations people actually came to church in Regina, we felt that if an indigenous branch president were called and a unit organized according to the basic unit program, the people themselves would see this as their branch run by their leaders. We were aware of the risk that such a move might foster a unit built solely upon social or cultural factors rather than testimony and priesthood keys, but the potential for growth through such ownership outweighed that risk. We hoped that our sensitivity to possible problems would enable us to minimize them.

We called Earl as president of the new Regina Lamanite Branch, a Phase 1 unit since a sole experienced priesthood holder cannot run a full-program ward by himself. A few more than a handful of Native people were there the first Sunday. Next time there were more. Within a year, over one

hundred people were seated in the Native branch each Sunday. While the communication of the Spirit knows no cultural barriers, the Natives' ability to participate comfortably in Church programs had sometimes been hindered by cultural obstacles. With President Stevenson and other Natives leading the branch, those obstacles seemed to be removed. The youthful counselors learned leadership skills by watching and listening to what he had to say in their branch presidency and other meetings.

President Stevenson could say things to the members that other, non-local leaders could not: "You people need to teach your children to be reverent at home. Then they will be reverent here!" I swallowed hard when I heard him being so direct, but he was right. Everyone knew he was right and loved him for his directness. When he asked members to serve in a calling or to perform some duty, they felt it was a request directly from God, not just from Earl Stevenson.

As attendance rose, tithing faithfulness climbed. In short order, this fledgling branch became the most effective Native Canadian or American Indian branch I had ever seen. The simplified program allowed President Earl Stevenson to serve his people as they had never before been served.

I was district president for only one year. In response to the Church's guidelines that minority units should have minority leadership,²⁸ a Native

man who was my first counselor, Christopher J. C. LaFontaine (see fig. 4), was then called as the district president. President LaFontaine understood the challenges of Church leadership and now had a foundation in Church government gained from the simplified manuals and guidebooks as well as his own leadership experience. Even though he had been a member only three years, he was fully able to handle all aspects of the district and was able to interact with neighboring stake leaders on all matters of business affecting the district.

By the time I was transferred from Saskatchewan, there were nine active Melchizedek Priesthood holders in the district and several others holding the lesser priesthood. Average attendance had risen to over 30 percent of the potential (fig. 8); the increase seemed



Courtesy John p. Livingstone

FIG. 8. Cynthia Thomson, 1979, from the Carry the Kettle (Assinaboine) Reserve in southern Saskatchewan, participated faithfully in Indian seminary.

considerable to us, since the rate was less than 10 percent when we were called. Tithing faithfulness resulted in donations that were over ten times what they had been when the district was organized. The district has used the simplified program in its branches to this day. I was grateful for the opportunity to become acquainted with the program, for I would have another experience in its implementation years later.

The Detroit Michigan District. In 1995, I was called as president of the Michigan Detroit Mission. There were nine branches in inner-city Detroit, where the population is primarily African American. The Bloomfield Hills Michigan Stake had seven of these minority branches, and the Westland Michigan Stake had two. Here, as in Regina twenty years earlier, most of the leadership was not indigenous. Men from the suburbs served as branch presidents in several city branches, and stake high councilors were assigned to supervise and visit the branches on their regular monthly rotation. Stake priesthood and auxiliary leaders did their best to include branch members in stake programs and activities. From the Bloomfield Hills Stake, a “sister ward” was assigned to each branch. The sister wards helped with rides to church meetings, home teaching appointments, and branch activities.

Although stake leaders did all they could to be helpful, most were unfamiliar with inner-city life. They recognized that minority priesthood leaders would be better able to assist members and conduct Church affairs in a manner appropriate to local circumstances. We in the mission presidency concurred and implemented strategies to increase the number of men contacted and converted by missionaries. All missionary elders were encouraged to avoid teaching single women alone in their homes. The elders were instructed to ask these women if they knew of a man who would listen to the gospel message with them. Missionaries were also asked to seek out men who would listen to the discussions—especially those who were married and who had jobs and cars. We wanted them to find stable men who could be called as priesthood leaders, help with transportation to church, and portray good examples of family life.

As in Regina, the creation of a new district was instrumental in establishing the Church among a people. Elder Donald L. Staheli of the North America Northeast Area Presidency created the Detroit Michigan District on Saturday, August 23, 1997. This district covered all of the city of Detroit, pulling nine minority branches into one district. The boundaries of the new district, Eight Mile Road to the north and Telegraph Road to the west, are recognized as distinct racial borders as well.

Meeting with Elder Staheli, my counselors and I outlined our ideas regarding the use of indigenous priesthood leaders. We also indicated our

desire to have the new district implement the Phase 1 and Phase 2 program. Elder Staheli was receptive to these suggestions, and the resulting organization was a district presidency with a nonlocal district president and two counselors from the inner-city area. Elder Staheli felt impressed that the district needed the guidance that an experienced nonlocal district president could provide: this leader's term could be shorter than normal but long enough to adequately train an indigenous successor.

The next day, Gordon Creer, a commercial real-estate salesman and member of the Bloomfield Hills Stake, was sustained as the first president of the Detroit district. Laménais Louis, an auto worker originally from Haiti, and Solomon Bills, a Detroit City policeman and former branch president of the Belle Isle Branch on the east side of the city, were called as counselors.

Initially, some members of the new district were concerned that the district was created on a racial rather than geographical basis. But in time it became obvious to local members that the branches belonged together geographically, making it possible for local members to serve as leaders. Within five months, all branches but one were presided over by local members.

Some district members were apprehensive about breaking their ties with the outlying stakes. For example, leaders worried that, without the rides provided by the sister wards, some branch members would not make it to church meetings. However, such fears were short-lived. Members continued to attend because many members with automobiles began to pick up fellow branch members for church.

On May 28, 2000, less than three years after the district's creation, President Creer was released, and President Laménais Louis became the first Black district president in Detroit. Laménais Louis did not join the Church until 1994, though his wife, Suzette, had listened to the missionaries and joined seven years earlier. He had been active in Solomon's Temple, a large congregation of the Apostolic Church, but he finally followed his wife into the LDS Church. Not long after baptism, Laménais began to receive callings, including one to serve in the branch presidency under M. W. Keil. As a counselor, Laménais learned to conduct meetings and issue callings and releases. The Louises were sealed in the Toronto Temple a year after Laménais's baptism. Just two years later, Laménais was called as a counselor to President Creer. Because of the simplified organization used in the district, President Louis was able to take on heavy responsibility early in his Church membership. In 1999 the Louises attended the dedication of the Detroit Michigan Temple with their son Gregoire W. Eugene-Louis (plate 1). Shortly afterward, Gregoire was one of the first three individuals (all of whom were preparing to leave for missions) to receive their endowments in the newly dedicated temple.

Courtesy John P. Livingstone



FIG. 9. Sister Valerie Orr, her daughters, and her grandchildren, from the New Center Branch in Detroit, visit with other members and missionaries at a district social in October 1998. Because the demands of running Church programs are reduced under the simplified organization, members are able to spend more time assisting each other with the daily challenges of raising families.

President Louis's story is not unique. I saw many local members (figs. 9, 10, 11) take control of their branches and serve as leaders and teachers. With a simplified organization and curriculum, these members did not have to spend much time learning to run the programs of the Church. Furthermore, the local leaders counseled about dealing with shootings, physical attacks, drug abuse, and other such topics. Teachers' lessons reflected the reality that a majority of Detroit households are headed by single mothers. Single mothers helped each other struggle to raise children in the Church without alienating the children from their fathers. Branch members understood the temptation a woman faced when a former lover returned and also understood the ramifications of inner-city poverty.

As these Saints taught the doctrines of the Church to each other, their attitudes about their circumstances changed. They learned they could follow a budget and pay their tithing. Aided by teachers and friends, they were no longer overwhelmed with teaching righteous values to their children.

One new convert I admired was particularly enthusiastic about her membership. But the first thing I noticed about Leticia* was her missing

*Name has been changed.

front teeth. She said that her abusive ex-husband knocked them out and that the missing teeth and extra weight she put on were useful deterrents to the sexual predators who were prevalent in her neighborhood. When the missionaries knocked on her door, Leticia was fixing up an abandoned house; she had been given a quit claim on the property. The water, power, and gas had been turned off and would not be restored until the house was brought up to city code. The missionaries were awed by this single mother who took hammer and crowbar to the walls of her house and replaced the plaster and lathe with new insulation and drywall.

Leticia had moved from Ohio (where she lost her teeth) into the Hamtramck area of Detroit. She had raised her five children to stay out of trouble, and four of them were doing just that. Her firm hand and stern voice did not have the desired effect on one of her sons, and his misbehavior had cost Leticia her home-based business in Ohio. Detroit had looked like greener pasture.

Leticia was captivated by the message delivered by the elders. She admired those young white men, who called themselves missionaries of the Lord and freely rode bikes in places even the Detroit police feared to tread.²⁹ If they could take such effort, paying their own way, to come to her, surely she could come to the Lord with the same effort and faith. As she studied the scriptures and met with the missionaries, the truth of the gospel struck her with increasing force, and she enthusiastically received baptism. When she found the members struggling to sustain the branch, she wanted to help. The simpleness of the program made it easy for Leticia to contribute in significant ways, such as teaching Relief Society and Primary lessons. Soon she was serving in leadership positions in those organizations. The more she



Courtesy John P. Livingstone

FIG. 10. Michelle Isaac (left) and Faye Knox, both from the Palmer Park Branch in Detroit, share a moment together at a district social in 1998. Sisters in small branches become very close as they help each other and serve the Lord.



Courtesy John P. Livingstone

FIG. 11. While of predominantly Black membership, the Detroit River Branch has several Hispanic members. Victorio Cisneros, from Mexico, and his wife, Maria, with their daughter and granddaughter, attend a district social in October 1998.

served, the better she felt, and before long, Leticia was one of the branch's stalwarts. Leticia's countenance changed; she now radiates a new softness and dignified confidence. She has a vision of where she is going and why. She wants more than the appearance of living the gospel; she wants to really live it. She wants her children to live it. One by one, they have begun to listen to their mother's encouraging words. Her older sons are still skeptical, but Leticia persists. "Three down, two to go," she says.

Membership in the Church brought Leticia unexpected benefits. A priesthood leader's referral resulted in new employment. A dentist in a neighboring stake was asked to help district members with their dental needs. He responded with enthusiasm and kindness, and Leticia has front teeth again. But she is still working on the house.

Conclusion

North American Church units are currently the leadership, finance, and missionary engines of the Church. Truly, the Book of Mormon

reminds us, North America has been a choice land, blessed by the Lord to be a sort of neonatal incubator for his fledgling kingdom. However, in many ways, the Church of Joseph Smith's day or Brigham Young's day or even Heber J. Grant's day was significantly different from the Phase 3 program we enjoy today.³⁰

Even so, it seems only natural that missionaries and expatriate members from Phase 3 wards would try to organize Church units in challenging cultures and developing countries by following the pattern with which these members are so familiar. Perhaps they want to share the happiness and success they have experienced. But rather than trying to customize the Phase 3 organization and curriculum for special circumstances, seasoned members can apply the approved, Church-correlated simplified program. Members and missionaries familiar with the Phase 1 and Phase 2 program are in a better position to assist in the establishment of the Church both at home and abroad. And a new unit's dependency upon missionary couples, expatriates, or a lone experienced member can be greatly alleviated by following the approved Phase 1 and Phase 2 program.

Starting simply and then building on that foundation can greatly reduce the time required for new members and leaders to learn the system and their place in it (fig. 12), for learning comes more naturally than it does through a premature imposition of a Phase 3 model. And under the direction of area or mission leadership, new members and recently converted priesthood leaders need not shoulder responsibilities greater than those appropriate to local circumstances.

The success in the Detroit Michigan District offers dramatic evidence of the wisdom and power of gradually growing toward ecclesiastical maturity via the simplified program of the Church. In 1980, President Spencer W. Kimball noted that "the basic unit program has been developed to assist where there are special language or cultural needs. . . . Couples can be trained in the basic unit program and can then assist in establishing the Church among all people in all lands." He urged "priesthood leaders to become familiar with this program and use it to bless people." His support of the simplified Church organization and materials was based on the positive results of their use. "Where the program is being used as outlined," he reported, "we are meeting with *great* success."³¹ Indeed, the Church program of multiple phases seems to be a fulfillment of the Lord's promise, "Behold, I will hasten my work in its time" (D&C 88:73).



Courtesy John P. Livingstone

FIG. 12. In the simplified program, new members are able to quickly assume positions of leadership. Here Fred Spotted Bull, center, a member from the Blood band near Cardston, Alberta, makes a comment in a small-unit leadership meeting in 1980.

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1. For further exploration of these issues in an Australian context, see Marjorie Newton, “‘Almost Like Us’: The American Socialization of Australian Converts,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24 (fall 1991): 9–20.

2. Marion G. Romney, “The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance,” *Ensign* 12 (November 1982): 91. Sometimes the situation is complicated. For example, an article on the Church in Ukraine quotes a mission president who felt that “the best thing that can happen is for the Americans to get out so it can be seen as a Ukrainian church.” But a Ukrainian woman quoted in the same article expressed her feeling that “when the [North American] missionaries are there, I feel the Holy Spirit. When they are not, I don’t. Church leadership should have been left in the hands of the missionaries—it was given away too soon!” Tania Rands, “Mormonism in a Post-Soviet Society: Notes from Ukraine,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30 (spring 1997): 82, 85.

3. See Doctrine and Covenants 3:18–20; 10:48; 28:8, 18; and Max H. Parkin, “Lamanite Mission of 1830–1831,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:802–4.

4. President Young advised:

I do not know that you have hitherto met with any difficulty from the Indians on your journey. You have heard of Indian hostilities against the whites on the western route, but you will have no trouble with them if you will do right. I have always told the travelling public that it is much cheaper to feed the Indians than to fight them. Give them a little bread and meat, a little sugar, a little tobacco, or a little of anything you have which will conciliate their feelings and make them your friends. It is better to do this than to make them your enemies. By pursuing this policy you may escape all trouble from that quarter, while you are journeying on the Pacific slope. (Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86], 10:231–32, July 8, 1863)

5. Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), 237; Francis M. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball: Resolute Disciple, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 160–61. Elder Kimball described the meeting:

Then one morning in 1946, the Prophet of the Lord called me into his office and asked me to give leadership to a committee of the brethren to see that the gospel was carried to all the children of Lehi, not only to those close by but to those all over the world, including the isles of the sea. An hour or two later, as the Presidency and Council of the Twelve sat in regular session in the temple, the President of the Church referred to it again: “The church is so large now,” he said, “our missionary field is extending, too. It is not just Europe and the United States, but other parts of the world. . . . I was talking with one of the brethren this morning in regard to the Indians, and I feel that the work of disseminating the gospel among the Indians is one of the most important things we have to do—not only to the Indians close to us, but all over the world, in the islands of the sea, and elsewhere. That is going to take more time than it has taken before. We must find people who are willing to go and make the sacrifice.” (Excerpts from remarks of President George Albert Smith in meeting with Council of the Twelve and Presidency, September 13, 1946, in Spencer W. Kimball, “Lamanite Prophecies Fulfilled,” *Speeches of the Year* [Provo, Utah: Extension Publications, Brigham Young University, April 13, 1965], 4)

6. The committee was called by several other names, among them Indian Committee, Lamanite Committee, Lamanite and Minority Committee, and Minorities Committee. Several General Authorities served as coordinators until January 1962, when Dean L. Larsen became the secretary to the Indian Committee. He served until August 1, 1966, when Stewart A. Durrant was called. In 1968, Brother Durrant’s title was changed to Coordinator of Lamanites and Other Cultures. On February 2, 1971, the entire committee was released and coordination of efforts among Natives fell to LDS Social Services. In 1973 responsibility was shifted to the office of the Council of the Twelve; in July 1975, the Melchizedek Priesthood Department took responsibility for Lamanites and other minority cultures in America. Elders LeGrand Richards and Boyd K. Packer became advisers in May 1976. Stewart A. Durrant, James Moyle Oral History Program, interview conducted by Richard L. Jensen, June 8, 1983, 29, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

7. Stewart A. Durrant, “Brief History of Indian Committee and Related Programs,” typescript, no date, copy in author’s possession.

8. Church leaders were concerned with the education and the development of more than American Indians:

Not only the southwest Indians, but Lamanites in general, are facing an open door to education, culture, refinement, progress, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church has spent its millions in Hawaii and New Zealand and other islands to provide schools for the young Lehites. Surely, no descendants need go now without an education, and schools in Mexico will be followed by schools in other nations. Surely the number of deprived ones is being reduced, and opportunity is knocking at their door. Hundreds of Lamanites are serving in mission fields in both Americas and in the islands of the sea. Lamanites are exercising their priesthood and rearing their families in righteousness. A new world is open to them, and they are grasping the opportunities. God bless the Lamanites and hasten the day of their total emancipation from the thralldom of their yesterday. (Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982], 618–19)

For more on the Indian seminary program, the special curriculum developed for Native American students kindergarten through high school and designed as a supplement to their regular school day in public school, see William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988). For more on the Indian student placement services, which places Native students with Latter-day Saint host families during the school year, see Genevieve de Hoyos, "Indian Student Placement Services," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:679–80.

9. Durrant, oral history interview, 29.

10. Elder David B. Haight, Memorandum to Stewart A. Durrant, June 4, 1975; copy in author's possession.

11. Stewart A. Durrant was given the minutes of this meeting and other meetings on this subject that followed, which he later shared in an interview. Durrant, oral history interview, 29.

12. As quoted in Durrant, oral history interview, 30.

13. Durrant, oral history interview, 31.

14. On June 16, 1977, the Council of the Twelve determined the following organizational procedures:

PROCEDURE FOR ESTABLISHING SMALL UNITS: The Minorities Committee presented the proposed procedure for establishing groups or small branches in stakes and/or missions which must be approved by the Area Supervisor and Regional Representative. This proposal has Correlation's approval. This document will be presented to Zone Advisors and Area Supervisors in a special training meeting on June 25. (Council of the Twelve Minutes, as cited in Durrant, oral history interview, 31)

15. For example, President Kimball said, "Many challenges face all of us as we fellowship and teach the gospel to the cultural and minority groups living in our midst. . . . When special attention of some kind is not provided for these people, we lose them." "Aid Minorities, Pres. Kimball Asks Leaders," *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, October 11, 1980, 4.

16. Josiah W. Douglas, interview with John P. Livingstone, September 30, 1998, Salt Lake City, copy in author's possession.

17. *The Deseret News 1974 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1974), 158–75.

18. *The Deseret News 1989–1990 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1988), 232–46.

19. Durrant, oral history interview, 31.

20. A keyword search for *basic program* in the computers of the Church History Library lists fourteen versions by 1985: the English version and thirteen translations (Spanish, Chinese, Danish, Finnish, French, Hmong, Italian, Norwegian, Samoan, Swedish, Tongan, Vietnamese, and Cambodian).

At this same time period (late 1970s through 1980s), the Church produced simplified hymn accompaniments, easing the burden of pianists and organists with limited musical experience. See Messages to Stake/Mission/District Presidents/Bishops and Branch Presidents from Church Headquarters, no. 34 (May 25, 1979), copy in Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. Such modifications are evidence of the Church's desire to make many aspects of the Church program accessible to more people.

21. *Basic Unit Program* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 1. Language and cultural differences are not necessarily determined by nationality or ethnicity. As Stewart A. Durrant pointed out, other factors can contribute to differences in culture: "I just last week returned from a deaf conference," he said, "where probably 500 people were gathered together in Southern California, because that culture, the deaf culture[,] loves to be together. That is a separate, distinct culture, even though it's not a nationality." Durrant, oral history interview, 17.

22. *Branch Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993), 1.

23. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979); *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood: Basic Manual for Priesthood Holders*, Parts A and B (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979); *The Latter-day Saint Woman: Basic Manual for Women*, Parts A and B (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979); *Walk in His Ways: Basic Children's Manual*, Parts A and B (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979). For an example of matching curriculum to Native culture, see Jessie L. Embry, "Lamanite Relief Societies: The Relief Society and Its Relationship with Native Americans" (paper presented at the sesquicentennial Relief Society celebration, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1992).

24. *Family Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977); *Branch Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977); *Priesthood Leader's Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977); *Teaching Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994).

25. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Church Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 1998). The *Church Handbook of Instructions* is printed in two parts: Book 1 is addressed to stake presidents and bishoprics; Book 2 is addressed to priesthood and auxiliary leaders.

26. Julie A. Dockstader, "Strengthening the Work of the Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society," *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, November 1, 1997, 8–9, 12.

27. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 2:262.

28. In his article "Taking the Church Anywhere," Marvin K. Gardner reported that the First Presidency's letter of October 10, 1980, was accompanied by these instructions: "Do not use Anglo leadership in minority units." *Ensign* 11 (June 1981): 44.

29. This statement is attributed to Officer Knox, president of the Palmer Park Branch, Detroit Michigan District.

30. See, for example, William G. Hartley, "Common People: Church Activity during the Brigham Young Era," in *Nearly Everything Imaginable*, ed. Ronald W. Walker and Doris R. Dant (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 249–95.

31. Spencer W. Kimball, "Ministering to the Needs of Members," *Ensign* 10 (November 1980): 46; italics in original. The availability of Spanish-language basic unit curriculum materials was announced in a Church bulletin in November 1980. "Materials Management," *Bulletin*, no. 5 (November 1980): [4], LDS Church Archives. For discussions on how the plan was implemented in Spanish and Asian-American cultures, see Jessie L. Embry, "*In His Own Language*": *Mormon Spanish Speaking Congregations* (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1997), 63; and Jessie L. Embry, *Asian American Mormons: Bridging Cultures* (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, 1999), 68.



PLATE 1. Laménais Louis, president of the Detroit Michigan District; his wife, Suzette; and son Gregoire at the dedication of the Detroit Michigan Temple, October 1999. Courtesy *LDS Church News/Deseret News*.