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LDS Ethnic Wards and Branches in the United States: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Language Congregations

Jessie L. Embry

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s Esmeralda Meraz's parents moved from Mexico to Southern California, seeking better economic possibilities. They moved back and forth between the two countries, finally settling south of San Diego. Her father was a Mormon; her mother converted to the Church. They became leaders in their Spanish-speaking branch. As Meraz (1991) explained, "Though my dad speaks English, he has not mastered the English language and he can't communicate very well. . . . My mom has had less schooling than he has" and could say only a few words in English. When asked what she would do if there were no Spanish-speaking branch, Esmeralda's mother pleaded in Spanish, "Please don't make me go to the English ward." She continued, "I think it would be a step backward for me. I like to be helping, working in the Church" (5).

Yet there were disadvantages to the branch. Esmeralda Meraz went from a fully functional ward in Mexico to a Spanish-speaking branch in California. "It was kind of discouraging to see only ten people . . . in the meetings. It was also discouraging not to see any youth. We [she and her three sisters and one brother] were the only kids that were attending church." It was difficult to operate Primary and Young Women's. Meraz continued, "We always had a feeling of not being complete and of not having everyone there that needed to be there to make it a successful experience for us every Sunday" (5, 10).

But integration was not always the answer. Meraz went to seminary with English-speaking students. She complained that the teenagers there "saw me as a different person. . . . They would make remarks and say things that didn't make me feel very good and didn't make me feel like I belonged." She liked going to the branch because "they were not going to make a reference to my skin color or the fact that [she is] Mexican" (9-10).

The Meraz family is a classic example of why The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had a roller-coaster view of sponsoring ethnic congregations in the United States. What works for one person does not work for another.

LDS CHURCH POLICY TOWARDS ETHNIC CONGREGATIONS

Over the years, LDS Church policy toward ethnic congregations in the United States has varied. Sometimes the Church encouraged the formation of language wards and branches where members could hold meetings in their native tongues. Other times such specialized wards have been disbanded. These plans operated from mutually exclusive premises. Both met some needs of ethnic members and failed to meet others. Integration into multicultural, multilingual units was based on the ideal—and idealized—philosophy that gospel unity produces social unity. But the contrasting philosophy of ethnic independence recognized language

disabilities" (Embry 1992, 84; Florence 1992, 36).

Separate congregations have always existed in the Church at least to some degree. In 1849 Welsh immigrants met as a group in Salt Lake City, although some of their activities were in English. In 1852 Danish and German immigrants held meetings in their native languages. It is not clear whether these meetings were officially church sanctioned, but later organizations were. For example, in 1860 Brigham Young called Karl G. Maeser to preside over the German meetings. In 1877 all the non-English branches became part of the Salt Lake Stake. Ethnic congregations continued in Salt Lake until World War I, and again until World War II when they were all shut down except for the Mexican branch in Salt Lake City (Jensen 1987, 276–81).

In 1952, Church leaders organized a regional mission to convert non-English-speaking members in the Salt Lake Valley, believing that it was easier to convert immigrants than to travel to foreign countries. The newly created mission was the motivation to re-create language Sunday Schools. Then in 1962 and 1963, Apostles Spencer W. Kimball and Mark E. Petersen organized a branch for members speaking each of the following languages: Japanese, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Danish; they also organized a second Spanish (Cumorah) branch and two Native American branches. There were also French, Mandarin, and Cantonese Sunday Schools. Each branch became part of an organized stake (*Church News*, 21 April 1962, 7; Jensen 1987, 287–88).

While these branches helped the ethnic members feel at home in the Church, it meant a separation and different treatment from their neighbors and other Mormons. Apostles disagreed whether separate language congregations or integrated wards best met the needs of all members. The apparent uneasiness with a mixed policy kept the seesaw going

back and forth in an effort to find a one-policy-fits-all solution.

The existence of separate missions to proselyte nonmembers in Utah and other parts of the United States raised the same questions. Some members of Apostle Spencer W. Kimball's Indian and Minority Group Committee, composed of other apostles and some church members, felt that separate branches encouraged segregation. They argued that people from different cultures needed to meet and know each other as individuals and therefore that integrated congregations were best. Others felt integrated wards had a poor record of keeping ethnic minorities fully involved and growing.

Following established procedure, Kimball rarely mentioned what happened in meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve in his journal. However, he broke with that tradition on 3 February 1966 to express his deep misgivings about attempts to eliminate the ethnic branches and the language missions. He wrote:

"Among others was the matter of the possible integration of the minority group branches with the Anglo branches and the possible combination . . . of the missions, doing away with the Spanish-speaking missions in the United States. . . . I vigorously protested and while several of the brethren seemed to feel the other way would be better, I was so vigorous in my protestation that the President did not take a vote on it but asked us to return with the matter next week." He continued, "While it would be easier, more adaptable to administration, I feel sure we would lose ground and many of our members and cease to grow as fast as we have done" (1966).

Despite Kimball's resistance, administrative changes were made in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the ethnic congregations in Salt Lake City were active members of stakes and stake missionaries could talk to nonmembers, the Salt Lake Regional Mission was closed in 1967. While the Salt Lake ethnic branches continued to

operate, the General Authorities stopped organizing new ethnic congregations and even disbanded some. In a 1972 letter to all stakes, wards, and branches, the general leaders asked all local leaders and members to be conscious of "racial, language, or cultural groups." Where there were language barriers, the congregations should organize special classes. If there were sufficient need, a stake president could ask for permission to organize a branch, but its boundaries had to match those of the stake. Some stake leaders, including those in Oakland, California, thought that the letter was asking them to dissolve their ethnic congregations. Others, including the leaders in the Los Angeles Stake, interpreted the letter as authorization to create language branches, but when stake leaders requested permission to do so in the 1970s the General Authorities refused (Larsen and Larsen 1987, 55; Orton 1987, 262–63).

However, the pendulum swung back. By 1977, the General Authorities realized they were not meeting all the needs of ethnic members. Small branches, especially those on Indian reservations, were unable to fully staff themselves. In response, General Authorities approved a Basic Unit plan which identified "essential" church programs for small congregations. Stakes used this simplified plan to set up ethnic branches. In explaining the need for these units, Spencer W. Kimball, then Church President, told Regional Representatives at a seminar in 1980, "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" (*Church News*, 11 October 1980, 4).

Despite periods of intense misgivings about foreign language congregations in the United States, LDS Church leaders have never completely eliminated them. During the 1990s the numbers have grown. In 1996 there were over four

hundred congregations in the United States operating in a language other than English; two-thirds were Spanish-speaking.

How do ethnic members feel about the language wards and branches? As the Meraz example has already pointed out, reactions are mixed. Whatever the nationality, there are Mormons who want to worship with people who share language and culture and others who want to intermix with the larger American culture. Leaders also worry that ethnic congregations do not reach people like Esmeralda Meraz, the second generation. The history of two congregations—one Spanish-speaking and one Asian—in Provo, Utah, show some of the dilemmas.

SPANISH-SPEAKING CONGREGATIONS IN PROVO, UTAH

A Mexican branch was organized in Provo in 1960. Enoc Q. Flores, a Mexican American from the Mormon colonies in Mexico, came to Provo in 1964 after serving a mission. He remembered then there was a small Spanish branch in Provo with fewer than fifty members. He worked as the ward clerk and a counselor in the branch presidency. "I went through all the organizations. . . . Almost everything that you can imagine I had the opportunity of doing there because there were not a lot of us" (1991, 6–7).

Flores eventually left the branch to attend a geographical ward. In 1981 when the Spanish branch became a ward, he was asked to return as the second bishop. He recalled, "It was a great experience to see the development and the growth that the people had done. They were mostly new people because the ward was used as a spring board or as an entry into the Church. Once the people learned the language they would move into the different wards" (6–7).

In 1991 a Spanish-speaking ward met in a chapel at 800 North and 500 West in

Provo. The ward was so large that at a missionary farewell, the congregation overflowed from the chapel to the back of the cultural hall. Ricardo Diaz, a Mexican American BYU student, was attending the ward then. He explained, "The 33rd ward is the best ward that I've ever been to . . . because it is fully active." The ward sponsored two or three activities a week. There were so many members that they were "just asking for jobs." In addition to all the members, there were often visitors who came consistently but left their memberships in geographical wards (1991, 24).

George I. Monsivais, a Mexican American and a research analyst for the Research Division of the Correlation Department of the LDS Church, listed some reasons LDS Latino Americans preferred separate congregations: to hear the gospel in the language of their hearts; to participate in classes, meetings, and callings without embarrassment or concern over English language ability; for children to see their Spanish-speaking parents participate in classes and meetings and function in callings in their wards and stakes; to receive training in the language in which they are most comfortable; to have interviews conducted without the need of a translator; and to have Church-centered associations with individuals who share a common language and cultural heritage (1996, 15).

The Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University collected 94 interviews with Spanish-speaking Mormons. Fifty-two lived in Provo and 34 were BYU students. Of the 79 cases where branch/ward membership could be determined, 55 percent attended ethnic congregations. Of those whose views could be determined, 67 percent (45 of 67) reported positive experiences. Only 5 said that they had negative feelings about ethnic congregations, 17 said they had mixed reactions. Those who expressed concerns complained that the members did not work on learning

the predominate language and culture. While the members shared a common language, their culture was not always the same. A Native American from Peru and an immigrant from Spain, to cite two extreme examples, have very different cultures. While many interviewees enjoyed the mix, others complained about cultural misunderstandings (Embry 1997, 67, 77, 91–100).

ASIAN CONGREGATIONS IN PROVO, UTAH

During the 1970s, Church leaders organized a branch for all Asian international students at Brigham Young University. Since members spoke so many languages, sacrament meetings were in English with Sunday School classes in Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese. When Southeast Asian refugees started arriving in the late 1970s, the branch added a Vietnamese Sunday School class (Embry 1999, 78–81).

Unlike other BYU wards and branches, the Asian branch combined married and single students. It also did not require members to be BYU students, so Asians from throughout Utah Valley attended. In 1994, Honam Rhee, a Korean professor at BYU, served as bishop. While he believed that Koreans moving to the United States needed to "get into the mainstream" of American life, he felt that the ward provided an essential "bridge" in learning the American culture. It also helped some members who were not immigrants but who planned to return to their home country after completing their education (1994, 15).

Jennifer Chenn, a BYU student who grew up in the United States, remembered attending the combined branch. Coming from BYU single wards, she felt "It was so nice to be around a family ward again" (1994, 11–12). Ying Yuet (Jane) Liu, a BYU student from Hong Kong, also liked attending the combined Asian congregation. "This Asian ward

used to be a huge ward, a family ward with kids, old people, students, and any kind of people. We felt like we were a family." She felt, however, that "it was just too big, so it was hard to get to know people" (1994, 12–13).

BYU student Helen Lai Fong Chan, who grew up in Singapore and joined the Church when she was in junior high school, was newly married and complained it was hard in the Asian ward to relate to couples with children while "the singles . . . were not interested in speaking to [those] who were just married" (1994, 9–10).

In 1995 Church leaders split the Provo Asian congregation into a ward and a BYU student branch. Both continued to combine Asian groups and operated much like the earlier congregation.

According to Arien Hamblin, who conducted interviews for the Redd Center, more than 120 attended the Asian singles branch every week; branch members were from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Singapore. About ten European American returned missionaries came regularly. Since most members attended Brigham Young University or Utah Valley State College, everyone spoke some English. Sacrament meetings were in that language.

Sunday School classes were in Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. The Relief Society was in English, although women tended to sit with their own ethnic group. Ying Yuet (Jane) Liu enjoyed the new branch: "It is just like a college ward. I feel like we are really strong. We are really united" (1994, 12–13). Activities included a Chinese New Year's celebration and other parties. Some interviewees, however, said they did not attend the parties very often because they spent all their out-of-class time studying.

Most members of the Asian ward came from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. A few members were from mainland China who were married BYU students, baptized in the United States, and some were European Americans who

were married to Asians. Sacrament meetings held in English were sometimes turbulent with children running in the aisles during the talks. Sunday School classes were held in Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, and English. Most of the European Americans attended the English class. Native speakers—men and women—taught the rest of the classes.

The Relief Society met together except on the first Sunday of the month, when the women split into language groups. Most Japanese and Chinese women could speak English, but most Korean women could not. Jessica Kwan, a Korean who was adopted by an American family as a preteen and grew up in the United States, explained, "I've never liked the Asian wards." As a single BYU student, she attended a student ward and reluctantly began attending the Provo Asian ward after she married a Korean. "What I didn't like is it doesn't seem like it is one. Everybody speaks all these different languages. Korean people get to know Koreans. The Japanese know Japanese, and the Chinese Chinese." She taught Relief Society and felt frustrated by the hubbub. Some of the chatter was translation, but others "don't even care about the person who is in the front" (1994, 18).

At the Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium on 7 April 2000, I learned that the Asian ward had been dissolved and a Chinese ward for students, local residents, and anyone interested in the Chinese language had been formed. The ward still combined Cantonese and Mandarin. A combined Cambodian and Laotian branch had also been created. While the new congregations solved having so many languages represented, they each still served two different language groups.

CONCLUSION

These are just two ethnic examples in one city. Similar concerns can be found throughout the United States with almost all ethnic groups—even African

Americans who speak English. As I have studied ethnic congregations, I have found that my views have varied as much as the Church's. Initially, I believed strongly in integration so that European Americans could learn about other cultures. But as I listened to the concerns of ethnic members, I realized the advantages of worshiping in one's native language.

A Japanese professor here at BYU expressed some of the same concerns but came up with the opposite opinion. Masakuza Watabe was in the bishopric of a BYU ward that I attended when I started working at BYU in 1979. His English was so perfect, I did not guess he was a first generation immigrant. Watabe believed strongly in integrated wards and spoke out against language congregations in his interview. But he also discussed the struggles that he sometimes has communicating in English because it is not his native language (1994, 9–10).

The LDS Church, of course, is not alone in these concerns. The Catholic Church in Provo struggles on how to combine the Spanish- and English-speaking members. Because there is no easy answer, churches, like other American institutions, will go back and forth, trying to please everyone and in doing so always leaving out someone.

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