

# The Herald

## MEXICO

The Miami Herald  
INTERNATIONAL EDITION

2nd. Year, No. 216

www.mexiconews.com.mx



EL UNIVERSAL

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

THE MORMONS

# LDS church charting rapid growth in Mexico

BY JONATHAN CLARK  
The Herald Mexico

Gabriel López González was 14 when the first group of missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — the Mormons — arrived in his Mixe Indian town of San Juan Guichicovi, Oaxaca. He was immediately impressed.

"The missionaries wore neckties, and I had never seen people wearing ties," he recalled.

Gabriel followed the missionaries as they knocked on doors in the community, and when they struggled to communicate with the Mixe-speaking locals, he stepped in as translator.

He continued in this capacity for four more years, and as he spent more time with the missionaries and listened to their message, Gabriel decided to convert. He wasn't alone. Today, the town of 28,000 inhabitants has a thriving community of some 200 Latter-Day Saints.

"I think at first, like me, people wanted to know the missionaries because they wore ties," Gabriel said, when asked to explain the church's appeal in his hometown. "But as they heard more, they became more interested in the teachings and began to realize that it was the truth."

Thanks to converts like Gabriel and his neighbors in San Juan Guichicovi, Mexico now has the second-largest Mormon population in the world, after the United States. And it continues to grow. In 1990, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS, counted 617,455 members here. Today, it reports a membership of 1,037,775: a 15-year growth of 68 percent. In Mexico City alone, LDS officials say they are adding 1,000 new members each month.

Church leaders say that Mexico and Mormonism are a perfect match; their spiritual message connects well with Mexicans, as does their emphasis on the family, a healthy lifestyle and Jesus Christ.

"I think one of the reasons the church has grown so much in Mexico is that this is a culture that has had a certain inclination towards the spiritual, ever since ancient times," said Tomás Hidalgo, LDS spokesman in Mexico. "That is a crucial factor that allows people to feel the influence of the Holy Spirit and receive the message brought to



LÓPEZ GONZÁLEZ

**1,037,775**

is the number of Mormons in Mexico today, according to the church.

**1,016**

is the number of Mormon chapels nationwide

**12**

is the number of temples here, one more than in all of Europe.

them by the missionaries."

Independent analysts point to the Mormons' tenacious recruiting efforts and suggest that they and other upcoming religions are benefiting from a growing dissatisfaction with the dominant Roman Catholic church.

Prof. Carlos Martínez Assad, a sociologist at the National Autonomous University (UNAM) Center for Social Research, cites studies which show that a growing number of citizens view the Catholic church as antiquated or lacking in spiritual dynamism.

"Apparently, what is happening is that people are finding more emotional motivation in other churches than in Catholicism," he said.

Along with the Mormons, evangelical Christian sects have blossomed to include more than 4 million members nationwide, and the Jehovah's Witnesses also count more than a million followers here. But while the Mormons and evangelicals have ex-

perienced growth, the proportion of Mexicans who identify themselves as Roman Catholic has declined in recent years, from 96 percent of the population in 1970 to 88 percent in 2000.

Martínez Assad said churches such as the Mormons, supported by a vigorous missionary corps, are doing a better job of reaching out to the nation's spiritually undecided.

"The Mormons are people who believe strongly in their faith and they go about it with a level of effort that I think the Catholic church would like to have," he said.

### A LONG HISTORY

The first Mormon missionaries came to Mexico in 1875, and at first, had little luck in finding converts. But 10 years later, a group of nearly 400 colonists arrived from Utah, fleeing prosecution for polygamy (a practice that was banned by the church in 1890) and established a permanent settlement at the Casas Grandes River in Chihuahua state. Others joined them, and English-speaking Mormon colonies soon sprang up throughout Chihuahua and the neighboring state of Sonora.

Meanwhile, an LDS mission in Mexico City continued to plug away at the local population, and by the time revolution broke out in 1910 the number of converts in the south-central region had reached 1,000.

In the decades after the Revolution, the church showed slow but steady growth. By 1972, national membership had reached 100,000, and by the 1980s, the church entered its boom period. The nation's first Mormon temple opened in Mexico City in 1983, and ten years later, the government formally registered the church, allowing it to own property. LDS membership reached 500,000 in 1989 and passed the one million mark last year.

In response to its rapid growth, the church began building additional temples — ceremonial centers where it holds weddings and "sealings," rituals that bind couples or families for eternity. From 1999 to 2002, 11 temples were opened, stretching from Nuevo Leon and Jalisco in the north to Chiapas and Yucatan in the south. Today,

TURN TO RELIGION, 8

# MEXICO NOW HAS WORLD'S SECOND-LARGEST MORMON POPULATION

• RELIGION, FROM 3

Mexico has more Mormon temples than the entire European continent.

Prof. Martínez Assad is only moderately impressed by the LDS's expanding membership. "In reality, the churches that have grown the most in Mexico are the various evangelical sects," he said. "All we know about the Mormons is that they have built the most temples, which could mean that they simply have more resources than other churches with which to grow."

Martínez Assad wonders if this construction boom may serve as a promotional tool as well as a reflection of growth.

"I think of people who look at these Mormon temples, built as the Bible describes the Temple of Solomon," he said. "These are very impressive structures, and naturally, we know that people are going to be drawn to them."

## THE TEMPLES

The Mexico City temple in the San Juan Aragón neighborhood is indeed an impressive structure. The massive monolith, constructed in a Maya architectural style, would not be out of place at one of the nation's ancient religious sites like Palenque or Teotihuacan. A pillar towers overhead, topped by a golden statue of Moroni, the angel who reportedly appeared to LDS prophet and founder Joseph Smith told him of scripture written on golden plates.

According to Smith, he unearthed those plates near his home in upstate New York and translated them into the Book of Mormon, which now serves as a companion document to the New Testament.

Next door to the temple, a large billboard beckons passers-by into a state-of-the-art visitors' center, complete with interactive exhibits and gift shop. A 10-foot-tall marble statue of Jesus adorns the lobby, looking out through a wall of windows to the busy thoroughfare in front.

"We get a lot of people who come in just from seeing the statue," said Ann Goulding, an LDS elder from Sandy, Utah, currently serving as a missionary here. "Mexicans love Jesus."

Those who venture into the center are greeted by guides who lead them on a tour of Mormon history and philosophy. They learn the story of Joseph Smith, born 200 years ago in Vermont, who received a vision in which God and Jesus themselves told him to form the church. They hear how a resurrected Jesus visited the Americas, and how Native Americans and their civilizations descended from the Lamanites, a lost tribe of Israelites who



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

**SPREADING THEIR FAITH:** Two young Mormons pose at the Church of Latter-day Saints missionary training center in the San Juan Aragón neighborhood of Mexico City.

came to the New World in the sixth century B.C.

It's a message that connects directly with Mexicans, said Goulding.

"They have all these pyramids right in their backyards offering proof of what is talked about in the Book of Mormon," she said.

## THE LIFESTYLE

While some level of LDS recruiting goes on at the temples and associated visitors' centers, the bulk of the effort is carried out by volunteer missionaries, who spend two-year stints in the field. Nationwide, there are 3,488 Mormon missionaries — 2,343 of them Mexican citizens — knocking on doors, distributing copies of the Book of Mormon translated into Spanish, Tzotzil, and two dialects of Maya.

The temple complex in Mexico City also houses a training center where new missionaries receive a 19-day crash course. Most of the missionaries at the center are in their early 20s, and all are well-dressed, neatly groomed and exceedingly polite. Like all members of their faith, they do not smoke, drink alcohol or consume caffeine.

Hidalgo says the positive example set by LDS members is another factor that has drawn Mexican converts to the church.

It certainly aided in the conversion of Gabriel López González, back in San Juan Guichicovi, Oaxaca, who needed his parents' blessing before joining the church.

"As a minor, the missionaries couldn't teach me without the permission of my parents," he explained. "But at first, my parents

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—PROF. CARLOS MARTÍNEZ ASSAD  
sociologist, UNAM Center for Social Research

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—TOMÁS HIDALGO  
spokesman, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

while her friends and family are impressed by her self-discipline, others occasionally misinterpret the Mormon lifestyle and its emphasis on clean living.

"People say, 'Oh, that's the religion where you can't dance and where the women have to wear long skirts,'" she said. "So I explain that, no, we are normal young people and ours is a normal life; we go out dancing, we have fun."

In addition to having fun, the LDS church also encourages its members to assume active roles in their community, via charitable activities or political participation. And while the Mormon church is socially conservative by tradition, Hidalgo says that Mexican LDS members are encouraged to join the political party of their choice. As evidence, he points to Jeffrey Max Jones, a senator from Chihuahua and a descendant of the early Mormon settlers in that state; and Lázaro Mazón Alonso, mayor of Iguala, Guerrero. Although both are Mormons, Jones belongs to the conservative National Action Party, while Mazón Alonso is a member of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution.

Asked to name prominent popular culture figures who are Mormon, Hidalgo had more difficulty. But he predicted that there would be plenty in the future.

"The flourishing of our members in important positions of Mexican society is just starting," he said.

"The church in Mexico has reached a level of respect that it obviously didn't have during its beginnings here, and I feel that we are in a period when the harvest is going to be big."

said that I could join any church I wanted — except for this one."

Eventually, however, his mother softened her stance.

"She saw that I had been tempted by alcohol and drugs, and I think she knew that the church would keep me away from that," he said.

Denise Calahorra, a 24-year-old missionary from Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas, said that