

Chapter 9

Growth and Internationalization: The LDS Church Since 1945

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Even though the history of the LDS Church experience in the international arena has appeared in print only sparsely, it is the scene of the Church's greatest growth and challenges. In some cases, this situation exists because much of this history is in the recent past and the documentation is not yet available to develop a comprehensive perspective. Except for Europe, Australasia, and a few countries scattered on other continents, the Church cannot be said to have had a major international presence until after World War II. At the end of the twentieth century, it was still largely a western hemisphere church, rather than a global one. In other cases, the history goes back for decades but has been largely ignored because the American experience dominates Church historiography. Likewise, it sometimes takes decades or centuries for watershed events to come into focus.

This article will identify the landscape of international Church historiography for the last half of the twentieth century. Only after World War II, did the Church begin to fulfill a destiny envisioned by earliest prophet, Joseph Smith, when he spoke in a small log schoolhouse in Kirtland, Ohio: "It is only a little handful of Priesthood you see here tonight, but His Church will fill North and South America—it will fill the world." Those writing the history of the international Church live mostly in the United States and are either observers in academia or those who participated in Church events abroad, usually while serving as missionaries. Another group is employees of Church publications sent abroad to interview and report progress. Members native to areas outside the borders of the United States, such as in Latin America and Europe, have begun to craft their history from their perspective, ensuring a richer tapestry of how the past is portrayed in print. (See also "The LDS Church in the United States Since 1945" by Jessie L. Embry in this volume.)

Whereas in 1901, five out of six members lived in the Intermountain West, by 1996 more members were living outside than inside the borders of the United States.¹ At mid-century, that trend was still nascent when newly appointed Church president George Albert Smith said at October general conference in 1945, "We must preach the gospel to the South American countries which we have scarcely touched. We must preach the gospel to every African section that we haven't been in yet. We must preach the gospel to Asia. And I might go one step further and say in all parts of the world where we have not yet been permitted to go. I look upon Russia as one of the fruitful fields for the teaching of

1. (No author), *Out of Obscurity: The LDS Church in the Twentieth Century* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), vii.