

The New York LDS Historian

Building a Branch in Harlem

By Matthew and Sarah Archer-Beck

On 19 October 1997 the Harlem First Branch of the New York New York Stake was created. Although the Church itself began in New York State and some of its first meeting places in Manhattan were located in Harlem on 125th and 126th streets¹, the Harlem First Branch, at its inception, confronted challenges common to the Church in less established areas of the world.

The fledgling branch started without a permanent meeting place, with imported leadership, an incomplete church program, and few active members. In addition, the formation of the Harlem branch met with some opposition from members inside and outside of Harlem. Now, over three years after its founding, the Harlem First Branch still struggles with some of these issues, but it has grown to form its own sense of community as it looks forward towards new opportunities.

Beginnings

According to Brent Belnap, New York New York Stake president since 1997, if the decision to form the Harlem branch could be summed up in one word, it would be “retention.” During the mid-1990s missionaries had much success baptizing people from the Harlem area. Many new converts, however, quickly fell into inactivity after baptism. President Ronald A. Rasband (now Elder Rasband of the Seventy), who served as mission president from 1996 to 1999, felt strongly that the Church must be brought to the people of Harlem by placing a branch in their midst to overcome this obstacle. Prior to the branch’s formation, members who lived in Harlem were meeting with the Manhattan



Harlem Branch in front of Sylvia's Restaurant, November 2, 1997

First and Second Wards at the Stake Center on 65th Street and Columbus Avenue. President Rasband urged President John R. Stone, New York New York Stake president at the time, to form a branch of the Church in Harlem in order to better retain the converts in that area.²

As the formation of a branch in Harlem was considered and discussed, some members of the stake voiced opposition. Some saw the formation of the branch as type of segregation, moving Harlem residents, who were primarily black, out of the culturally diverse First Ward into their own branch. Others questioned the ability of a new branch to meet the needs of the proposed congregation, as many members were new to the Church.³

The stake presidency moved forward with plans to form the branch despite the opposition voiced. When the sustaining vote was brought to the First Ward in sacrament meeting on 19 October 1997, some members voted in opposition. Most of those who opposed the formation of the branch did not live within the boundaries

The New York LDS Historian

is the quarterly newsletter of the New York New York Stake LDS History Committee. This newsletter contains articles about and notices of the research of the Committee.

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of the proposed branch.⁴ But many of those who would be part of the new branch were unhappy about the change.

“When I was baptized,” said Polly Dickey, the branch’s first relief society president, “I liked the idea of being downtown. I enjoyed the diversity. My idea was never

to leave. Then, after about five years in the Manhattan Second Ward, the announcement was made that some of us were going back to Harlem. I was upset and thought, ‘Nobody asked me if I wanted to go.’ The thought that ‘Where the Lord

wanted me to go, I would go’ was in my head, but it was not in my heart... The night before the first meeting, I prayed about it and was told that I was meant to be in the branch. So, I went.”⁵

Ronald Anderson, who had been called to the position of Stake Mission President only months before, was called to be the president of the Harlem First Branch. President Anderson knew many of the long-time members from Harlem from the Manhattan First Ward as well as most of the new members from his calling as ward mission leader of the First Ward, but he did not live in the new branch boundaries, which extend south from 155th Street to 125th Street on the West Side and 110th Street on the East Side. Clifford Munnings had lived in Harlem for most of his life and although he had been a member for only two years, he gladly accepted the calling of first counselor in the branch presidency.⁶ Van Woods, who was called to be the second counselor also lived inside the branch boundaries.

Sylvia’s

Finding an appropriate place for the Harlem Branch to meet was a difficult task. Stake leaders had spent months before the branch was created trying to locate a building that would meet the needs of the members. Finding a place that was close to transportation, large enough

to accommodate the congregation and available on Sundays proved to be impossible. At this challenging time, Van Woods stepped in to help. Brother Woods and his family own several buildings in Harlem, most notably Sylvia’s, a famous “soul food” restaurant on Lenox Avenue. “I knew that they were looking,” said Brother Woods, “and as the looking became more frustrated, I offered my space (in Sylvia’s Also, the banquet hall annex of Sylvia’s located at 326 Lenox Avenue). It was something that was divine and something that needed to happen at this time.”⁷ The space offered at Sylvia’s, which the Woods family generously provided free of charge, allowed the branch to begin meeting 2 November 1997.

Meeting at Sylvia’s was not without difficulties, however. Because the restaurant is so popular, the branch needed to end its meetings each Sunday in time to allow for the lunchtime opening at noon. This meant that the branch would have only two hours together, leaving no time for Sunday School. In addition, the commercial restaurant space had a markedly different atmosphere than the stake center across from Lincoln Center, where the members had met previously. Some members felt that it was difficult to feel the Spirit at the Sylvia’s location because it was not a church but a restaurant. “I didn’t like it there,” said Agnes Martinez, a member of Church since 1991 and a resident of Harlem. “Not because of the Church or anything, it was the environment, the setting—it was like a club.”⁸

Sylvia’s also had space limitations. Christopher Caceres, a young man in the branch, remembers that at Sylvia’s “we used to have classes by the kitchen.”⁹ Branch President Ron Anderson commented:

“I think that the difficult part about meeting in Sylvia’s in the first year of the branch was just basically dealing with the logistics—making sure that the meetings were planned, that the speakers would show up that the sacrament table would be set up, that the chairs would be set up, that the floor would be vacuumed and cleaned... Classroom space was

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Harlem Garden

By Raquel Cook

Three years ago when the Church purchased the 129th street storefront that now serves as the Harlem chapel, the neighboring lot was a wasteland of weeds, rubble, and broken glass. Like every other vacant lot in New York City, garbage piled mercilessly against the fence and graffiti stained the walls. But last summer the members in Harlem turned the 125' x 25' lot into a beautiful garden space, creating not only a source of neighborhood pride, but also a valuable missionary tool for the church.

Harlem members pushed forward the idea to clean up the vacant lot last July, when physical facilities funds were made available for the landscaping. Because professional services could not be hired, the entire branch participated in the development process. Members traveled to New Jersey, where they purchased plants, and in a single Saturday, planted flowers and laid the sod.

On the day of the planting, a passing resident provided sodas from the local grocery; and dozens of neighborhood children battled for turns with rakes and seeds. "They thought it was their summer garden camp," says Christian Jacobs, a counselor in the Branch Presidency. "They're now very protective of the space."

The north gate of the garden now opens to a large plot of grass, where rambunctious primary children can dispel their energy. Over 30 types of flowers, roses, impatiens, petunias, pampas grass, and rhododendrons, to name a few, line the perimeter; and half a dozen evergreens promise future shade. From the vines, gardeners hand tomatoes to passers-by.

Much of the novelty of the garden came in rearranging existing rubble, rather than hauling it away, in order to portray the creative energy of the people who live and worship there. Stray bricks were laid to create the path between the grass and the

vegetable plot, large stones were stacked into a wall along the south border, and dozens of colorfully painted smaller stones—origin unknown—decorate the western fence. The tip of a lone, spare tire peeks out of the earth near a tomato plant.

Future plans include expanding the vegetable garden, a mural on the outer wall of the church, roses and sweet peas climbing the chain link fence and a couple of benches hopefully to be acquired from the city.

Branch President Ron Anderson and his congregation believe the garden has united the Harlem branch and opened dialogue between members and 129th Street residents, many of whom were previously unaware that the Church had moved into the neighborhood. The patch of green is a slice of beauty in the otherwise concrete area, so neighbors and branch members are doing everything they can to protect their prize.



Harlem Building's Garden and side of Harlem Building



Portion of Garden away from Harlem Building

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also always an issue. We had the Relief Society in one area [of the banquet hall], we had the priesthood meeting in another area, primary meeting in another area, and the young women actually meeting in a hall downstairs. So, from the beginning the logistics, were difficult and a challenge to see if we could work it out.”¹⁰

Challenges of a New Branch

Attendance records show that retention was enhanced by “bringing the Church to the people.”¹¹ As expected, however, the new branch faced several challenges on a weekly basis, beyond the physical surroundings. The branch presidency, along with three sets of missionaries, formed the core of the priesthood leadership. This fact, along with the newness of the Church to most branch members, made it difficult to fill positions in the branch leadership and auxiliary programs. Jeremy Shaffer, who served as missionary in the Harlem First Branch from October 1998 to March 1999, remembers that the missionaries “were very involved in running [the branch],” including meeting with the branch presidency and teaching many of the classes. Elder Shaffer also recalls an

unexpected assignment, “I was asked to be the branch organist, and all I could do was play the hymns with my right hand.”¹²

The Relief Society was certainly the most mature and experi-

enced body within the branch, containing sisters who had been active members of their respective previous wards for several years. Polly Dickey as Relief Society President with first counselor Pat Phillips and second counselor Brenda Woods, who replaced Caroline Jennings, lent needed support to the branch presidency during the early stages of the new branch.

Lisa Anderson, wife of President Ron Anderson, has served in various callings in the branch, including organist, Relief Society teacher and, currently, Primary President. She said of the first year:

“We had to let go of some things. We had to keep reminding ourselves that this was a branch – a small, tiny branch. And we’re not going to have a full primary program. We’re not going to have a full Young Women’s program. We had a Young Women’s president, we had a Primary president, and that was it for each of those programs. And there weren’t very many participants in each of those programs, either. It worked, but it was a struggle teaching three and four year olds with ten year olds in the primary.”¹³

New Building

While the branch was meeting at Sylvia’s, the search for a permanent building continued with difficulty. Finding an existing building that could be modified to meet the needs of the branch appeared to be a nearly impossible task. By the end of the branch’s first year, both the branch members and the stake leadership urgently felt the need to find a building where they could meet without the time and space constraints found at Sylvia’s. The opportunity came in an unlikely form: the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Jehovah’s Witness congregation that met at the Kingdom Hall located at 58 West 129th Street was in the process of relocating to a new building in another part of Harlem, leaving the building vacant. The building was conveniently located, being only three blocks to the north of Sylvia’s, just off of Lenox Avenue. It was, however, in need of major renovation. The plumbing needed to be entirely redone and the interior was, by all accounts, unattractive and in great disrepair. It was also very small—only 25 feet across and fifty feet deep.

The benefit and convenience of having a permanent place where members could meet for the full three-hour block of meetings as well as during the week, however, outweighed all of these shortcomings. Commenting on the blessing of

Classroom space was also always an issue. We had the Relief Society in one area [of the banquet hall], we had the priesthood meeting in another area, primary meeting in another area, and the young women actually meeting in a hall downstairs.

having their own building despite its problems President Anderson added:

“Just in having the building immediately our numbers jumped... There was a huge increase in the level of activity and the enthusiasm of the branch by having their own place. And you cannot understate that. Now you have a place that is a church, instead of meeting in a restaurant... Now I had an office that I could meet with members, and a place that during the week we could meet. That was a huge benefit. So we are very grateful for the building.”¹⁴

Growth

Following the move to the 129th Street building in December of 1998, the Harlem branch experienced a period of remarkable growth. Average weekly attendance jumped from around 30 people to over 50. In addition, there were over 60 baptisms in the course of 12 months, compared with the 9 that had been baptized the year before.¹⁵ Aaron Sattler, a missionary from Austria who worked in the Harlem Branch from February to June of 1999 said of that time:

“We had a lot of work when I was here as a missionary. In my area alone we had about 200 media referrals to look up. And in the other two areas were similar. So the days were packed with appointments, usually about seven and nine appointments a day. Most of the times, of course, we didn’t eat lunch. We didn’t have time to do that. But it was fun work. We baptized two or three brothers and sisters each week within a district of six people. It was just the hottest part of the mission. No one baptized as much as we did in our district. I think we baptized more than the whole zone in Manhattan. But we also brought a lot of people in through activating, or re-activating those who had left the Church a while ago.”¹⁶

Mark Rodriguez, who was baptized in May 1999, remembers “when I first became a member, it seemed that the branch was experiencing exponential growth. It seemed like every other Sunday you would hear: ‘There’s going to be a baptism, come down to the Stake Cen-

ter.”¹⁷ This growth brought with it its own challenges. Again a major problem was retention. Because the branch was so small, the branch and auxiliary leaders did not have the infrastructure to engage the influx of new members and several newly baptized people went inactive. Also, although some young men were baptized, the majority of the new converts were women and children, meaning that the branch still faced a shortage of priesthood holders.

Branch leaders implemented one program with the help of the missionaries to address the difficulty of fellowshipping a large number of converts and to help the members bond as a

branch. It was called Family Fun Night, based on Family Home evening, and featured activities such as potluck dinners, games, talent shows and spiritual lessons. According to Marcelli Maczak, a missionary from Poland who worked in the branch, “the place was full of people—sometimes even 50 or more.

We had some success in reactivating members and in the couple of months that I served there we found many new converts... We found very interesting people. It is amazing how the Lord gets people to his church.”¹⁸ Elder Shaffer remembers Family Fun Night as a great opportunity to teach many of the basics of the gospel to new members.¹⁹

Another challenge to the branch at this time of great growth was the sickness and death of First Counselor Munnings. Brother Munnings, according to both President Anderson and President Belnap, had been key in organizing the branch and provided great spiritual strength to all its members with his firm testimony. His sickness, at the time of the greatest growth, created an increasing strain on the branch leadership. Following his death during the summer of 1999, the branch presidency

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was reorganized: William Cottam was called to be the first counselor and Christian Jacobs, a new resident of Harlem, was called to be second counselor. Their experience in the Church allowed President Anderson to pass administrative duties off to them and focus on the spiritual needs of the congregation.

In response to the strain put on the branch infrastructure by the rapid growth, the branch presidency and stake leaders decided to call members from other units

within the stake to fill positions in Harlem. One of those called was Maurice Matsumori, who was asked to be the Young Men's First Counselor. He commented about the rewarding nature of his calling in the branch:

"You can see instant impact...very minute efforts see great big fruit. So it just goes to show, if you really do thrust in the sickle you're really making a difference. That

is the one thing that has been amazing—you get to see a branch, in this case, from the very embryonic stages blossom into something unbelievable."²⁰

A Feeling of Community

The Harlem First Branch has developed a strong sense of community among its members. Those who attend the branch can often feel the warmth of the branch family. Agnes Martinez, a Harlem branch member said, "Someone came from 65th Street not too long ago and she was in the singles ward and she said, 'oh my gosh, it's so warm here and so kind.' And it is. It took a long time to do it. It really did. Because when you are building upon a rock its really hard because you really have to mold it out. We've gone a long way."²¹

Frankie Wleh, a missionary in the branch in 1999 and originally from West Africa, expressed his feelings for the Harlem branch in this way: "I was part of the community... It was a very nice experience. It felt like home. It felt like family."²² Polly Dickey echoed the idea of family,

"After I was baptized and confirmed, I took literally that I had entered into a new family. And as a family, we need to work together, to stick together. And I feel that way not only about the Church but about the branch."²³

Lisa Anderson added, "I think we have a lot of love in our branch and everybody just working hard to make it happen. That's been the feeling we've had since the beginning. I don't think that feeling has gone away. I think there's still a lot of people trying to pull together to make the branch succeed and to help the members to succeed and move forward."²⁴

Current Successes and Challenges

One way that the branch has helped its members progress is by preparing them to go to the temple. Some examples are: Rosinell Gladden, who joined the Church when the branch met at Sylvia's, was the second Relief Society President and now lives in the Bronx; Nana Mensah, who currently lives in Brooklyn; Maria Goodall, an older member of the branch; and Julia Caceras. Although Julia was a member of the Church before the formation of the branch, it was during her time in the branch that she became most active and grew spiritually enough to take out her own endowments earlier this year.²⁵

Lack of Melchizedek priesthood holders and the newness of many members to the Church continue to be challenges for the branch, which still must bring in some leaders from other units of the stake to help run the branch. "We've always had to balance between finding people that have enough experience in the Church and enough training to do a calling with the need to educate and teach and bring new members and those who have had less experience along so that they can eventually fulfill those roles,"²⁶ said President Anderson. This training process can be seen in the Young Men's Program, which has grown under the leadership of Dan Clayton, who was called as Young Mens' President from a singles ward, from one or two active Aaronic priesthood holders to six. "These young men are active in Seminary and are an important part of the



The Current Harlem Building

Stake youth program,”²⁷ said President Anderson. A similar increase in activity has been seen in the Primary, which regularly has ten children in attendance.

One notable partnership designed to assist the branch’s young people, from elementary through high school age, is a tutoring program. The program, which is organized by the Eighth Ward Service Committee, under the direction of Christina Taber, meets at the branch building twice a week. Besides the academic help that the tutors provide, they also act as mentors to the youth participants, half of whom are not members of the Church. Sister Taber said, “The program allows singles to share their immense resources with the youth of the stake, which helps to create a stronger church community. It also helps us fulfill our obligation and desire to reach out to those who are not in the Church.”²⁸

The branch also faces unique challenges because of its location in a dynamic urban setting. Amini Kajunju, a counselor in the Young Women’s program, said:

“The biggest challenge, I think, is that people take for granted that one is a member of the Church all their lives. There are just certain rituals, daily things that you take for granted, like going to church every Sunday, that’s something that has to be taught. And one of the biggest challenges that we have is that people just have a lot of things going on in their lives and sometimes, though they want to learn more about the Church, life is very difficult for them and the Church is not always a priority. And so that’s been the challenge: life is very hard for a lot of people around here and as they prioritize, the church is not always the first thing on their mind. It will take time to create a culture, not a church culture, because Harlem has a church culture, but an LDS Church culture. One that requires consistent commitment.”²⁹

The Harlem First Branch leaders, from inside and outside the official boundaries, are strengthening members spiritually and temporally. Most members are excited and optimistic about their church membership and being in Harlem at this time. Mark Rodriguez, a young man who was baptized in the summer of 1999 said, “This is

indeed a small branch... It does have its problems. We do have our trials. But, in the end, this branch will persevere ... because the members constantly strengthen one another.”³⁰

Looking toward the Future

Harlem itself has changed significantly in the past few years. After decades of decline the neighborhood is rebounding. As New York’s real estate prices soared during the economic boom of the late 1990s, Harlem, which was previously bypassed by many renters, buyers, and retailers became increasingly popular. As more white and affluent families move into Harlem, its demographics are changing. The 2000 Census found that Harlem grew by 3,000 people since 1990, and many of these newcomers are non-Hispanic whites. Many feel that this trend has continued at an even quicker pace since the census data were collected.

As real estate prices rise, many of the long-time residents and recent immigrants who live here are being forced to leave by the higher rents.³¹ This demographic shift is apparent in the branch. According to President Anderson, many converts have left Harlem for the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn as the cost of living continues to rise. Also, a few white families are moving into the historically black community. So as Harlem changes the Harlem First Branch is changing as well. On any given Sunday one will find a mix of African-American, Latino, and Caucasian families and individuals attending branch meetings.

The next milestone to which Harlem branch members are looking forward is having a new meetinghouse with enough room to grow. In May 2001, the Church finalized the purchase of land at the corner of 128th and Lenox Avenue for the construction of such a meetinghouse. While reviewing potential sites for the new building Bishop Richard C. Edgley, First Counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, saw



The site purchased for the new Harlem building

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several alternatives including a plan to expand at the current site on 129th Street, but he was convinced that a corner lot on a major street was important for the long-term growth of the Church in Harlem. Plans for the multi-story structure call for a baptismal font as well as a full-sized basketball court. While these features are not always part of new meetinghouses (baptismal fonts are usually reserved for stake centers) President Belnap says that he insisted on these features. The Church feels that a strong presence in Harlem is necessary and important.^{3 2}

When asked about the plans for a new building, Harlem branch member Mark Rodrigez responds, "I'm thinking that its about time," and he adds optimistically, "President Anderson should become Bishop Anderson; it will no longer be the Harlem Branch, it will be the Harlem Ward."^{3 3} Gloria Lynch, another branch member, said she was "so happy" to hear about the location of the new building, "This is a tourist area now and we will have people being curious... It is impossible to pass a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints constantly without wanting to know, 'what's inside that building?'" and [thinking] 'I want to know more,' when you see people coming and going."^{3 4}

Since the purchase of the lot the Church has faced several obstacles to the construction of the proposed building. Some

members of the Harlem community have voiced opposition to the meetinghouse on the grounds that it contributes to the gentrification of Harlem and believe it would strip the neighborhood of its character. Some have voiced concerns about the Church's history with the black community, particularly the fact that blacks could not hold the priesthood before 1978. The newest obstacle to the building's construction came in the form of a tenant named Victor Parker who lived in one of the abandoned buildings the Church bought on the site—Church leaders were told that the buildings were vacant. Until suitable new accommodations can be found for Mr. Parker the construction is on hold.^{3 5}

Conclusion

Throughout its three-year history, the Harlem First Branch has faced a variety of obstacles, including the difficulties of finding a permanent meeting place and fulfilling the needs of the large number of new members. In the process of tackling these problems, the branch has created a strong sense of community and the desire to bring more people to the Church. As Polly Dickey said, "I love the Church and want to see the branch grow. I will do whatever I can to make sure that it happens."^{3 6}

Notes

- 1 Ned P.Thomas, *Various Times and Sundry Places: Buildings Used by the LDS Church in Manhattan*, New York LDS Historian, Spring 2000.
- 2 Brent Belnap Interview 20 May 2001
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Polly Dickey Interview with Ann Knight 16 March 2001.
- 6 Ronald Anderson Telephone Interview 10 July 2001
- 7 Van Woods Telephone Interview 1 June 2001
- 8 Agnes Martinez Interview 4 March 2001
- 9 Christopher Caceres Interview 17 June 2001
- 10 Ronald Anderson Telephone Interview 10 July 2001
- 11 Brent Belnap Interview 20 May 2001
- 12 Jeremy Shaffer E-mail 8 June 2001
- 13 Lisa Anderson Telephone Interview 9 May 2001

- 14 Ronald Anderson Telephone Interview 10 July 2001
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Aaron Sattler Interview 4 March 2001
- 17 Mark Rodriguez Interview 17 June 2001
- 18 Marcelli Matczak E-mail 4 June 2001
- 19 Jeremy Shaffer E-mail 8 June 2001 "We started 'Family Fun Night', and I remember singing 'We Thank Thee Oh God for a Prophet', and they didn't like singing a song that wasn't familiar! I remember Pres. Anderson asking one of them what the Word of Wisdom was, and they said, 'The Word of God!'" So we were assigned to teach them all what the word of wisdom was."
- 20 Maurice Matsumori Interview 4 March 2001
- 21 Agnes Martinez Interview 4 March 2001
- 22 Frankie Wleh, Jr. Interview 3 June 2001
- 23 Polly Dickey Interview with Ann Knight 16 March 2001.
- 24 Lisa Anderson Telephone Interview 9 May 2001

- 25 Lisa Anderson Telephone Interview 31 August 2001
- 26 Ronald Anderson Telephone Interview 10 July 2001
- 27 Ronald Anderson Email 30 August 2001
- 28 Christina Taber Telephone Interview 31 August 2001
- 29 Amini Kajunju Interview 4 March 2001
- 30 Mark Rodriguez Interview 17 June 2001
- 31 Felicia R. Lee. "Another Harlem On Their Minds." *New York Times*, 1 April 2001, p. B1.
- 32 Brent Belnap Interview 20 May 2001
- 33 Mark Rodriguez Interview 17 June 2001
- 34 Gloria Lynch Interview 17 June 2001
- 35 Amy Waldman. "Long-Overlooked Tenant Stands Between Mormons and New Harlem Chapel." *New York Times*, 18 August 2001, Metro Section.
- 36 Polly Dickey Interview with Ann Knight 16 March 2001.