

The New York LDS Historian

Spanish Saints in the City

The first Spanish-speaking LDS Church members in New York City

By Sara Anderson

Spanish-speaking members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints account for almost half of all ward and branch units in the five boroughs of New York City.¹ The two Spanish-speaking units in Manhattan have strong, long-built traditions of active youth programs and dedicated temple worship.

Members of the Manhattan 4th and Inwood 2nd Wards juggle their identities as Latinos, Spanish-speakers, New Yorkers, and Latter-day Saints. But only forty years ago, New York City was home to only a few Hispanic Saints, many of whom were first introduced to the gospel while visiting the 1964 World's Fair in Queens.

The World's Fair and the Spanish-American Branch

The World's Fair brought the world to New York City. It also brought many New Yorkers to see the Mormon Pavilion, the LDS Church's landmark exhibit, featuring a large replica of the Salt Lake Temple.

"When I saw the building, I saw a man with a trumpet, and it grabbed my attention," recalls Lirio de Belén Cruz Pacheco (Inwood 2nd Ward) who remembers how the pavilion-temple impacted her.

"I said, pointing, 'Do you see that man there on top? It seems like he's calling me. Let's go there.' Now I understand that this was the Holy Ghost guiding me towards the building. After that, the missionaries came to my apartment two or three times until they found me at home and started to teach me the discussions."² Like many other visitors at the

World's Fair, impressed by the spirit they felt, Sister Pacheco decided to get baptized soon after the missionaries began teaching her.

As an early response to the influx of newly baptized Spanish-speaking members around the time of the World's Fair, a small Spanish group was formed in the Brooklyn Branch with interpretation available for Sunday School and Priesthood.³ In the Church's building at 142 West 81st Street, a similar group of Spanish-speaking members also met with the Manhattan Ward. In the mornings, Sunday School, Relief Society, and Priesthood classes were held separately in both languages. Later in the afternoon, the members returned for one joint Sacrament Meeting in English.

A short time later, the Brooklyn group was disbanded when the mission formed the New York Spanish Branch in Manhattan. Members from all the boroughs of New York City, New Jersey, and Westchester met with the Spanish Branch in Manhattan—some at considerable time and expense.

Missionaries served as priesthood leaders in the branch, since none of the newly baptized members had the Melchizedek Priesthood. But the first Relief Society President was Sister Maria Marrero, a local woman baptized soon after her experiences at the World's Fair.



Lirio Pacheco and her two sons at the Mormon Pavilion

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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Bishop Dagoberto Garces

Another early member of the branch was Manuel Nieto, who joined the Church shortly after emigrating from Uruguay. Over the years, he would serve as Branch President, Bishop, member of the Stake Presidency, and Patriarch. But he remembers that in the beginning, “we didn’t know anything or have any experience.”⁴ With time, however, the new members gained experience and were able to serve in the branch. Early branch presidents included David Smith (a missionary), Bob Farmer, Lorin Walker, Peruano Cordova, Ralph Figueroa, Dagoberto Garces, and Manuel Nieto.

By 1968, with close to 50 people attending the New York Spanish Branch each week, the supervision of the branch was shifted from the mission to the stake, and its name was changed to the Spanish-American Branch.

One of the early challenges of the Spanish-American Branch was the division between different regional and national groups. Branch Presidents Garces and Nieto and their counselors worked hard to unify the members who came from all over Central and South America and the Caribbean. Another challenge for the young branch was getting to the temple, the closest being in Utah.

“It was very difficult to go to the temple,” recalls Manuel Nieto. “The temples were very far away, and it was expensive to get there. We dreamed of going to the temple.”⁵ With the completion of the Washington, D.C. temple in 1974, however, Spanish-speaking members of the stake began to regularly take advantage

of its proximity and attend sessions as a branch.⁶ Consistent temple attendance is an honored tradition of the New York City Spanish-speaking saints.

Another tradition of the Spanish units has been consistently large youth programs, starting with the earliest days of the Spanish-American Branch at the 81st Street building. The teenagers would gather at the church building Sunday mornings at 8 AM, when Sunday School started, and stay until the evening, when Sacrament Meeting ended. Parents and leaders were grateful because “this way, they didn’t wander off in unknown paths,” recalls President Nieto.⁷

Frequent and well-attended activities gave the youth the chance to make friends with similar values and standards. The young men participated in the scouting program, and Jaime Mir (a new convert originally from Cuba) was called as the first Scoutmaster. The first campout for the young scout group was during the winter at Camp Alpine in New Jersey. New to the scouting program and to the Church, the five boys and Brother Mir were somewhat unprepared. Frank Miller, who at the time was a stake Young Men’s leader (he later became the stake president), recalls that “when we got there, these guys just had their sandals on, in the snow. They had brought a whole chicken to cook . . . using a wooden rack.” But “the kids had a lot of fun, and they learned, and survived.”⁸

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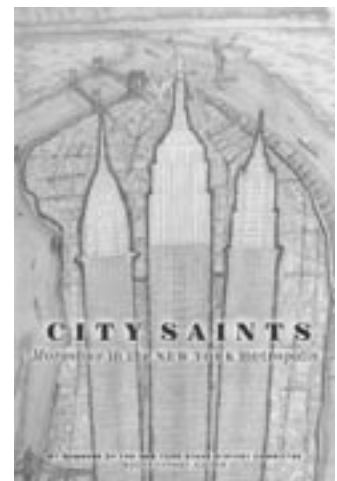
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A Glimpse into the Lives of New York's Spanish-Speaking Church Members

By Sariah Toronto and Sara Anderson

Romulo Macías

Romulo Macías first encountered the LDS Church in 1969, at the age of 11, when his brother gave him a Book of Mormon. It wasn't until 13 years later, however, that he would be baptized.

On a rainy day in 1982, Romulo's father was taking the bus home from work when he decided to get off at 65th Street. Taking shelter from the weather at what turned out to be the church building, he was invited to a baptism that was taking place at that moment. He accepted, and after the baptism the missionaries invited him to learn more about the gospel. He declined the invitation, but asked them to please teach his 24-year-old son, Romulo.

Romulo began meeting with the missionaries and learning the gospel. When the missionaries challenged him to read the Book of Mormon, he did so in one night. He attended church meetings for nearly 6 months, but he had a difficult time committing to be baptized, and the missionaries finally gave up on him. But in the summer of 1982, one of missionaries, Elder Ismael Mayans, prayed and asked God for a baptism as a birthday present. Soon after, Romulo announced to the missionaries out of the blue that he wanted to be baptized on August 11th—Elder Mayans' birthday.



Romulo Macías

Former Branch President of the Manhattan 5th Branch, Romulo Macías recently moved to Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania with his wife Arleen and their children.

Juan Osvaldo Gonzales

Juan Osvaldo Gonzales was 82 years old when he first visited the Hill Cumorah pageant and Church history sites in upstate New York. Father of 4th Ward member Yanet Tapia, Juan had resisted invitations to hear the gospel for 17 years. Finally, in 1999, Yanet and her husband Arturo convinced him to come along on the Fourth Ward's yearly trip to Palmyra. As was the custom on these ward trips to upstate New York, they drove in a bus all night Thursday, spent Friday and Saturday touring historical sites, and watched the pageant before returning to Manhattan late Saturday night.

One of the sites they visited while upstate was the Sacred Grove, where Church founder Joseph Smith was visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ. Brother Gonzales had his own remarkable spiritual experience in the grove, which convinced him he needed to be baptized. In October 1999 he became a member of the Church, and until his health began to fail, was as persistent about attending church as he once was about not listening to Yanet and Arturo.

Today, Juan Osvaldo Gonzales is a member of the Manhattan 4th Ward.

América Cruz

Interviewed by Al and Genny Gamez

While visiting the World's Fair in Queens in 1965, América Cruz was particularly impressed by the Mormon Pavilion. She felt what she later called the Holy Spirit at the Pavilion, and spent some time talking to the missionaries there about

Juan Osvaldo Gonzales was 82 years old when he first visited the Hill Cumorah pageant.

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Glimpse *(continued from previous page)*

the gospel. Her sister decided to be baptized soon afterwards, but América was not so eager: she was reluctant to give up an old habit – a good cup of coffee. It took years of her sister's patience, the Relief Society sisters' diligent help, and Sister Blum's invitations to Family Home Evening before América finally decided that she wanted to be baptized in 1977.

"I know that the gospel changed my life," says América, "I know that I could have gone down a wrong path without it. I feel very happy to be a member of this church, and I know that Jesus Christ lives, and that His church is the means to return to the Father."

Today, América Cruz is a member of the Inwood 2nd Ward.



América Cruz

were teaching were the true principles of the gospel and the true church of Jesus Christ."

José went back to Puerto Rico shortly thereafter, and the subject of the Church was dropped until the following spring when José came to visit again. Talking at length with Gerardo's mother about the Church, they persuaded her to meet with the missionaries again. The whole family listened to the missionary discussions and was baptized on April 20, 1980.

Today Gerardo Nieves and his wife Elena attend the Manhattan 4th Ward where he is a member of the bishopric.

Gerardo Nieves

Gerardo Nieves first set foot inside an LDS Church in 1979 when he was 15 years old. His uncle, José Quinones, was visiting from Puerto Rico and asked Ger-

aldo to go with him to find the church. At that time, the building at 65th and Columbus housed a visitors' center. Gerardo was not quite sure what to think of the displays about Church history and paintings of Biblical and Book of Mormon prophets, but a week later he found himself back at the building with his uncle, his mother, his brothers and sisters. This time they watched the Joseph Smith's First Vision filmstrip, and made arrangements for the missionaries to visit

them at home. The missionaries came a week later and taught the family about the Church and Joseph Smith.

"I had a very weird feeling inside," Gerardo recalls about the first meeting with the missionaries, "as though I knew about this before... Back then I was not sure what I was feeling, but I know now that it was the Holy Ghost confirming to me that the things the missionaries

Manuel Nieto

Interviewed by Al Gamez

Manuel Nieto moved to the United States from Uruguay in 1965. He attended church meetings with a Mormon friend and was soon baptized.

"My testimony is immense," he says. "I wish I were younger so I could continue with the work. I feel proud to be a Mormon. If I were not convinced that the Church is true, I would still have been part of the Church so that my children could be raised in a pleasant, healthy environment."

He was called as branch president of the Spanish-American Branch and was bishop of New York's first Spanish Ward. He later served as a member of the stake presidency and a patriarch. Today Bishop Nieto lives in Uruguay.



Gerardo Nieves with his family

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From *Haunted House* to New Home

North Manhattan's Spanish-Speaking Unit

By Sara Anderson

In September of 1993, the New York New York Stake split the downtown Spanish Ward and created the 5th Branch for Spanish-speaking members north of 155th Street. The change made some members feel a little like castaways, especially since they had no chapel of their own until several months later.¹

During the subsequent years of meeting in a rented school building, however, the branch strengthened in unity and size. By the time a permanent chapel was constructed in Inwood, the 5th Branch had grown in numbers, developed its own identity, and was ready to become the Inwood 2nd Ward.

The branch was formed before it had a home, at first holding Sunday services in the 65th Street building while leaders looked for a meeting place uptown. Antonio Cruz served as Branch President during this time. In February of 1994, the Church rented the Herbert L. Birch Manhattan Early Childhood Center at 554 Fort Washington Avenue, but the building was not at all ready to be occupied.² Romulo Macías, who became Branch President after President Cruz moved, remembers that it “looked like a haunted house.”³ Members of the branch worked hard to clean up the mess and the cobwebs, and eventually, contractors came in to finish the job of making it usable.

However, the workers worked all week, including Sundays, and the noise and dust were an irritation and a serious distraction during services. It was so bad that the branch suspended Sunday School and held only Sacrament Meeting, Relief Society, Priesthood and Primary meetings. After three months, however, President Macías insisted that the construction work had to stop on Sundays, and the branch resumed its normal meeting schedule.

Meeting in the school was a mixed blessing. While it was much closer to branch members' homes, many members say it was uncomfortable.⁴ The one narrow

staircase between the five floors had to be climbed several times during the course of Sunday meetings. Sacrament meeting was three flights down from street level; Primary was two floors up. The bathrooms were on the top floor; chairs had to be set up and taken down; and there was no heat or air conditioning. Fans in the summer blew so loudly that people sitting near them (and most preferred this cool spot) couldn't hear the speaker at the pulpit.⁵

Despite the difficulties meeting at the school, the branch flourished during those years and started to see itself not as a splinter group, but as its own unit.

The number of those consistently attending Sunday meetings grew from 120 to around 300; the Relief Society had to split into two groups for classes. The Elders Quorum, the primary, and the youth programs had also grown considerably and were very cramped in the small spaces at the school. Sofia Soriano gives some of the credit for this growth to President Macías's hard work, friendliness, and his excitement for missionary work and the gospel. David Jones suggests that the growth also coincided with rising immigration rates from the Dominican Republic, where the Church is increasingly well known and respected. Romulo Macías himself points to the sixteen full-time missionaries serving in the unit at the time, and the branch's



The Herbert L. Birch Manhattan Early Childhood Center, initial home of the Manhattan 5th Branch

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From *Haunted House* to New Home *(continued from previous page)*

determined efforts to search out people ready for the gospel.

President Macías relied on his Relief Society Presidents, first Sister Sofía Soriano and then Sister Teófila Marte, to be his “right hand” managing the needs of the members.⁶ Sister Soriano recalls working closely with César

Riofrío (the Elders Quorum President), to solve whatever problems came up in their auxiliaries, and then taking their solutions to President Macías.

President Macías focused intensely on the teenagers, and the branch’s youth programs were some of the largest in the stake, which at that time still included Westchester County. The almost 50 youth enthusiastically per-

formed in road shows and many prepared for missions. They went on frequent temple trips, as did the adults, continuing the tradition started in the Spanish Ward downtown. Every month they would rent a bus, leave at midnight on Friday, arrive in Washington, D.C. around 5 AM, spend all day Saturday at the temple, and come home exhausted late Saturday afternoon. During the summers, instead of going to the temple, the ward took a trip to the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra and visited the nearby Church sites and Niagara Falls.⁷ The branch’s frequent activities gave members opportunities to grow together and share a sense of belonging.

To the great excitement of Church members in the 5th Branch, in June of 1997, the stake broke ground on a new chapel to be built at 1815 Riverside Drive in Inwood. Members were thrilled that soon they would soon be leaving the school and would have a chapel of their own.⁸

Six months after the construction started, President Macías was released; Francisco Sandoval, one of President Macías’s counselors and a convert of almost 3 years, was called to be the new branch president. President Sandoval worked to activate members who had stopped coming to church and to encourage the

youth to continue going to seminary. He also nurtured relationships with the neighborhood through ward participation in community service.⁹ Sofía Soriano, who at the time was Primary President, organized an annual project for the older primary children to sew sleeping bags for the homeless with a local organization called the Fresh Youth Initiative.¹⁰

As the branch grew in unity with the prospect of a new chapel, it dealt with one more division during the three-year period while the chapel was constructed. In December of 1997, the stake split the branch and sent 40 families who lived between 155th and 173rd streets to meet with the Manhattan 4th Ward in the 65th Street building. It was hard for many of those members who were asked to attend downtown, since they could no longer walk to church and some felt isolated from their LDS neighbors in the nearby branch building.¹¹ However, when the new Inwood chapel was dedicated in March of 2000 and the 5th Branch became the Inwood 2nd Ward, the families who had been meeting downtown with the 4th Ward were asked to become a part of the new ward.

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Two sisters from the 5th Branch look at plans for the Inwood Building at the building’s groundbreaking



“Faith, Hope and Free Cookies” flyer announcing Inwood Building Open House

General history of the LDS Spanish-speaking units in Manhattan

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| <p>1964-65 The Mormon Pavilion at the World's Fair generates interest in the LDS church</p> <p>1965 Spanish groups (with Spanish classes for Sunday School, RS, and Priesthood) form in the Brooklyn Branch and Manhattan Ward.</p> <p>1966¹ The Brooklyn Spanish-speaking group disbands. The mission forms a Spanish-speaking branch in Manhattan: the New York Spanish Branch.</p> <p>1968 The Spanish-American Branch is organized in Manhattan as part of the stake rather than the mission.</p> <p>1974 The Washington, D.C. temple is dedicated. Spanish-speaking members of the church from New York City make regular bus trips to the temple and visitors center.</p> <p>1975 The Spanish Branch (and other Manhattan units) moves to the new stake center on 65th Street.</p> <p>1977 The Spanish Ward is created with Manuel Nieto as the first bishop. As the only Spanish unit in the area, Spanish-speaking members from all over the metro area attend this ward.</p> <p>1978 Elder Robert Hales reorganizes the stake. The new stake president of the New York City New York Stake is Frank Miller with counselors Al Woodhouse and Bishop Manuel Nieto.</p> | <p>Gilberto Perea is called as the new bishop of the Spanish Ward.</p> <p>1978 The revelation on Priesthood is received by President Spencer Kimball. Spanish-speaking members of color can now receive the priesthood.</p> <p>1978 A Brooklyn Spanish branch is created.</p> <p>1979 A Bronx Spanish branch is created.</p> <p>1980 Manuel Nieto is called as a stake patriarch.</p> <p>1982 Jaime Mir is called as bishop of the Spanish Ward.</p> <p>1982 At the Spanish session of stake conference, President Thomas Monson promises the Spanish-speaking saints that if they are faithful, a Spanish-speaking stake will be organized in New York City.</p> <p>1984² Luis Gallegos is called as the Manhattan 4th Ward bishop; he serves for nine years.</p> <p>1985 The stake is divided again. Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island become a stake separate from Manhattan and the Bronx.</p> |
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Cub Scouts of the Spanish-American Branch, 1960s

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General history of LDS Spanish-speaking Units in Manhattan

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Sept 26, 1993 The 5th Branch is created for Saints in Washington Heights and Inwood. Antonio Cruz is the first branch president. The Spanish Ward becomes the Manhattan 4th Ward.

1993 Albis Gomez is called as the Manhattan 4th Ward bishop.



*President Romulo Macías
with his Branch Presidency*

1994 The 5th Branch begins to meet in a rented school in Washington Heights in February. Later that year, Antonio Cruz moves away from New York, and Romulo Macías is called as branch president.

1994 Amadeo Durante is called as the Manhattan 4th Ward bishop.

June 1997 At 1815 Riverside Drive in Inwood, ground is broken for a new chapel to house the uptown Spanish- and English-speaking congregations.

November 1997 The stake is divided; the Bronx becomes part of the Westchester Stake. The New York New York stake boundaries include exclusively units in Manhattan for the first time.

1997 Francisco Sandoval is called as the branch president of the 5th Branch.

1997 Felix Pichardo is called as the Manhattan 4th Ward bishop.

1999 Kurt Wickham (Manhattan 1st Ward) is called as the Manhattan 4th Ward bishop.

March 2000 The Inwood chapel is dedicated. The 5th Branch becomes the Inwood 2nd Ward.

August 2001 Matthew Day (Inwood 1st Ward) is called as the new bishop of the Inwood 2nd Ward.

2002 Construction begins on the temple at 65th Street and part of the stake center closes. The Manhattan 4th Ward starts to meet with the English-speaking 5th Ward in the fall.

Feb 2003 David Skouson (Inwood 1st Ward) is called as the new bishop of the Manhattan 4th Ward.

June 2004 Dedication of the Manhattan New York Temple.

July 2004 Scott Higbee (Manhattan 1st Ward) is called as the bishop of the 4th Ward.

¹ Date is approximate.

² Date is approximate.

From *Haunted House* to New Home (continued from page 6)

The opening of the new building “transformed the ward,” recalls David Jones, the former executive secretary for the ward. Diplomats and city officials attended the open house and made the displaced members feel legitimate. Members buzzed with excitement, and José Gomez remembers thinking “great things are going to come out of this chapel here.” People speculated that some day there would be a temple in New York.¹²

The new chapel gave members uptown a sense of belonging and a place to call their own. Now they could be baptized in the same building where they would attend church. They could more easily have parties and use this neighborhood church for wedding receptions and other occasions, which had been difficult to schedule in the very busy stake center on 65th Street. Members felt a connection to the chapel and ward that they did not feel in the school and even in the downtown building.¹³ Finally, the ward had its own home.

In August of 2001, Bishop Sandoval was released; Matthew Day from the Inwood 1st Ward was called as the new bishop. With a renewed focus on growth, missionary work has thrived as ward members invite their friends to church and fellowship new members. In each of the last two years, more than 30 people have been baptized in the Inwood 2nd Ward. Most still attend church, filling the current congregation with recent converts.¹⁴ While fellowshiping so many new converts and teaching them leadership and administrative skills is a challenge for the ward, these new members are excited to learn about the gospel.¹⁵ Many are preparing to go to the temple, attending the temple preparation class in Sunday School and doing baptisms for the dead on frequent ward temple trips. One recent convert, Argelis Peñaló, returned in January 2005 from his mission in Anaheim, California. In April, 2004 long-time ward member Edward Felix left on his mission to Las Vegas, Nevada.

In his nearly 4 years as bishop, Matt Day has focused on organizing the ward and lovingly encouraging its members to fully live the gospel principles they know. He sees their tremendous potential and the deep spirituality evident in the



The Inwood building

prayers they offer and the testimonies they bear. He hopes that soon the ward will be strong enough to divide again and create a second uptown Spanish-speaking ward.¹⁶

¹ Namiana Filión, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/2/04

² Romulo Macías, phone interview with Sara Anderson 1/18/04

³ Romulo Macías

⁴ Sofia Soriano, interview with Sara Anderson 1/24/04

⁵ David Jones, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/9/04

⁶ Romulo Macías

⁷ David Jones, Namiana Filión

⁸ Romulo Macías, phone interview with Sara Anderson 4/4/04.

⁹ Francisco Sandoval, interview with América Cruz, December 2003

¹⁰ Sofia Soriano, 1/24/04

¹¹ Sofia Soriano, phone interview with Sara Anderson, 4/2/04

¹² José Gomez, phone interview with Sara Anderson, 2/13/05

¹³ David Jones

¹⁴ Matt Day, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/14/05

¹⁵ Matt Day, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/23/04

¹⁶ Matt Day, 2/23/04



At his baptism, Brian Romero stands next to Bishop Matt Day

Glimpse *(continued from page 4)***Andrés Nieto**

Interviewed by Genny Gamez

“At the age of 7 years, I came to this country, and from that time forward, I started to attend the Spanish Branch (meeting on 81st Street). My father had arrived in 1965, and I went every Sunday with him. The branch was small and the feeling that it had in this time was very special for me, since I came from a different country – in language and in culture. Being in the Church and with people of Hispanic cultures I felt surrounded by a family, and I could hide a little bit of the sadness I had from leaving my country, where my family had stayed.

I had the opportunity of being in the young men and in Boy Scouts, and to share with people from different places, for example, South America, Central America, the Caribbean. We had lots of activities, and I enjoyed it very much since there were a large number of youth.

I think that the youth were a strong engine in that time. Many completed missions and came back later to become leaders of the Church.

These people would have families, and they would grow up within the Church.

I think that the Spanish wards are important since there are many immigrants who arrive in this country seeking to feel at home with people of their same culture. And I have had the opportunity to see how these people grow spiritually, and they are strengthened and enjoy everything that the gospel brings. I think that if the Church had not had the vision of organizing the Spanish wards, many of us perhaps would not be here.

My testimony of the truth of the gospel is great. I know that it is important that we read the Book of Mormon, apply its teachings, and teach our families about the principles of the gospel. I believe that the priesthood brings blessings to our families.”

Andrés Nieto, son of Bishop Manuel Nieto, now lives in New Jersey.

Gilberto Perea

Interviewed by Al Gamez

Gilberto Perea was baptized into the LDS Church in Colombia in 1971 and moved to the U.S. a few months later.

“I believe that the Church is like a family, and our wards are like homes for our families, he says. “We have to respect each other and not hold resentments; we should forget other brothers’ errors. We should have sweet words for our brothers and sisters. We should open our hearts to and give love to others, and treat them well, and we will receive [it] back.”

Gilberto Perea was bishop of the Spanish Ward in Manhattan from 1978-1982 and was later called as Stake Patriarch. He is now a Stake Patriarch in Missouri.

Al Gamez

Alvaro Gamez was born in Bogotá, Colombia and came to the U.S. when he was 20 years old. Living with his Mormon aunt’s family in New Jersey, he began attending church with them. Although interested in what he learned at church, he lost contact with the Church when he moved to New York City.

Twenty years later, Al saw a Church commercial on TV and started to think about what he should do spiritually for himself and his daughter Katharine. He called the phone number from the commercial, and a week later, the missionaries came to teach him about the gospel. Converted over the course of the next 8 months, Al was baptized on May 27, 1998. On December 20th of that year, he baptized Katharine, who had turned 8 years old. His first calling in the Manhattan 1st Ward was to prepare the sacrament. He was later called as a Stake missionary, as Ward Mission Leader, and then as teacher for the Gospel Principles class.

“I know with all clarity of the love of my Heavenly Father for us. Jesus Christ is the most important thing in my life, and improving my relationship with Him is part of my daily life. I know with certainty that the church of Jesus Christ



Gilberto Perea with his wife and former stake president Frank Miller

is restored to the earth, and that only one voice calls us to Zion – Gordon B. Hinckley. The Holy Ghost guides me in my life. Holding the priesthood makes me happy, and helps me to make other people happy.”

Recently sealed in the Washington, D.C. temple, Al and his wife Genny are grateful for each other and for and their daughters Katharine and Laura. Today Al Gamez is a member of the bishopric of the Manhattan 4th Ward.

Luís Antonio Rojas Rodriguez

Interviewed by Al Gamez

“In June 1974, a month after we were baptized, I traveled to the United States. I came to New Jersey by myself. The branch president in Bogotá counseled me to look for the Church when I arrived in the United States, because many Mormon families go inactive and fall away when they come from another country. I did exactly what my branch president counseled me to do and only once did I miss a sacrament meeting in the fifteen years that I spent in New York.

‘When I arrived I went to Queens, and that very week I found the Church in Manhattan. When I went to live in New Jersey, I could not find a Spanish-speaking branch, so I came into Manhattan for church. I went to 81st Street on the west side every Sunday. The first people I met were Brother Garces, who was the branch president and Brother Nieto. Brother Garces’ wisdom and Brother Nieto’s diligence were very valuable to my growth in the Church.

‘I received my first calling the Sunday after attending the branch for the first time. Brother Nieto asked me to help in Sunday School. I thought he wanted me to move a desk or something like that, but then he gave me a manual and asked me to give the next lesson. I was barely familiar with the Bible and the Book of Mormon, and felt I did not know anything about the gospel.

‘Brother Nieto told me that I had the best teacher, the Holy Spirit. He told

me to read the lesson, fast and pray, and on Sunday I would give the lesson as a Sunday School teacher. I became absolutely convinced of the power of the Holy Spirit, as that Sunday I noticed its effect on me. It was at that time that I began to learn the gospel, and to understand that the Holy Spirit was what helped me to search for the truth in the first place.

‘Since I worked and lived in New Jersey, it was difficult for me to attend Church activities, but when I had to do my home teaching, I would come from work in New Jersey by bus, then train, then another bus, to meet up with my teaching companion, who had a shoe store in Queens. Sometimes I would get there, and it would be too late to visit people who lived in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan.

‘I began to learn how the Church functions when I was called to the high council. That helped me to see the way Americans manage Church affairs. Then I was called as a counselor in the stake presidency, which turned out to be difficult, as I did not know how to speak English. Meetings were hard, for I did not want somebody to have to translate for me. But Brother Raymond Rivera, who was so dear and such a good worker, offered to translate. He was executive secretary of the Spanish-speaking ward and a great man.

‘If I hadn’t been introduced to the gospel, my life would have been frustrated like the lives of my parents. Instead my children are the great people that they are. All my children have served missions, and we are all sealed in the temple. Even my wife and I have served as missionaries. If I had not been introduced to the gospel, perhaps I wouldn’t have had a family. I could have lost it upon coming alone to the United States if I hadn’t followed the counsel of my branch president in Colombia.”



Al Gamez and his family

Spanish Saints in the City *(continued from page 2)*

Change and Progress

In May of 1975, the branch moved to the LDS Church's new building at West 65th Street and Columbus Avenue, along with the other units of the Church in



Bishop Nieto and his Bishopric

Manhattan. Moving to the new building was a "joy for everyone" according to América Cruz (Inwood 2nd Ward).⁹ President Spencer W. Kimball presided over the dedication of the new building, and President Nieto had the opportunity to speak at the meeting along with the bishops of the Manhattan First and Second Wards. President Nieto remembers that the prophet "was a very exact man, and he said to me, 'President Nieto, you have 5 minutes to

speak.' I was very careful to speak only for the 5 minutes that he had given me."¹⁰

On July 24, 1977, with President Nieto called to be its first bishop, the Spanish-American Branch became the Spanish Ward of Manhattan. The following year when the stake was reorganized to include Manhattan, the Bronx, Staten Island, most of Brooklyn, and a small part of Queens, Bishop Nieto was called as the second counselor to Frank Miller, the new Stake President. Gilberto Perea became the new bishop in the Spanish Ward. Former ward member Luís Rojas describes President Perea as "the worker bee; he worked nonstop. If something needed to be done, he did it. He would do whatever needed to be done for the well being of the [ward]."¹¹

Upon receiving his call to the stake presidency, President Nieto worried about his ability to communicate with the English-speakers in the stake. He asked Elder Robert Hales (who had grown up in Queens and was back in New York to reorganize the stake) for a blessing to help him with the language. The blessing he received had an immediate effect. That night, when President Nieto's former counselor Luís Rojas came to be interviewed to serve on the stake high

council, President Nieto was able to interpret for him.¹²

In another example of divine intervention overcoming language barriers, President Miller remembers an occasion in the Manhattan Spanish Ward when his help was solicited. "As they were telling me the story [in Spanish], I understood what the problem was. I didn't need the interpreter. My response had to be interpreted, but I experienced the gift of comprehension at that time."¹³

Linguistic inspiration continued as stake leaders worked to run the stake in two languages. They memorized interview questions in both languages¹⁴ and made an effort to call Spanish- and English-speakers to auxiliary presidencies and the High Council.¹⁵ The stake Relief Society Board had a Spanish Ward liason. During the summer of 1979, Paul Gunther organized Spanish language classes for stake leaders, taught by an Anglo Spanish-speaking returned missionary using materials from the Missionary Training Center. The six or so pupils met weekly. Brother Gunther remembers that although he never became fluent, by the end of the summer, he was able to read his High Council talks in Spanish.¹⁶

Besides the language gap between the Spanish Ward and the predominantly English-speaking stake leaders, President Miller and his predecessor George Watkins were concerned about the generational language gap within many Hispanic families.¹⁷ Speaking English at school, Hispanic children in the Spanish Ward learned English quickly and many preferred it to Spanish. Their parents generally learned English much more slowly. Stake leaders worried that this language disparity within families excluded parents from their children's English-speaking lives. They saw this trend as devastating to the families who attended the Spanish Ward and began an intensive drive to teach English to help parents communicate with their children.

In regular classes in the new building on 65th Street, the stake strongly encouraged members to learn as quickly as possible.¹⁸ Meanwhile, youth who had become more fluent in English than Spanish

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attended seminary classes in the English wards so that they could be taught the gospel in the language most comfortable for them.

The late 1970s brought more organizational changes to the Church across the New York City metro region. As the Church grew, the Spanish Ward in Manhattan was divided to create Spanish-speaking units in Brooklyn and the Bronx. In the 1980s, the Caldwell New Jersey stake also formed Spanish units, calling unit leaders from the Spanish Ward in Manhattan.¹⁹ In addition, the youth in the Spanish Ward were preparing to serve missions and become future Church leaders in and out of Spanish units. Two young men of that era who left on missions from the Spanish Ward and returned to become local leaders are Alejandro Soffiantini, the current stake president in Brooklyn, and Jorge Ordonola, who became the Queens West district president.

Broader changes in the Church also affected the Spanish Ward in Manhattan. In June of 1978, President Kimball received the revelation “extending Priesthood and temple blessings to all worthy male members of the Church.”²⁰ For Brother Raymond Rivera, the announcement was particularly significant. A black Honduran living in Brooklyn, Brother Rivera had been baptized in 1956 and had attended the Spanish-American Branch for years. Although he could not hold the priesthood, he had served faithfully as the ward clerk with special permission from Harold B. Lee. When the revelation was announced, Brother Rivera was ordained a priest in the Aaronic Priesthood the following Sunday. Three weeks later, he was one of three men ordained an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood.²¹ América Cruz remembers that his “happiness was overflowing.”²²

In 1982, Jaime Mir, the former novice Scoutmaster, became bishop. Romulo Macías (Inwood 1st Ward), a new convert at the time, met Bishop Mir before Sacrament Meeting on the Sunday after his baptism in August of that year. He remembers that the bishop shook his hand, handed him the manual for the youth Sunday School class, and called him to teach the class. Brother Macías accepted,

and was both welcomed into the ward and sustained as the new teacher that same day. Although he thought it was “a little crazy” to teach so soon after his baptism, Brother Macías credits the calling with keeping him involved in the Church from the beginning. He calls Bishop Mir “the best man that could ever come across my life.”²³

Namiana (Anny) Filión (Inwood 2nd Ward) remembers that Bishop Mir treated people kindly – especially the young people. He made them feel loved, and made them want to come to church. He worked closely with the youth, who loved him in return, and he encouraged them to invite their friends to church. She recalls that many people started attending church because of his warm, gentle manner, and some were later baptized.²⁴

In the 1980s, integration of Spanish-speakers in the stake was a focus among members and leaders. During the Spanish session of a 1982 stake conference at which President Thomas S. Monson spoke, President Monson “promised the saints that if they would be faithful, there would one day be a Spanish-speaking stake in New York. When he sat down, he said that he hadn’t planned on saying that,” recalls President Miller. “But, he is . . . very close to the Lord, [and he] depends on Him for inspiration and guidance.” The Spanish ward leaders were delighted at this promise, and committed to work towards this goal.²⁵

By 1985, the stake was ready for a division. Perhaps remembering President Monson’s comments, stake and area leaders considered the creation of a Spanish-speaking stake with the nine Spanish-speaking units in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey.²⁶ Feeling that the time wasn’t right for such action, however, Elder Franklin D. Richards (the senior president of the Seventy) and Paul Thompson (the regional representative) made the decision to divide the stake geographically. Manhattan and the Bronx remained the New York, New York Stake, and Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island became the New York East Stake.



Bishop Luís Gallegos at his farewell

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Spanish Saints in the City *(continued from previous page)*

A Flourishing Ward



Members perform in the Spanish Ward's annual Día de la Raza party

The bishop of the strong and growing Spanish Ward in Manhattan for most of the 1980s and the early 90s was Luís Gallegos. Sofía Soriano (Inwood 2nd Ward) describes him as the best bishop she ever had. He knew everyone in the large ward – each family member, not just the parents. He learned everyone's name and what everyone did for work. The young people loved and respected him, and he was aware of the activities of each auxiliary. "He was an incredible man, very blessed," she recalls.²⁷ Lynda Gunther (Manhattan 2nd Ward) remembers that although he carried a heavy burden during the long, sometimes difficult years he was bishop, he was cheerful and "cool as a cucumber." He always had a smile or funny look to lighten an anxious moment or relieve the stress of a too-long meeting.²⁸

During the nine years with Bishop Gallegos, members of the Spanish Ward enjoyed the fellowship of frequent activities together. Every summer, they looked forward to a picnic at Lake Liahona, a camp the Church owned in Upstate New York.²⁹ The active institute program strengthened young sisters and brothers in the ward, and every Friday night after class, the 15 – 20 institute students went out together.³⁰ The large primary had quarterly activities with scripture games and crafts for the children. The annual primary program in Sacrament Meeting was a much-anticipated production with children memorizing and rehearsing their parts for weeks.³¹

The youth attended seminary taught by Ross Burningham, Fiorella Horna, and Elena Nieves. Ross was a single member who joined the ward in 1985 when he was called to lead the Scouts. He was a mentor to many youth; José Gomez (Inwood 2nd Ward) credits Ross with being a powerful influence in helping him decide to serve a mission. Ross served in a variety of capacities in the ward, including in the bishopric as a counselor to Bishop Gallegos.

One annual activity that always strengthened membership was the ward party for Día de la Raza (Columbus Day). Members brought food and wore costumes from their countries of origin, many

of which were in the Carribean, but which also included Central and South America. After the food, different groups performed typical music and dances from their homelands. Some years, the party would go on from the early evening until past midnight.³²

Activities like this one helped resolve the cultural divisions between the many different nationalities within the ward, which had been a challenge since the earliest days of the branch. Lynda Gunther remembers a homemaking activity she attended as the stake relief society president about different word usages in different countries, and words that might be offensive in one country, yet innocuous in another. She recalls that it got the sisters laughing and more comfortable with one another, helping them understand their differences.³³

Regional linguistic differences aside, Spanish-speakers in the stake were often grouped together and sometimes did not feel integrated with the rest of the stake. Youth from that era remember the fun they had at institute dances, but also remember that the Spanish- and English-speakers didn't interact.³⁴ In the late 1980s, as the stake and area presidencies evaluated the growth and increasing cultural isolation of the Spanish units, they considered integrating them with the English wards.

Elder Loren Dunn, then the area president, was a strong proponent of integration in the interest of unity. But stake president Michael Young finally concluded that the Spanish units provided essential service opportunities for older, first-generation immigrants who would be less comfortable serving in an English ward. In addition, President Young felt it was essential to have all the members hear the gospel regularly taught in their own native language, and so the stake continued to operate in both languages.³⁵

In the early 1990s, the much loved former bishop and patriarch Jaime Mir developed cancer and became very sick. Although he had moved to New Jersey by that time, the Spanish Ward had a service honoring and thanking him in the chapel on 65th Street shortly before he died. His wife María brought him – pale, thin, and weak – from the hospital, where he was receiving chemotherapy. After she

had helped him to the pulpit so he could speak, he told the members of the ward that he was just waiting for God to take him home.³⁶ Former bishop Gilberto Perea composed a song for him which was performed at the service. Anny Filión remembers that she cried through the whole service, as did many of the ward members. “The whole world turned sad” when Bishop Mir died.³⁷

The 4th Ward

As the Spanish Ward continued to grow during the 1990s, stake president John Stone felt it was time to divide it and create an uptown Spanish-language unit. In September of 1993 the 5th Branch was created for those members who lived north of 155th Street (see article *From Haunted House to New Home* on page 5). The downtown ward was renamed the Manhattan 4th Ward and was led for a short while in the 1990s by Bishop Albis Gomez, a small, polite, and humble man who possessed a quiet power.³⁸ When Bishop Gomez moved to North Carolina in 1994, Amadeo Durante was called as the next Bishop. He was a hard-working man with a friendly smile and a warm, accepting manner. He led by the



Young Women from Manhattan 4th Ward dance at Especially for Youth event

book and strictly (and good-naturedly) followed Church policies. José Gomez remembers that Bishop Durante joked with Sacrament Meeting speakers that he didn't want to have to pass them a note telling them that they had gone over their time.³⁹ In 1997, Bishop Durante moved

to Texas, and Felix Pichardo was called to serve as the next 4th Ward bishop.

The years with Bishop Pichardo were particularly productive for temple work, both for living and vicarious ordinances. Arturo Tapia and Manuel Vera took a group of 20-25 people to the stake genealogy library every Sunday to research family history. As they had for years previously, the ward regularly attended the Washington, D.C. temple together, filling a bus nearly once a month. They would spend all day Saturday at the temple, arriving around 5:00 in the morning and leaving late in the afternoon. Guests and new members who could not participate in the temple sessions would spend their time at the Visitors' Center or walking around the grounds; youth did baptisms for the dead. Arturo Tapia estimates that of the endowed members currently attending the 4th Ward, the majority went to the temple for the first time during this era.

In December of 1999, Kurt Wickham, a member of the Manhattan 1st Ward, was called as the new bishop of the 4th Ward. During his more than three years as bishop, the ward enjoyed tremendous growth, with sometimes as many as 10-15 baptisms each month.⁴⁰ One of these new converts was a 24-year-old from Mexico named Juan Carlos Ortiz. Juan Carlos had met the missionaries on

the street in New York City and had been enthusiastic about the gospel ever since. After his baptism, he began preparing to serve a mission as soon as possible, but learned that since he was in the US illegally, he would have to return to Mexico in order to be called on a mission.



The Washington D.C. Temple

Leaving behind his hopes of living in the states, he returned to Mexico City and received his mission call to Mérida, Mexico. The 4th Ward paid for his mission entirely from ward member contributions, even though he would not be returning to the ward. The first missionary called from the 4th Ward in several years, Juan Carlos was an example to other youth. Shortly after he left, Juan Luís (Luiggy) Peguero, left for his mission in Oakland, California (Spanish-speaking), and Mónica Paulino served in the Temple Square mission.

With the many new members joining the 4th Ward, fellowshipping and nurturing new testimonies became a large part of the members' work. Under Elders Quorum President Ignacio Medel, the 4th Ward began using what Bishop Wickham calls “home teaching blitzes” to make sure all the members were cared for. The priesthood “would meet every week on a certain night and blitz a neighborhood doing home teaching visits,” remembers Bishop Wickham. “Many members were reactivated, and the brothers who participated had really neat experiences. It was really an amazing effort by the priesthood holders.”⁴¹

When Bishop Wickham moved to San Diego in February of 2003, David Skouson, from the Inwood 1st Ward,

Spanish Saints in the City *(continued from previous page)*

was called as the new bishop. When he was called, the 4th Ward was meeting with the 5th Ward (an English ward) for Sacrament Meeting because of temple construction at the stake center. The joint Sacrament Meetings alternated weekly between Spanish and English with headset interpretation for members who were not bilingual. Though difficult for members of both wards, this experience helped English- and Spanish-speaking members develop a sense of camaraderie as they reached out to communicate with each other in a way that had not happened before.⁴²

In August of 2003, several Young Women from the Manhattan 4th Ward (accompanied by a few other youth from the Manhattan 1st and the Inwood 2nd Wards) were able to go to Especially For Youth at the Brigham Young University Provo campus together. The group, which included one young man and 23 mostly Spanish-speaking young women, was conspicuous at BYU. At the EFY talent show, they were a sensation when they performed a dance number in “I ♥ NY” t-shirts. They had the opportunity to sit on the stand with the Church President Gordon B. Hinckley during a Sacrament Meeting, meet the General Young Women President Susan Tanner, and hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.⁴³ These

experiences strengthened their testimonies and their resolve to live the gospel.⁴⁴

Home from Utah, the youth found that one of the greatest challenges for the ward continued to be managing its growth. In a congregation where the majority of members were first generation converts, teaching new members about living the gospel day-to-day became an increasingly large task. One important tool for that job was something at which ward had always excelled – temple attendance. Instructed that new members who visit the temple within two months of baptism are far more likely to remain active,⁴⁵ Bishop Skouson and the 4th Ward worked hard to make sure that newly baptized members went to the temple (in Boston or Washington, D.C.) to do baptisms or just to walk around the grounds.

In June of 2003, shortly after the dedication of the Manhattan, New York Temple, Bishop Skouson and his family moved to Las Vegas, Nevada. Scott Higbee—the 4th Ward’s High Council representative and a member of the Manhattan 1st Ward—was called to be the new bishop. Since the dedication of the temple, the ward has continued to re-activate many families with improved home teaching, and sacrament meeting attendance has increased by more than 50%. Members of the ward

continue their faithful temple worship, attending as a ward once a month and taking the youth to do baptisms for the dead. In addition, an unusually high proportion of 4th Ward members volunteer in the temple. Temple President John Stone says he is grateful for the many 4th Ward sisters and brothers who run the Temple laundry and staff the appointment desk.⁴⁶

From its small beginnings in the original Spanish groups of the Manhattan Ward and Brooklyn Branch, the Manhattan 4th Ward has grown tremendously. As the parent of many other Spanish-speaking units in the New York area, it trained generations of leaders. Over the years, it welcomed many new converts to the church and many new Latter-day Saint immigrants to the country. The members of 4th Ward and its predecessors built a strong tradition of faithful temple work and now rejoice in the blessings of a temple in the heart of Manhattan. As for the old replica of the Salt Lake Temple at the Mormon Pavilion—only a few members remain who remember the exhibit at the World’s Fair. But the influence of that exhibit on the Hispanic pioneers of New York City is felt today in the testimonies of the Spanish-speaking Saints in and beyond the Manhattan 4th Ward.

¹ In Queens, 8 out of 17 units were Spanish speaking in 1999; in the Bronx 4 of 6; in Brooklyn 5 of 12; Manhattan 2 of 9; and in Staten Island 1 of 2 (James Lucas, chapter in the book, *New York Glory: Religions in the City*, p. 201).

² Lirio de Belén Cruz Pacheco, interview with Elena Nieves, December 2003

³ Frank Miller, interviews with James Lucas, Feb/March 1997

⁴ Manuel Nieto, interview with Al Gamez, December 2003

⁵ Manuel Nieto

⁶ Romulo Macías, phone interview with Sara Anderson 4/4/04

⁷ Manuel Nieto

⁸ Frank Miller

⁹ América Cruz, interview with Al and Genny Gamez, October 2003

¹⁰ Manuel Nieto

¹¹ Luís Rojas, interview with Al Gamez, December 2003

¹² Frank Miller

¹³ Frank Miller

¹⁴ Frank Miller

¹⁵ Lynda Gunther, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/25/04

¹⁶ Paul Gunther, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/2/04

¹⁷ Lynda Gunther

¹⁸ Lynda Gunther

¹⁹ Frank Miller

²⁰ Doctrine and Covenants, Official Declaration 2

²¹ Frank Miller

²² América Cruz

²³ Romulo Macías, phone interview with Sara Anderson, 1/18/04

²⁴ Namiana Filión, phone interview with Sara Anderson, 2/9/04

²⁵ Frank Miller

²⁶ Frank Miller

²⁷ Sofia Soriano, interview with Sara Anderson 1/24/04

²⁸ Lynda Gunther

²⁹ Sofia Soriano, interview with Sara Anderson, 1/24/04

³⁰ Tati Dominguez, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/2/04; Arleen Macías, phone interview with Sara Anderson, 2/26/04

³¹ Sofia Soriano

³² Lynda Gunther

³³ Lynda Gunther

³⁴ Tati Dominguez, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/2/04

³⁵ Michael Young, interview with Sara Anderson 2/15/04

³⁶ Namiana Filión

³⁷ Sofia Soriano, phone interview with Sara Anderson 3/30/04

³⁸ José Gomez, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/13/05

³⁹ José Gomez

⁴⁰ Kurt Wickham, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/22/04

⁴¹ Kurt Wickham, email 2/23/04

⁴² Kurt Wickham, 2/23/04; Laurel Dougall, email 3/15/04

⁴³ Melissa Puente, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/24/04

⁴⁴ Melissa Puente; Kurt Wickham, phone interview with Sara Anderson 2/22/04

⁴⁵ Mission president Nelson Boren, as recalled by David Skouson, phone interview with Sara Anderson, 3/2/04

⁴⁶ John Stone, interview with Sara Anderson, 2/9/05