



Aerial view of the Benemérito de las Américas campus, Mexico City, Mexico.

Transitioning Benemérito de las Américas into the Mexico Missionary Training Center

Barbara E. Morgan

“This is a dramatic moment in Church History,” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve noted following the momentous announcement that Benemérito, the Church-owned high school in Mexico City, was being converted into a Missionary Training Center at the end of the school year. To the nearly 2,400 Mexican youth and thousands more parents and leaders throughout Mexico listening via satellite on January 29, 2013, he continued, “You have lived to see your role in one of the most historic moments in the Church.”¹ Though dramatic, this change was not completely unexpected, but was rather the climax of decades of developments in Latter-day Saint education. To appreciate the significance of this transition, an understanding of the process, policies, experiences, and people involved in the transformation of Benemérito de las Américas into the second largest LDS Missionary Training Center is critical.

A Changing Focus in LDS Church Education

Since its inception, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has placed heavy emphasis on the spiritual and secular education of its members. LDS scripture teaches that “the glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36), and emphasizes the importance of gaining intelligence, stating that “what-

BARBARA E. MORGAN (barbara_morgan@byu.edu) is an assistant professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. She received her BS and MA from Brigham Young University and her PhD in Instructional Psychology from Utah State University. In addition to her continued interest and research in the field of instructional psychology and its relation to conversion, she also specializes in international Church history and education, with a primary focus on Mexico. She is also a member of the Mormon History Association and the Religious Education Association.

ever principle of intelligence man attains in this life will rise with him in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18–19). The Newel K. Whitney store, the Kirtland printing office, and the Kirtland Temple were places where Church members participated in spiritual and secular education in the 1830s, followed in the 1840s by additional educational establishments, including a university, in Nauvoo, Illinois. Soon after the Latter-day Saints entered the Salt Lake Valley, schools followed, culminating with President Wilford Woodruff’s announcement in 1888 that “the time has arrived when the proper education of our children should be taken in hand by us as a people.”² Local leaders responded by creating over thirty Church-sponsored stake academies, including an academy at Colonial Juarez, a Mormon colony in northern Mexico, in 1895.³

By 1920, however—due mainly to financial difficulties and the improvement of the public education system—Church leaders decided on a policy that led to the closure of almost all Church schools. (This policy eventually led to the formation of the seminary program in the public schools, and still later the establishment of the institute program in the colleges and universities.) Elder Rulon S. Wells, a member of the First Council of the Seventy explained: “The present policy of the church . . . in withdrawing from secular education, must not be construed by the people as a withdrawal from the great cause of education; but it does seem like an unnecessary duplication of work for the church to undertake to do, in an adequate way, what is already being so well done by our public schools.”⁴ In accordance with this policy, by the 1940s all Church academies had been closed, with the exception of Academia Juarez in the Mormon colonies.

However, as the Church began to expand internationally, educational deficiencies in other parts of the world became pronounced. Recognizing the need for better schools, during the administration of David O. McKay (1951–1970), an educator by profession, and one who had extensive international experience, Church schools were established in areas where a high LDS membership was concentrated and where educational facilities and opportunities were inadequate. During McKay’s tenure, nearly one hundred Church schools commenced operation in the Pacific, Mexico, and South America.⁵ Over forty of these, mostly on the elementary level, were in Mexico alone.

On November 3, 1963, the groundbreaking ceremony for what would become the largest school in Mexico—consisting of a primary, secondary, preparatory, and normal school—was held. At these services, Elder Marion G. Romney remarked:

This school for which we are breaking ground today is destined to become a great Spanish-speaking cultural center. Its influence will reach far beyond the valley of Mexico. . . . It will be felt in all of Latin America, including South America. Hundreds of thousands of people will come here. Going out from here, they will



Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve (left) presided over the Benemérito de las Américas groundbreaking services and offered the dedicatory prayer. Harold Brown, president of the Mexico City Stake (right), translated for Elder Romney. November 4, 1963. Photograph in the possession of Barbara Morgan.

help the Nation build up its education, its culture and its spirituality. This school will prepare men for a better future here on the earth, and for eternal life in the world to come. . . . Those who attend will learn of the pre-earth life and of principles and practices which will prepare them for the life to come. . . . It is my prayer that our Father in Heaven will bless . . . the Mexican people; that they may come to an understanding of the real purpose of this institution.⁶

These international school endeavors resulted in great benefits among Church members, and some nonmembers. However, the financial burden placed upon the Church, and expanding international needs—especially in regard to religious education—led leaders of the Church Educational System (CES) to reevaluate their policy on Church schools. The restructuring of the Church’s educational program began to take place in 1970 with the death of President David O. McKay. The retirements of Ernest L. Wilkinson, head of the Unified School System and President of BYU; Harvey L. Taylor, chancellor of the Unified School System; and William E. Berrett, head of the seminary and institute program, were also catalysts for change.⁷

In 1971, Neal A. Maxwell, newly appointed commissioner to direct the entire Church Educational System, formulated three basic policies in his official report on education: (1) “Literacy and basic education are gospel needs,” (2) “Church programs will not duplicate otherwise available

opportunities especially in higher education,” and (3) “ultimately all high school and college-age Latter-day Saints should have access to weekday religious education, in tandem with secular education.” Maxwell’s report also stipulated that “The general policy for governing the Church Educational System rests on the assumption that non-religious education is usually provided by the state.” Furthermore, “since members contribute taxes to support their local, state, and national governments around the world, they are entitled to and should participate fully in those systems of education.” The report concluded that “where other educational systems are non-existent, seriously deficient or inaccessible to our members, the Church may elect to provide basic education for its members under carefully established criteria.”⁸

Pursuant to this policy (and similar to the one enacted in the 1920s), the number of Church schools was dramatically reduced. By the mid-1980s, all schools in South America, nearly twenty schools in the Pacific, and all but two of the forty-one schools in Mexico—Academia Juarez and Benemérito de las Américas—were closed, leaving only a few schools in Mexico and the Pacific. Even more recently, on June 29, 2006, the closure of the Church College of New Zealand was announced, and the school was closed in November 2009.⁹ As the educational system improved in other countries where Church schools existed, questions regarding their future became eminent.

The Decision for Mexico

Since opening its doors in 1963, nearly 23,000 students have attended Benemérito. They have come from all different walks, many from extreme poverty, some of whom experienced warm showers and three meals a day for the first time. Most of these students came from Mexico, with others coming from Central and South America. A few also came from the United States, Canada, and Europe. The majority of the students lived on campus with “foster families” and participated in a variety of cultural, sports, academic, and religious activities. For most of the students and faculty, it was more than just a school—it became their home. From the school have come doctors, teachers, attorneys, political leaders, LDS bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, and General Authorities. Over the years the school has become known throughout Mexico for its academic prowess, its faith-based religious instruction, its excellent athletic programs, and its folk dance teams.¹⁰

However, over the past several decades the public and parochial educational system in Mexico has continued to improve. This improvement raised questions in light of Church policy—primarily among the local Mexican members and leaders—regarding the purpose of continuing to operate a large

Church boarding school in Mexico City. Some questioned the wisdom of having young members of the Church in Mexico leave their families to attend Benemérito. For example, when asked about this situation, Jose L. Alonso remarked: “One of the basic doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ is families. Why are we separating families, and having our youth leave at such a critical age, when we as parents should be raising them? My children left our home to attend Benemérito when they were only fourteen. From there they left for missions, went to college and are now married. I lost an incredible opportunity to be with my children during the most critical times of their lives.”¹¹ Others have questioned the wisdom of taking the brightest and most active youth away from their hometowns where they could be a light and an influence for good. Some local members questioned the use of Church funds to duplicate already available education on the high school level. A few, including local priesthood leaders, questioned the Church’s focus on high school students, feeling that the real need was in the area of higher education, and suggested that Benemérito be transitioned into a junior college, technical school, or even a university, which would play a role in Mexico similar to that of BYU north of the border.

With these questions becoming more frequent and vocal, Church leaders, including the Church Board of Education, considered closing Benemérito. “The future of the school had been on the table for over ten years,” Elder Paul V. Johnson, Commissioner of Church Education said. “But the right reason to close the school never came to fruition.”¹² However, the catalyst for the change came with President Thomas S. Monson’s announcement in 2012, which lowered the age requirement for full-time missionaries. CES, like other departments throughout the Church, was asked to make changes to free up financial resources and provide possible assistance for this expanded missionary effort. Near the end of November 2013, leaders of the Church’s institutions of higher education—including Commissioner Johnson, Chad H. Webb of Seminary and Institutes (S&I), and the presidents of the three Brigham Young University campuses—met for their monthly presidents’ roundtable discussion. Of primary focus was the increased financial burden placed upon the Church and the immediate need for missionary housing and training facilities. At the end of the meeting, the idea was cautiously suggested that the Church’s high school in Mexico, Benemérito de las Américas, be converted into a missionary training center (MTC). This suggestion “triggered the immediate decision to convert Benemérito into an MTC.”¹³

The suggestion to convert Benemérito into an MTC “hit me like lightning,” Paul Johnson explained. From this meeting, he took the suggestion to Elder David F. Evans, executive director of the Missionary Department of the Church, who knew very little about Benemérito. After asking

him if he would be interested in this consideration, Evans responded that this could be the answer the department was looking for. A few days later, Johnson spoke with Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve, chair of both the Church's Board of Education and the Missionary Executive Committee, who gave preliminary approval. Johnson then met with the Board of Education, which included Elder Nelson, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, also of the Twelve; Linda Burton, General President of the Relief Society; and Elder Donald L. Hallstrom of the Presidency of the Seventy. Following this meeting, Johnson met with the Missionary Executive Committee, composed of Elder Nelson, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder David F. Evans of the Seventy, and Bishop Gérald Caussé, first counselor in the Presiding Bishopric. Every time the proposal to make Benemérito into an MTC was presented, "almost immediately, people knew, this was the right thing to do," Johnson later recalled.¹⁴

With such enthusiastic support from leaders in Salt Lake City, Chad H. Webb, administrator over Seminaries and Institutes and all Church schools, referred the proposal to the Mexico Area Presidency for further consideration. The presidency, which had already been pondering the future of the school, reported: "Our reaction was unanimously positive. It filled us with joy. All of us. There were no objections or doubts. We knew it was the correct decision."¹⁵

With the Missionary Department, Church Board of Education, and the Mexico Area Presidency all in agreement, Elders Nelson, Johnson, and Evans presented the idea to the First Presidency, who asked detailed questions and were very open to the idea. However, before the final decision was made in early January 2013, and while the students and faculty were still away for winter break, Elder Johnson and Steven Allen, managing director of the Missionary Department, in addition to a few others from that department, visited Benemérito. "We went through the whole campus, nearly ninety acres," Johnson recalled. "The missionary department was blown away because the facilities were way better than they expected. Benemérito has everything: a health center, a cafeteria, a gym, an auditorium, classrooms, and dorms. It's unbelievable. It's exactly as if it were meant to be an MTC. In fact, some of us felt that it was built for this very purpose."¹⁶

Upon returning to Utah, the Missionary Department finalized the proposal. Only a few days later, on January 10, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve gave the final approval of transitioning Benemérito into an MTC. "It was an answer to our prayers," Elder Johnson expressed. "First of all, it saved the Church millions of dollars, in the ongoing cost of running the school as well as the cost of building a new or expanding the old [Mexico] MTC. Second, speed. With the big bubble of missionaries coming

the summer of 2013, they needed something that was already ready. With this facility, they can walk in and house 1,300 missionaries without having to make one change.”¹⁷

Preparing for the Announcement

Only a few hours after the final decision regarding Benemérito had been made, Carl B. Pratt and his wife Karen arrived at Church headquarters expecting that he would be set apart as the president for the small Mexico MTC as it currently existed. However, when Elders Nelson and Holland entered the room the first thing they said was, “Please sit down. We have a lot to tell you.” They explained that they had just come from their Thursday morning temple meetings and had approved the decision to make the Benemérito into an MTC. Pratt had previously served as the area president of Mexico for four years, had given devotionals at the school, and had participated in many activities, programs, and performances and was well acquainted with its facilities. “Benemérito is a special place,” he stated, “but over the years, with the growth of the Church in Mexico, the school has only been able to educate a privileged few. That has been a concern for many in leadership positions in Mexico.” He then added, “When they told me they were changing Benemérito into an MTC, I thought the idea was wonderful. It was absolutely perfect.”¹⁸

Knowing that this transition would mean teachers and other faculty would lose their jobs in June of that year, and that students would be needing to find a new school, it was decided that the sooner the announcement was made, the better. With Elder Nelson’s role as the chair of both the Missionary Executive Committee and the Board of Education, he received the assignment to preside over the meeting when the announcement would be made.

The next step was to announce the decision to the Mexico Area Presidency. They too were thrilled with the final decision. “It was a miracle in so many ways,” Area President Daniel L. Johnson declared. “First, I had never seen such an important decision as this, made with such rapidness in the Church. Second, the size of the Mexico MTC will be increased by ten times, and there needed to be the right person to be able to handle this,” he explained. “To have President Carl Pratt, such an experienced leader in the Church in missionary work and in Mexico, already called as the Mexico MTC mission president was more than a coincidence. Third, in order to have this transition work smoothly we needed to have a principal with the ability to efficiently communicate with students, teachers, and parents. Alfredo Miron was assigned to be the director of the school only seven months ago. Both of these men received their assignments and were put in place by the Lord

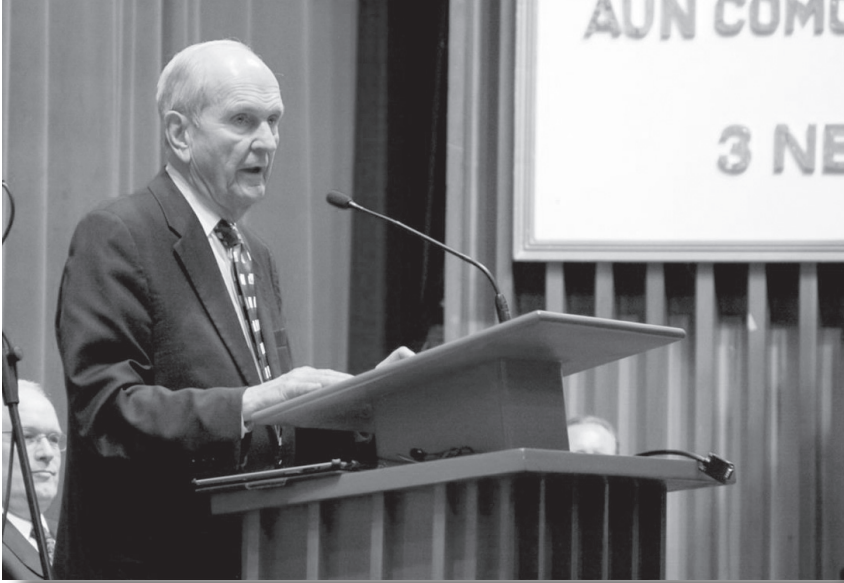
before the idea of a transition from the school to an MTC was even thought of.”¹⁹

With only a couple of weeks to prepare for the announcement, and desiring “not to go before the First Presidency” by leaking the information too soon, the Mexico Area Presidency was careful with the information. Due to his responsibilities in the Church, as well as in the Church Educational System, Abraham Martinez, the area director for Seminaries and Institutes and an Area Seventy, was informed immediately. Alfredo Miron, the director of the school, was informed by the Area Presidency, but only days before the announcement. “I decided in that moment,” Miron stated, “that I would support the decision. I knew there were hard times ahead, as I would be in charge of communicating with teachers, parents and students following the announcement. As members of the Church we say that we follow the prophet, but now we were being put to the test to see if we would follow the prophet with our actions.”²⁰

Just prior to the announcement, the Area Presidency had flyers distributed throughout Mexico announcing an important meeting to be held on the school campus on January 29, 2013, inviting all members in Mexico who were in any way associated with Benemérito to attend a broadcast via satellite, but no further information was given. Although the members did not know exactly what was going to be announced at this meeting, because of the deliberate ambiguity of the invitation, there was much speculation. Many guessed that the announcement would be a larger school, possibly a university. Some even thought that perhaps the school would be transitioned into a temple. Others speculated that perhaps the school was being closed and that it would likely follow the pattern set for the closing of the Church College of New Zealand, which had been phased out over a three-year period. It seems that no one correctly speculated what was going to happen.

The Announcement

On January 29, 2013, two separate meetings were held at Benemérito, with a number of Church leaders and officials present for the occasion. The first meeting was a closed announcement to the teachers, staff, and stake presidents throughout Mexico, and the area presidency. The second session, which was broadcast via satellite throughout Mexico, included students, parents, alumni, and leaders, and those living in the Mexico City area. In both sessions, Elder Daniel L. Johnson (Mexico Area President, First Quorum of Seventy) made the announcement. In the first session Elder Benjamin de Hoyos (counselor in the Mexico Area Presidency, First Quorum of Seventy) gave brief remarks, while Elder Jose L. Alonso (counselor in the



Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve speaking at the meeting announcing that Benemérito would become the Mexico Missionary Training Center, January 29, 2013. Photograph courtesy Esli Hernandez.

Mexico Area Presidency, First Quorum of Seventy) did in the second session. Alfredo Miron (director of Benemérito), Carl B. Pratt (Mexico City MTC president), Bishop Gérald Caussé (counselor in the Presiding Bishopric), Elder Paul V. Johnson (Church Commissioner of Education, First Quorum of the Seventy), Elder David F. Evans (executive director of the Missionary Department, First Quorum of Seventy), and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland and Elder Russell M. Nelson (Quorum of the Twelve) all spoke in both sessions. Each session was conducted by the member of the Area Presidency.²¹

After briefly explaining the need for more space to house the rapidly increasing numbers of missionaries throughout the world in response to the change in missionary age, Elder Daniel L. Johnson announced: “The First Presidency have considered and analyzed every possible avenue, and the best solution was to transform the Benemérito into an MTC. . . . The school year will continue, but it will be the last that the school will have. Benemérito will graduate, along with the final group of students, transforming itself into an MTC beginning July of this year.” To the emotional students and leaders he continued: “This decision that was made was inspired by God. This is what the Lord desires for this institution in this time.”²²

Those who gave remarks following the announcement spoke in support of it. Elder Paul V. Johnson described his experience walking through the campus earlier that month while all the teachers and students were gone for the winter break. “Even though the campus was beautiful and the spirit was grand, something was different than my other visits to this school,” he explained. “This campus was basically empty. There were only a few employees and no students nor teachers. The rooms and auditorium were empty. There was no movement in the dorms.” Alluding perhaps to what has happened at other schools, and the inevitable reality that at some point this school would be closed, he continued, “I was grateful to know that the future of this campus would not be empty with vacant rooms. Instead, this place will continue with much energy.”²³

President Carl B. Pratt, who would be transitioning as an MTC president over approximately one hundred missionaries to over a thousand, focused his remarks on missionary work and the future of Mexico. “Brothers, I testify of the blessings that we have had and those that will come to Mexico and to the whole world because of what is happening here right now.”²⁴ Continuing on the theme of missionary work, Elder David Evans affirmed that the transition was being directed by the Lord, and he invited the students in the audience to return to their homes as a light to their family and friends and then return to the MTC as full-time missionaries. “We know the history of this institution, we know that President McKay was inspired to create it. We know that President Romney was inspired when he dedicated it, but now we have to believe the words the Lord is now speaking and will yet speak to us,” he declared. “There will be thousands upon thousands of missionaries that will go through here that will bless thousands and thousands and millions of lives. And so it is with great humility and gratitude that we even attempt now to convert this campus into an MTC. We would only do this with the assurance that it is Heavenly Father’s will.”²⁵

In his address, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland inquired rhetorically, “Do you believe God knows everything?” and then answered, “I do too.” Continuing, he asked if God knew at the time ground was broken nearly a half a century earlier that “this day [the closing of the school] would also come?” To which he replied, “He did, of course he did. In fact, *that* day may have been done and that school started in order that *this* day would come, because we need an MTC immediately; we need it now. And if we started to build one tomorrow it would take three years, and millions of dollars to construct. . . . I believe God knew this day would come the day we broke ground for this school. . . . This is a dramatic moment in Church history. You have lived to see your role in one of the most historic moments in the Church.”²⁶



LDS General Authorities, education officials, and local leaders at Benemérito on the occasion of the announcement that the school would become the Mexico MTC. L-r: Chad H. Webb, Elder David F. Evans, Elder Benjamin De Hoyos, Elder Daniel L. Johnson, Elder Jose L. Alonso, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, Elder Russell M. Nelson, Elder Paul V. Johnson, Bishop Gérald Caussé, Elder Abraham Martinez, and Israel Morales.

Speaking as both the chairman of the Missionary Executive Council and the Church Educational System, Elder Russell M. Nelson was the concluding speaker. “Yes, today we’re in the middle of this story. January 29 will be an important day in the history of the Church, but the future lies before us,” he told the audience. “As Elder Holland has pointed out, instead of a few hundred being educated here at Benemérito, many thousands will be trained. Many of them will come from other countries. They will not only receive training, they will develop a love for Mexico, its language, and its people. They will be pioneers in their missions. They will be leaders throughout the entire world. So that’s what we see in the future.” He expressed appreciation to the students, alumni, and faculty who had “made of this place a very sacred place in the kingdom of God” and predicted that they would “become great leaders in the Church.” He then affirmed: “This hallowed ground where we sit tonight will become more sacred with each passing year. Better, higher, and holier purposes will be served in the future more than they’ve ever been before. Now I don’t know what the future will bring. I don’t know when this story will end. Perhaps it will never end. It will continue on and on, more and more, higher and higher to bless the lives of generations yet unborn. This sacred place will help the country of Mexico to become all that God intends it to become. With that sanctification, it will be a blessing to the entire world.”²⁷

Reaction to the Announcement

Following the meeting with the faculty, the teachers lined up and hugged the leaders on the stand, supporting the decision and expressing gratitude for having been a part of Benemérito. “When I heard the announcement, my first thought was, ‘What am I going to do with my family?’” expressed Victor, a newly hired teacher and young father. “But I felt that he [God] wouldn’t abandon me, and that this was the right thing. I felt that as a result of our sacrifice, we would not only see more missionaries, but more missions, more stakes, and more temples in Mexico.” Silvia Alvarez, another teacher, explained: “I came here as a nonmember student. I joined the Church here, then served a mission, was sealed in the temple, and then became a chemistry teacher here. Up to this point, Benemérito has been the greatest place for me and my family, but I know that there must still be something even better for us in the future. I believe that the Lord is closing this school so that, among other things, he can strengthen the Church in Mexico.” Jaime, a teacher and parent of one of the students added: “I had a variety of feelings swell in my heart when I heard the announcement, but to have this school taken away from my daughter was the most difficult feeling I had to cope with.” Following the announcement to the students however, he saw his daughter. “I could see the smile behind her tears, he recalled, “and I knew that Elder Nelson’s promise that everything would be okay was true.”²⁸ With tears streaming down their faces, parents, alumni, and students in unison sang the Benemérito school song, shouting at the end: “B de A, vivira!”²⁹ (“Benemérito de las Américas will live on!”)

Reflecting on his experience as a participant in the announcement of the transition of the school into an MTC, Elder Paul V. Johnson expressed gratitude for how well the decision had been accepted. “Benemérito has been the crown jewel of our school system. It was hard for me to say goodbye, but that got drowned out by the feeling that this is the right thing to do.”³⁰

The sentiments expressed by Elder Johnson were similar to those of many others. Rebecca, a student in attendance at the meeting explained: “I started to cry when they made the announcement, but I soon became happy as I began to realize what this announcement meant. We all now had the opportunity to be missionaries. Some of us would be going home to be missionaries at our schools, others would be returning to Benemérito to be missionaries in other parts of the world. I realized that we were being asked to prepare for the Second Coming of the Lord, and I could choose to be a part of this great work.” Another student, Daniba, shared: “When I heard the announcement I was very sad, but at the same time I knew that the decision was inspired of God. I was sad because I had younger siblings that were hoping to come here,

but I also knew that all of us would be willing to give up our seats so that other missionaries could come here and prepare to teach the gospel to thousands of people.”³¹

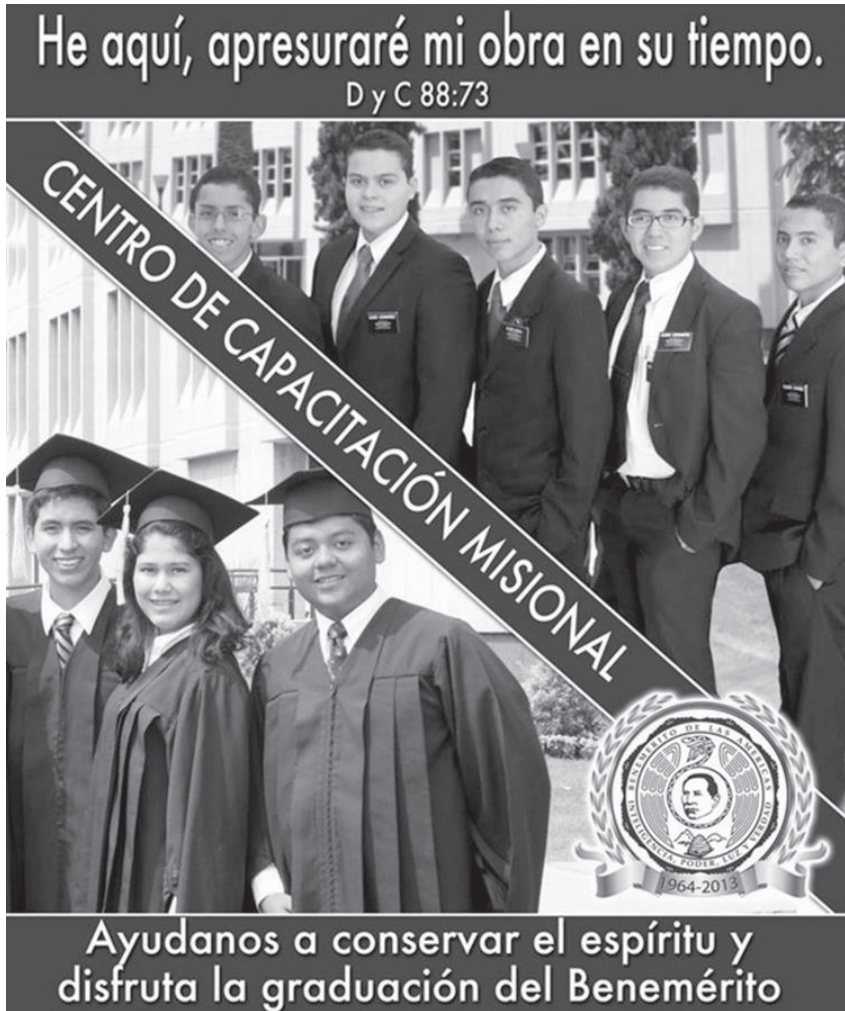
Facebook and other social media were flooded with comments, memories, pictures, and expressions of faith from those associated with the school. Maya Yerman, an alumnus of the school, posted on Facebook only minutes after the announcement: “Tears of love streamed from my eyes as I thought of the home of my youth, Benemérito de las Américas. In this place I felt the love of the Lord, and it helped me cultivate a testimony of this Church. What a blessing it was to be able to grow up there. Now the blessings of this institution will bless the hearts of millions of people because of the missionaries who enter their doors. Benemérito will live on!”³²

Although there were some who expressed disagreement with the decision of the leaders of the Church, the reaction of the Saints was overwhelmingly positive. Ruminating on his experience during the evening of the announcement and the response from the local members, Elder Russell M. Nelson remarked: “It was a tender thing to close their high school. . . It would be a bitter pill to swallow, but the faith of the Saints was remarkable. They all raised their hands to support this proposition uniformly. We have not had one ounce of repercussion, or ill feeling on behalf of the Mexican Saints.”³³

Two weeks after the announcement, Benemérito had more students and alumni on campus at one time than at any time previously. Each year Benemérito holds an anniversary celebration for the school, and during the past year preparations were being made for the fiftieth anniversary of its founding to be held in February 2014. However, due to the unforeseen announcement of the closure of the school, and knowing this would be the last year for this anniversary celebration, arrangements were immediately made for the final campus anniversary party. On February 15, over 15,000 people from all throughout Mexico and other parts of the world swarmed the campus for a two-day celebration marking forty-nine years of the school’s existence.

At the time of the celebration, a sign, three stories high and about two stories wide, suspended over the library, could be seen by all who entered the campus. On one side of the banner were three students in their black graduation robes, and on the other side a handful of missionaries dressed in black suits and white shirts, their missionary name tags clearly showing. Near the top in bold lettering was the scripture Elder Holland had challenged all students of Benemérito to memorize: “Behold, I will hasten my work in its time” (D&C 88:73). At the bottom was an invitation to “help us preserve the Spirit and enjoy the graduation of Benemérito.”

Although the organizers of the celebration anticipated some protests from those who disagreed with the decision to close the school, no nega-



Banner depicting the transition of Benemérito to the Mexico Missionary Training Center. The banner hung from the school library during the 49th anniversary celebration in February 2013. Image courtesy Barbara Morgan.

tive demonstrations occurred. In fact, the true spirit of Benemérito showed as students, alumni, parents, and faculty energetically paraded through the campus, danced, joined in class reunions, whitewashed the “B” on the mountain for the last time, sang the school song, sold school paraphernalia, participated in athletic competitions, took pictures, ate meals together, and shared uplifting stories. Alumni from the first generations shared experiences and described miracles that they had witnessed as students, as well as expressing the impact the school, teachers, leaders, and friends had on their lives. There was heartache knowing that this would be their last reunion, and for the majority, the last time they would likely be on campus, but overall those in attendance expressed sentiments of faith, humility, and gratitude.

Closing of the School

Over the next few months, assisting the future needs of the students and faculty became top priority. At the end of the school year approximately one thousand students would be returning to their homes and would need to enroll in other schools. To help in these efforts, Benemérito administrators organized a school fair to which government and private high schools throughout Mexico came to showcase their schools and encouraged students to enroll by offering scholarships and grants. Because Benemérito was recognized throughout Mexico for its excellence in many areas, other schools were eager to encourage enrollment of the students. Although most of the students and parents recognized that the religious environment and the unique educational atmosphere offered at Benemérito would not be duplicated at other schools, they also believed that they would find a school that would meet their educational needs adequately. Some struggled, knowing that the price of a similar education in a private school would be above their financial ability, but they were willing to make compromises. For those students needing extra funding, a group of Latter-day Saints known as *Escalera*, who had provided scholarships at Benemérito, offered to help students who would be attending other schools. Among all of these concerns, many parents were gratified to know that their children would be attending schools closer to home.

Because the Church offered an excellent severance package for the administrators, teachers, and employees, the vast majority of them finished off the school year with adequate benefits to help prepare them for the transition. Although many teachers quickly found jobs for the next school year in other schools, some joined together and opened their own school. A few were hired to teach seminary and institute in localities throughout Mexico, others were hired as administrators for the new MTC, while some simply chose to retire.

From the time of the announcement in late January, to the high school graduation on June 13, and finally to the official conversion of the school to an MTC on June 26, administrators, teachers, faculty, parents, and students worked diligently to ensure that the transition would go as smoothly as possible. June 2 marked the beginning of the end as the final stake conference for the Zarahemla campus stake convened. During the next week, students took their final exams and began preparing to return to their homes. On Friday, June 7, the closing ceremonies were held for the school. Those who were among the original cohort met together to commemorate forty-nine years of the school's existence. A parade followed; students, alumni, and faculty walked around campus together one last time. During the school's final assembly, they joined together in song and prayer and listened to remarks from their peers and leaders. That evening, sophomore and junior students enjoyed their last Benemérito formal dance before leaving for their homes the following day. Students danced the night away, taking pictures, laughing, crying, promising to stay in touch, and wishing each other well. Saturday morning, the campus began to empty as young men and women loaded their luggage in their parents' vehicles or on school busses to return to their homes.

On Sunday, June 9, only two student wards, primarily made up of seniors who were awaiting their graduation the following weekend, remained. Interestingly, these were wards made up of high school-age young people, not the usual college student ward members. In the sacrament meetings, the bishops released all those with ward callings, and a member of the stake presidency released the bishoprics. After asking all who had callings and were being released to stand, almost the entire congregation stood.

Graduation, and its accompanying festivities, took place on Friday, June 14, and included a full schedule of activities—seminary graduation in the morning, a traditional folk dance in the afternoon, a banquet, the graduation exercises, and the senior ball. Between the two graduations, surrounded by family and friends, Shazer Luis opened his mission call. The letter informed him that he would serve as a missionary in Mexico City and would be entering the new MTC on July 26. A few hours after opening his mission call, he put on graduation robes and sat on the stand with other members of his class whose emotions at leaving the campus were tempered by the realization that many would be back soon, some within less than two weeks.

The final graduation was an emotional time for all those in attendance, not only the 650 graduates, but also for parents, family members, school officials, teachers, employees and alumni. Following the talks and musical numbers given by the students and administrators, and the presentation of graduation certificates to the graduates, the school flag was burned as required



Benemérito officials participating in the ceremonial burning of the school flag during the final graduation exercises, June 14, 2013. Mexican law requires a school's flag be burned at the time of its closure. The ceremony symbolized the end of Benemérito's academic activities and the beginning of its legacy as a missionary training center. Photograph by Barbara Morgan.

by Mexican law when a school closes. Emotions ran high as all those present recognized that graduation exercises had come to an end. Alfredo Miron, the school's final director symbolically handed a large wooden "key to the campus" over to the new MTC president, Carl B. Pratt. On the key was written the name of the school with the dates "1963–2013," indicating its "fifty years of teaching the youth of the Latter-day Saints."³⁴ Under this date was written "2013—Missionary Training Center," and the scripture "Behold, I will hasten my work in its time" (D&C 88:73). With an expression of gratitude to all who had been affiliated with the school, followed by a short testimony, Abraham Martínez, the Mexico S&I area director and an Area Seventy, declared that as of that moment "on June 14, 2013, Benemérito de las Américas was officially closed." A choir then sang "Bless this Land," followed by the benediction.³⁵

On Sunday, June 16, those few who remained on campus left the premises to attend church at the local ward. The ward underwent a transition of its own, since fifteen families, including the bishop and his family, were moving because of the changeover of the school into an MTC and their resulting loss of employment. The next week the faculty returned to their offices and classrooms to make final preparations for the transfer into an



Alfredo Miron, outgoing director of Benemérito, and Elder Abraham Martinez (middle) symbolically pass the school key to MTC President Carl B. Pratt and his wife Karen Y. Pratt (left), and Mexico MTC director Shawn Cates (far right), June 14, 2013. Photograph by Barbara Morgan.

MTC. A teacher testimony meeting was held on Wednesday, June 19. After nearly two hours of testimony bearing, Elder Abraham Martinez recognized the great contributions made by the teachers and their incredible sacrifices. “Yesterday, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles sent a message to me for you,” he said. “They want you to know that they are praying for you.” He then expressed his love for the students, the school, and especially the teachers. “We are all equal in this work,” he explained. “We have grown up together, taught together, lived together. The students will be taken care of,” he promised. “You have taught them well.” Although classes were no longer in session, and the school was officially closed, many staff members lingered throughout the week until June 24, when the campus became off limits to the public.

Transition to an MTC

Although the Missionary Department conducted a preliminary assessment prior to the decision to convert the school into an MTC, specific assessments continued throughout the remainder of the school year regarding such things as missionary capacity, operational budgets, physical facilities,

security, transportation, technological infrastructure, and employment needs. As a result of these assessments, MTC leaders determined that the capacity for the MTC would be capped at 1,200 for the first year, many of whom would be coming from Mexico, but also missionaries from other countries and the United States who, following their MTC training, would be sent to their respective missions.

Although the campus was basically ready for the transition, minor changes on campus commenced even during the months school was still in session. Sensitive to the needs of the school, Kelly Mills, the director of international MTCs, determined that with few exceptions “they would need to take the facility as it was for the first round of missionaries, until there was more time and space to do more work.”³⁶

Unlike the flexibility regarding the physical facilities, the hiring of the employed staff and the calling of ecclesiastical leaders needed to be done before the arrival of the missionaries. Following the call of President Pratt and his wife, the next step was to call an additional thirty men from the Mexico City area to serve in branch presidencies, with an additional sixty to be called by the end of the first year to meet the needs of the projected 1,200 missionaries who would eventually be assigned to the facility.

A crucial position was the hiring of a director of training and operations who would serve alongside the MTC president and would be in charge of employee hiring and training, and physical operations. After a number of interviews, Shawn Cates, a comparatively young man in his early thirties with previous experience working with international MTCs, was chosen to be the first temporary director of training and operations for the new Mexico MTC. “I was on the campus near the beginning of January on assignment to examine the campus and its future as a possible MTC,” he explained. “As I walked through the courtyard by the seminary building, I had the strongest impression that this place was going to change my life.”³⁷ Two months later, Cates received a phone call inviting him to return to the campus to become the new temporary director of the Mexico MTC. By the end of May, he and his pregnant wife and their two young boys moved into what for nearly fifty years was the residence of the director of Benemérito, now the home of the director of the MTC.

Upon his arrival Cates immediately began to search for, interview, and hire native Mexican employees to staff the MTC as custodians, cafeteria workers, maintenance workers, administrators, trainers, and teachers. Many of these, with the exception of the teachers, were previous Benemérito employees. Of the “core team” of MTC employees, meaning those involved in long-term training and administration, thirteen of the twenty were previous Benemérito employees. For example, Carlos Zepeda, a former student,

teacher, and director at the school, became the director of operations. Significantly, by the end of 2013, all faculty, with the exception of the MTC director, were native Mexicans. In the future, as other native Mexicans gain experience, it is anticipated that the director will also be a Mexican native, thus Cates' title as temporary director of training.

The largest and perhaps most important hiring assignment Cates had was the hiring of teachers. With the introduction of teaching program in *Preach My Gospel* and associated training tools, only returned missionaries who had been home less than two years were considered for the job. Initially, over fifty teachers from the Mexico City area, many of whom were Benemérito alumni, were hired in anticipation of the great influx of missionaries. In addition, experienced teachers from the Provo MTC were transferred to Mexico on a temporary basis for a period of a few weeks at a time to assist in the mentoring of the new teachers, and to "set our tradition and culture for years to come," Cates explained. "Perhaps one of the areas of greatest growth as a result of having this new MTC here will be the impact on these teachers," he continued. "Rather than coming home and looking for a job in a variety of areas, these teachers, over one hundred of them, will continue their gospel and leadership training. The impact on Mexico from the teachers alone will be huge."³⁸ On June 24, the first group of native Mexican teachers arrived, and heavy training began.

Because some teachers and faculty had stayed on campus longer than originally anticipated, only two days were available to make the final physical transition from a school to an MTC before missionaries arrived on June 26. School banners, flags, and logos, in addition to textbooks and uniforms, were replaced with pictures of Christ and the Twelve Apostles, *Preach My Gospel* manuals, and scriptures. The student dormitories and the director's homes were deep-cleaned, repainted, repaired, and put in shape



Carl B. Pratt and his wife Karen Y. Pratt, date unknown. The Pratts were initially called to preside over the small Mexico Missionary Training Center, but their assignment changed with the announcement that Benemérito would become the much larger Mexico MTC.



The new sign at the main entrance of the Mexico MTC reads “CENTRO DE CAPICITACIÓN MISIONAL MÉXICO” (“Missionary Training Center, Mexico”), June 2013. Photograph by Barbara Morgan.

to receive the new mission president, MTC director, employees, and most important, the first group of new missionaries. On the evening of June 25, the sign with the missionaries’ purpose etched in glass was hung at the entrance to what had previously been the library but literally overnight became the Missionary Welcoming Center. On June 26, at approximately two a.m., the sign in front of the campus with the school theme—which for twenty-five years read “*inteligencia, poder, luz, y verdad*” (“intelligence, power, light, and truth”)—was removed. It now read “CENTRO DE CAPICITACIÓN MISIONAL MÉXICO” (“Missionary Training Center, Mexico”).

Six hours later, administrators, leaders, and teachers welcomed the first missionary, Elder Carlos Lagunas, who arrived with his parents, a sister, and a friend. After receiving last-minute counsel from his father, taking pictures, hugging his family, and saying goodbye, Elder Lagunas entered the Welcoming Center, where he was greeted by President Pratt, and received his missionary name tag to begin his training. “With the arrival of this first missionary,” Shawn Cates announced: “This campus has now become officially an MTC. It’s so exciting!”³⁹

During the next several hours a number of new elders and sisters arrived with their families, while others came on busses from the airport. Upon their arrival, the missionaries picked up their name tags, wrote to their parents via



MTC director Shawn Cates (left) and MTC President Carl B. Pratt (right) greet Elder Carlos Lagunas (center), the first missionary to arrive at the new Mexico MTC, June 26, 2013. Photograph by Barbara Morgan.

e-mail, met their new MTC mission president and his wife, as well as their companions, district, and teachers. Nearly one hundred native Latin American missionaries arrived that day, some of whom had graduated from Benemérito only ten days previously. “I cannot believe it’s only been ten days since I graduated from this school,” one elder exclaimed as he entered the new MTC. “It’s quite a special experience to be able to see the way in which the Lord transforms things in order to fulfill his work. I can see now,” he continued, “how this campus as a Missionary Training Center will be used to bless even more people than it already has. It’s worth every sacrifice. This is going to be an incredible work, and I’m looking forward to being able to serve the Lord as soon as I can.”⁴⁰ “The real power of the MTC is the relationships that missionaries form with other missionaries, with their teachers, and with the president,” Cates explained. “During their first few hours they typically do not remember anything we tell them, but they do remember what they felt and who they met.”⁴¹ From here, they immediately start missionary work, observing others teach and then teaching “investigators” themselves. This first group of missionaries were trained in the MTC for twelve days and then reported to their missions throughout Mexico.



BYU Professor Barbara Morgan (left) and Heather Seferovich (right), curator of the *Education in Zion* gallery in BYU's Joseph F. Smith Building, worked together to create the exhibit "Hastening the Work: The Story of Benemérito," September 2013. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.



Portion of the exhibit "Hastening the Work: The Story of Benemérito" in BYU's *Education in Zion* gallery, September 2013. Photograph courtesy *Education in Zion*.

The following week nearly one hundred more missionaries arrived, most of them from North America with calls assigning them to serve primarily in the United States, as well as in Central America, Ecuador, and Chile. The third week, nearly three hundred additional missionaries both from North America and Latin America arrived. “In the other international MTCs, the North American Missionaries are the minority, with the local missionaries who already speak the language the majority. That will be the biggest difference between this MTC and all other MTCs,” Shawn Cates explained. Overall the Mexico MTC expects to have nearly five to ten times as many North American missionaries as Latin missionaries at one time, which will be both a benefit and a challenge. “The benefit is that these North Americans will come here with native Spanish speaking teachers and native missionaries surrounding them.”⁴²

As he watched the missionaries come off the bus and greeted them at what only a few days previously was the Benemérito library, President Carl B. Pratt explained: “I’m beginning to realize what a sacred place this is. Undoubtedly the Lord saw this from the beginning. Surely, when the ground was broken for the school, the Lord really knew what the purpose of this place would eventually be.” He continued: “This historic change only ends a chapter—not the whole book of the Lord’s work in Mexico. The next chapter begins with the MTC and the spirit those missionaries will carry into the world. Benemérito was already a spiritual place, but now missionaries come from all over the world to learn Spanish, be trained as missionaries, and be surrounded by the spirit twenty-four hours a day. There is nothing else like this in Mexico or anywhere else in the world.”⁴³

After the transition was complete, and most of the dust had settled, Elder Russell M. Nelson remarked: “I would like to say to every bishop, to every mommy, every daddy, and every stake president, all of the Mexican saints, we love you, we thank you, for supporting what will yet become one of the bright spots in all of the history of the Church, the establishment of an enlarged missionary training center in Mexico on the campus of the former Benemérito de las Américas. We love you and thank you.”⁴⁴

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, Remarks at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, transcript and video in possession of the author.

2. Wilford Woodruff, letter to the Presidency of St. George Stake, June 8, 1888, as cited in *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833–1964*, 6 vols., comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 3:168. For a more extensive history of LDS Church education see Scott C. Esplin, “Education in

Transition: Church and State Relationships in Utah Education, 1888–1933” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2006).

3. For more information on the Church Academy in Colonia Juarez Mexico see Albert Kenyon Wagner and Leona Farnsworth Wagner, *The Juarez Stake Academy, 1897–1997: The First One Hundred Years* (n.p., n.d.), 3.

4. Rulon S. Wells, in *Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1929), 103.

5. Casey P. Griffiths, “The Globalization of Latter-day Saint Education” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2012), 86.

6. Marion G. Romney, Remarks at Benemérito de las Américas groundbreaking ceremony, November 4, 1963, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

7. Griffiths, “The Globalization of Latter-day Saint Education” 86.

8. “Seek Learning Even by Study and Faith: Report for 1971 from Commissioner of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” M260 S451 1971, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

9. See Leann J. Walton, “New Zealand Church College to Close,” *Church News*, July 8, 2006, 11. For more information on the closure of the Church College of New Zealand see Scott Esplin, “Closing the Church College of New Zealand: A Case Study in International Church Educational Policy,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint History: The Pacific Isles*, ed. Reid L. Neilson, Steven C. Harper, Craig K. Manscill, and Mary Jane Woodger (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 161–79.

10. For a more comprehensive explanation of the founding of Benemérito de las Américas see Barbara E. Morgan, “Benemérito de las Américas: The Beginning of a Unique Church School in Mexico,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2013): 89–116; Barbara E. Morgan, “The Impact of Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas, a Church School in Mexico,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 145–67; and Barbara E. Morgan, “‘I Will Hasten My Work in Its Time’: Mexico School Becomes an MTC,” *BYU Religious Education REVIEW* (Fall 2013), 9–11.

11. Mexico City LDS Area Presidency, Daniel L. Johnson, Benjamin de Hoyos, Jose L. Alonso, interview by author, February 21, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico.

12. Paul V. Johnson, interview by author, March 1, 2013, and September 12, 2013, Salt Lake City, Utah.

13. Paul V. Johnson interview, March 1, 2013, and September 12, 2013. Chad H. Webb reported that another reason Benemérito was considered for an MTC was because it was expensive to operate and could easily be converted into an MTC facility. Chad H. Webb, interview by author, July 29, 2013, Salt Lake City, Utah.

14. Paul V. Johnson, interviews, March 1, 2013, and September 12, 2013.

15. Mexico City Area Presidency, Daniel L. Johnson, Benjamin de Hoyos, Jose L. Alonso, interview, February 21, 2013.

16. Paul V. Johnson, interview March 1, 2013.

17. Paul V. Johnson, interview, March 1, 2013.

18. Carl P. and Karen Y. Pratt, interview by author, Mexico City, Mexico, February 16, 2013.

19. Mexico City Area Presidency, Daniel L. Johnson, Benjamin de Hoyos, Jose L. Alonso, interview, February 21, 2013.

20. Alfredo Miron, interview by author, February 18, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico.

21. Also attending were Chad H. Webb (Director of Seminaries and Institutes), Kelli Mills (Director of International MTCs), Abraham Martinez (S&I Area Director and Area Seventy).

22. Daniel L. Johnson, Remarks given at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, Mexico City,

Mexico, transcript and video in possession of the author.

23. Paul V. Johnson, Remarks given at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico, transcript and video in possession of the author.

24. Carl B. Pratt, Remarks given at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico, transcript and video in possession of the author.

25. David F. Evans, Remarks given at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico, transcript and video in possession of the author.

26. Jeffrey R. Holland, Remarks given at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, emphasis added.

27. Russell M. Nelson, Remarks given at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico, transcript and video in possession of the author.

28. Remarks by teachers at a Benemérito teacher meeting taken from personal notes by the author, June 23, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico.

29. Chad H. Webb, journal, January 30, 2013, copy in possession of the author.

30. Paul Johnson, interview by author, March 1, 2013.

31. Remarks by Benemérito students taken from personal interviews by the author, February 18, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico.

32. Maya Isabella Yerman, Facebook entry, January 29, 2013, translated by the author.

33. Russell M. Nelson, interview by author, August 30, 2013, Salt Lake City, Utah.

34. Although the school officially commenced operations in February 1964, the actual groundbreaking day for the school was on November 4, 1963, thus marking fifty years from its groundbreaking.

35. Personal notes by the author, who attended the graduation exercises and who was frequently on campus during the month of June 2013.

36. Kelli Mills, interview by author, July 25, 2013, Provo, Utah.

37. Shawn Cates, interview by author, June 26, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico.

38. Shawn Cates, interview by author, June 26, 2013.

39. Shawn Cates, interview by author, June 26, 2013.

40. Remarks by an elder at the time of his arrival at the Mexico MTC taken from personal notes by the author, June 26, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico.

41. Shawn Cates, interview by author, June 26, 2013.

42. Shawn Cates, interview by author, June 26, 2013.

43. Carl Pratt, interview by author, June 26, 2013, Mexico City, Mexico, in authors possession.

44. Russell M. Nelson, interview by author, August 30, 2013.