

## History of the Church in Puerto Rico

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Puerto Rico is an island one hundred miles long in the Caribbean Sea, about one thousand miles south-east of Florida. It is about the size of the state of Connecticut. It became U.S. territory in 1898 and was given commonwealth status in 1952. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.

In the early 1940s Former Argentine missionaries Bryon Wheeler and Donald Brown, employees of Pan American Airways held church meetings in their home in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In 1948 meetings were held in the home of a Air Force family at Guajataca, Puerto Rico. Members from Ramey Air Force Base attended these services. In 1951 Gardner Russell, a former Argentine missionary [later a member of the Seventy] arrived in San Juan. He was employed as manager of Tim Manufacturing Company. He, along with his wife Dorothy, and five-month-old daughter Sheryl, attended the Church meetings at Guajataca. (From Chronology by Gardner Russell, submitted to LDS-Gems, April, 1998).

In the early 1950s, Melvin J. Rudd was called as the group leader of this small group of Saints. Meetings started to be held at Ramey Air Force Base, near Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. In July 1953, Reginald Dorff, a soldier in the U.S. Army, stationed at Fort Buchanan, outside San Juan, discussed with Brother Rudd regarding the possibility of starting to hold Church meetings in San Juan. On August 2, 1953, the first former Church meetings were held in the Military chapel at Fort Buchanan. Those attending were: Reginald Dorff, Kenneth Childs, J. Hunt, Larry Tate, Rene, Ninette, Aurelia and George A. Sims, Lucille, Sandra, Linda, Barbara and Marvin Redburn, Gloria and Valerie St. John. Two weeks later, the Gardner Russell family returned from vacation in the U.S. and were notified of church meetings. Elder A. Petersen was called to be Group Leader, under the LDS Servicemen's Committee. (Ibid.)

During 1953 Reginald R. Dorff presided at the baptism of Dorothy Tate. (1997-98 Church Almanac; "Caribbean Beginnings," Church News, April 22, 1978).

In 1955, Elder Ezra Taft Benson, then the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, went on a tour of Latin America. He visited Puerto Rico. In April 1955 General Conference, he mentioned: "I was pleased to meet our servicemen in Puerto Rico from Ramey Air Force Base and from Fort Buchanan." Also that year, the first island-wide conference was held at Ramey Air Force Base with fifty-seven people present.

In 1956, one set of missionaries served on the island among the military families. Maria Christina Sosa Burk was among the first native Puerto Ricans to be baptized in 1956. She was married to an LDS man from Arizona, serving in the military. [Their son William Burk later became one of the first Puerto Ricans to serve a full-time mission. He went to Uruguay in 1969. He also later served as a district president in Puerto Rico and then a stake president.] (LaRene Porter Gaunt, "Puerto Rico's Joyful Saints," Ensign, February 1996).

In November 1960, the Florida Mission was organized. It included Puerto Rico and all the islands of the Caribbean. In October 1963, Florida Mission President Ned Winder visited Puerto Rico. In January 1964 the missionaries were again sent to work with part-member families and English-speaking Puerto Ricans. They were Elders Verl Tolbert and Dwight K. Hunter. They visited the military branches and baptized a serviceman, Dennis Wayne Hart, on February 8, 1964. The first Puerto Rican they baptized was Ilka Josephina Frau, who was baptized at the Naval Beach on March 2, 1964. (1997-98 Church Almanac).

In 1963, more expatriate members arrived including Elmo Robinson with Sealand, Lynn James, with Dupont. Members of the Armed Services became a minority in the Church groups. During 1963, The San Juan, Puerto Rico branch was organized with 139 members. William Fotheringham, Manager of Kodak, was called as the

first branch president. Planning began to build the first chapel in the Caribbean. (Gardner Russell Chronology).

In 1964 the Caribbean District was organized and Gardner Russell was called to be the District President, with Henry Franklin and Burke Adams as counselor. Ural Morris Burk served as District Clerk. Elders Hunter and Tolbert, Assistants to the Mission President, arrived and began to teach part-member families. In July 1964, the San Juan branch sponsored a Pioneer Day parade and rodeo, as a fund-raiser for a new chapel. A chapel site was obtained in Jardines de Caparra, Bayamon. A Spanish translation of the Saturday morning session of October 1964 General Conference was broadcast for the first time by tape at Fajardo, Puerto Rico.

In 1965 Joe Greenland was the president of the San Juan Branch. The branch met in the military chapel at Fort Brooke, near the old El Morro fortress. The members of the branch consisted mostly of expatriate families, military families, and one or two local Puerto Rican families. The core of the branch consisted of the following families: Morris and Christina Burk, Elmo and Audie Robinson, Joe and Rachel Greenland, Billie and Yolie Fotheringham, Gardner and Dorothy Russell, Mildred Entwistle, Lynn and Jeri James, Colonel and Norma Johnson, Quentin and Canita Lambert, Benito and Griselda Gonzalez, and the James C. Dalton family. There were two other branches on the island at that time. One met at Roosevelt Road Naval Base on the eastern end of the island, and another at Ramey Air Force Base on the western end. (From History provided to LDS-Gems from Gregory R. Dalton, April, 1998).

In 1968 a Caribbean District Conference was held, presided over by mission president, J. Murray Rawson. At that time James Dalton was the president of the San Juan Branch with Ronald Todd and Quentin Lamber as counselors. The branch consisted of about fifty-five active families. On September 7, 1968, a groundbreaking ceremony was held for the Jardines de Caparra meetinghouse. Dr. Carlos Lastra, Dean of Administration of the University of Puerto Rico was an honored guest. (Gardner Russell Chronology).

During 1969 six Spanish-speaking missionaries were assigned to the island. Also that year Ronald Todd became the president of the San Juan Branch. The Ponce branch was organized with Perry Hiram Bingham, President, and Ora Lynn Justice and Robert Chynoweth, as counselors. Their families had been brought into the Church, in Ponce. Also, Sunday school meetings started to be held in Caguas and Mayaguez. The first live broadcast of the priesthood session of General Conference was received at the home of Gardner Russell.

In 1969, Lucila B. DeMobbille, of San Juan, was introduced to the Church. She recalled:

It was January when two young men knocked on my door, saying they were Mormons. They were getting to know their neighbors. Imagine! They considered me their neighbor, and that made me very happy. I had a good feeling about these young men, so I listened to them. Little did I know that I would be the first person to be baptized in the baptismal font in the new chapel. When I joined the Church, there were six active Puerto Ricans, a Mexican family, and a Cuban sister -- all the rest were Continentals [English-speaking Americans]. (Orson Scott Card, "The Saints in Puerto Rico," Ensign, March 1978).

On March 7, 1970, the new chapel at Jardines de Caparra, Bayamon, was dedicated by Elder Sterling W. Sill, Assistant to the Twelve Apostles. At that time, there were 450 members on the island and four branches. Some of the wonderful Puerto Rican families who were converted during this period were: Lirio Pachecho, Jose Moreno, Lucila Mombil and her daughters (Brother Mombil joined the church years later), the Irizarry and Chaves family and others. Also during 1970 the first Spanish-speaking branch was organized. On October 17, 1970, a seminary was organized.

When the missionaries first came into the city of Caguas, they searched for a meetinghouse. A nonmember, Mr. Laguana allowed them to use a house behind his carpentry shop. He later joined the Church. The Cortese family were the first full family to be baptized in the Caguas branch. Orson Scott Card related:

Sister Cortese, afraid that her husband might be furious if he discovered she was investigating the Mormon Church, hid her "Meet the Mormons" book. All in vain -- Brother Cortese found it anyway, and read it through. But instead of getting angry, he got interested, and they began the spiritual journey to conversion -- which included a mad search for white clothing that would fit Brother Cortese, a very large man, for his baptism at the beach near Humacao. (Ibid.)

On June 20, 1974, the Florida Fort Lauderdale Mission was formed. It included Puerto Rico and the other islands of the Caribbean. As many as eighty-five missionaries worked in Puerto Rico at one time.

In January 1976 there were 963 members in Puerto Rico. By May 1977 there were 1,306 members in the Puerto Rico District which also included 19 members at the Guantanamo base in Cuba. On November 20, 1977, the first all-Puerto Rican district presidency was sustained. There were six independent Spanish-speaking branches and one English-speaking branch.

In July 1979 the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission was formed. It included the Dominican Republic and other islands of the Caribbean.

During 1979, Doel Irizarry of Guayanilla, came into the Church. He related: "In 1979 the missionaries asked our family to pray about the Book of Mormon. That night, I knelt in prayer with my wife, Cruz, and our children, Maritza and Eric, and prayed to know if the Book of Mormon was true. I had a dream that was repeated three times. When I went to church the next week, to my surprise I met the man whom I had seen in my dream. The details of my dream came to pass. I knew this was the answer to my prayer." (Ensign, February 1996).

On December 1980, the San Juan Puerto Rico Stake was created by the president of the Twelve, President Ezra Taft Benson. There were about 3,500 members on the island. Herminio De Jesus was sustained as the first stake president. About 80 percent of the members attended this conference. During this conference, President Benson taught:

The Lord recognized that truth will only prosper where religious freedom exists. Religious freedom cannot be fully enjoyed without a full measure of political freedom. So before the gospel was restored, wise and inspired men in North, Central, and South America were raised up who proclaimed the sovereign truth that all men -- not just the privileged, the rich, or the rulers -- but all men have divine rights. Among these rights are life, liberty (which includes our freedom to worship), and right to property. (Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p.661)

On March 7, 1981, President Spencer W. Kimball visited San Juan, Puerto Rico. He was the first president of the Church to visit the island. Earlier that day, he had broken ground for the new temple in Atlanta, Georgia, which would be a great blessing for the Saints in Puerto Rico. He told the Saints gathered in a convention hall, "I love you with all my heart. You're a choice people." Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Seventy also attended the conference. He remarked to the Church News about the Caribbean: "This is a whole new area for the Church; it has an outstanding retention rate, converts are staying active. The success is solid. Our chapels are overflowing; people are standing on sidewalks, looking in windows to see and hear what's going on in meetings." (Gerry Avant, "History is made: Prophet Visits Caribbean Islands," Church News, March 21, 1981).

In 1982, Belinda Berrios was baptized. [Later she was 1984 Miss Teenage Puerto Rico]. Many years earlier, missionaries had visited her family's home, presented a few discussions, but stopped their visits. As she grew older, Belinda told her mother that she would like to go back to the LDS Church. Her mother resisted, but started to pray for answers to some of Belinda's questions. One evening, two elders knocked on the door. Belinda recognized that they came in answer to her mother's prayers. Her mother still resisted attending Church. When Belinda received a perfect score on a test in school, her mother said she could have a prize.

Belinda asked if they could attend Church that Sunday. They did and they were baptized in July 1982. (Gerry Avant, "Church was prize for girl's good test score," Church News, May 16, 1987).

In 1982 there was no branch of the Church in the town of Arroyo. Miriam Cosme met sister missionaries serving in another town. At that time her husband, Daniel Cosme was too busy with his fishing career to listen to the missionary discussions. On one Sabbath Day, a wave turned over his boat, causing him to lose his net and his engine. Daniel was humbled and took time to listen to the missionaries. He and his family were soon baptized. They became the pioneer members of the Church in Arroyo. Brother Cosme later served as the branch president. (Ensign, January 1996)

Television spots developed by the Church reached out to people in Puerto Rico. Eighteen-year-old Gerard Aguirre responded to a commercial and was visited by the missionaries. He related:

When I heard the story of Joseph Smith I felt just like him. I was confused too, and I went to an area where cactus grows, found an open, flat space, and asked the Lord to guide me. I felt the most wonderful spirit then. I felt that same spirit when the missionaries talked to me. I'd never had much religious training before, but once the elders started teaching me, it didn't take long for me to realize that this is the truth. It was like I'd always known. (Lisa A. Johnson, "A Song in the Night," The New Era, October 1987).

On April 11-12, 1987, President Ezra Taft Benson, now president of the Church, returned to Puerto Rico. President Benson had originally been scheduled to visit Puerto Rico in November 1986, but the visit was canceled when he entered the hospital for a heart pacemaker implant. The Saints were delighted when his visit was rescheduled. At that time there were 12,000 members in four stakes on the island. He spoke to 2,600 members at two general sessions of a regional conference held at a municipal gymnasium in San Juan. The attendance was hampered by poor weather. A total of three inches of rain fell during the day. Three busloads of members arrived moments before the close of the meetings. They had been delayed by washed-out roads.

Elder Rex D. Pinegar of the Seventy said to those at the conference: "The weather has not been pleasant, but we are grateful you have braved the [storm] and are here with us. Such an effort is indicative of your commitment to the gospel."

At the conference, President Benson encouraged the Saints to use the Book of Mormon. "Reading the Book of Mormon is one of the greatest persuaders to get men on missions. We need more missionaries. But we also need better-prepared missionaries coming out of the wards and branches and homes where they know and love the Book of Mormon." At the conclusion of his remarks, he said: "I would love to be down there [from the podium] among you and just hug you to show my love for you. You are choice people. I rejoice in the growth that has taken place here on this island." (Gerry Avant, "Pres. Benson visits Puerto Rico," Church News, April 18, 1987).

Elder Pinegar commented after the conference was over: "This conference was such a reward to the faith of these people. They will never forget it, not only because of the prophet's words but also because he would make the special effort to come." (Ibid.)

In September 1989, Hurricane Hugo swept destruction over the Virgin Islands, part of Puerto Rico, and the southeast coast of the United States. More than fifty people were killed. President Kay Briggs of the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission said: "The islands here look like battlefields. The members and missionaries have fared pretty well considering, but what was once lush green jungle now looks like Utah before the first snowfall." ("Fury of Hurricane Hugo Unites LDS in Midst of Overwhelming Ruin," Church News, September 30, 1989).

No members or missionaries were killed or seriously injured. A number of LDS families in Puerto Rico lost their home. Shelter was quickly found for them. Some of the members had to wait for weeks for water and electrical service to be restored. ("Hugo Was Devastating, but Saints' Lives Were Spared," Ensign, November 1989.)

Laurel MacDonald recalled her experience in San Juan during the eight hours that Hugo pounded Puerto Rico.

I watched trees break like toothpicks and house roofs fly through the air. During the height of the storm, both our electricity and water were knocked out. We had gone inland during the actual storm, but when the winds subsided, we were allowed to go back to our home one mile from the ocean. It was a humbling sight. The whole area looked as though it had been bombed. Trees and power lines were down, buildings were smashed, cars had been over-turned, and broken glass and debris were everywhere. However, we were lucky. Our home was still standing and had received only minor damage. ("Hurricane Hugo and High-Rise Helpers," Ensign, June 1991).

Sister MacDonald said that the disaster was a real test of her family's preparedness. "Fortunately we had plenty of canned food, water, boxed drinks, sanitary supplies, books, scriptures and games set aside to get us through without serious problems." The MacDonalds had many opportunities to help others who were not as well prepared. This led to many missionary opportunities. (Ibid.)

President Briggs said: "People are asking, 'What Church do you belong to?' because they see how we've banded together. Missionary work in the normal sense may have slowed down, but kindness and charitable works have not." (Church News, September 30, 1989).

In 1990, there were 13,000 members in Puerto Rico, in more than fifty wards and branches.

In 1992, three 16-year-old identical triplets were baptized into the Trujillo Ward. Awilda, Belen, and Cecilia Figueroa entered the waters of baptism with their older sister, Carmen. Missionaries had visited their home seven years earlier but hadn't returned. In 1992, Belen felt inspired to take a different route home from school, where she found some elders. She asked them to come and teach her family. ("These's Gospel Company," The New Era, April 1993).

In 1993, the four stakes in Puerto Rico were discontinued because of a reduction of U.S. military personnel stationed there. Priesthood leadership was lacking. Elder L. Tom Perry divided the four stakes into eight districts. William A. Burk, president of the San Juan Puerto Rico District said: "Our salvation doesn't depend on whether we are a stake or a district but on our individual work." (Ensign, February 1996).

In 1993 Elder Alexander B. Morrison of the Seventy said of the Church in Puerto Rico: "We have four stakes there, and we are experiencing steady growth in both numbers and depth. By depth, I mean in maturity of our leadership -- both sisters and brethren -- and in understanding among members of what it means to be a covenant people." ("A Conversation on the Church in the Caribbean," Ensign, June 1993).

In July, 1993, Jose M. Jimenez, of Puerto Rico, was called as the mission president of the Guatemala City North Mission. Sadly, President Jimenez and his counselor, Julio Afre, died in a plane crash on November 22, 1993.

In December, 1993, The First Presidency announced that a temple would be built in the

Caribbean, in nearby Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. This news brought great joy to the Saints in Puerto Rico, who would be in the new temple district. About 19,000 members were living in Puerto Rico during 1993.

On March 11, 1995, nearly one hundred youth of the Toa Baja Puerto Rico District participated in a handcart pioneer reenactment. They stopped on the way to read pioneer experiences. Alberto Zayas, associate CES director for the Caribbean said: "We want our seminary students to realize that our sacrifices, no matter how great, are but a little bit compared to the pioneers." (Ensign, February 1996).

During September, 1995, Hurricanes Luis and Marilyn raged through the Caribbean, causing at least twenty-two deaths. The Church's administrative office in Puerto Rico sent relief supplies to help the victims on other island. The hardest hit were St. Thomas, St. Martin, and Antigua.

On June 30, 1995, Puerto Rico received its first native mission president. Jesus Nieves became the president of the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission. He said: "I love the people of Puerto Rico, and they love the gospel. I believe we will succeed because of the love and support we have for each other." (Ibid.)

In July, 1995, 220 members traveled to the Orlando Florida Temple. The trip was organized by the Toa Baja District.

In 1996 there were 20,000 members of the Church in Puerto Rico, in eight districts and fifty-three branches. Ernesto Rivera, president of the Toa Baja district said: "We must be willing to give up material possessions for spiritual blessings. . . . The growth of the gospel in Puerto Rico depends on our spirituality." Ronald E. Dyer, former president of the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission said: "Members are beginning to reach out more to their families and friends with the gospel. There has been an increase in members working with the full-time missionaries. That's the key to a strong missionary program." Activation efforts were also underway. The Ponce First Branch met together one evening for an "activation battalion." The leaders passed out cards with the names and addresses of the less active members. For two hours, pairs of members made home visits and then gathered back at the chapel to report. (Ensign, February 1996).

A large temple excursion took place in November, 1996, to the Orlando Florida Temple. About 390 members made the journey. During the trip about one hundred members received their endowments, six couples were married, and thirty families sealed. The Toa Baja District presidency all attended, as well as all the district's branch presidents. (Church News, December 21, 1996).

During 1996, two former stakes were reinstated. On August 11, 1996, the Mayaguez Puerto Rico Stake was organized by Elder Stephen D. Nadauld. Tomas Olmo was called as the president. On September 22, 1996, Elder Russell M. Nelson organized the Ponce Puerto Rico Stake. Rafael Ortiz was called as the president. On May 4, 1997, the San Juan Puerto Rico Stake was reinstated, the third in Puerto Rico. William A. Burk was called as the president.

In 1998 Dean M. Davies was called as the new mission president of the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission.