Mormon Temples a Sign of Church's Growth Into Global Organization

By GUSTAV NIEBUHR

AMERICAN FORK, Utah—On a bluff here above Utah Lake, with the snow-dusted Wasatch Mountains for a backdrop, the Mormon Church has raised a building whose pale granite surface reflects the dazzling Rocky Mountain sunlight. A gilt inscription atop one wall identifies it as "the House of the Lord."

It is a temple, the latest in a remarkable era of worldwide construction of such sacred spaces by the church. The inscribed words are meant literally, signifying a place designed so that God would feel at home within.

In 1980, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints operated 19 temples, including the famous one in Salt Lake City. Since then, it has built 30 more, on every continent but Antarctica. An additional 15 are planned.

The one here, named after nearby Mount Timpanogos, will be dedicated on Oct. 13. Over the next two years, the church will open temples in St. Louis, England, Colombia and Vernal, Utah, while breaking ground for others in Harrison, N.Y., Boston, Billings, Mont., and Nashville and in Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico.

Costing about $18 million apiece, each new temple marks the expansion of the once Utah-bound church into a global organization, a majority of whose 9.5 million members live outside the United States. Membership in the church has soared; there are 2 million more members than in 1990 and twice as many as in 1980.

The buildings make unique theological statements in stone, offering visible testimony to Mormon beliefs, much as medieval cathedrals proclaimed Europe's great age of faith.

"We believe that temples are the most sacred buildings on earth," said Elder W. Eugene Hansen, a top church official in charge of them. "We try to maintain a reverence, a spirit, that would be compatible with a visit of the Lord to one of his temples."

Mr. Hansen, a lawyer and former president of the Utah Bar Association, did not speak metaphorically. Mormon theology teaches that Jesus physically appeared within the church's original temple, in Kirtland, Ohio, and spoke to Mormonism's first prophet, Joseph Smith, on April 3, 1836.

Essential to Mormon practice ever since, temples have assumed an even greater importance in maintaining the faith's distinctive beliefs at a time when the church strives ever harder to be accepted in the American religious mainstream, said Jan Shipps, a non-Mormon expert on the church.

Earlier this year, the church changed the design of its logo, the official name that appears on its buildings and letterheads, enlarging the words Jesus Christ, while shrinking all else. Church authorities also said they wanted to be known as "the Church of Jesus Christ," rather than the Mormon Church.

"The thing that preserves Mormon peculiarity," said Professor Shipps, who teaches religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, "and that separates them from all others in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is the Book of Mormon and the fact that they are a temple-going people."

The Book of Mormon, published when Smith founded the church in 1830, tells of a civilization established in the Western Hemisphere by a tribe of ancient Israelites, who were visited by the resurrected Christ. The church accords the book Scriptural authority, as a supplement to the Bible.

Mormon meeting houses serve for Sunday worship. But temples, surrounded by manicured lawns and typically topped with a...
statue of the Angel Moroni, provide private sanctuary for Mormons to perform duties called ordinances and receive teachings that church authorities do not reveal to outsiders.

Inside, Mormon men and women practice baptism for the dead. By immersion in a stainless steel pool, they stand in for deceased non-Mormons whom the faith teaches reside in a spirit world but possess the free will to accept the invitation to convert through such baptisms by proxy.

Temples serve for marriages, where husband and wife are "sealed for time and eternity," as they stand between two mirrors placed to reflect their images endlessly.

God, said Smith, revealed to him that the baptismal pool should be on the temple's lowest floor, where ceremonies represent death and resurrection. Activities move upward from there, in accord with the Mormon belief that existence is an eternal progression toward divinity.

The "sealing rooms" are on the upper floors, along with the "endowment rooms," where Mormons receive religious instruction, learning that everyone begins as God's spirit children, long before birth. Life on earth is a time of testing, of who will obey God's laws.

The temple's highest point is the celestial room, representing heaven's top level (Mormons believe there are three levels), reserved for the obedient. It is a luminous space, with plush white chairs, walls trimmed with gold leaf and a massive chandelier. "Everything is pointed toward the celestial room," said Robert J. Matthews, president of the Mount Timpanogos Temple.

All this is off-limits to outsiders, open only to church members in good standing, whose status is verified by a plastic-coated card, the size of a driver's license, that Mormons carry. Called a "temple recommend" and signed by a local bishop, it testifies to a member's tithing and abiding by behavioral codes that forbid alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea.

But before dedicating a temple, the church allows the public a view inside. At Mount Timpanogos, 680,000 people streamed through in August and September.

When a visitor was allowed inside after the open house had ended, but a few days before the dedication, he was given plastic covers for his shoes, a covering also worn by three Mormon officials who said that it was to protect the carpets, then being shampooed. Professor Shipp said this practice, whether acknowledged today or not, reflected the belief that temples must be kept pure, untainted by outsiders.

Smith, in the church's Doctrine and Covenants, said that when Jesus appeared in the Kirtland temple, He warned that church members must "not pollute this holy house." Jesus, Smith said, also declared He had "accepted" the temple and would "manifest myself to my people" there.

To Mormons, Professor Shipp said, that promise makes temple-going profound. "In the temple, you might have the opportunity to come into contact with Christ himself."

Photo: The Mormon Temple in American Fork, Utah, is the most recent of 30 temples built around the world since 1980 by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The building is to be dedicated on Sunday. (Tom Smart for The New York Times)
Mormon temple construction, no matter where it occurs, indicates not only a strong and mature Latter-day Saint community but also one that is growing. (Temples are separate from chapels, where members gather for weekly worship services.) And in 2015, growth merited the creation of the Church’s first two stakes (groups of congregations under the direction of an ecclesiastical leader) in Mozambique. In 2015, the Church created 17 new stakes (each similar in size to a diocese) throughout Africa. To appreciate this rapid growth, historical context helps. In Africa 30 years ago, the Church had 137 separate congregations and about 22,000 members.