



Though the general church office buildings are located in Salt Lake City, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not an “American” religion but rather a diverse, worldwide church with members scattered across the globe. (Courtesy of Brent R. Nordgren.)

Matthew K. Heiss

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DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE:
DOCUMENTING THE
WORLDWIDE CHURCH

IN 1987 Dennis B. Neuenschwander was called to preside over the newly created Austria Vienna East Mission, which comprised Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Soviet domination, though waning during those days of glasnost and perestroika, was still in effect. Travel through the mission was difficult, and basic necessities that would support missionaries—such as food, reliable medical care, and a communication infrastructure—were hard to find. Feeling as if he was facing an impossible task, President Neuenschwander asked Elder Russell M. Nelson how serious the church was about missionary work in this vast area. Elder Nelson replied, “The Lord is master of the unlikely, and he expects the impossible.”¹

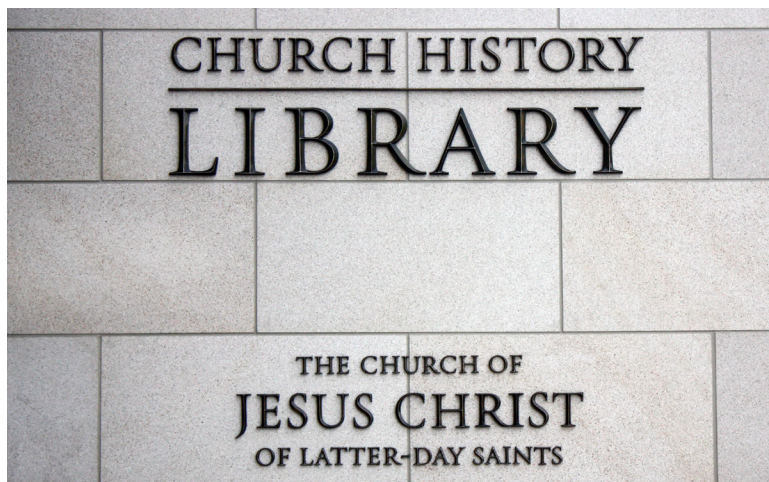
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I sometimes feel we are facing a similarly impossible task in the Church History Department.

The department is required to document an ever-expanding worldwide Latter-day Saint population. Currently there are more than thirteen million church members in 177 countries, territories, and protectorates.² These Latter-day Saints speak many different languages, have had varying opportunities for education, and live in diverse economic circumstances; therefore, their record-keeping capabilities are uneven. Nevertheless, a record of their stories and history is essential “for the good of the church, and for the rising generations” (D&C 69:8).

To capture and preserve their experiences, the Church History Department will have to rely on nonprofessional and volunteer helpers living in local congregations throughout the world who have a vested interest in their local Latter-day Saint history.



The Church History Library in Salt Lake City houses a massive collection of church history artifacts that can be accessed by the general public. (Courtesy of Brent R. Nordgren.)

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The task will require priesthood leader endorsement, basic instructions for people at various education levels, and a reliable technical infrastructure.

In this paper I will describe where we have been and where we are going in terms of documenting global church history. For me, this is a unique opportunity to put a mark in the sand and see what we can accomplish in the next few years.

EVOLUTION OF THE CHURCH
HISTORY DEPARTMENT

In a Church History Department meeting, assistant church historian Richard E. Turley Jr. and Steven L. Olsen, then the managing director of the Church History Department, briefly described the history of the department by discussing four different and necessary eras:

1. Clerical era
2. Professional era
3. Collaborative era
4. Global era

Their presentation was informative and culminates, as you can see, with a global focus. Here is a brief summary of what they said.

The first era, clerical, began on the day the church was organized: April 6, 1830, when the Lord declared that “there shall be a record kept” (D&C 21:1). Church historians such as Willard Richards and Joseph Fielding Smith, as well as capable assistants such as B. H. Roberts, wrote the history of the church. The staff of the Historian’s Office supported those efforts.

The professional era began when the church started hiring library, archives, and museum professionals who had training in and a love for history. These professionals helped the department

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implement nationally accepted standards of cataloging, expand its collection efforts, and automate its finding aids.

The collaborative era began when Steve Olsen was asked to be managing director of the department. Steve knew the department could not move ahead significantly, especially in gathering the history of the global church, without partnering with the leaders of the church and other church departments.

The collaborative efforts of the Church History Department improved significantly when Elder Marlin K. Jensen was called and sustained as the church historian and recorder in the April 2005 general conference. It had been sixteen years since the church had a functioning historian and recorder.

Today the Church History Department is poised to enter the global era in a systematic and sustainable way. The question naturally arises: why focus on the global church now? Here are four possible answers; there may be more.

First, if the Church History Department does not begin to document the global church, the department will become increasingly irrelevant to the majority of Latter-day Saints. Most church members have a limited personal connection to nineteenth-century church history. While they know about the foundational events of the Restoration that define all Latter-day Saints, the majority of members today do not trace their ancestry in the church back to the nineteenth century. Instead, most members are pioneers in their own families, having joined the church during the last half of the twentieth century.

Consider this interesting comment made by President Gordon B. Hinckley:

In 1936, 68 years ago, one of the secretaries to the Quorum of the Twelve told me what a member of the Twelve had told her. She said that in the coming general conference there would be

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announced a program which would come to be recognized as even more noteworthy than the coming of our people to these valleys as pioneers. . . .

I wondered back in those days how anything the Church did could eclipse in anyone's judgment the historic gathering of our people to these western valleys of the United States. That was a movement of such epic proportions that I felt nothing could ever be so noteworthy. But I have discovered something of interest in the last short while.

We receive many prominent visitors in the office of the First Presidency. They include heads of state and ambassadors of nations. . . . In our conversations not one of these visitors mentioned the great pioneer journey of our forebears. But each of them, independently, spoke in high praise of our welfare program and our humanitarian efforts.³

It is crucial that we document contemporary issues such as our humanitarian efforts, the Perpetual Education Fund, small temples dotting the earth, and church growth in foreign lands. These issues have immense relevance to many, if not most, of our brothers and sisters around the world.

Second, historically speaking, the current era is one of the greatest in the history of the Lord's kingdom on earth. The church has grown significantly since it was first organized. On the day Gordon B. Hinckley greeted the public as president of the church, he said, "The most serious challenge we face, and the most wonderful challenge, is the challenge that comes of growth . . . but what a remarkable and wonderful challenge that is."⁴

What a time to be a historian and to be able to document the church's "most serious" and "most wonderful" challenge!

A third reason for the department's focus on global church history is this: if the department does not begin to systematically

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document the worldwide church by acquiring and preserving records, others will fill this vacuum. This is not entirely a bad thing; clearly we need to partner with others. But I firmly believe the church should assume the leading role in this work so that it can maintain a focus on remembering the great things of God and on witnessing to the truth of the Restoration. These should be the guiding principles for this documentation effort—not someone’s private agenda.

And finally, we will begin the systematic documentation of the global church because we are ready to do so. I base this statement on two critical factors: (1) A few members of the Church History Department staff have spent the past two decades learning how to document the global church. We have traveled extensively and experienced much of the church’s wonderful diversity. We are now ready to introduce sustainable history-gathering programs for the entire church. (2) Technology has finally enabled us to better document the global Latter-day Saint experience. I will address this subject following a brief review of our past efforts throughout the world.

HISTORY OF DOCUMENTING THE GLOBAL CHURCH

Preserving global history is not a new endeavor for the Church History Department. Early on, Andrew Jenson traveled the earth as a one-man documentation machine. Beginning in 1891, he went on several “missions,” as he called them, to visit nearly every Latter-day Saint settlement in the Rocky Mountains, from Mexico to Canada, all of the historic sites of the Restoration, and finally “all the missions and conferences and nearly every important branch of the Church in the entire world.”⁵ Ah, those were the days!

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In the 1970s a few History Department employees—Gordon Irving and Richard Jensen in particular—traveled to Mexico, South America, and Western Europe, where they recorded interviews with church members. After these trips ended in 1977, fourteen years passed before the Church History Department staff ventured out into the world again. In 1991 a few department employees began doing fieldwork in places such as France and Finland, Mongolia and Malawi, Russia and Romania, Tonga and Thailand, Korea and Kiribati, and many other nations. All of these important efforts have provided a solid foundation and a deeper knowledge of the challenges and possibilities facing the Church History Department.

As I share with you a brief history of these pioneering efforts, I must also pay tribute to a man who had an inspired vision of what the department could do: Steven R. Sorensen. Almost twenty years ago, Steve realized it was critical for the department to gather records from congregations worldwide and from people whose stories would provide insights into the manner of life, faith, and works of church members across the globe. Steve's vision, combined with the trust he gave a few of us, has prepared us to take the next step.

What was the catalyst for our renewed global documentation efforts? In my opinion, there were three important events:

In June 1985 the Freiberg Germany Temple, the only temple ever to exist behind the Iron Curtain, was dedicated. Several years later Elder Russell M. Nelson wrote: "In retrospect, it is evident that the influence of that temple has been immeasurably great. The spiritual radiation from that temple deserves much credit for the changes that have occurred. This house of the Lord was the pivot point around which all good things subsequently seemed to

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turn.”⁶ One of those “good things” was the reinstatement of worldwide collecting projects by the Church Archives.

As mentioned, Dennis B. Neuenschwander was called to open the Austria Vienna East Mission in July 1987 and was given responsibility for all of Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. This enabled us to document the beginnings of the church in nations that were once behind the Iron Curtain.

In November 1989 the Berlin Wall came crashing down. We could now capture the voices, memories, and records of church members who had lived in East Germany—members of whom President Thomas S. Monson had spoken in some of his general conference addresses. With the demise of communism, these faithful Latter-day Saints could now speak for themselves without fear of reprisal.

In 1991 two fairly new Church Archives employees, Jeffery L. Anderson and I, flew to Germany, where we recorded the oral histories of the East German Latter-day Saints who survived four decades behind the Berlin Wall. For the first time in many years, the Church Archives was capturing the story of Latter-day Saints throughout the world in their own language and within their own context. And some of the stories were truly remarkable.

Henry Burkhardt, the man who presided over the East German congregations, described what it was like to be a target of the infamous Stasi, the East German secret police. He knew spies were in the branches and said he would rather have a faithful church member reporting accurate and harmless information than a person with an ax to grind giving the Stasi false and damaging information.⁷

These early trips led other staff members to travel throughout the world. Armed mostly with tape recorders and later with

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digital recording devices, they were charged with the responsibility of helping to capture the story of the global church.

Between 1991 and 2005, Church Archives staff members visited sixty-three countries. The department's oral history collection almost doubled, going from 2,390 interviews in 1991 to nearly 4,700 oral histories in the short span of fourteen years. Most of these interviews came from Saints outside the United States.

Why oral history? Sometimes people ask me, "Why did you primarily seek oral histories during these international trips?" There are two main reasons.

First of all, oral histories are easily transportable. It was simpler to carry a recording device, batteries, and tapes than to acquire large quantities of records in the field and carry them back to Salt Lake City. A few of us would fill suitcases with records, but mostly we focused on gathering stories through oral history.

We dreamed of the day when we could capture records in the field, microfilm or digitize them, send the films or images to the archives in Salt Lake City, and leave the original documents in the hands of their owners. But during those early years, the technology and other factors were not in place to make this possible in a systematic way.

Second, we used oral history because we learned that while every member of the church may not be a record keeper, everyone has a story to tell. Some of the people we met, especially in Africa, the Philippines, Polynesia, and Eastern Europe, did not live in record-keeping societies. Illiteracy and poverty prevent people from recording and preserving their stories in ways that are common in the Western world. Once in Nigeria, my coworker and I held a focus group to learn about local record-keeping capabilities. We learned about a generational dividing line: Many people in their forties were the first literate members of their families.

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Their parents, some of whom were Latter-day Saints and still lived in villages, were unable to read and write. We also learned it is nearly impossible to preserve documents in the typical Nigerian home. Termites and humidity wreak havoc with records.

In Russia and Bulgaria we learned from a series of focus groups that there is another type of generational dividing line. Younger people who grew up in the glasnost and perestroika era were more likely to keep personal records than their parents were. Older members of the church still feared the possibility of the KGB confiscating personal records and using them to hurt people.

As enjoyable as oral history was, we were also well aware that we were not using a perfect documentation tool. We learned that oral history has its limitations. One quick example of this:

In May 1995 I was in St. Petersburg, Russia, recording oral histories with some of the first Russian Mormons. St. Petersburg was the last leg of my three-week trip. I had already worked in Kiev, Ukraine, and Moscow, where I had recorded many oral histories, most of which were in Russian. I had studied three years of Russian at the University of Utah and was feeling pretty comfortable asking questions and then listening to responses I could only partially understand. Sometimes voice intonation and body language alerted me that it was time to ask the next question. I felt confident I was getting the gist of all the stories.

I always asked about each person's conversion experience. I wanted to know how each person received her or his testimony. This was a question I had already asked countless Russian and Ukrainian Latter-day Saints.

In St. Petersburg I interviewed Alexei Akimov, one of the earliest converts in Russia, having been baptized in January 1991. At the appropriate time in my interview I asked him, "Как вы

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обрили свое свидетельство?” which I thought meant, “How did you receive your testimony?”

In English Brother Akimov kindly said that I had just asked him, “How did you shave off your testimony?” The Russian words for “have found” and “shaved off” are the same except for one vowel. I now wonder how many other Russians and Ukrainians I asked about their shaving habits when I thought I was asking about their conversions.

I have framed that page of the transcript from my interview with Brother Akimov. I keep it on my wall as a constant reminder of my own limitations and of the need for locals to be engaged in documenting their own history.⁸

The church is flat. Another radical change has altered the course of our documentation efforts, making it possible to gather records in a way that was not imaginable twenty years ago. We have entered a new era with brave new possibilities. What was that change?

The world and the church suddenly became flat. I am referring to the phenomenon documented by Thomas L. Friedman in his book *The World Is Flat*.⁹

Digital capabilities, cheap electronic storage, and the ability to send large electronic files across the Internet are revolutionizing our documentation efforts. Now, instead of having to bring all records to Salt Lake City for microfilming, we can have records scanned in the field and then transferred electronically to the Church History Department. My coworker Clint Christensen has started a pilot program in Mexico to do just that.

A larger question now looms on the horizon: How should the Church History Department implement a worldwide program of acquiring, preserving, and making available church history records that will bless the lives of Latter-day Saints?

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LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY
OF THE CHURCH

I believe Latter-day Saint history offers the Church History Department an inspired paradigm for systematically documenting the global church. I am referring specifically to the recent developments in church governance. I don't take credit for these ideas; they are based on chapter 44 of Bruce C. Hafen's biography of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, *A Disciple's Life*.¹⁰

Four principles will guide our department in expanding our efforts worldwide:

1. A focus on core values
2. Delegation
3. Decentralization
4. Strategy

First, let's look at how these principles apply to the development or evolution of church governance.

A focus on core values. Referring to some changes that were occurring in the early 1980s, Elder Hafen wrote, "The movement of the Twelve toward being a council of generalists was further accelerated by a globalization process across many cultures that required more emphasis on the church's general core values rather than on particular programs."¹¹

It is interesting that around this time, the leaders of the church introduced the church's core values as a three-fold mission. In 1981 President Spencer W. Kimball said, "My brothers and sisters, as the Brethren of the First Presidency and the Twelve have meditated upon and prayed about the great latter-day work the Lord has given us to do, we are impressed that the mission of the church is threefold: To proclaim the gospel . . . ; To perfect the Saints . . . ; To redeem the dead."¹² Since then, other landmark

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documents have increased our focus on basic or core values, such as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” and “The Living Christ.”

Delegation. As the church grew throughout the world, the First Presidency delegated an increasing load to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The Twelve, in turn, delegated an increasing load to the Seventy and to stake presidents.

For example, there was a time when general authorities ordained every bishop, an apostle ordained every patriarch, and general authorities set apart every missionary. Now those ordinances are performed locally by stake presidents.

Decentralization. The church’s governing bodies have been decentralized to meet the needs of a growing and global church. In 1965 there were twelve assistants to the Quorum of the Twelve and seven Seventies serving as general authorities. Regional representatives were first called in 1967. Now there are eight quorums of the Seventy. Most of the men who serve in these quorums reside in their own countries and in their own homes.

In 1997 President Hinckley, after announcing the formation of some of these quorums, said: “With these respective quorums in place, we have established a pattern under which the Church may grow to any size with an organization of area presidencies and area authority seventies, chosen and working across the world according to need. Now, the Lord is watching over His kingdom. He is inspiring its leadership to care for its ever-growing membership.”¹³

These new quorums of the Seventy and the increasing responsibilities of area presidencies indicate a decentralization of authority necessitated by growth.

Strategy. In the 1980s and 1990s, according to Elder Hafen, members of the Twelve and the First Presidency focused more on

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their spiritual ministries and let the Seventies and stake presidents take charge of operational matters. In 2000 Elder Maxwell said members of the Quorum of the Twelve were “Apostles first and then we may have assignments, rather than having the assignments seem to dictate our role to us.”¹⁴

The Twelve became “more strategic and less tactical,” less specialized or tied to a program, auxiliary, or geographical area. Elder Bruce R. McConkie would say he wasn’t “the Archbishop of South America” even though he oversaw church affairs there. In other words, his role was not to specialize in South America; rather, he was an apostle of the Lord first and foremost.¹⁵

APPLICATION TO THE CHURCH HISTORY DEPARTMENT

So once again I ask, How should the Church History Department implement a worldwide program of acquiring, preserving, and making available church history records that will bless the lives of Latter-day Saints?

I believe that by following these four principles—a focus on core values, delegation, decentralization, and strategy—we will be able to support area presidencies with Church History Department programs, thereby ensuring that the history of the church is relevant to all Latter-day Saints. We are already well underway in applying some of these principles.

A focus on core values. Under the direction of Steven L. Olsen, Church History Department staff focused on defining the department’s core values. Steve insisted that these definitions be simple and easy to understand—no easy task for those of us who sometimes revel in the complexities of history and historiography and their theological underpinnings. But we sought to follow this direction in describing the department’s efforts to *preserve* and

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share the history of the Lord's work on the earth with the purpose of blessing Latter-day Saints worldwide.

The process of defining the department's core values helped us better communicate to church leaders and members what we do and why we do it. It also helped department staff stay focused on the larger vision.

Delegation. Delegation began back in the 1960s with the professionalization of the History Department. The department no longer consists of a church historian surrounded by clerks and research assistants; rather, it is staffed by a core of professional curators, librarians, and archivists. Instead of Elder Marlin K. Jensen, our current church historian, giving all the presentations, writing all the books, recording all the oral histories, and determining what to acquire, now the professional staff shoulders those responsibilities. I believe Elder Jensen trusts the staff's expertise.

The staff has also taken a major step forward in delegating some of our work to church-service missionaries. Our next step is to delegate even further to missionaries in the field, who can help with the acquisition and processing of church history records and other Church History Department programs. This is already happening in Mexico and Ukraine. This naturally leads to the notion of decentralization.

Decentralization. Decentralization depends on our ability and willingness to empower local Latter-day Saints, who already have the requisite language skills and cultural understanding, to represent the Church History Department and do the work of documentation in their own nations.

In 2008 we began a concerted effort, with area presidency approval, to implement two Church History Department programs, one in Mexico and the other in Ukraine.

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Mexico. We had long set our sights on Mexico because:

- It has the second-largest Latter-day Saint population in the world (after the United States), with 212 stakes, 41 districts, 21 missions, and 13 temples.¹⁶
- The church has a lengthy history in Mexico, going back to 1874.
- Several themes in Mexican church history have become significant themes in the globalization of the church.

In analyzing our collections, we discovered that most manuscript records in the Church Archives relating to Mexico are either from the Mormon colonies in northern Mexico or from Anglo missionaries, mission presidents, or general authorities. We have a good collection of records relating to early efforts to establish the church in Mexico, but not much reflecting the growth of the church in the last half of the twentieth century. Virtually all native representation was either in the local records, such as minute books, or in the oral histories recorded by Gordon Irving in the 1970s and 1980s.

For the most part, there had been no concerted effort by our department to acquire records relating to the church throughout Mexico. Private collecting efforts in the country had preserved many records that would not have survived otherwise.

Given the incomplete state of the Church History Department collection, and with the encouragement of the Mexico Area Presidency, we put together an experimental program headed by a Mexican couple called to serve as Church History Department missionaries. Santiago and Rosa Mejia of Puebla were called as area church history advisers by the area presidency. The Mejias have launched programs in two areas, Puebla and Tecalco, where they are focusing on three acquisition projects: (1) they

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are recording interviews with some of the released Seventies from Mexico; (2) they are locating elders' and sisters' missionary journals in the possession of stake and ward leaders in the Puebla area; and (3) they are recording oral histories with ten Puebla women to be sure that female perspectives are captured.

Not long ago the Mejias held "cultural and historical nights" in five stakes. Local church members were encouraged to bring personal records, photographs, artifacts, and artwork to these events. More than four hundred people attended and learned more about the purposes of the Church History Department.

Within a year's time, one hundred significant new collections about Mexican church history were acquired for the Church History Department, including twenty oral histories, eighteen of which were recorded and processed by the Mejias.

For example, the Mejias had the wonderful opportunity to record an interview with ninety-five-year-old Dario Perez. Brother Perez, a second-generation Latter-day Saint, was born and raised in the town of Tepecocolco, where he still lives. In his November 2008 interview, Brother Perez shared many fascinating details about his life. He described how he reluctantly agreed to be president of the town at a young age, believing the Lord wanted him to serve in this manner. He was able to accomplish much in this position, but certain corrupt individuals sought to take his life.

On one occasion he was walking home at night when a force pushed him to the ground. This happened three times. Finally he remained on the ground until he heard the sounds of a group of men who had been lying in wait for him. They eventually left, and Brother Perez was able to return home safely.

As Brother Perez shared this and other experiences with the Mejias, Church History Department staff and local members made scans of his personal documents and photographs. The

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materials are now preserved in Mexico as well as in the Church History Library, enabling future generations to learn about this stalwart pioneer.¹⁷

We hope to use this model to build a permanent program for documenting Mexican church history. It may also serve as a template for preserving history in other areas of the world.

Ukraine. The Lord often opens doors when we are ready to walk through them—or when we are *almost* ready. The program we are establishing in Ukraine is a testament to this principle.

In May 2008 Marc and Cherylee Hall were called to serve as church history missionaries in Kiev. Like the Mejias in Mexico, the Halls were an inspired gift to the Church History Department. They had already served five missions, including one in which they presided over the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission, as well as two other missions in Russia.

Europe East Area president Paul B. Pieper charged the Halls to prepare a book that would capture the first twenty years of the church's history in Ukraine and would be part of the celebration for the Kiev temple dedication. The Halls traveled throughout Ukraine gathering photographs and personal records, as well as recording interviews. These records will be used for the book and will also be sent to the Church History Library to build the Ukraine collection.

Now, I realize there is one minor problem with the Ukraine program: Elder and Sister Hall are Americans from Sacramento, California. But at this point, some places in Ukraine lack experienced local members to run Church History Department programs, and so expatriates will have to do. One of the Halls' responsibilities is to try to find local church members who can replace them when their mission is completed.

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The Mejias and the Halls represent a huge step forward in the Church History Department's attempts to delegate and decentralize. Their missions were made possible by the vision and endorsement of the Mexico and Europe East area presidencies.

This brings me to the final way in which the Church History Department can mirror the evolution of the church's global governance model.

Strategy. Just a few years ago the History Department staff had a model for documenting the global church, which we developed to near perfection. We called it the "Team-of-One-and-a-Budget" approach. A staff member would select a country, gather records from former missionaries or immigrants up and down the Wasatch Front, and then travel to the country, where he or she would spend a week or two recording interviews with the locals.

It was great while it lasted, but it was also fraught with problems. As I have illustrated, there were severe language barriers. There were also health and safety issues. In November 2005, Clint Christensen and I almost wound up in a Nigerian jail in Port Harcourt. It took a seventy-five-cent bribe to get us and our two Nigerian friends away from the crooked cops and back on the way to the airport.

Also, each of us who traveled throughout the global church came home with the nagging frustration that we had only scratched the surface. We realized that as church archivists, we could not do everything that needed to be done.

Now our task is to become global program managers. The Church History Department, with inspired direction from the church historian and recorder and also with crucial input from the area presidencies, will soon offer a variety of programs to the worldwide church. The area presidencies may select those programs that fit the area's needs and circumstances or develop their

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own projects, which the Church History Department will support. This is how we will move into the future.

In some respects I am sorry to say, “Gone are the days of being a team of one with a budget.” Being a latter-day Andrew Jenson was fun. But I know our new direction is necessary and inspired. Church History Department staff now work to support local initiatives that meet area presidency objectives. In return, we will reap the benefits of extending our reach through local church members. In doing so we also hope to raise up a new generation of Latter-day Saint record keepers.

This may be what former church historian Leonard Arrington envisioned many years ago when he said: “As the Church becomes more international, it will become increasingly important to write the history of Latter-day Saints in their homelands. By reconstructing these people’s lives, we give their heirs a sense of their LDS heritage as well as provide real models for their own lives, models with whom they can identify.” He said further, “When history comes from the grassroots, from where the people live and worship, the individual can identify personally with the general Church experience.”¹⁸

In conclusion, I have taken some liberty with a verse of scripture that I believe sums up our need to make church history more accessible and therefore more relevant to Latter-day Saints worldwide: “For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel [including church history] in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ” (D&C 90:11).

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NOTES

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