



CHAPTER TWO



PRESIDENT HINCKLEY'S INSPIRATION

President Gordon B. Hinckley, prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, came to rededicate renovated campus buildings as part of the Juárez Academy's centennial celebration on Thursday and Friday, June 5–6, 1997. During his fireside speech on Thursday evening, the idea of having a temple in the colonies became a real possibility. For over seven decades, Saints in the colonies had needed to travel long distances to reach the nearest temple in Mesa, Arizona. For over twenty years, they had needed to travel at least six to seven hours, and earlier than that, up to a full day to reach Mesa. The Church membership of less than five thousand in the colonies area was considered far too small to warrant building a temple there.

PRESIDENT HINCKLEY'S CENTENNIAL VISIT

“I’ve often wondered why the Lord has blessed me in so many ways, especially since being called as president of the Colonia Juárez Mexico Stake,” reflected Meredith I. Romney of the Juárez First Ward. “One of my greatest experiences was personally meeting and picking up President Hinckley at the El Paso International Airport and bringing him to Mexico for the Academia Juárez centennial celebration. To be in the

car with President Hinckley, his personal security man, David Sayer, and personal secretary, Don Staheli, was, to say the least, a very unique experience.”¹

This was President Hinckley's third trip to the colonies. During the three-hour drive, he talked “quite a bit about temples. One of his concerns for the people here was the distance they traveled to attend the temple.” President Romney told the prophet how stake members typically made a three- to four-day excursion to the temple in Mesa. President Hinckley responded by remarking on the length of time needed to build a temple and the cost involved. He indicated that he was concerned about getting temples closer to the members. The prophet mentioned that various options had been considered. Suggestions had even included placing the temple in a ship or airplane, but these ideas were rejected because of various drawbacks.

On Thursday evening, June 5, as President Hinckley arrived at the special fireside on the Juárez Academy campus, “He was impressed at the reverence and respect of the people assembled under the large tent, as everyone was in their seats ten to fifteen minutes early, quietly awaiting his arrival,” President Romney noted. “This was also the first opportunity that many people had of seeing and hearing a prophet speak in person.”



President Gordon B. Hinckley addressing Saints at a fireside, June 5, 1997, during which time he suggested the possibility of a temple in the colonies. Courtesy of John Hart.

Elder Eran A. Call of the Seventy spoke first. He reminisced about his experiences growing up in Colonia Dublán and attending the Juárez Stake Academy. He also recounted how the colonies had produced hundreds of missionaries and scores of mission presidents—a record unequalled by other Church units of their size. This caught President Hinckley's attention, President Romney recalled.²

President Hinckley was the principal speaker. After reviewing the history of the colonies and praising the Saints for

their faithfulness, the Prophet surprised his listeners with an unexpected idea: “This is the greatest era in the history of the Church and in the world for temple building. I would like to see the time come when all of our people throughout the world could get to a temple without too much inconvenience. I think you are about as far away as anybody, and I don’t quite know what to do about you. There aren’t enough of you to justify a temple. Now, if you’d multiply the membership here and get about twenty thousand members of the Church here, or thirty thousand, we’d build a beautiful temple. That’s a challenge for you. You may decide it is easier to keep going to Mesa.”³ (For the complete text of President Hinckley’s remarks, see appendix A.) Many who were in attendance commented that they had never before even contemplated the possibility of a temple in the colonies, so they were electrified by this unexpected suggestion.



President Hinckley speaking at academy graduation. Courtesy of John Hart.

A NEW CONCEPT REVEALED

After the meeting, President Hinckley accompanied Meredith Romney to his home, where he was to spend the night. The Romney residence was located on the hill just behind and above the academy. “Before going in the house,” President Hinckley “spent an hour outside walking around looking out over the valley. He remarked on how much the people of the colonies had contributed to the growth of the Church throughout the world—especially in Mexico,” President Romney remembered.⁴

The next morning President Hinckley spoke at the JSA commencement exercises. Immediately following the meeting, President Romney again had the privilege of driving the prophet back to the airport in El Paso. “On the way into Mexico, President Hinckley was sitting beside me in the front seat and was quite talkative,” President

Romney noted. “However, on the way back he sat in the back seat and seemed to be resting and meditating. He commented several times on how impressed he was with the people at the fireside, the musical numbers presented, and the sweet spirit that was there. He also commented on the graduating class.”⁵

President Hinckley later described what was going on in his mind during the drive to the airport: “As we were riding to El Paso, I reflected on what we could do to help these people in the Church colonies in Mexico. They’ve been so very faithful over the years. They’ve kept the faith. They’ve gone on missions in large numbers. These stakes have produced very many mission presidents who served faithfully and well. They’ve been the very epitome of faithfulness. And yet they’ve had to travel all the way to Mesa, Arizona, to go to a temple. . . . I thought of these things and what could be done. The concept of . . . smaller temples came into my mind. I concluded we didn’t need the laundry. We didn’t need to rent temple clothing. We didn’t need eating facilities. These have been added for the convenience of the people but are not necessary [for the temple ordinances].” President Hinckley noted that a smaller temple could be built more quickly and yet include all the essential facilities needed for temple ordinances. After boarding the airplane, he recalled, “I took a piece of paper” and “sketched out the [floor] plan, and turned it over to the architects to refine it.” He concluded, “The concept is beautiful. It’s a very workable concept.”⁶

At a regional conference at Chihuahua City on March 13, 1998, President Hinckley also spoke of his experience following the visit to Colonia Juárez, “There came to my mind an idea I’d never thought of before. It was inspired of the Lord to build a temple there, a small one, very small, six thousand square feet with facilities.” The President emphasized that “every faithful member needs access to the house of the Lord. The gospel is not complete without the ordinances of the temple.”⁷ Later, in the temple’s dedicatory prayer, the prophet specifically used the word “revelation” to describe the source of the small temples concept. “It was here in northern Mexico, that Thou didst reveal the idea and the plan of a smaller temple, complete in every necessary detail, but suited in size to the needs and circumstances of the Church membership in this area of Thy vineyard. That revelation came of a desire and a prayer to help Thy

people of these colonies who have been true and loyal during the century and more that they have lived here. They are deserving of this sacred edifice in which to labor for themselves and their forebears.”⁸ (For the full text of the dedicatory prayer, see appendix F).

A STUNNING PHONE CALL

Nearly a week after President Hinckley's visit, Saints in the colonies were pondering the meaning of his remarks about a temple. “While still savoring this wonderful experience and thinking I probably would never have the opportunity to speak to President Hinckley again,” President Romney recalled, “I received a phone call on the morning of June 11. At the time I was preparing to depart for a temple excursion to Mesa, Arizona.” President Hinckley's secretary indicated that the prophet wanted to speak with the stake president in about an hour. “You can imagine the thoughts that were running through my mind wondering what President Hinckley wanted to talk to me about! When he called, and after the normal greetings, he said, ‘President Romney, I would like to do something special for the Mormon colonies. What do you think about building a temple there?’ Just the thought of it left me speechless with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. I thought what a blessing this would be for the members in northern Mexico.”⁹

Only a few months earlier, a change in the immigration policy had made it impossible for members without passports to attend the Mesa temple, a privilege which they had previously enjoyed. The complicated and expensive procedure for obtaining passports effectively prevented many Mexican Saints from going to the temple because they could not afford to obtain the needed documents. A special fast in the Colonia Dublán and Colonia Juárez Stakes had sought divine help in resolving the problem.

“When I gained control and could speak again,” President Romney continued, “I told him I thought it would be wonderful! He then asked me if the people in the colonies would be willing to donate the property for the construction of the temple. I assured him that wherever they wanted to construct the temple, the property would be

donated. He mentioned that this was confidential and nothing should be said about it.”

President Romney carried this knowledge in his heart, “wanting to shout it from the rooftops” but being unable to share it with anyone. During the summer of 1997, Elder Andrew W. Peterson, president of the Mexico North Area, came to the colonies to rededicate the Colonia Juárez chapel on July 23–24 and to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the pioneers reaching the Salt Lake Valley. “Somehow in our conversation we were talking about temples, and I mentioned to him that President Hinckley had called and talked to me about building a temple in the colonies. Because he was the Area President, Elder Peterson had been advised that this was under consideration. I did not ever mention this to anyone else from that time, but it gave me an opportunity to get a lot of things off my chest,” the stake president confided.¹⁰

THE ASTONISHING ANNOUNCEMENT

Nearly four months after President Hinckley's visit to the colonies, the Church was preparing for its regular fall general conference. On Friday morning, October 3, Elder Call was attending a meeting of General Authorities in the Church Administration Building. At 9:30 a.m. he was handed a note that read, “Elder Call, come to President Hinckley's office at once.” When he arrived, he met Elder Jerald L. Taylor, a member of the Seventy from Colonia Dublán, who had also been summoned to the President's office. “*Compadre, ¿qué estás haciendo aquí?*” (My friend, what are you doing here?), Elder Call asked in surprise. “*No sé*” (I don't know), Elder Taylor responded. Don Staheli, President Hinckley's secretary, then escorted them into the prophet's office.

After warmly greeting Elders Taylor and Call, President Hinckley confided, “You brethren are both from Mexico. I just thought you might like to know that in this conference we are going to announce three small temples, one in the Mormon colonies in northern Mexico.” Elder Call was so “thrilled and overcome,” he recalled later, that he “shed tears of gratitude and joy.” They spent about thirty to forty minutes considering where the temple could be located. They discussed the surrounding areas from which people would come to the temple, considering travel distances and

times. For example, those coming from Hermosillo, capital of the neighboring state of Sonora, would have to travel seven hours. "In a wonderful warm way, President Hinckley responded, "Tell them not to worry about it. We'll build them one.'" (This was before other small temples were announced for Mexico.)¹¹

President Romney recalled that on that same weekend he was out "working cattle at the Casa de Adobe ranch." On Thursday, President Hinckley's office was able to contact President Romney's wife, Karen, who was actually in Utah at the time; they indicated that President Hinckley wanted to talk with her husband and insisted that it was very urgent. She told them that he was out where she could not contact him until the following morning, when he would be on the radio. The following day, he received the radio message that he was to get to a phone and call President Hinckley as soon as possible. "Again, questions started running through my mind as to what he might want," the stake president remembered. "I left the ranch and went to a small town, Casa de Janos, where the only phone in town was a public one. I tried to place a collect call to the number they had given me, but they wouldn't accept my call." With some concern, he insisted that he would pay for the call himself.

When President Romney was finally able to get through, he learned that he was on a speaker phone with Elders Taylor and Call in President Hinckley's office. "President Romney," the prophet began, "in general conference I will announce the plans for the construction of three small temples: one to be built in Anchorage, Alaska, one in Monticello, Utah, and the other in the Mormon colonies in Northern Mexico. Do you still think that the members will donate the property?" President Romney replied, "You just tell us where you want the temple, and I'm sure the property will be available."¹²

President Hinckley also telephoned Carl L. Call of the Colonia Dublán Stake to share the marvelous news. The two stakes would work closely together.

In the Saturday evening priesthood session, the construction of these temples was announced publicly for the first time. "There are many areas of the Church that are remote, where the membership is small and not likely to grow very much in the near future," President Hinckley began. "Are those who live in these places to be denied

forever the blessings of the temple ordinances? While visiting such an area a few months ago, we prayerfully pondered this question. The answer, we believe, came bright and clear. We will construct small temples in some of these areas, buildings with all of the facilities to administer all of the ordinances.” He explained that they would be built “to temple standards, which are much higher than meetinghouse standards. They would “accommodate baptisms for the dead, the endowment service, sealings, and all other ordinances to be had in the Lord’s house for both the living and the dead.” A local man would be called to preside over each of these temples; his first counselor would also be the temple recorder, and his second counselor would serve as temple engineer. Because patrons mostly bring their own temple clothes, no expensive laundry facilities would be needed (except for baptismal clothing). Then came the stunning news: “We are planning such structures immediately in Anchorage, Alaska, in the LDS colonies in northern Mexico, and in Monticello, Utah.” Members in the other two locations, as in the Mormon colonies, had to travel relatively long distances to reach a temple. Church leaders wanted the temple at Monticello to be built first, because it would be more accessible to Church headquarters and therefore easier to test the concept.¹³ President Hinckley declared that the Church was determined “to take the temple to the people and afford them every opportunity for the very precious blessings that come of temple worship.”¹⁴ (For the complete text of President Hinckley’s announcement, see appendix C.)

THE JOYOUS REACTIONS

President Hinckley’s words were heard all over the world as members, particularly those with ties to the colonies, listened and then celebrated in ecstatic jubilation. Common reactions included shock and disbelief, happiness, gratitude, tears, and a desire to share the



Architectural rendering of the eagerly anticipated temple. Note the white angel Moroni called for in early plans. Courtesy of Church History Library.

exciting news. For colonists everywhere, October 4, 1997—the day the temple was announced—will be a day long remembered.

At that time, many Saints in the colonies were able to pick up the priesthood session broadcast with satellite equipment they had in their homes. Hence, not only the men who were gathered in the two stake centers, but many others, including their wives, heard the good news at home. Mary Bowman of the Dublán First Ward, for example, couldn't believe her ears. "It was something that I'd never dreamed because it was too impossible, . . . too wonderful. My heart was beating very fast." Wesley, her husband, was also shocked. "It just sounded like something that was so unbelievable, something that we never expected. We were just speechless because we thought it was something that would never be."¹⁵

Members who were living away from the colonies expressed similar feelings when they heard the news. Elder Jerald Taylor, who was serving in the Chile Area Presidency at the time, wrote in his journal: "What a great blessing this will be to the Saints there and in the surrounding area. I had been involved in helping the Saints in our stake in Mexico go to the Arizona temple for twelve years, and I know the problems it entails. Now the temple was coming to them! I know that the Lord is mindful of His Saints and desires to bless them. There could be no greater blessing than a temple for the colonies!"

Elder Taylor's wife, Sharon, added, "I am sure the news traveled as quickly in the colonies as it did among our family in Utah! Surprise, wonder, and joy accompanied all remarks about this most wonderful announcement in conference—a temple in the colonies! Everyone was thrilled! . . . Who would have ever thought there would be a temple in the colonies?" Sister Taylor accurately anticipated that "love, unity, and harmony will abound as everyone puts their shoulder to the wheel to help this dream become a reality. The children will have a special feeling in their hearts when they sing the song 'I Love to See the Temple,' for it will be *their* temple, a house of the Lord in their midst!"

Colonist Waldo P. Call, a released Seventy, and his wife, LaRayne, of the Juárez First Ward, were serving a mission in Guatemala at the time of the announcement.

“We couldn’t believe it. LaRayne and I sat up most of the night talking about it. How wonderful, how unbelievable to have a small temple in the colonies.”

Mona Cluff, whose husband was then serving as president of the Chihuahua Mission, felt great gratitude for the faith and the examples of the Saints in the colonies. Sister Cluff, originally from Canada, had lived with her husband in the Juárez First Ward for several years. “I thought how deserving they were and how much I appreciated all they had done for me. I also thought how well prepared they are to serve in the temple because of their faithfulness in temple attendance and in fulfilling their callings through the years. I thought of them serving those who would come from a distance and that both would be edified together.”

Kevin Schmidt of the Juárez First Ward was serving a mission in Spain at the time. He received word by global express about three days later. He started to scream with joy and complete excitement. His companion couldn’t understand what was going on. Kevin’s excitement about his temple helped him understand a little better what the Spanish Saints were feeling about their temple then under construction in Madrid.

“I am so happy to be alive to see the temple,” remarked ninety-eight-year-old Clarence Turley of the Juárez First Ward, “and I am expecting to attend if someone will help me get up there and keep me from falling down. I love the Church. It is everything!”

Hispanic Saints were equally excited. Victor M. Cerda of the Huertas Ward, soon to be called as president of the stake in Colonia Dublán, shared the feelings of many. “I was very surprised taking into account that temples were built only where there were great numbers of members. The announcement provoked in me great humility to see that we were favored with such a great blessing. It also made everyone more aware of the great responsibility the Lord had placed in our hands.”

Fifteen-year-old Berenisse Chavez of the Spanish-speaking Juárez Second Ward said, “The temple that we are soon to have in Colonia Juárez reminds me that many of us, the youth, will have the opportunity of getting married in there some day to be united for the eternities. Having a temple near, where we can see it everyday, reminds us all to set a goal to marry in there someday so we can be an eternal family.”

Catalina Cisneros de Vazquez of the Obrera Ward was grateful that her dreams would now be realized: "My greatest desire is to work in the temple. I give thanks to God for this great gift He has given us." Her husband, Alberto, an enthusiastic missionary-minded convert, added, "The doors to the gospel will be opened up. It is also the fulfilling of the prophecies."

Charlene Artalejo of the Hidalgo Ward felt that her mother and her aunt Juliana were probably jumping with joy in the spirit world and would be very near to the temple upon its completion; she also believed the temple would help her feel closer to these and other loved ones who have gone before her.

Guillermina Acosta of the Nuevo Casas Grandes First Ward sensed that a great responsibility lay on her shoulders. As an only member of the Church in her family, she realized the importance of first cleansing her inner temple and then working hard to perform the needed ordinances.

This was a time of jubilation because having a local temple would eliminate travel and expense problems faced by many Mexican members, as Victor Cerda pointed out.

Rosa Chavez of the Huertas Ward "felt that it was an answer to many prayers, because I knew that many members' economical situations had deteriorated, and as time went on less and less members were being able to attend the temple. When President Hinckley told us that we would need to convert many members before we could have a temple, I felt like it would be an impossibility. But when the temple was announced, I felt great gratitude because, in a way, we are an isolated people and I knew that the Lord was aware of each of us."

Elvira Vizcaino of the Juárez Second Ward concurred. "I thought what a great blessing it will be to not have to travel to attend the temple. Now that we were going to have a temple in our town, I vowed to do everything possible to attend as often as I could."

Even those who were not Latter-day Saints were interested in the news. According to President Cerda, some of the most frequently asked questions were, what is the difference between a chapel and a temple? what do you do inside a temple? who can enter

a temple? Many had high expectations of what the presence of a temple would do for the community. *El Diario*, the local Spanish newspaper, suggested that because there was only one temple in all the republic located far away in Mexico City, the local region “will be benefited through the affluence which visitors to this [temple] will bring.”¹⁶

The Dublán stake presidency set goals in the wake of the announcement: every member should be worthy to receive a temple recommend and be able to enter the temple. Stake members should also get more involved in the family history center so they could do the vicarious work for their own ancestors.

President Cerda and other stake leaders emphasized that even though temples are structurally beautiful, the most important things are the ordinances and covenants that are realized inside. They hoped that every time members returned to the temple they would go with a higher level of spirituality. By doing so, they would reveal that they understood the link that exists between the Lord and us through the temple.

President Samuel H. Cluff of the Chihuahua Mission described what happened when the temple was announced in October of that year: “We were sitting in the mission home with a group of about fifteen elders watching the priesthood session of general conference. When President Hinckley announced a temple to be built in the colonies in northern Mexico, all the elders turned towards us and cheered. We didn’t know until later when we read in the *Church News* that he had also announced the temple of Monticello, Utah.” The temple in Monticello was mentioned after the one in the colonies, so this part of the announcement must have been drowned out by the missionaries’ excitement. “We were all amazed because we had been talking about a temple in the state of Chihuahua for a year before this announcement.”¹⁷

While many in the colonies watched the announcement at home, most members in Chihuahua were not able to watch conference live, so they received the news days or even weeks later. Many called the mission office to verify what they had heard. Tears were shed in gratitude and anticipation. Several missionaries specifically expressed excitement that a temple in Chihuahua—a dream throughout the mission—was now on its way to fulfillment.

An elder in the Missionary Training Center who was coming to the Chihuahua Mission wrote President Cluff asking if he might be assigned to help build the temple. In response, President Cluff told him that “he would not be working on the temple, but that his calling would be to find, teach, and gather the people in the area to receive the blessings of the temple.”¹⁸ He was assigned to the Colonia Juárez Zone and had great success because of his desires.

“I was grateful to the Lord for answering our faith and prayers and was totally amazed that it happened so soon,” reflected President Cluff, “because we thought we had to baptize thousands of people before it could happen. I was very excited because I love the colonies and the people who live there. I am so grateful for the wonderful upbringing which I received in that sacred place.”¹⁹

NOTES

1. Meredith I. Romney to Virginia Romney, December 1997, original copy in Virginia Romney's possession; see Romney, *History of the Colonia Juárez Chihuahua Temple*, 1:42–43. Meredith Romney, interview by Richard O. Cowan, November 17, 2006; recording in Richard Cowan's possession. Unless otherwise indicated, the material on the next three pages is drawn from these sources.
2. Meredith Romney interview.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, remarks at Academia Juárez centennial fireside, June 5, 1997; typescript in Virginia Romney's possession.
4. Meredith Romney interview.
5. Meredith Romney interview.
6. Dell Van Orden, “Inspiration Came for Smaller Temples on Trip to Mexico,” *Church News*, August 1, 1998, 3, 12.
7. Based on notes taken by Mona Cluff, wife of Chihuahua mission president, at Chihuahua regional conference, March 13, 1998, typescript in Romney, *History*, 1:54–55.
8. Gordon B. Hinckley, “This Is a Day Long Looked Forward To,” *Church News*, March 13, 1999, 7.
9. Meredith Romney interview.

10. Meredith Romney interview.
11. Eran A. Call interview, February 26, 1999; typescript in Virginia Romney's possession; Brenton Yorgason, *Two Fond Hearts: The Eran and Catherine G. Call Story* (Provo, UT: Lighthouse Publishers, 2006), 324–25.
12. Meredith Romney interview.
13. Van Orden, "Inspiration Came for Smaller Temples," 3, 12.
14. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1997, 68–69.
15. This and following statements in this section, unless otherwise noted, are based on interviews by Virginia Romney, in *History*, 1:73–77.
16. "Construirán templo mormón en esta zona," *El Diario de Nuevo Casas Grandes*, November 7, 1997, 2–3.
17. Sam Cluff, in Romney, *History*, 1:74.
18. Cluff, in Romney, *History*, 1:74.
19. Cluff, in Romney, *History*, 1:74.