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Edmonton and Northern Alberta

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Edmonton and northern Alberta has experienced considerable growth in a relatively short period of time. When the first small group of Latter-day Saints began meeting officially in Edmonton in early 1933, slightly more than a century had elapsed since the Church was organized in Fayette, New York. During the eight decades since that 1933 meeting, six stakes of Zion have been formed in the Edmonton area and the region north, and in 1999 the beautiful Edmonton Alberta Temple was dedicated. Hundreds of leaders at every level, a host of missionaries, and many thousands of members have been involved in this remarkable achievement. Their contributions, large and small, have provided a strong foundation for the Church in the northern part of the province. Most of the leaders and many of the members during much of this history did not come from Edmonton, however, but mostly migrated from southern Alberta for education, employment, or government service.

President Gordon B. Hinckley affirmed that without attending the temple, a person cannot receive the full blessings of the gospel. “The temple ordinances,” he said, “become the crowning blessings the Church has to offer.”¹ In

this chapter on the history of the Church in Edmonton and northern Alberta, three main themes emerge: sustained growth in the face of numerous challenges; the power of a knowledgeable testimony of the restored gospel; and the blessings of temple worship. Despite the challenges of vast distances and very cold and sometimes unpredictable winter weather, the Church in Edmonton and other northern areas has flourished from very humble beginnings to become a centre of strength with more than twenty thousand members in 2015.

GATEWAY TO THE NORTH

The vastness of Alberta, the fourth largest Canadian province, has posed challenges for members of the Church. Alberta contains 661,848 square kilometres, which is approximately the size of the state of Texas, the second largest in the United States. The distance by road from the north to the south of the province is about 1,500 kilometres, while the longest east–west road is more than 650 kilometres and the narrowest is about 360 kilometres.² Edmonton, although technically in the southern half of the province, is referred to as the “Gateway to the North.”



◀ *Walter C. Meyer graduated from the University of Alberta as a dentist in 1961. He taught in the Faculty of Dentistry beginning in 1963 and served from 1977 until his retirement in 1994 as professor and chairman of the Operative Division. He played in the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra as a cellist from 1957 to 1967, then as soloist and chamber musician in concerts, on radio, and on television for more than three decades. An accredited genealogist, he has served as president of the Edmonton Branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society and has written five books on genealogy for the use of his family. His Church service has included missionary in the Canadian Mission, bishop, stake extraction program director, family history centre director, and temple sealer. He and his wife, Gwen Payne, are parents of six children and have twenty-five grandchildren and nineteen great-grandchildren. (Walter Meyer)*

Founded as a Hudson's Bay Company fur trading post in 1795, Edmonton has a long history which includes explorers, fur traders, gold seekers, and religious missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant. It was incorporated as a city in 1904 with a population of 8,350 and, when the Province of Alberta was created in 1905, was selected as the provincial capital.³ In 2015 it was the fifth largest metropolitan area in Canada with 1.3 million inhabitants.⁴ Edmonton has become the centre of one of the major economic regions of the country due to its location in a rich farming area; its important natural resources in the area and to the north, including vast oil deposits; and its geographic position as a transportation hub between the north-south and the east-west corridors of Canada. Additionally, Edmonton has had the economic advantage of being the provincial capital as well as claiming the University of Alberta, the province's oldest university, dating from 1908.⁵

Because of the huge distances in the vast area of northern Alberta, filling Church responsibilities has often required much time, effort, and expense. Fort McMurray is located about 450 kilometres, or five hours driving time, from Edmonton. Local leaders in Fort McMurray and those in Cherry Grove and Lloydminster, also hundreds of kilometres away, have regularly attended once-a-month stake leadership meetings in Edmonton.⁶ Stake presidency members in the widely spread out Grande Prairie Stake averaged 500 kilometres of driving each week on stake business, meaning that after a decade in office, they had driven approximately 250,000 kilometres, essentially the life of a car.⁷ Driving time to the Cardston Alberta Temple from Edmonton, almost 600 kilometres straight south, was six to seven hours each way, and from Grande Prairie, close to 1,000 kilometres, ten to eleven hours.⁸

Another significant challenge in the Edmonton area and further north has been that of severe winter weather. The average low temperature in Edmonton in January is -19°C (-2°F).⁹ Unexpected winter storms, sometimes with blizzard conditions, have made winter driving perilous. Many travelling in these northern areas routinely carry a snow shovel in case they go off the road and emergency winter clothing in case of mechanical or other difficulty.

EARLY GROWTH IN THE RED DEER AREA, NORTHERN ALBERTA, AND EDMONTON

Called as president of the Alberta Stake in 1903, Edward J. Wood travelled annually to visit the wards and branches of the stake. In July 1904, accompanied by stake and ward officers, Wood made a trip to visit scattered Church members in the north. The group travelled as far north as Lacombe

Distance, Faith, and Unexpected Bad Weather

The experience of an Edmonton Second Ward family in late October 1970—still in the fall season—illustrates the role of distance and unexpected bad weather and shows a remarkable degree of spiritual commitment in fulfilling a Church assignment. The family, with a young baby and four other children aged seven to twelve, was assigned to visit a small branch in Rocky Mountain House, a town about 220 kilometres southwest of Edmonton, to provide talks and music in a sacrament service. Although the weather forecast had predicted only limited snowfall, the snow grew progressively worse as they drove. Rather than turning back, the decision was to make it a matter prayer, and after a short distance, they reached the southern edge of the storm, and the snow stopped from there to the journey's end. But a blizzard descended on the way home, making driving impossible. The family decided to stop part-way in Ponoka and to rent a motel room overnight, apparently the last available. The main highway remained closed until noon the next day, and even after the road was opened, bad conditions continued, so that the drive from Ponoka to Edmonton, normally about one hour, took four hours.¹⁰

and Rimbey, north of Red Deer, and held Church meetings there. A total of thirty-eight adults and children met in William C. Tolman's home, near Rimbey, for services. This is the first known record of Church services in the northern part of Alberta. The next day, Wood was inspired to organize a branch in that area, calling Tolman to be the first branch president.¹¹

Some of the migration of Latter-day Saint families and individuals to northern Alberta came as a result of the Federal Dominion Lands Act of 1872, which provided opportunity for homesteads. One such homesteading group emigrated from Iowa in 1907 to Leedale, Alberta, about 70 kilometres northwest of Red Deer. The group did not have contact with any official unit of the Church for thirty-five years, but they remained true to the faith and held a Sunday School until 1942, when missionaries from the Western Canadian Mission found the group of seventeen members.¹²

A notable pioneering expedition took place during the Great Depression when, in May and September 1933, two groups of Latter-day Saint families, totalling about sixty souls, migrated north from the Glenwood area to escape



the drought conditions of southern Alberta. These hardy Saints travelled to Beaver Crossing, Alberta, about 280 kilometres northeast of Edmonton, to homestead in an area with reputedly more rainfall. Reminiscent of the pioneer trek to Utah, they journeyed in covered wagons across Alberta prairie land to Rosebud (110 kilometres northeast of Calgary), from whence they were moved by train to Bonnyville and then resumed their wagon journey for the final 55 kilometres to their destination. In September 1933, more than two years before the organization of the first branch in Edmonton, these Saints became the Beaver Crossing Branch, part of the North Central States Mission. In December 1942, the Beaver Crossing Branch (later renamed Cherry Grove), along with all Saskatchewan, was transferred to the Western Canadian Mission.¹³

The First Branch in Edmonton

The first members who came to Edmonton in the early decades of the twentieth century came for a variety of reasons, but they did not stay permanently. John H. Blackmore,

who later became the first Latter-day Saint elected to the Canadian House of Commons, was the first known Latter-day Saint student at the University of Alberta, attending from 1909 to 1913.¹⁴ In 1914, Robert Gordon; his wife, Fannie; and their four children moved from Stirling to Edmonton so Robert could work as a land surveyor for the provincial government. They were the first known LDS family in Edmonton. However, they moved to Lethbridge after two years so their family could attend Church meetings and activities.¹⁵ Lawrence Peterson and George Stringam, members of the Legislative Assembly first elected from southern Alberta in 1921, stayed in Edmonton hotels to attend sessions of the legislature.¹⁶ John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles visited Edmonton for a week in 1925 at the request of the provincial premier to advise the government on irrigation. While in Edmonton, Widtsoe found that there were “very few” members of the Church in the city, although he “met some,” including Rhoda Low Rogers.¹⁷

The permanent establishment of the Church in Edmonton began in the 1930s.

▲ *Horse-drawn wagon on the 1933 trek from Glenwood to Beaver Crossing (later Cherry Grove Branch). Pioneers in this wooded area lived in log cabins. When this family's horses died of “swamp fever,” the family went to Church meetings by dogsled in winter. (Betty Margaret Burgess)*



In 1930, students from southern Alberta—David Elton, Wayne Matkin, and Vi Wood—came to attend the University of Alberta, the only university in the province, and by 1933, the ranks of LDS students at the University of Alberta had increased to four or five.¹⁸ In July 1932, the Alfred R. and Mabel Strate family moved to Edmonton from Glenwood.¹⁹

The first recorded meeting of Latter-day Saints in Edmonton took place on 26 February 1933 in the home of Alfred and Mabel Strate, with a handful of families and students. Vi Wood kept minutes of that first meeting, attended by fifteen members and two nonmembers. The group had not yet received authorization to serve the sacrament, but this was granted at a later date. In addition to the Strate family, the small group included, among others, a married student, Glen E.

Nielson, later founder of Husky Oil; his wife, Olive (daughter of Edward J. Wood); and other students, Briant W. Stringam, Wallace Hansen, Vi A. Wood, and Elmo Fletcher.²⁰ Fletcher later became president of the Lethbridge Stake, and both Fletcher and Wood later served as presidents of the Cardston Alberta Temple.²¹

While the little group discontinued meetings in the summer of 1933 when the students went home, it resumed meetings when they returned in the fall and met continually thereafter.²² In November 1935, the Edmonton group became a dependent branch of the Calgary Ward with Alfred Strate as presiding elder and with Grant Woolley (later to be president of the Lethbridge Stake) and Clarence Strate as counselors. The branch began holding meetings in Scona Hall, at Whyte Avenue and 103rd Street.²³

The election of a Social Credit government in Alberta in 1935 brought four Latter-day Saints from southern Alberta to the provincial legislative assembly in Edmonton—Nathan Eldon Tanner, Solon Low, Hans E. Wight, and James Hansen.²⁴ For the 1936 sessions of the Assembly, they only remained there for the two to three months while the legislature was in session. Tanner and Low moved their families to Edmonton in 1937 when they were appointed to cabinet posts requiring their full-time attention.²⁵ N. E. Tanner served as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in 1936, and in 1937 he was appointed Minister of Lands and Mines, which in 1949 became two ministries, with Tanner holding both portfolios. Solon Low was appointed in 1937 as provincial treasurer. Both men, stalwarts in the Church, served with distinction in the provincial legislature and later went on to other responsibilities—Tanner as the first president of TransCanada Pipelines and Low as national leader of the Social Credit Party.²⁶ The addition of the Low and Tanner families was a significant increase to the membership of the Edmonton Branch.

◀ Clarence and Esther Strate and their family were early members of the Edmonton Branch, arriving in August 1934. Clarence was the older brother of Alfred Strate, the first branch president. Gordon, the youngest child in the photograph, was the first Latter-day Saint child born in Edmonton and later played hockey for the Detroit Red Wings in the National Hockey League. (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)

► N. Eldon and Sara Tanner with their five daughters. This photograph was taken about 1935, before the family moved to Edmonton. (Thomas E. Walker)

► The Edmonton Branch held meetings in the IOOF Hall on 95th Street and 112th Avenue from 1942 until 1951. This photo was likely taken in the 1940s. (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)



On 1 July 1938, the Edmonton Branch became an independent branch in the Lethbridge Stake.²⁷ The membership records of sixty-one, including unbaptized children, were transferred from the Calgary Ward to the now independent Edmonton Branch.²⁸ Auxiliaries were first organized in the branch on 9 October 1938, with Sara Tanner as Relief Society president, Alice Low as Young Women's MIA president, William Sykes as Young Men's MIA superintendent, and Mary Ella Hancock as Primary president.²⁹ The branch met in various rented halls during those years, some of which required the removal of beer bottles and cigarette butts

before meetings could be held. In 1942, the branch began meeting in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) hall on 95th Street and 112th Avenue, where it met until the Whyte Avenue meetinghouse was built following the Second World War.³⁰

THE WESTERN CANADIAN MISSION

As early as 1935, Asael E. Palmer, president of the Lethbridge Stake, expressed concern to President Heber J. Grant that the Lethbridge Stake was unable to adequately serve and support Church members in Edmonton, more than 300 miles (480 kilometres) away, and that the Edmonton Saints would best be served by a mission.³¹ In June 1940, Palmer reported to the First Presidency that there was a thriving branch of 124 in Edmonton but that the branch was isolated, being 200 miles (300 kilometres) from the nearest ward in Calgary. The city of Edmonton was growing, and there was much potential for missionary work. Palmer strongly recommended the establishment of a Western Canadian Mission, which N. Eldon Tanner, president of the Edmonton Branch, firmly supported.³² This recommendation was endorsed in a report of the stake presidents of the Lethbridge, Alberta, and Taylor stakes, who had been appointed to investigate the possibilities of successful missionary labour in Alberta.³³

In April 1941, Walter Miller from Taber, Alberta, a recently returned missionary, reported on his mission to Apostle George Albert Smith at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Elder Smith asked for his thoughts about the Church establishing a mission in Western Canada. Miller responded, "Brother Smith, I think it an excellent idea!"³⁴ In July 1941, the same Walter Miller, just thirty years old and still unmarried, received a call from the First Presidency to preside over the Western Canadian Mission, the thirty-seventh mission of the Church. Miller put his affairs in order, was set apart by Stephen L. Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve on 5 September 1941, and five days later, as the youngest of all existing mission presidents, moved to Edmonton for four years.³⁵

The first mission home at 9734-106 Street was leased for \$47.50 a month. Miller and two or three missionaries "batched" there until October 1942. At that point, the bachelor president returned from general conference with his new wife, Afton Ingersoll Miller, who was from American Fork, Utah, and whom he had first met in 1939 while he was on his way to the British Mission. She had been an employee of the Presiding Bishop's Office, and during lunch she cashiered at the Lion House cafeteria. They were united in marriage in the Salt Lake Temple on 5 October 1942.³⁶



The missionary force provided to Miller in September 1941 consisted of six “seasoned missionaries” transferred from the North Central States and Northwestern States Missions. Unfortunately, they were all scheduled soon to complete their two-year terms, and only a small number were being sent to replace them and build the missionary force due to war-time conditions (see chart below).³⁷ A few short-term missionaries were called from southern Alberta, beginning in December 1941, to supplement the full-time missionary force.³⁸

The Western Canadian Mission originally covered “all territory north of the city of Calgary” but did not include Saskatchewan and British Columbia, which were added later.³⁹ Between 1941 and 1998,



Boundary Changes in the Western Canadian Mission

1942	In May, the mission expanded south to Nanton, taking in Calgary and Medicine Hat. ⁴⁰ All of Saskatchewan and the Beaver Crossing Branch near Cold Lake, Alberta, were added in December. ⁴¹
1947	The province of British Columbia was included within the mission boundaries in December. ⁴²
1960	British Columbia was transferred to the Alaskan-Canadian Mission, and the mission office was moved from Edmonton to Calgary.
1970	The name was changed to the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mission.
1974	The name was again changed to the Canada Calgary Mission.
1976	The province of Saskatchewan was reassigned to the Canada Winnipeg Mission in February.
1980	The Cranbrook British Columbia Stake was made part of the Canada Calgary Mission in June. ⁴³
1998	In July 1998, the Canada Edmonton Mission was created, which included the Red Deer Stake and the areas north, plus the Northwest Territories, with Edmonton as the seat of the mission. ⁴⁴

when the Canada Edmonton Mission was created, there were many name and boundary changes, as summarized above.

At its largest, in the 1950s, the Western Canadian Mission, besides including the three western provinces, extended north through the Northwest and Yukon Territories as far as there was land—covering an area almost one and a half times larger than the western section of the United

States if the line were drawn between Texas and the Dakotas.⁴⁵

The Edmonton missionary district was formed in September 1941, and missionary work expanded to Olds, Red Deer, Camrose, Wetaskiwin, Lloydminster, and Drumheller by the end of that year. The first convert was baptized in Edmonton in December 1941.⁴⁶ In 1942, missionaries also laboured in Calgary, Edson, Grande

▲ Walter Miller, seated second from left, beside his wife, Afton, and a small group of missionaries. Miller was the first president of the Western Canadian Mission. This photograph was taken between 1942 and 1944. (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)

Prairie, Leedale, Ponoka, Rosedale, Stettler, Vegreville, Vermilion, Medicine Hat, High River, and Wainwright, as well as began work in Saskatchewan; new missionary districts were also created in Calgary and Peace River.⁴⁷ The Edmonton Branch remained a part of the Lethbridge Stake until November 1942, when it was officially transferred to the Western Canadian Mission.⁴⁸

Tanner, who had previously served as bishop of a Cardston ward, was appointed branch president. His counselors were Arthur McMullin and Ernest Poulson.⁵⁵ Under Tanner's leadership, the Edmonton Branch prospered with the application of the full Church program, including the establishment of a standard budget, building fund, and welfare programs. Branch missionaries were now set apart,

Missionaries in Limelight, Play Basketball, Sing in Quartet

A basketball team was formed on 2 December 1941, comprising five missionaries and three members of the Edmonton Branch, with Solon Low as coach and Vi Wood as assistant coach. In order to expand the missionaries' circle of contacts and to gain favourable publicity for the Church, the team competed against other Edmonton teams, winning most of their games, and the LDS team was known for its good sportsmanship.⁴⁹

A few years later, four missionaries formed a successful male quartet, broadcasting biweekly programs over a Grande Prairie radio station. In December 1948, the quartet went on a three-province, eight-week tour, performing for fifteen thousand people, and travelling eight thousand kilometres. They were even offered a contract with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation "if they would dissolve the name of 'The LDS Male Quartet,' and assume a professional title."⁵⁰

Joseph Y. Card, son of Charles Ora Card, became the second president of the Western Canadian Mission at the release of Walter Miller in 1945. Glen G. Fisher, a former bishop from Hill Spring, Alberta, served as mission president from 1947 to 1951.⁵¹ The Second World War was over when President Fisher took the reins, which meant an increase in available young men to serve missions, causing a period of great expansion in the mission, with a dramatic increase in convert baptisms.⁵²

and home teachers emphasized reactivation and the importance of temple participation.⁵⁶

N. Eldon Tanner, known in government circles as a man of great integrity,⁵⁷ was almost idolized by the branch members during his tenure as branch president, especially by his associates and by the youth. He expected a high level of performance and encouraged people to have confidence in themselves to become who the Lord wanted them to become, and they responded with enthusiasm. He led

Early Growth Statistics of the Western Canadian Mission⁵³

	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
Missionaries	19	27	23	23	17	77	132	134	130
Converts		24	35	48	17	20	23	102	162
Copies of the Book of Mormon			434	459	354	635	1,573	1,597	3,112
Members	27	756	971	1,097	1,109	1,174	1,287	2,857	3,267

**THE EDMONTON BRANCH:
THE N. ELDON TANNER YEARS**

The first conference of the Edmonton Branch was held 19 March 1939.⁵⁴ Lethbridge Stake President Asael E. Palmer presided, and during the meeting N. Eldon

by example and in his words and actions showed people how to be true Latter-day Saints. He practiced love and charity for those who had less of this world's goods than he, giving anonymous gifts of food, home furnishings, or needed items. Perhaps in part because of his later role in



the leading councils of the Church, especially in the First Presidency, his legacy continues to have a powerful influence in Edmonton.⁵⁸

Joseph F. Merrill of the Quorum of the Twelve, the first Apostle to visit Edmonton on Church assignment, attended a special meeting of the branch on Tuesday, 25 February 1941. He was accompanied by Octave W. Ursenbach of the Lethbridge stake presidency. Reflecting the musical emphasis of the branch, the meeting featured two vocal solos, one violin solo, and two numbers by the branch choir. The visiting Church leaders instructed the members on gospel principles and encouraged them to support the war effort by purchasing war bonds.⁵⁹

The War Years and After

The growth of the Edmonton Branch during its first decade was significantly influenced by World War II. Because of Edmonton's relationship to the north and the building of the Alaska Highway—as a result of concern about a Japanese invasion through Alaska—many military personnel from many countries enlarged the branch. In these early

years, there were some convert baptisms, but migration for employment, especially with the military and government, was the largest factor in branch growth.⁶⁰ Most migrating Church members came from southern Alberta and included many of the Edmonton “pioneer” families—Morgan and Fay Pitcher, Low (Al and Regina, Bruce and Ruth), Harry and Golda Kincade, Robert and Ethel Stockdale, Kay and Marie Burnham, John and Emma Sheppard, Harold and Dora Bennett, and others.⁶¹

During the war years, while the city of Edmonton grew at an accelerated rate, the Church grew even faster. In 1940, Church membership in the Edmonton Branch stood at 129 and by 1945, at war's end, branch membership had increased to 237,⁶² nearly doubling, while city population in the same period had grown from 90,000 to 112,000, just under 25 percent.⁶³

The trend continued in the postwar period of prosperity. By 1949, branch membership had risen to 488,⁶⁴ again outstripping the growth rate of the city, which had increased to 137,000.⁶⁵ In 1947, with the gushing of oil from the famous wildcat well Leduc No. 1, some fifteen kilometres west of

◀ *The Edmonton Branch adult Sunday School class, May 1946, at the IOOF Hall. J. Y. Card, mission president, and N. E. Tanner, branch president, are seated on row 2, the ninth and tenth from the left. (Thomas E. Walker)*

the city, Edmonton became the “Oil Capital of Alberta,” and the economic boom which followed attracted many people. Church growth was also fueled by an increase of LDS university students and an increase in convert baptisms.⁶⁶

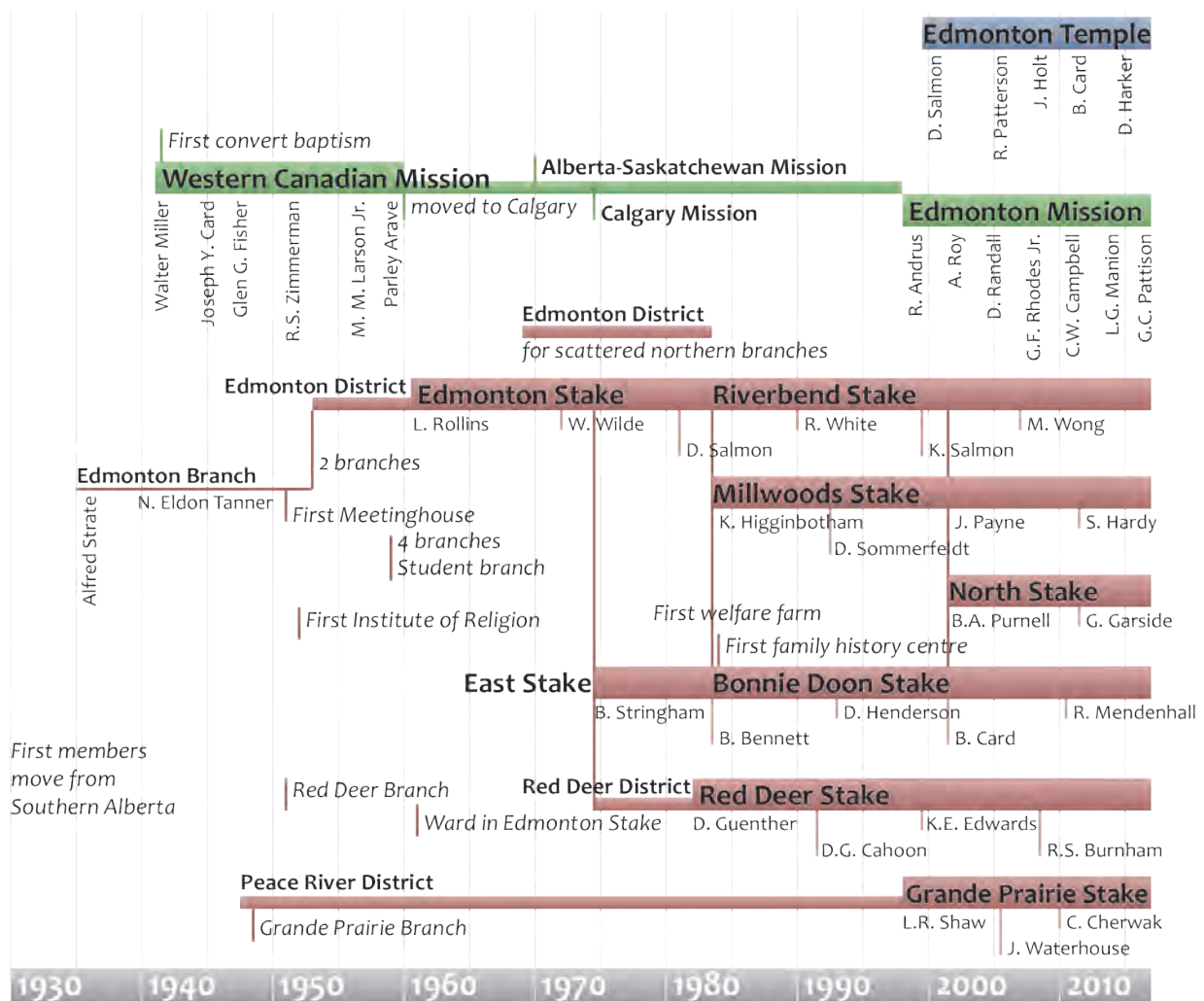
Building the Whyte Avenue Chapel

Church members in Edmonton, having met for years in rented halls, greatly desired to have a meetinghouse of their own, but at that time, local members were required to donate a significant portion of the funds or labour for building construction. Fund-raising activities occupied

much time and effort. Over a period of many years, branch members raised building funds through donations and projects, such as bazaars put on by the Relief Society, exhibition booths, and the annual chocolate project. In 1948, the branch sponsored the production of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta as a fund-raiser, which netted three thousand dollars. As branch members sacrificed and worked diligently together, they developed “a remarkable spirit of love and harmony.”⁶⁷

Progress of the building was delayed due to the war. Although the site at 82nd Avenue and 108th Street was purchased

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in 1944, the wartime shortage of building materials delayed the granting of a building permit.⁶⁸ In May 1949, after many months of correspondence between branch leaders and the Church Building Department, the Church Expenditure Committee in Salt Lake City gave permission to proceed. N. Eldon Tanner turned the first sod on 6 June 1949.⁶⁹ Much of the construction was done by local members, some of whom recalled feeling heat through their leather gloves as they transported newly made bricks from a brick kiln onto a member's truck and to the work site.⁷⁰ The first baptismal service in the uncompleted building, with visitors seated on planks that rested on sawhorses, took place on 23 April 1950, and the first worship service was held in the cultural hall on 3 September 1950, where the branch continued to meet until the chapel was completed.⁷¹ "The patience, faith, and prayers of the little band of Saints was at last rewarded" when the dedication of the Edmonton chapel took place 5 August 1951, with the offering of the dedicatory prayer by Stephen L. Richards of the First Presidency.⁷²

In 1952, N. Eldon Tanner resigned from government service and moved to Calgary to work in the petroleum industry, thus ending his tenure of thirteen years as president of the Edmonton Branch.⁷³ He left it strong, vibrant, and enthusiastic—still



young and ready to grow to the next stage of stakehood.

INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

The route from southern Alberta to Edmonton was sometimes called the "Sheepskin Trail," as students migrated northward to what, at that time, was the only university in the province. Although there were a few Latter-day Saint students at the University of Alberta in earlier years, from 1930 onward there has been a continuous presence and increase of LDS students in Edmonton.⁷⁵

In the 1940s, Latter-day Saint students in Edmonton formed an LDS club in order to participate in an intramural basketball

▲ *Chocolate making was a successful fund-raising project for members in the Edmonton area for many years. It required significant teamwork and specialized skills, especially in rolling and dipping the chocolates. (Walter Meyer)*

► *The Whyte Avenue building, the first LDS meeting-house in Edmonton, was completed in 1951 under the leadership of N. E. Tanner, branch president. (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)*

The Edmonton Chocolate Project

For many years, members of the Church engaged in bazaars and other fundraising efforts to meet the financial needs of Church programs. When Hattie Jensen moved with her husband to Edmonton in 1951, she was asked to crochet two doilies for an upcoming Relief Society bazaar. She estimated it would take her two months to crochet the doilies and that they would sell for about \$1.50 each. She told Relief Society leaders that she thought they could make a better profit if she made a batch of chocolates to sell. So the Relief Society provided her the ingredients, and she, with a helper, made one hundred pounds of hand-dipped chocolates, which were quickly sold for many times the projected profit from two doilies. Thus was started the Edmonton chocolate project, which over the next quarter century produced thousands of dollars annually for Church building and welfare funds, with production climbing to more than ten thousand pounds per year. At the completion of a new stake centre in 1962, the stake president suggested to Hugh B. Brown that it was "the only stake center in the Church built on chocolates."⁷⁴



Stone, and Ron Patrick, who all served with a number of full-time and part-time instructors.⁸⁶

Although Church services had always been held at the institute building, the students were officially organized as an independent branch on 20 September 1959, with the institute director, Monte Nyman, as branch president.⁸⁷ When the Edmonton Stake was created in 1960, the student branch became a ward, with Malcolm Asplund as bishop.⁸⁸ In 1986 the original institute building was replaced with a new two-story structure dedicated on 29 November 1987 by Philip Sonntag of the Seventy, a former missionary in the Western Canadian Mission.⁸⁹

The institute had a powerful impact on the lives of LDS young people. From 1983

to 2012, a total of over 21,000 institute students were enrolled, of which 7,690 were not college students, and 324—representing the missionary aspect of the institute—were not Church members. These statistics reflect the success of the institute in achieving the Church Educational System objective to have every Latter-day Saint university student also enrolled in a course of religion.⁹⁰ Schooled in gospel principles at the institute, educated LDS professionals—teachers, accountants, physicians, dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, agriculturists, engineers, and many other occupations—have been a great boon not only to the Church but to the province, the country, and even the world. Among the professions, dentistry seems to have held a particular attraction for Latter-day Saints, perhaps because of

▲ *This photograph was taken during the winter of 1957–58 in front of the institute building, on 100 percent Sunday, which was the day targeted to have every institute member in attendance. Many future Church leaders, including four temple presidents, are in the group. (Jack Chalmers)*

► *Members of the Red Deer Branch in 1953. The Red Deer Branch became part of the Calgary Stake when it was formed in 1953 but was transferred to the Edmonton Stake when it was created in 1960. (Red Deer Stake)*

the lifestyle associated with the practice of dentistry. A study of University of Alberta dental graduates from 1954 to 1994 showed that Latter-day Saints represented more than 5 percent of those graduating, more than twice the percentage of the LDS population in Alberta.⁹¹

The numbers of University of Alberta students from southern Alberta continued to increase until colleges and universities were established in southern locations, mostly in the mid-1960s, helping students to obtain their education closer to home. The institute and university ward, however, soon became a magnet for LDS young people from many other locations across the country and continues to be so.⁹²

THE EDMONTON DISTRICT

In 1953, Heber Jensen was called as the president of the newly formed Edmonton member district, with counselors Harold Bennett and Kay Wood.⁹³ As president of the district, Jensen's function was similar to that of a stake president, establishing and overseeing a full slate of district officers and travelling to the various branches to give guidance and training.⁹⁴ The district included not only branches in Edmonton but also those in a wide radius from Lloydminster on the east to Hinton and Edson on the west.⁹⁵

Heber Jensen was rich in leadership experience. He had served in bishoprics and a stake presidency and as the first bishop of the Calgary Second Ward before his call as president of the Edmonton Branch in 1952, replacing N. Eldon Tanner.⁹⁶ Jensen and Tanner were in fact born the same year (1898); lived on adjacent farms in Aetna, Alberta; and grew up together as close friends and kindred spirits. Jensen's "understanding of the gospel, his ability to teach, his great spiritual strength, wisdom and his inspired leadership qualified him for this great work."⁹⁷ When Jensen was released as president of the Edmonton Branch in 1953, a second branch was formed in Edmonton, with Arthur McMullin and Morgan Pitcher as presidents of the first and second branches, respectively.⁹⁸

On 10 May 1959, after a period of substantial growth, the two Edmonton branches were divided into four.⁹⁹ All four branches held all their meetings, tightly scheduled, in the Whyte Avenue meetinghouse. The building was scheduled all day on Sunday and each day of the week from Tuesday through Saturday. Despite the challenge of crowding, Church members experienced a strong feeling of unity and goodwill.¹⁰⁰

Growth in Red Deer

While growth in Edmonton was increasing, Church membership in other areas of northern Alberta was growing as well. The first Church members in the Red Deer area were





the Ervin and Mary Ellen Tolley family, who moved from Mountain View, Alberta, to Red Deer in 1939 when Ervin Tolley was stationed there with the army.¹⁰¹ In the spring of 1941, the Tolley family taught the gospel to twin sisters Dorlene and Donabelle Blades, and that fall missionaries from the newly formed mission opened the area. The Blades sisters became the first converts in Red Deer in September 1945.¹⁰²

On 11 November 1951, the Red Deer Sunday School, which was first created in 1942,¹⁰³ became a branch, with 85 members. In 1953, along with other units in the area, the Red Deer Branch became part of the newly created Calgary Stake. But seven years later, in November 1960, the Red Deer Branch, which had then grown to 156 members, once again was grouped with the Saints in Edmonton, becoming part of the Edmonton Stake. That same month, the branch began meeting in its newly constructed meetinghouse.¹⁰⁴ The Red Deer Ward was created 16 April 1961, with Stanley N. Swainson as bishop and John Mitchel and Arthur Lacey as

◀ *Twin sisters Dorlene and Donabelle Blades, Red Deer's first converts, were baptized in 1945. (Red Deer Stake)*

► *The groundbreaking for the Edmonton Stake Centre was held 19 April 1960, seven months before the creation of the stake. Sod turners, left to right: Heber Jensen, district president; Kay Burnham, president of Second Branch; James P. Low, building committee chairman; and Parley A. Arave, mission president. (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)*

▼ *Like most meetinghouses in smaller branches, the Red Deer meetinghouse was built in phases. The first phase 2 structure was dedicated in 1964. Additional phases were added later. (Walter Meyer)*



counselors. Following the successful retirement of a loan from the Church Building Department, the Red Deer meetinghouse was dedicated on 2 August 1964 by N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency.¹⁰⁵

CREATION OF THE EDMONTON STAKE

In November 1960, Richard L. Evans of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and N. Eldon Tanner, then an Assistant to the Twelve, travelled to Edmonton with the assignment to create a stake there.¹⁰⁶ On Tuesday, 15 November 1960, only eight years after Tanner was president of the Edmonton Branch, the “very inspirational and important” meeting that created the Edmonton Stake was held in the Whyte Avenue building.¹⁰⁷ It was the 312th stake in a Church of two million members.¹⁰⁸ Leroy Rollins was called as stake president, with Arthur M. McMullin and Mark L. Spencer as counselors.¹⁰⁹ Heber Jensen, who had been the district president since 1953, became the patriarch of the new stake. The four Edmonton branches and the Institute Branch became four family wards and the University Ward. These five wards in Edmonton were joined by the Red Deer Branch, which was transferred from the Calgary Stake.¹¹⁰

Remarkable Church growth that had taken place in the preceding decade was reflected in the fact that there were 2,126 members in the new stake.¹¹¹ The rate of growth of Church membership far exceeded that of the city, which had grown rapidly from 148,000 to 269,000.¹¹² Many Church members had come from southern Alberta. The patriarch, all members of the stake presidency and high council, all clerks, all bishops, and all but one bishop’s counselor had moved to Edmonton from elsewhere, and all but two of these had moved from the stakes in southern Alberta.¹¹³

Leroy Rollins, the new stake president, was relatively new to Edmonton, having come from Cardston two years earlier to establish a chain of grocery stores. He was also relatively inexperienced in Church administration, having served mainly in the Young Men organization. As he sought the Lord’s guidance for his new calling, he had a remarkable dream which taught him precepts that guided his presidency: the principles of flying are the same, even with different machines (Rollins was a trained pilot), and one has to have confidence in the team.¹¹⁴

To accommodate the rapidly growing membership, preparations for a new building to house two wards and the stake offices had commenced prior to the creation of the stake. Construction started in 1960, supported by

extensive fund-raising and donated labour. Eventually called the Bonnie Doon Stake Centre, the building was dedicated 10 June 1962 by Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency, who had served impressively in Edmonton in



the early 1950s as Gospel Doctrine teacher in both branch Sunday Schools and at the institute.¹¹⁵ During the dedication service, Brown spoke with great power and inspiration, and some in the congregation felt it was the most spiritually stirring experience they had ever had.¹¹⁶ Besides giving a moving sermon and offering the dedicatory prayer, Brown also raised his hands as though placing them on the heads of the congregation and pronounced an apostolic blessing upon all those in attendance.¹¹⁷

Rollins served tirelessly as the stake president for nearly twelve years, during which time Church members learned to function as a stake, and the stake experienced sustained growth. The Edmonton Stake expanded in January 1963 to include a significant territory south of Edmonton, formerly administered by the Western Canadian Mission.¹¹⁸ The stake was enlarged to include new branches that were created in Rimbey (1961), Stettler (before 1963), Barrhead (1964), Wetaskiwin (1966), and Lloydminster (1958 but became part of the stake in 1971). By the time Rollins was released in 1972, there were fourteen wards and branches in the stake, including six family wards and a university ward in Edmonton and wards in Cherry Grove and Red Deer.¹¹⁹

Women provided effective leadership in directing well-run Relief Society, Primary, and Young Women programs.



◀ *Stake Relief Society presidents from 1960 to about 1972, left to right: Melba McMullin, Marie Burnham, Verona Merkley, Norma Fletcher, Verda Gibb, and Beverley Bateman. (DiAnn Hirsche)*

► *Heber and Hattie Jensen were a complementary team in their service to the Lord. (Maureen Woolf)*

► *Leroy Rollins, with his wife, Cavell, at his side, served as the first president of the Edmonton Stake and later as patriarch. (Walter Meyer)*

About fifty women from the Edmonton Stake, along with equal numbers from the six other Alberta Stakes, participated in the Alberta women's choir, which provided music for one session of general conference in October 1967. They were invited in recognition of Canada's centennial celebration. The group also sang at the Relief Society general meeting, where their performance was recorded.¹²⁰

In later years, women of Relief Society also provided humanitarian service, including assembling hygiene kits for disaster relief and preparing layettes for new mothers in the local hospitals.¹²¹ In her autobiography, Hattie Jensen said, "I have a strong testimony of what quality women can do as they forget themselves in the service of others."¹²²

▼ *Edmonton Singing Mothers, 1966. About fifty of this group performed in general conference in October 1967. (Wells Photographic Studios)*



Inspiring Early Stake Leaders who later became Patriarchs

Heber Jensen functioned as patriarch most inspiringly for three years following the creation of the Edmonton Stake, until he retired from the provincial government post as Deputy Minister of Lands and Mines. At that time he and his wife, Hattie, received a mission call. While serving in New Zealand as senior missionaries, they were reassigned as president and matron of the New Zealand Temple, where they served until 1968, during which time he continued to function as a patriarch. The Jensens then returned to Alberta, the land of their birth, where they served from 1968 to 1972 as president and matron of the Alberta Temple in Cardston.¹²³

Leroy Rollins, having served twelve years as the first stake president in Edmonton, was selected in 1974, at the creation of the Edmonton East Stake, as patriarch of that stake. During the next twenty-two years, he gave 1,475 patriarchal blessings, a large number by any standard. His time in both positions contains many spiritual highlights related to individuals and to Church functioning. He also served for seven years as director of the Bonnie Doon Stake Family History Centre. He personally indexed over half a million names and, at age ninety-six, he was still indexing prior to his death in 2014.¹²⁴



Reestablishment of the Edmonton District

In October 1969, in an effort to better serve isolated Church members and branches in northern Alberta, the Western Canadian Mission reestablished the Edmonton District, which had been dissolved in 1960 when the Edmonton Stake was created. Though centred in Edmonton, and although most of the leaders of the district resided in Edmonton, the new district did not include any parts of the Edmonton Stake. Instead, it encompassed a large area outside the boundaries of the stake, including the Cherry Grove, Lloydminster, Rocky Mountain House, Drayton Valley, Hinton, Edson, and Fort McMurray Branches.¹²⁵ Calvin Merkley of Edmonton was appointed district president, with his wife, Verona, as district Relief Society president. Serving with the Merkleys as counselors were Henry and Jeannie Takahashi, also from Edmonton; John C. Webb, from Vermilion, served as a counselor in the district presidency.

The district presidency travelled many kilometres almost every Sunday, often on treacherous winter roads, visiting outlying branches to provide support and training. These visits were greatly appreciated by the isolated branches. Church members in Fort McMurray said in 1971, "You are the first church visitors we've ever had."¹²⁶ On district conference weekends, the district members gathered in Edmonton, and the leaders' homes bulged with youth in sleeping bags on the floor.¹²⁷ The district continued until 1974, when the units were incorporated into the two Edmonton stakes.¹²⁸

GROWTH AND DIVISION OF THE EDMONTON STAKE

On 23 April 1972, Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve presided at stake conference in the Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton, in which Warren D. Wilde was sustained as the new president of the Edmonton Stake, with counselors Dennis J. Prince and Robert S. Patterson.¹²⁹ During the next two years, there was much activity and growth in the stake. New events provided activity for members to interact and learn together, such as the regional MIA dance festival in May 1973 and BYU Education Week in June 1973, which attracted 669 enthusiastic members. In July 1973, a genealogical library conference was held, and in September, there were regional leadership meetings for the Peace River District and the Edmonton, Calgary, and Calgary North Stakes.¹³⁰

With each successive stake conference, attendance increased, until it was necessary to hold conferences in two sessions, beginning in February 1973.¹³² Electronic technology was employed. In 1974, stake conference was broadcast (audio) to Cherry Grove and Red Deer for the first time, to reduce travel, and video conferencing was later used for all distanced units.¹³³ In January 1974, with the revamping of the Church stake-naming system, the Edmonton Stake officially became the Edmonton Alberta Stake.¹³⁴ In 1973, the Sherwood Park Ward was created, and the Edmonton Seventh Ward was added in 1974, making a total of seventeen units.¹³⁵

The stake was now well prepared for its division. On 3 November 1974, N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency attended the conference of the Edmonton Alberta Stake, held in the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium, with

Chocolate Making in Lloydminster

As the new meetinghouse of the Lloydminster Branch was being constructed in the autumn of 1973, branch members focused on raising funds to complete the project. One of the major fundraisers was their Christmas chocolate project. The branch had received orders for two thousand dollars' worth of "Mormon Chocolates," the profits from which would pay for painting their new building. Many branch members, including two missionaries, participated in making and boxing the chocolates for sale. Shortly after completing the chocolates, one of the missionaries was diagnosed with hepatitis. Health officials felt that he had probably been contagious when he helped with the chocolates and ordered the destruction of the entire batch of chocolates.

The missionary felt devastated. He wrote to his family in Idaho Falls, Idaho, expressing his feelings of guilt and regret. His family shared his sorrow and wanted to help. Friends, family, and people in two wards volunteered their assistance in creative ways. One woman made and sold bottles of her best Roquefort dressing; others made and sold candy and baked goods; newspaper boys donated wages. In raising money for people they didn't even know, the people of Idaho Falls found the Christmas spirit, giving them a joyous experience.

On New Year's Eve, the Lloydminster Branch had a holiday celebration. During the party, the missionary told the branch members of the efforts of his family and friends back home. He presented an envelope to the branch president which contained \$2,103.22, more than enough to cover the losses from the contaminated chocolates.¹³¹

Units in the New Stakes¹³⁶

	Edmonton Alberta Stake	Edmonton Alberta East Stake
Wards	Edmonton 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th	Edmonton 2nd, 4th, 7th , Sherwood Park, Cherry Grove, Red Deer
Branches	University, Barrhead, Rimbey, Spruce Grove	Lloydminster, Stettler, Provost
Branches transferred from mission	Drayton Valley, Edson, Hinton, Rocky Mountain House, Grande Cache	Coronation, Fort McMurray, Wetaskiwin



◀ The Edmonton Stake was divided on 3 November 1974, creating the Edmonton East Stake. Left to right: Robert Lundrigan, Robert Patterson, and Warren Wilde of the Edmonton Stake presidency; Rulon Craven; N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency; and Bryant Stringham, Dennis Prince, and Thomas Davies of the Edmonton East Stake presidency. (David Henderson, provided by Janis Butler)

3,052 in attendance. Under Tanner's direction, the stake was divided, creating the new Edmonton Alberta East Stake, with Bryant Stringham as president. Warren Wilde was retained as president of the Edmonton Alberta Stake.¹³⁷ At the same time, the Edmonton District was dissolved, and its eight branches were incorporated into the two Edmonton stakes.

Calgary Solemn Assembly

Priesthood leaders from Edmonton and northern Alberta attended an Alberta solemn assembly held in Calgary on 2 August 1975, with the entire First Presidency and some other General Authorities in attendance. Spencer W. Kimball, Church President, explained the purpose of the solemn assembly was "to strengthen the priesthood and discuss with them doctrinal and spiritual matters in a direct way."¹³⁸

The positive effects of the solemn assembly were demonstrated in many ways in the months that followed. One notable example is of the Edmonton Seventh Ward elders quorum president and secretary, who attended the solemn assembly. They were deeply impressed with the instruction to "say nothing but repentance unto this generation" (D&C 6:9) and seriously studied Spencer



W. Kimball's book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. They then visited every less-active elder and adult Aaronic Priesthood holder in their quorum, bore their testimonies, and called each to repentance. Instead of "dwelling on the mechanics of repentance and scolding," they testified to the "joy that comes into one's life" when the gift of forgiveness is experienced. The result of their efforts was inspiring: 100 percent of the elders in that quorum became fully

▲ In 1979, the Edmonton Second Ward had an impressive number of its members serving missions—sixteen young missionaries and one senior couple. On the left side of the missionary board are the names of fifty-seven missionaries who had served previously. (Walter Meyer)

active, most of the adult Aaronic Priesthood holders received the Melchizedek Priesthood, and many baptisms took place in part-member families.¹³⁹

GROWTH IN GRANDE PRAIRIE

The Peace Country in northwest Alberta is a significant agricultural area because of the extensive prairie land with good quality soil. Despite the long winters, the area has an extended growing period because of the long days of sunlight in summer. It is possible there to work in the garden at 11:00 pm during the summer.

The first known Latter-day Saint in the Peace Country was Delva Tolman, from Mountain View, Alberta, who arrived by train in September 1932 after a twenty-one-hour journey from Edmonton. She had accepted a position as a teacher in the small Kleskun Hill School. One of the earliest missionaries sent to the area, in about 1943, was Philip T. Sonntag, who later served in the First Quorum of the Seventy. The George O'Brien family came in 1945, and Walter Scott came with his wife, Irene, in 1947.¹⁴⁰

The Peace River missionary district was opened in October 1947 with five pairs of elders, and in April 1948, the Grande Prairie Branch was created. An early convert was Chester Horton, who, in July 1948 in the Fairview-Dunvegan area, had given a ride to two young men from Utah. Horton and his family were baptized in June 1949, and he became the fourth branch president in 1953. Philip Proctor, an engineer transferred by his company from Lethbridge in 1958, became branch president in 1959.¹⁴¹

There are many stories of healings and of the manifestation of priesthood power among the Saints in Edmonton and northern Alberta. One example is that of Michael Radke, a farmer who regularly attended church even though he lived more than 90 miles (145 kilometres) from Grande Prairie. Radke was losing his hearing, and medical professionals had been unable to help. While attending a Grande



Prairie branch conference on 5 February 1961, Radke requested and received a blessing from the mission president, Parley A. Arave. At the completion of the ordinance, Radke stood up and exclaimed, "I can hear! I can hear!" He related that as the president started the blessing, he heard only muffled sounds, but before it was finished, "something snapped," and he heard the remainder of the blessing perfectly.¹⁴²

On 24 March 1963, the Peace River District was created, with Philip Proctor as district president. The Grande Prairie (1948) and North Star (before 1962) Branches were included in the district, as well as the Dawson Creek (1956) and Fort St. John (1961) Branches in northern

▲ The Grande Prairie meetinghouse was dedicated in May 1965, when this photograph was taken. (Philip F. Proctor)

► Grande Prairie's first stake presidency. Left to right: Richard Gilson, first counselor; Peter Berkahn, mission president; Lennard R. Shaw, stake president; Ronald Peterson, second counselor. (Ronald Peterson)

▼ Church members in Grande Prairie held services in this meetinghouse in the early years of the branch. (Philip F. Proctor)



British Columbia.¹⁴³ The Peace River District, which was later renamed the Grande Prairie District, had 350 members at its creation. Later, a dependent branch was formed in Peace River (1964) and a branch in Hudson's Hope, British Columbia (1968), further expanding the size of the district.¹⁴⁴

These branches were located at considerable distances from one another. The farthest branch, Hudson's Hope, was 298 kilometres from Grande Prairie, but others were also two to three hours' drive. In his setting-apart blessing, Proctor was promised that as he served, he would have no serious travel problems or accidents. During the next seven years, he travelled many thousands of kilometres on district business in his own car each year, often on gravel roads, and testified that the blessing had been fulfilled: he didn't have as much as a flat tire.¹⁴⁵

Population increased in Grande Prairie, an important regional centre of trade and agriculture. In 1966, the dis-

accepted many leadership positions over the years, including branch president, district president, and stake patriarch, and also served elsewhere as mission president and temple president.¹⁴⁶

Philip Proctor was pleased to report at the end of his term as district president that the district sent out eighteen young men on missions in the previous decade.¹⁴⁷ By the time of Proctor's release in 1970, the district membership had doubled to seven hundred.¹⁴⁸

In the years that followed, more branches were added to the district, including Valleyview (1976), High Prairie (1979), High Level (1979), Beaverlodge (1979), Fairview (1982), and Tumbler Ridge (1985).¹⁴⁹ At district conference on 13 September 1987, there were 628 in attendance.¹⁵⁰ The Grande Prairie Alberta Stake was created on 12 April 1998, with Lennard R. Shaw as the first stake president and counselors Richard Gilson and Ronald Peterson.¹⁵¹



trict received a boost when the Grande Prairie Regional College was established. The college drew people to the community, such as LaRon Woolley and Kelvin Johnson, who accepted teaching positions, helping the Church grow not only numerically but also in maturity. Woolley

FORMATION OF THE RED DEER STAKE

When the Edmonton Stake was divided in 1974, N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency recommended that a district be formed in Red Deer in the near future. In October 1975, Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve created the



Red Deer District, containing the Red Deer, Coronation, Wetaskiwin, Rimbey, Rocky Mountain House, and Stettler Branches.¹⁵²

Stanley Swainson became the first district president. The new district had a membership of 505. In 1982, after several years of steady growth, the district became the Red Deer Alberta Stake, with Dennis Guenther as stake president and a total membership of 2,308.¹⁵³

EXPANDED PROGRAMS AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

As the Church became stronger in the Edmonton area, its programs were expanded. In the early 1970s, the Church established a family history centre and began administering welfare projects. Likewise, building on long-term development, the Church contribution in the community to music and culture, academe and politics became more visible. A significant number of civic and Church leaders had Edmonton roots.

Family History Centres

A family history centre was established in the Bonnie Doon stake centre in 1973, with Rune Backstrom as the centre

◀ *Stanley and Dorlene Swainson, 1999. In 1945, Dorlene (Blades) and her twin sister, Donabelle, were the first converts in Red Deer. Dorlene introduced the gospel to Stanley Swainson, who was baptized in 1948. Stanley became the first bishop of the Red Deer Ward in 1961 and was the first president of the Red Deer District in 1975. The Swainsons became workers in the Edmonton Temple in 1999, with Stanley as one of the first six sealers. (Walter Meyer)*



◀ *On 8 November 1996, three Edmonton stake presidents visited city hall and presented a copy of the family proclamation to Mayor Bill Smith. Left to right: Don Sommerfeldt (Millwoods), Robert White (Riverbend), Mayor Bill Smith, and David Henderson (Bonnie Doon). (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)*

► *In 2009, the Clarkdale Ward of the Bonnie Doon Stake performed the musical Scrooge. The production, under the direction of Janis Butler, was performed for the community in the Sherwood Park meetinghouse. (Patrick Reid)*

director.¹⁵⁴ The centre, located in the junior Sunday School room, had a unique design in which the microfilm readers could be lowered for use in searching films and in the extraction program but could be raised to the ceiling when not in use.¹⁵⁵

The centre was the only family history centre in Edmonton for many years, until one was established in the Riverbend Stake in 1987. Staffing was provided by members of all Edmonton stakes. Members cooperated with the Alberta Genealogical Society to accomplish much family history work over the years.¹⁵⁶

Partnering with the Alberta Genealogical Society

The Bonnie Doon Family History Centre (FHC) has participated with the Alberta Genealogical Society (AGS) in several ways over the years. The two groups cooperated in an outreach program to take presentations to outlying places, such as Mayert-horpe; they provided instructors for one another's conferences and courses; and the AGS donated funds for the FHC to acquire the Ontario birth, marriage, and death records on microfilm. This cooperation was developed and nurtured by Leroy Rollins, FHC director, and by his successors, Rich Bayly and Walter C. Meyer.¹⁵⁷

Church Welfare Projects

While the Edmonton chocolate project originated as a building-fund project, after the dedication of the stake centre in 1962, the project was also used significantly to raise welfare funds until it was discontinued in 1976.

A stake welfare farm located several miles west of Edmonton and near Wabamun Lake was purchased in 1976 during the presidency of Bryant Stringham of the Edmonton Alberta East Stake (later becoming the Edmonton Alberta Bonnie Doon Stake). That stake held the farm stewardship for several years, but the farm was also supported by the leaders and members of the Edmonton Alberta Stake.¹⁵⁸

The farm covered 1,500 acres and originally had 300 acres under cultivation. As a result of volunteer work projects over a period of approximately seven years, supervised by Ron Holland and Ken Ross on stake assignment, the cultivated area was increased to 700 acres. Because Holland and Ross had connections to both the business and oil industries, they were able to arrange beneficial leases related

to mineral rights that made the farm very cost effective. In fact, it was one of a small number in the Church that was profitable.¹⁵⁹ The farm machinery, purchased as economically as possible, had been maintained in such good repair by Paul White—a local member, volunteer, and friend of Holland who worked professionally as a mechanic—that when the farm was eventually sold more than a decade later, in the late 1980s, the machinery brought in more money than what it had originally cost.¹⁶⁰

Another welfare project, a raspberry patch near Beaumont (about six kilometres south of Edmonton) began as a project of the Edmonton First Ward in 1969 and continued until the land was sold six years later. The fruit was never sold commercially, but members could use it for their own families.¹⁶¹

In 1978, a site for a bishop's storehouse and cannery was purchased in Sherwood Park. Although the building was constructed in the Edmonton Alberta East Stake, it functioned for both stakes.¹⁶²

Edmonton Music and Culture

Festivals and cultural celebrations were held frequently from the early years of the Church in Edmonton, including music, dance, and quartet festivals in addition to road shows and sports tournaments. Stage productions, including musicals, were often presented. In 1948, a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta was sponsored as a fund-raiser;¹⁶³ *Promised Valley*, composed by Crawford Gates for the 1947 pioneer centennial, was a highlight of stake activity in the early 1960s.¹⁶⁴

This tradition has continued to the present, with dozens of musicals over the years, including *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and *Scrooge, the Musical*. Numerous concerts and stage productions in the community have featured Latter-day Saint performers—pianists, vocalists, instrumental musicians,



and actors. Latter-day Saint Christmas concerts, *Messiah* performances, and music festivals in Edmonton have been outstanding. The talents of the Edmonton Saints and their willingness to share them have been a significant contribution to the cultural life of Edmonton.¹⁶⁵

Edmonton has also hosted Latter-day Saint musicians from Salt Lake City, including Alexander Schreiner, who gave an organ concert at the Edmonton stake centre soon after its completion, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which performed twice in 1975. These events were attended and appreciated by many members of the Edmonton community.¹⁶⁶

Academic Staff

The University of Alberta, which opened in 1908, has included more than a dozen

Latter-day Saints in the academic staff over the decades, starting with Brigham Y. Card, a sociologist, in the 1940s. Others include George Jarvis, sociology; Robert Patterson and Warren Wilde, education; George H. Gibb, Walter Meyer, Kent Gibb, and Steve Patterson, dentistry; Malcolm Asplund and Darrel Murri, agriculture; Michael Murdock, drama; Tom Davies, chemistry; and Derril Butler, English.¹⁶⁷ There have also been LDS instructors at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton.¹⁶⁸ While Latter-day Saints have served in many professions, they seem to have had a particular proclivity for teaching. Melvin Sillito served for many years as coordinator of professional development of the Alberta Teachers Association, and at one time in 1967 there were fifty-four teachers in the Edmonton First Ward alone.¹⁶⁹

► *Children of the Riverbend Alberta Stake remember their pioneer heritage in a 1997 pioneer celebration. (Edmonton Riverbend Stake)*

▼ *In 1978, Edmonton hosted the Commonwealth Games, and Queen Elizabeth II attended. LDS Mayor of Edmonton, Cecil Purves, escorted her at various official functions. (Cecil Purves)*



Politics

Many Latter-day Saints have been employees of the Alberta provincial government, but a few have held high-profile political positions, such as N. E. Tanner and Solon Low. Edgar Hinman served as provincial treasurer from 1955 to 1964. Many other Church members were elected as MLAs from southern Alberta over the years, but because they were in Edmonton only during the sitting of the Legislative Assembly, they have not been viewed as Edmontonians. David Dorward, educated in and a longtime resident of Edmonton, was elected in 2012 as the first Latter-day Saint to become an Edmonton MLA. Nonelected government officials have included Heber Jensen, Vi A. Wood, Glen R. Purnell, who served as deputy ministers; Cathryn Landreth, an assistant deputy minister; and other senior administrators, such as Robert Gehmlich, Mel Wong, Kevin Molcak, and Alan Champion.¹⁷⁰

In the City of Edmonton, Sig Dietze was the chief commissioner of the city for many years in a nonelected position. Cecil J. H. Purves served as a city alderman from 1966 until 1974 and then as mayor of Edmonton from 1977 until 1983. He was the first native-born Edmontonian to be elected as mayor, but “Cec,” a convert to the Church, was also the first native-born Edmontonian to be an LDS bishop in Edmonton.¹⁷¹

In addition to the ways mentioned above, LDS involvement in the community has included Scouting and many other activities. Such participation has raised the profile of the Church and provided for a better integration of the members within the community. As in other places in Alberta, where the Church has a significant presence, people generally have come to appreciate the Mormon contribution.

FORMATION OF TWO NEW STAKES IN EDMONTON

In the 1980s, Church membership continued to grow unabated in Edmonton, resulting in the formation of two new stakes. On 6 November 1983, a large two-stake conference was held in the Universiade Pavilion (affectionately called the Butterdome), at which the Edmonton Alberta Stake became the Edmonton Alberta Riverbend Stake; the Edmonton Alberta East Stake became the Edmonton Alberta Bonnie Doon Stake; and a third Edmonton stake, the Edmonton Alberta Millwoods Stake, was created, with Kenneth O. Higginbotham, president, and counselors Robert Zemp and Darrel Hudson.¹⁷² In 2001, a fourth stake, the Edmonton Alberta North Stake, was created, with Brent A. Purnell, president, and counselors Robert van Bruggen and John Nelson.¹⁷³



On 5 June 2011, the Yellowknife Branch (organized in 1983) was transferred from the Canada Edmonton Mission and was made a part of the Edmonton Alberta North Stake. Because of the great distance between Edmonton and Yellowknife (1,490 kilometres), Yellowknife Branch members sometimes use personal video conferencing, Skype, and other electronic means to attend meetings and participate in the events of the stake.¹⁷⁴

Stake Publications and Heritage Events

Two stakes undertook the publication of historical and testimonial publications near the turn of the century. The first, *Tribute to the Pioneers of the Church in Edmonton*, was produced by the Millwoods Stake in 1997 for the 150th anniversary of the Mormon pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley. This volume contains reminiscences by a number of former Edmonton Church leaders and long-standing members.¹⁷⁵ In December 1999, a millennial book project entitled *Northern Light* was published by the Bonnie Doon Stake. Four hundred fifty stake members responded to the invitation to share brief accounts of their conversion or a faith-promoting experience in a three-hundred-page book.¹⁷⁶ These two volumes gave tangible witness of “the tender mercies of the Lord” to those faithful Saints who laid the foundation of the Church in northern Alberta.

The heritage of Latter-day Saint pioneers has also been the focus of major events involving children and youth. The spiritual development of children and young people has long been a priority of Church leaders in Edmonton and other areas of northern Alberta.¹⁷⁷



THE EDMONTON ALBERTA TEMPLE

In writing about spiritual highlights in *Northern Light*, one Edmonton stake president pointed out that there are always three goals: to strengthen the Saints, to have the Church

grow, and to have more members participate in temple worship.¹⁷⁸ Surely the most important event pertaining to the spiritual welfare of souls in the Edmonton and northern Alberta region was the dedication of the Edmonton Temple.

The Edmonton Alberta Temple was announced on 11 August 1998 by Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, nine days after he spoke to a gathering of about nine thousand, the largest number of members to ever gather in Edmonton.¹⁷⁹ News of the new temple electrified the Saints in Edmonton as they anticipated the great blessing that would soon be theirs. Saints who had routinely driven seven or more hours each way to attend the temple in Cardston eagerly attended the groundbreaking on 27 February 1999. Many followed the construction with excitement, and a large group gathered to witness the raising of the statue of the angel Moroni atop the structure on 1 September. In anticipation for the opening of the temple, much genealogical research was done as Church members prepared to do temple ordinances for their ancestors. The open house was held between 1 and 7 December. Gordon B. Hinckley dedicated the temple on 11 December 1999, with six other



◀ *Stuck in the mud at a 2014 trek for youth and adults of the Edmonton Alberta Bonnie Doon Stake. Those participating in pioneer trek reenactments come to feel firsthand the trail experience. (Edmonton Bonnie Doon Stake)*

dedicatory sessions being held later that day and on 12 December.¹⁸⁰

Donald D. Salmon and his wife, Joyce, were appointed the first president and matron of the Edmonton Alberta Temple. Subsequent temple presidents and matrons include Robert and Belva Patterson, Jack and Rita Holt, Bryce and Katherine Card, and most recently Darrel and Janae Harker, who commenced their responsibilities in November 2014.¹⁸¹ Since the dedication of the Edmonton Alberta Temple, many members have received and performed sacred ordinances for both the living and the dead. The temple evidenced the maturity and strength of the Church in the northern part of the province and serves as a spiritual anchor for the Saints.

THE CHURCH IN THE NEW CENTURY

◀ *The Edmonton Alberta Temple, dedicated in 1999, is a symbol of permanence to the LDS community in northern Alberta. (Walter Meyer)*

The Canada Edmonton Mission

The Canada Edmonton Mission, announced by President Hinckley in January 1998, was officially established on 1 July 1998, with Richard M. Andrus presiding over 137 missionaries.¹⁸² By the end of the year, the number increased to 151. After 2012, when the age of missionary eligibility was lowered to eighteen for men and nineteen for women, missionary numbers increased dramatically. By the spring of 2014, there were 240 missionaries in the mission. Prior to 2012, the average number of sister missionaries in the mission was 12, but by 2014 there were 50, with even more expected.¹⁸³

Caring for those in need continues to be a part of life for Church members in northern Alberta. On 15 May 2011, a forest fire swept through the town of Slave Lake, 250 kilometres north of Edmonton, forcing the evacuation of the town's seven thousand residents. Many homes, some government buildings and schools, and the meetinghouse of the Slave Lake Branch were destroyed. Some of the evacuated Church members were housed in the meetinghouse of the Athabasca Branch, over 100 kilometres to the southeast. Relief Society and priesthood leaders of the Edmonton Alberta Riverbend Stake provided food and other supplies to the displaced Church members and donated hygiene kits to the community.¹⁸⁵

In early May 2016, a massive wildfire, the costliest natural disaster in Canadian history, engulfed Fort McMurray.¹⁸⁶ Nearly 90,000 residents, including 498 members of the Church, fled with just a few belongings.¹⁸⁷ The fire burned out of control until early July 2016, destroying 2,400 homes and buildings and burning nearly 600,000 hectares (1.5 million acres) of forest. Miraculously, no lives were lost in the fire.¹⁸⁸

Tod Beaulne, called just days before as the bishop of the Wood Buffalo Ward in Fort McMurray, and the leaders of the Edmonton North Stake, using cell phones and social media, kept track of Church members, shepherding them to safe refuge in Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary, and southern Alberta.¹⁸⁹ Thirteen LDS families, including the elders quorum president and

Statistics from the Canada Edmonton Mission¹⁸⁴

	'98	'99	'01	'02	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13
Missionaries	151		195	161	128	222	121	96	120	132	199
Baptisms	403	415	242	192		222	312	est. 203	est. 216	est. 199	156

the author's granddaughter, lost their residences to the fire. The LDS meetinghouse survived the fire but suffered significant smoke damage.¹⁹⁰ Emergency supplies were sent from the bishop's storehouse in Lethbridge to assist evacuees.¹⁹¹ The response to this disaster was a fine example of people in the Church and the community working together to assist one another in a time of crisis.

FIVE DECADES OF STAKEHOOD

In 1949, two years before the Whyte Avenue meetinghouse was dedicated, there were 488 members in the Edmonton Branch, a significant increase from the 17 people who attended the first recorded meeting in 1933. By 1960, when the Edmonton Stake was formed, there were 2,126 members in the stake, and by December 2013, the Edmonton Temple District was approaching 21,00 members.¹⁹² From 1960 to 2014, the population increase for the greater Edmonton area roughly quadrupled, from 269,000 to 1.2 million; for that same time in Edmonton and the surrounding area, the LDS population increased by roughly seven times, from 2,100 to 16,000.¹⁹³ The figures below show the populations of each stake in the Edmonton Temple District, not

at the dates of their creation but at the ends of those years.¹⁹⁴

In addition to large numbers of move-ins, this growth includes many converts and sufficient child-of-record baptisms, so that over the years, Edmonton has developed generations of families born and raised there. Many Edmonton Church members have come to see themselves as Edmontonians instead of transplanted southern Albertans, and homegrown leaders fill many responsible positions in the Church.¹⁹⁵ This augurs well for the future, as the community of Saints in Edmonton and northern Alberta now depends less and less on southern Albertans and has established its own identity on the basis of local leadership and Church population.

In 2014, there were seventy units—forty-nine wards (five for young single adults) and twenty-one branches—with a total of forty-eight meetinghouses within the six stakes. In Edmonton, there are now four stake centres, and in the immediate area there are nine other chapels. All units have an LDS chapel in which to meet and none need to rent worship facilities. The most recent meetinghouse (Beaumont in the Millwoods Stake) was dedicated 25 January 2015.¹⁹⁶

► From 1963 to 1970, two former Edmonton residents, Hugh B. Brown (left) and N. Eldon Tanner, were counselors to David O. McKay in the First Presidency. (Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

Membership in Edmonton and Northern Alberta Stakes

Stake	1960	1974	1982	1983	1998	2001	2013
Edmonton Alberta Riverbend	2,126	2,800	4,118	2,768	3,770	3,058	3,818
Edmonton Alberta Bonnie Doon		3,220	3,739	2,923	4,232	3,325	3,801
Red Deer Alberta			2,308	2,321	2,395	2,594	3,000
Edmonton Alberta Millwoods				2,582	3,537	3,054	4,401
Grande Prairie Alberta					1,741	1,790	1,800
Edmonton Alberta North						3,007	4,000
Totals	2,126	6,020	10,165	10,594	15,675	16,828	20,820

Church Leaders from Edmonton

In addition to N. Eldon Tanner and Hugh B. Brown, there have been many other prominent Church leaders with an Edmonton connection. Among those born or raised in Edmonton, Alexander B. Morrison became a member of the Seventy, and Blair Bennett served as an Area Seventy, Bulgarian mission president, and temple president. Robert B. White, a noted lawyer, was a stake president and Area Seventy. Robert van Bruggen served as a mission president in Ukraine, and Paul Cahoon as a mission president in Australia.

Many others from southern Alberta were either educated or resided in Edmonton. Donald D. Salmon served as stake president, patriarch, and temple president in Edmonton and also as a mission president in Utah and a member of the Church Audit Committee. Blaine Hudson was a mission president in South Africa and became a regional representative. E. Dale LeBaron, who served in the Church Educational System in Edmonton and at BYU, was mission president in South Africa and a noted LDS scholar on the Church in Africa. Randall K. Bennett, raised and educated in Edmonton, was a mission president in Russia and a member of the Seventy. Calvin Merkley, a long-term resident of Edmonton, was a mission president in Oklahoma.

Others from northern Alberta that were educated at the University of Alberta became prominent. John Young, from Grande Prairie, served as president of a Russian mission, and Ellis B. Stonehocker, from Cherry Grove, as a regional representative and, as of November 2015, the president of the Calgary Temple. At least sixteen presidents of temples in Cardston, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, and Vancouver have lived in, grown up in, or were educated in Edmonton.



CONCLUSION

The three concepts referred to at the beginning of this Edmonton and northern Alberta chapter—those of sustained growth,

the power of a knowledgeable testimony of the restored gospel, and the blessings of temple worship—have all become part of the Saints' spiritual heritage in the Alberta region of Zion. The growth of the Church in Edmonton and northern Alberta has been remarkable since the Edmonton Branch was organized in 1935. Many people in Edmonton and northern Alberta have come from southern Alberta and elsewhere, and, with mission headquarters in Edmonton for many years, there has been a steady stream of convert baptisms. These factors have caused Church membership in the area to increase at a much higher rate than the general population. By 2015, more than twenty thousand Latter-day Saints resided within the Edmonton Temple District. Active and viable institute and young single adult programs continue to help young people develop knowledgeable testimonies. A growing leadership base augurs well for future Church growth. The Edmonton Alberta Temple is a symbol of the permanence and maturity of the Church in Edmonton and northern Alberta. The temple provides a reason for members, including those retired and preparing for retirement, to remain in an area where they can live in a strong gospel environment and enjoy the "crowning blessings" available for both the living and the dead.

ADDENDUM

After this chapter had been written, the Sherwood Park Alberta Stake, a fifth Edmonton stake, was created on 9 April 2017, by realignment of the boundaries of the four existing stakes. Robert W. Mendenhall was sustained as stake president with J. Paul Kristensen and W. Darwin Laurie as counselors.

The Church in Saskatchewan started in the early 1900s with scattered families coming from the United States to homestead, and the province was one of the last to receive missionaries in 1925. Despite numerous challenges, the Church has since grown, and in 2015, it had two stakes and a temple, with a total provincial membership of over five thousand.

