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New 'first' for western Africa: stake is formed in Aba, Nigeria

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The first stake in western Africa - the Aba Nigeria Stake - was created May 15, emerging from an alliance of faith and work. The stake was created less than a month before the 10th anniversary of the June 9, 1978, revelation making it possible for all worthy male members to be ordained to the priesthood. The stake's formation is a milestone in Church history not only because it is the first stake in western Africa, but also because it is the first stake in which all priesthood leaders are black.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Council of the Twelve presided over the creation of the stake. He was assisted by Elder Robert E. Sackley of the First Quorum of the Seventy and president of the Nigeria Lagos Mission since 1986.

More than 1,000 of the stake's 2,300 members filled the Aba meetinghouse and courtyard to sustain the nation's first stake presidency: David W. Eka, president; Ephraim S. Etete, first counselor; and Lazarus Onitchi, second counselor. (Biographical information on the new stake presidency will be published in the new stake presidencies column in a future issue.) Reuben Onuoha was sustained as stake patriarch.

The new stake has six wards and three branches, and some 300 Melchizedek Priesthood holders. Sacrament meeting attendance ranges from 44 to 75 percent.

The first 12 members of the Church in Aba were baptized in January 1981. By the end of that year, there were 40 members. The Aba District was formed May 14, 1984.

In the history-making conference to create the new stake, Elder Maxwell conveyed greetings from President Ezra Taft Benson and his counselors, President Gordon B. Hinckley and President Thomas S. Monson.

In his address, Elder Maxwell quoted Acts 17:26, which, in part, states: "And GodT hath made of one blood all nations of men. . . . and hath determined the times before. . . ."

He spoke of the "timing and planning of the Lord," and then quoted Alma 29:8, which says, "the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word . . . all that he seeth fit that they should have."

Of the creation of the first stake in western Africa, Elder Maxwell said, "On this day, for this nation, there now comes more of the gospel's fulness in the unfolding plan of the Lord."

He expressed "deep gratitude to all past mission presidents and their wives; missionary couples; full-time missionaries; local priesthood leaders and sisters who have labored so hard for this day, which is a historic day in the Church in this dispensation, and in any dispensation."

Elder Maxwell told the congregation that news of the stake's creation "would flash around the world of the Church and be received with great rejoicing."

"I was present in the upper room of the temple that early June day in 1978 when all the General Authorities gathered to receive the revelation and decision from President Spencer W. Kimball," he recounted. "I wept with joy that day. The handkerchief I wiped my tears with I took home and told my wife not to wash it. I put it in my book of remembrance, still bearing the marks of my tears of joy."

"On this Sunday, I have a second handkerchief that have wiped more tears of joy. I will take it home and place it in my book of remembrance next to the other handkerchief."

As Elder Maxwell told the story of the handkerchiefs, the congregation appeared visibly touched.

The members had come to the conference on a typically hot Nigerian spring morning from throughout the stake, some on buses, others on bicycles. Many walked.

The conference began with the congregation singing, "Now Let Us Rejoice." During the meeting, a stake choir sang "An Angel From on High," "I Stand All Amazed," and "O Thou Rock of Our Salvation." The closing hymn was "I Know That My Redeemer Lives."

Elder Maxwell told the Church News he was impressed with the "intent - almost enraptured - listening by the members. There was a great feeling of reverence and quietness, even with a great number of children present."

Elder Sackley spoke of his great love for the people of Nigeria and proclaimed that the greatest goal of a mission president is to see a stake formed where there had previously been only a mission district.

In comments to the Church News, Elder Sackley said Nigeria is "a grounding area of the Church in western Africa."

"We are seeing the revelation on the priesthood unfolding before our eyes. I have a feeling a great prophet is looking down upon us and smiling. The Lord obviously made it known to President Kimball that the day had come. Ten years have yet to pass, and look at what is happening in western Africa."

"A characteristic that really distinguishes Nigerians and other Africans is their great spirituality," observed Elder Sackley. "These are an intelligent people; many members are educated. I see some of the most capable leadership in Nigeria as could be found almost anywhere in the Church. Some of our members here are medical doctors, engineers, university professors and businessmen, as well as farmers and laborers. Some members not only have attended colleges but also have more than one degree. Many women in the Church have bachelor's and master's degrees."

Examples of educated leadership are found within the new stake presidency. Pres. Eka has a master's degree in petroleum engineering from a British university. His counselors are university graduates. Pres. Etete, his first counselor, is deputy commissioner of police for River State; and Pres. Onitchi, his second counselor, is an insurance company executive. Pres. Eka's wife, Etta, has a master's degree in business administration.

Elder Sackley said, "I have noticed that the intellectual African is searching for God. By contrast, the intellectual North American often tends to become interested in something other than God. Nigerians read their Bibles continually. They are deep believers in the Lord. I would say if Africa has any message for us, it is that education ought to bring us closer to God and not further away from Him. It has done so here. The educated blacks of western Africa are inclined to reach for the spiritual things. They do not separate their intellectual studies from their spiritual lives. As they study, they become more deeply aware of the expanse of the universe and all that the Almighty God has created."

Elder Alexander B. Morrison, second counselor in the United Kingdom/Ireland/Africa Area presidency, spoke with the Church News regarding the creation of the stake.

"The members in Nigeria now have the total blessings of being a stake of Zion," said Elder Morrison. "A stake strengthens the people. This stake will give members an anchor in the gospel soil, which they cannot have in a district, no matter how well organized and how well run that district is.

"The Lord's pattern is to have stakes. To drive a stake into the ground gives strength, something to hang onto, to build upon, to provide a shelter from the problems of the world. The Church is a great refuge from the world; a stake is a gathering place, a tangible evidence that the gospel is in Nigeria to stay.

"Nigeria is a classic example of a prepared people. These Latter-day Saints are as ready as any to receive the fulness of the gospel."

With more than 100 million people, Nigeria is Africa's most densely populated nation. About one in four Africans is Nigerian. Nigeria is divided into 19 governmental states. The Aba Nigeria Stake takes in parts of River State and Imo State in eastern Nigeria; more than 1 million people reside within the stake's boundaries. English is spoken in most areas of the stake. Some villagers speak Ibo, one of the three most widely-used ethnic languages in Nigeria.

The stake center, Aba, is an industrial city of about 500,000. It is located about 30 miles from Port Harcourt, a principal city in Nigeria's reasonably large oil industry.