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Pres. Hinckley dedicates the Aba Nigeria Temple

By Associated Press | Aug 8, 2005, 11:00am MST

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Nigerian members of the LDS Church crowd the temple grounds during the long-awaited dedication of the Aba Nigeria Temple on Sunday. | Photo by Dan Dockstader

ABA, Nigeria — For Latter-day Saints in Nigeria, what they called a "Day of Rejoicing" seemed to last for two days. After a member meeting and a traditional African cultural event with President Gordon B. Hinckley on Saturday, they gathered Sunday for a solemn but even more joyous event.

In an event anticipated for decades by many of the church's pioneers in this west African country, President Hinckley dedicated the new Aba Nigeria Temple, the 122th operating temple for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the second temple in west Africa. (The Accra Ghana Temple was dedicated in January 2004.)

Speaking of the blessing a temple has been in Ghana, President Hinckley said, "I'm confident that the temple here will likewise be a blessing to the people of Nigeria."

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Members gathered for this historic event in Aba in southeast Nigeria from throughout this

of the new temple could not contain their emotions and joy.

"You can see the excitement here already," Elder Sheldon F. Child of the Seventy, who is president of the church's Africa West Area, said two days before the dedication. "The people have been waiting over 26 years for a temple and now the wait is over."

"We have looked for this day and our joy is profound with this moment," said Frederick Chukuemeka Ihesiene, who was the second stake president of the Aba Nigeria Stake, the first stake created in West Africa.

"All that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can give for the salvation of the living and the dead have now been accomplished with the dedication of the temple and of the prophet coming."

President Hinckley dedicated the church's newest temple during a worldwide tour that included visits in Alaska, Russia, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India and Africa. He was greeted in Aba with joyous celebrations on Friday.

Many of those gathering for this occasion included those who had some part in the early missionary work in Nigeria. One early missionary was Deaun Bishop of St. George, who was one of the first resident missionaries in Aba in 1981 with her husband, Lars Bishop.

"We did baptisms in the river here," Bishop said, recalling the days she and her husband, who has since died, labored here. She related that at the time, there were 15 members attending church. By the time they returned home, she added, there were 100 members. They returned in 1988 to help establish the church's seminary and institute program.

Standing by Bishop was Alex Ituma, who lives in Lehi, but who grew up in Nigeria until he came to the United States when he was 15. His father, Uduka Ituma, was the first president of the Aba Branch.

"I used to go pick up people with my Volkswagen and take them to church," he recalled, smiling. "Just seeing this means a lot to me."

These sentiments were repeated by many wandering the grounds of the newly dedicated temple, especially those who have watched the church grow here to more than 66,000 members. There are currently some 120,000 members in West Africa.

The history of the LDS Church in Nigeria goes back as far as the 1950s, when some Nigerians learned about the church through magazine articles. After acquiring some church literature, groups of people began meeting unofficially in the church's name. After the 1978 revelation that extended the priesthood to every faithful, worthy man in the church, the first missionaries were sent to Nigeria and Ghana.

Less than 10 years later, membership in Nigeria approached 10,000. Aba, Nigeria, was the site of the first stake in west Africa, created in 1988. On April 2, 2000, President Hinckley announced a temple would be built in Aba.

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Nnenem Pepple of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, may well have described the feelings of many Nigerian Latter-day Saints when asked her feelings of finally seeing a temple in her homeland.

"Very terrific, very, very happy."

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