

Spencer W. Kimball and the Lamanite Cause

Elder LeGrand Richards recalled the beginning of Spencer Kimball's official assignment with the Indians in these terms:

When President George Albert Smith became the President of the Church, one of the things that he said to me was, "Bishop, I don't think Father Lehi is going to be satisfied with the way we've neglected his posterity." And he appointed Brother Kimball to do the work with the Indians. I served on his committee and I don't think any man in this church has ever been more devoted to a calling than Brother Kimball has been from that day on.¹

Spencer Kimball was three years into his apostleship when he received his special charge to "watch after the Indians in all the world." With characteristic energy, he adopted their welfare as his cause. His first concern was for the tribes served by the struggling Navajo-Zuni Mission in Arizona and New Mexico, the first modern Indian mission in the Church, established in 1943 with only a handful of members. He studied their problems and visited their reservations repeatedly.

Harsh weather and early snow in the fall of 1947 gave him reason to intensify his concern. He mounted a publicity campaign, writing magazine and newspaper articles, contacting congressmen and service organizations, and giving dozens of talks to stir up interest in providing aid to Indians who were suffering cold and hunger because of the unseasonable weather.

This was only the beginning. His interest spread to other Indian tribes in the United States and Canada, then to the nations of Latin America. Twelve times he used his opportunity to speak at general conference to speak out forcefully on the subject of the Lamanites and their florescence, and he frequently addressed this topic in other talks and writings. This emphasis, together with his efforts promoting the Indian student placement program, irrevocably identified him with the American Indian in the minds of Church members. Many others, less visible than he, contributed vital efforts to the Indian programs, but he stood as a symbol of the Church's commitment to the Lamanite cause.

His involvement went beyond just preaching. His twenty-five years as chairman of the Church Indian Affairs Committee gave him

responsibility and opportunity to influence the direction of Church programs. He continually prodded local Church officials to look after the Indians in their areas. He promoted the teaching of natives in Central and South America in their own languages. As President of the Church, he called Elder George P. Lee, a Navajo, to serve as a General Authority. And he personally helped individuals by counseling, writing letters of recommendation, performing marriages, intervening with officials, giving money, providing housing.

For him the work with Indians was not just an assignment. He felt a personal identity with their cause. Stewart Durrant, who worked with him on the Church Indian Affairs Committee, said:

I saw Elder Kimball really angry only once. He said to me, "Stewart, you go down and release that stake president." "Elder Kimball, I can't do that; I haven't the authority. I'll get the information and report back to you." "He has not been doing right by the Indians. You release him." Of course he knew I could not do it, but he was expressing his frustration. A few weeks later Elder Kimball himself visited the stake and released the stake president.²

Elder Boyd K. Packer reported a similar incident:

I've only seen him really impatient once, and that was on an Indian reservation. [The stake president] had released the branch president because he was not worthy. So then the stake president had dissolved the branch, and Elder Kimball said, "Well, why would you do that?" "We've got no one to serve." "You mean you'd dissolve the branch?" "Yes." Finally he went through everybody in the branch name by name, and the stake president said, "We can't use him; we can't use him; we can't use him." Finally Brother Kimball stood and in real exasperation said, "President, do you have an eleven-year-old boy who you think would be worthy?" And he said, "Well, yes, I'm sure we do." "You make him branch president." The stake president said, "You're fooling!" Elder Kimball's reply was, "I'm not fooling. We're going to have a branch here for these people!"³

Though as the years passed Spencer Kimball's responsibilities and concerns broadened to include all peoples and all programs of the Church, he maintained a special place in his heart for those in whose interest he had worked so long and so hard. He did all he could to insure that "the time of the Lamanite" had arrived.

NOTES

¹LeGrand Richards, videotape interview by Bonneville International, winter 1980.

²Stewart Durrant, statement to Edward L. Kimball, 17 April 1979.

³Boyd K. Packer, videotape interview by Bonneville International, winter 1980.

Additional sources on President Kimball and the Lamanite cause:

Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977). See chapter thirteen and *passim*.

Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982). See chapter twenty-two.

Eugene England, "'Lamanites' and the Spirit of the Lord," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 25-32. See especially pages twenty-five through twenty-seven.