

**Mission Reports to the High Council
2016
January – May**

**Elder Paul Stevens
Illinois Chicago Mission
1st Ward**

My mission was the greatest experience of my life up to this point! Experiencing and seeing the gospel change lives (especially those of families) helped me to develop a greater love and appreciation for God's plan for our happiness and for the Atonement of His Son. I think that witnessing the conversion of the Diaz Family, particularly the father, Jose, helped me to better understand the hope and love the gospel brings to individuals and especially to families. Over the last few months of my mission I was blessed to serve around and work with a man named Jose Diaz.

When we first met with him he expressed very powerful concerns and we learned that he had experienced some very difficult sadness in recent years. However, the more we met with him and the more he sought to apply the gospel in his life, the more peace he found. By the time he was baptized Jose was a new man with a new understanding of who he was, who God was which filled him with hope and optimism for himself and his family.

I am so grateful for Jesus Christ who is the Savior of the world and my personal savior. His atonement has changed my life and the lives of those I love. I am grateful for and know that he established his church in these the Latter Days including the calling of Joseph Smith as his prophet and the revealing of the Book of Mormon as well as the restoration of his priesthood, all this because he loves us.

**Elder Paul David Seppi
Thailand Bangkok Mission
7th Ward**

Being on a mission in Thailand where I could serve the Lord and his children was the greatest blessing I have ever received. The people there (especially the members) are so generous, kind and loving. As a whole they are very friendly and open. It's very easy to make friends and generally people were open to the gospel. Most are unfamiliar with the Savior being they live in a dominant Buddhist country. They are a very easy going, happy and relaxed people and I love them.

I remember a lesson the Lord taught me in my second area in Bangkok. My companion and I were invited close to a shopping Center. Back then, I sometimes was not very humble invited.

At times I would sass people and talk back a little bit. This day was different. I remember inviting an older lady who was selling stuff out on the sidewalk from her store. I invited her and she started speaking a little strong to me. She was going off about how she is Buddhist and she does things this way and that way. She said she wanted nothing to do with us. I was about to return the same kind of speech and to argue and talk back to her but then something happened. Right before the words came out of my mouth a warm feeling came into my chest and heart that suppressed me. It told me to be quiet. I did not say a single word but she was still going off. So I just said, "Okay, never mind" and walked away feeling good. I thanked Heavenly Father for what He did for me that day.

I just want to say that I know the Savior lives. I've never seen Him but I know he has blessed me in my life and in the lives of people I love. I know God loves all people and wants their salvation. I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know He gives us this book for our happiness and salvation and to learn of Him so we can better our lives. I know Joseph Smith saw Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. I know the priesthood power is real and that Christ's mercy and love is ministered through His worthy priesthood holders. I know this church is true.



Richard & Suzanne Turnbow
Kenya Nairobi Mission & Johannesburg South Africa Area
1st Ward

We were called to the Kenya Nairobi Mission to serve as PEF/Self Reliance missionaries. We were located in the city of Nairobi, Kenya. While in Kenya, we visited 14 wards or branches on a rotating basis. During the nine months that we served there we were involved in assisting young returned missionaries in obtaining loans for education that would result in preparing them for a job at the conclusion of their education. After serving five months in the program, it

changed. Two full-time employees were hired to oversee the granting of loans and screening of the schools so that the education would be more in line with the available jobs.

Also, the program was re-directed to become a new “initiative” under the direction of the First Presidency. This initiative would now include all worthy members, no matter what their age. This initiative also gave the responsibility for granting loans to the priesthood leaders so that they would be more involved with the successful completion of the education resulting in a job for the student. We spent the remaining four months in Kenya training priesthood leaders on the new program. During the priesthood training time, we were able to visit several of the branches and wards in outlying areas of Kenya. Some of those areas were Kitale, Kisumu, Chyulu Hills, Eldoret, and Busia.

After nine months of our repeated visa requests to the government of Kenya (we were on a “special, 3-month passes” as \$500 each), we were finally denied visas along with 42 other younger missionaries. No explanation was given, but we were given 24 hours to pack, prepare our offices, and leave the country. We were expecting to return, but never did. When the Kenya government would not extend our visas, we flew to Johannesburg, South Africa on October 9, 2014. This was handled under the direction of the Infield Representative of the Missionary Committee, Elder Gary Heaton.

Once in Johannesburg, South Africa, we waited. We kept busy doing our long-distance calls for the PEF Renewed Hope Loans. The Area Offices had a backlog of over a hundred of these, which we soon narrowed down to just a few. Elder Turnbow continued to do his checking and correspondence with students for their loans.

As we sat across the hall from Thabo Lebethoa, the manager of PEF/Self-reliance, he was very much aware of our presence and dilemma. He attended a weekly meeting with the Area Presidency where important and pressing items were discussed. They were looking for an “extra” missionary couple that could help with their number one problem of travel and visa challenges. Thabo Lebethoa was very gracious and suggested that we be temporarily assigned to help in the Travel/Visa Department, while we waited to get our visas for Kenya.

That is how we were called in and introduced to the Area Presidency in a series of private meetings where we were asked to help in the Area Travel/Visa Department. After we accepted, we were introduced to the department as “Helpers”, with the unmentioned assignment of helping identify and problem solving. We were immediately snatched up by Liz Burger (Visa Management) to upload the backlog of over 600 passports for missionaries. This was a start. There were other things she was able to identify that needed extra helping hands. We made ourselves useful as we learned the Global Visa Management (GVM) system and how each person in the office played their strategic part.

In the meantime, we finally found out that we were not getting our visas for Kenya, and that put us in the predicament of also having our 90-day visa running out for South Africa. They had a new law that required application for a work permit visa to be initiated and applied for from your country of origin. That meant that we would need to return to the United States to apply for a South African visa.

By this time, the Area President Carl Cook decided that he wanted our services to continue in the Travel Visa Department. He arranged for us to fly home to obtain our permanent South Africa visas on the 17th of December, 2014. We were able to enjoy a quick visit with our family and loved ones as we continued to upload missionary passports on the internet, and even managed a day of training in both PEF and Travel/Visa from the Salt Lake Head Offices. (This period of time to get visas for South Africa took two months, which we added on to the end of our mission.)

On February 14, 2015, we flew back to Johannesburg with permanent visas. We were also reassigned and became Africa South East Area Office Specialists. We worked with the Church Employees as they struggled with the 34 different countries and all their constantly changing visa laws and requirements. The issues that they faced were complex and required input from the various missions along with assistance from the legal and public affairs department. Training is ongoing and requires a constant effort in order to keep the mission offices and full-time employees well informed on the requirements to keep missionaries legal. Much of what we learned was self-taught. We rotated through each individual missionary to check up on their legal status after mission transfers because some would change countries at this time.

We were able to complete a booklet that was used to train new BVM operators with basic information on how the system works and help in reading visa dates correctly. This booklet contains some of the most frequently asked questions that are not answered by the Church's GVM training. We were instrumental in creating a power point presentation that was used at the Johannesburg MTC to prepare Missionaries for their upcoming airport experience.

There were changes in Management. Before we left, they had removed the Management and were in the process of getting new ones. Elder Turnbow was able to help in an "Assistant Manager" role until they replaced him soon after our release.

Our Johannesburg assignment was a bonus blessing to us because we were right next to the temple. This allowed us to attend the temple often and we were blessed to be able to go through the temple with many of the people that we knew from Kenya. We were asked to attend with the new missionaries as they went through their first session at the Johannesburg Temple every other week. Sister Turnbow helped out in the Temple nursery every Tuesday. On Weekends, our service included teaching sewing skills, budgeting skills and helping out with a youth choir in our Sharpville Branch that we were attending near Johannesburg.

The people were definitely the best part of our mission. Our personal relationships that we were able to develop were the choicest experiences of all. A co-worker approached us near the end of our mission with tears in her eyes and said that we gave her the best gift anyone could give another person. She said she was finally free of debt, (thanks to our teaching and help with her budgeting) and she couldn't thank us enough. She was free and she would be forever grateful. It was so touching and a truly humbling experience.

While most of our mission was spent behind a computer trying to stay awake, there wasn't a day that went by where we didn't have an opportunity to share the gospel or to strengthen someone

in need. We even had gospel discussion in the early morning hours as we both walking with our next-door neighbor for exercise. She is still a dear friend and we enjoyed her so much. She was from Durban and of Indian lineage.

We love the Lord Jesus Christ and his Prophets. We see how the Gospel can transform lives for good in a world of trouble and sin. We give our simple testimony of the restoration through Joseph Smith, the Prophet. We loved teaching Christ's word and doing His work. We say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.



Craig & Connie Thomsen
Washington Tacoma Mission
3rd Ward

There are seven missions in Washington. Washington-Tacoma is the largest in geographical area. We served in the office and loved getting to know all the missionaries. We loved working close to the mission president and his wife. This was a beautiful green area near Puget Sound and Mount Rainier. The people there are very diversified and there is a large military influence. There are also many dock workers and lumber work is prevalent in this area of many faithful saints, some are affluent but many are poor.

We saw miracles of forgiveness and endless love to a young missionary who left the mission to return home to resolve some morality issues. He later returned and is a marvelous missionary. We had a call from a 24-year-old young man who was serving in the military. He wanted to know about our church. I offered to send the missionaries but he said "No I want to know right now!" So I invited him over to the office where Elder Thomsen gave him a quick overview. I asked him if he would like a Book of Mormon. He said "yes." I was impressed to tell him to pray about the book before he read it and he promised that he would. We turned him over to the young missionaries for future lessons. He was baptized three weeks later and just got engaged. He will be married in the Los Angeles Temple in June. Currently he attends church regularly, sings and participate in the lessons.

I am grateful for the power of the priesthood and the blessings we receive from them. It is because of one of those blessings that we were able to serve. We were blessed with good health and strength and able to keep up with the young missionaries. Our family has been blessed because of our service and we thank our Father in Heaven for all that he has given us.

Your own testimony grows as you watch these young Elders and Sisters work so hard and be so obedient. They work hard rain or shine. I am grateful for the restoration of the Gospel and the plan of Salvation.

God lives and has unconditional love for each of us. The Book of Mormon is the word of God brought forth to the convincing of Jew and gentile that Jesus is the Christ and the son of God. Joseph Smith is the prophet of the restoration. We are led by a prophet today, President Thomas S. Monson.