

Deep in the Mountains

BY HUGO MIZA

My family belongs to a Mayan tribe, the Cakchiquel. Deep in the mountains near San Juan Comalapa in southern Guatemala, life is not easy. Men go to the fields and work all day in their plantations, growing corn and beans. Women prepare lunch and dinner; then they take the meals to their husbands in the fields. After a day of heavy work and a long walk back home, most of the men and some of the women drink alcohol and soon fall asleep. The next day, the routine takes place again.

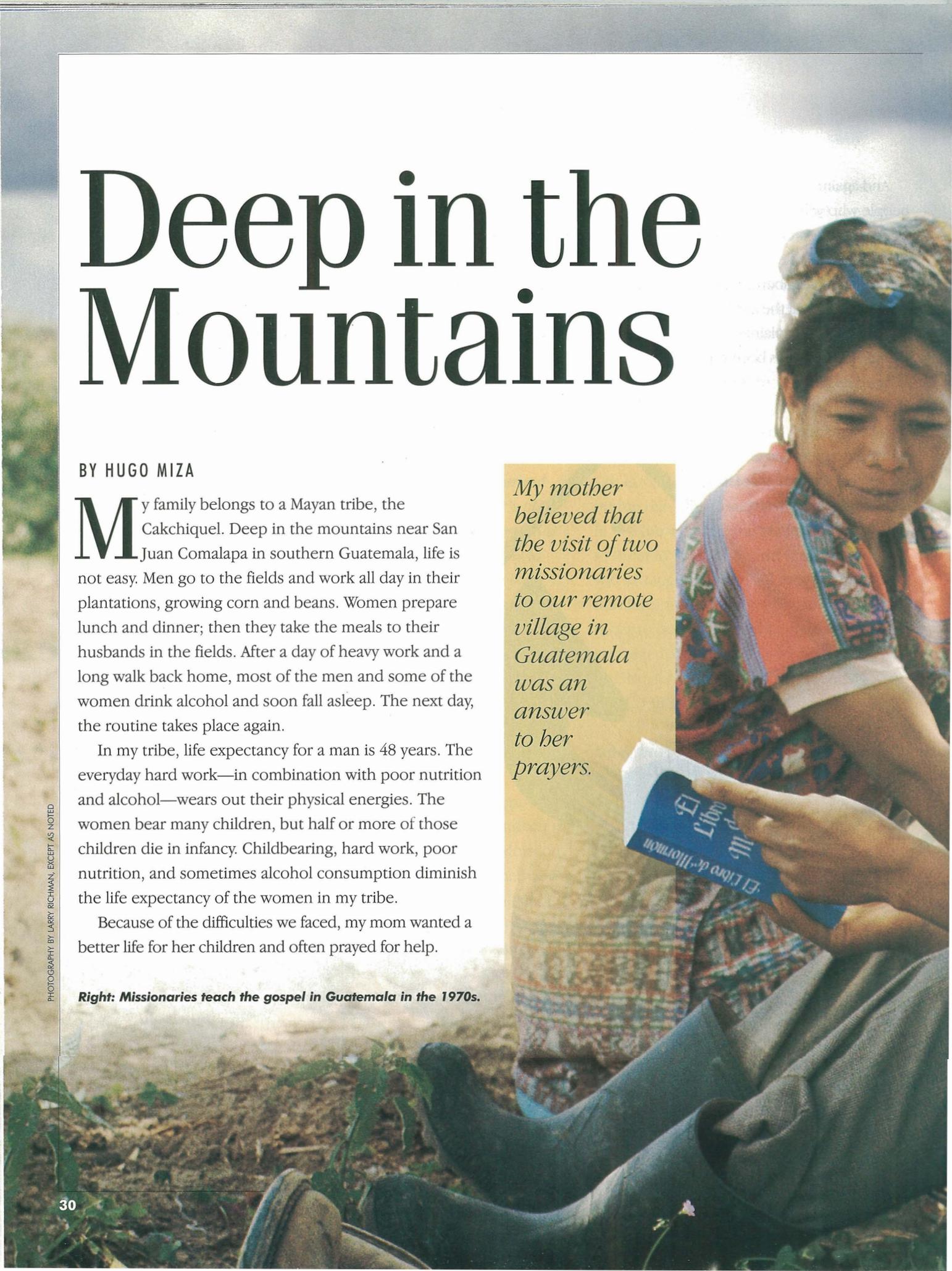
In my tribe, life expectancy for a man is 48 years. The everyday hard work—in combination with poor nutrition and alcohol—wears out their physical energies. The women bear many children, but half or more of those children die in infancy. Childbearing, hard work, poor nutrition, and sometimes alcohol consumption diminish the life expectancy of the women in my tribe.

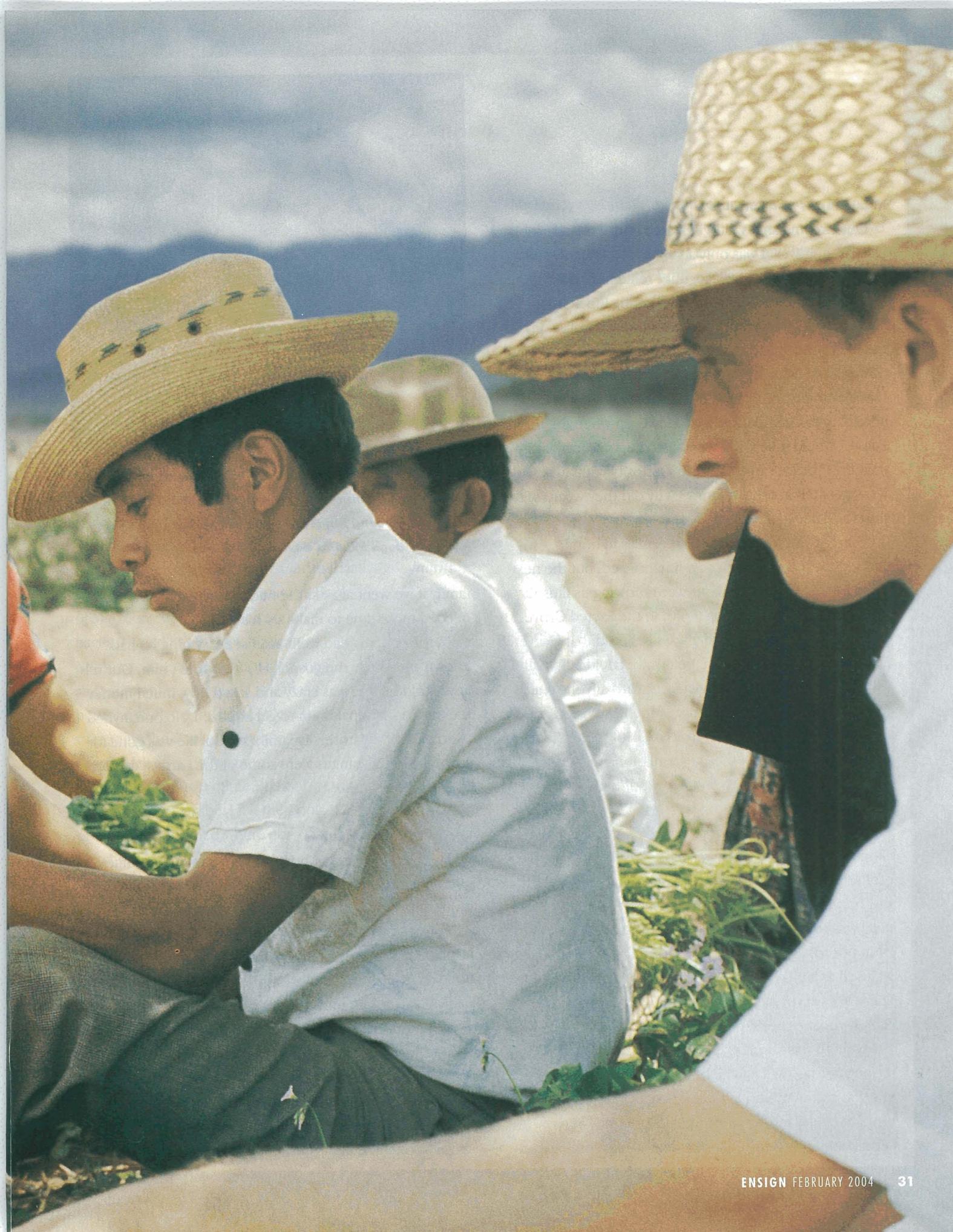
Because of the difficulties we faced, my mom wanted a better life for her children and often prayed for help.

Right: Missionaries teach the gospel in Guatemala in the 1970s.

My mother believed that the visit of two missionaries to our remote village in Guatemala was an answer to her prayers.

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Missionaries and Tortillas

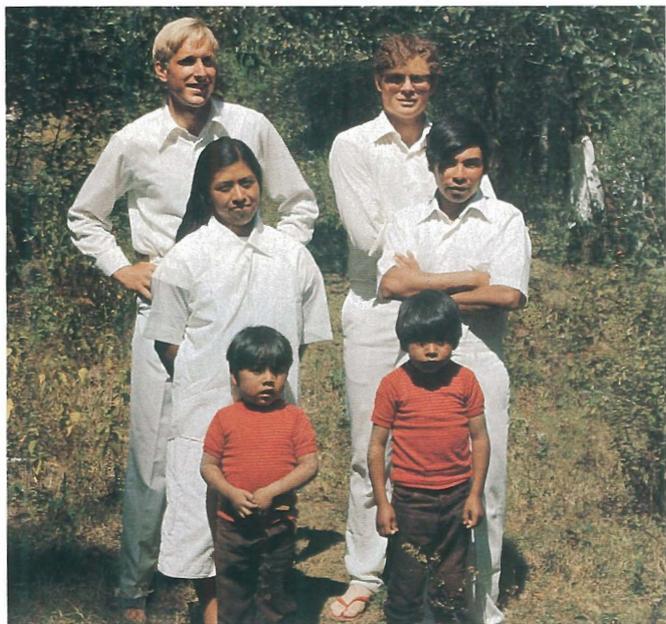
Our circumstances didn't change until a miracle took place in our lives. I was only a young boy when the missionaries came to our village, but I remember everything. My mom, dad, brother, and I were eating lunch in our field. I can still remember the smell of the tortillas on the fire as two white men with light hair made their way through the field. My eyes opened wide in surprise, and I held onto my mom, ready to kick the men if it became necessary to defend ourselves. However, when the men asked, "Would it be OK if we warmed up our tortillas in your fire?" peace came over me. Curiosity filled my head. Why was their accent so funny? Why did they wear white shirts and neckties? Why were they so big?

"Sure, you can warm up your tortillas in our fire," my dad replied. I don't know how it happened, but the next thing I knew, the missionaries were showing us illustrations of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. My mom was shocked! She had always believed that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ were beings we could talk to and ask questions of, but she had never heard anyone teach that. While listening to the story of the First Vision, my mom received confirmation from the Holy Ghost that it was true. The visit of these two missionaries was the answer to her prayers. My mom invited them to drop by our house any day.

Later when the missionaries visited us and taught us about the Word of Wisdom, my mom was the happiest I have ever seen her. My dad is a slightly different story. I remember that he was trying to smile, but his eyes were watery, his forehead was white, and the rest of his face was red.

In our tribe, you stick with the traditions—no matter what. Changing religions is viewed as an act of desertion. Friends leave you and relatives look down on you, especially if you are the first one to change.

My mom was surprised that the missionaries took so long to ask, "Will you be baptized into the Church?" She was ready. My dad felt in his heart that the message brought by the missionaries was true, but he was concerned about the consequences that would come to our



Above: *The Miza family with the missionaries on Brother and Sister Miza's baptism day. Lower right: Brother and Sister Miza with a young son a few years after joining the Church. Top right: Hugo Miza as a university student.*

family if we went against the traditions of our tribe. He needed more time to make up his mind.

In the end, my dad went against everything he had known and chose the gospel. His friends left him. Our relatives told him he was crazy and asked how much money the missionaries paid him to get baptized. No one invited us to parties anymore. My family's social life was gone for a while. These changes were some of the hardest my family ever had to make.

Life as Latter-day Saints

The gospel of Jesus Christ brought a mighty change into my family, for which I am grateful. My dad dedicated more time to our family. My mom cooked better meals. My parents now spent our income wisely. We even had the chance to attend elementary school. My dad said something to us that I will never forget: "From this point on, you will never quit until you get a degree from school."

We were a different family. Family home evening became a time when we set personal and family goals. My dad prepared gospel lessons and shared his life experiences with us, something he had never done before. We children knew our parents loved us. Alcohol was no longer in our home. The fights between my mom and dad turned

into discussions in which they tried to understand each other. Somehow we seemed to be materially rich, although we were actually poor. We were a happy family, and eventually my dad was respected for his new way of life. People trusted him because he did not drink anymore. His friends began to come to him for advice, and somehow whoever associated with my dad started to prosper. Gospel living was contagious. My dad even organized a group of farmers to learn new and better methods of farming.

Loving the Book of Mormon

As a child, I started my religious reading with the Bible, but the Old Testament was too hard for me to read and understand at that young age. My next attempt was the Book of Mormon. After reading a couple of pages, I could not put the book away. Nephi became my new hero. Each day, after some hours of school and many hours of work on the farm, I went back to reading the Book of Mormon. As I read, I felt a special connection between the people of the Book of Mormon and my tribe. I felt the Book of Mormon explained where our Cakchiquel tribe came from and who our ancestors were.

In my reading of the Book of Mormon and learning about the true gospel of Jesus Christ, I felt that I was part of the fulfillment of the promises God made to Lehi, Nephi, and other Book of Mormon prophets about their children being preserved. I'm eternally grateful to those faithful people in the Book of Mormon and to the missionaries who introduced us to the book that changed the course of our lives.

In our tribe, changing religions is viewed as an act of desertion, but my dad went against everything and chose the gospel. Through the Church's teachings, we became a happy family.

My family eventually moved to Guatemala City. My parents have served in our ward there for many years. My two brothers and two sisters and I are all faithful Latter-day Saints. My brothers and I served full-time missions. My brother, sister, and I are studying at a university.

My family's conversion story reflects God's love and mercy for His children. I am thankful for the love He has for His children wherever they are—even deep in the mountains of Guatemala. ■

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