

Missionary Homecoming Talk, Larry Richman, August 12, 1976

My dear brothers and sisters, it's a great pleasure to be here tonight. It has been a while since I've seen some of your faces and it's a joy to see all of you once again. I hope that some of the thoughts I share with you tonight will be of some benefit to you. I've thought a great deal about what I could say. And I have a great reservoir of experiences from my mission that I could draw from. Hopefully, the things that I've chosen to speak about will benefit you today. I've chosen mainly to speak to you about the Lamanites and describe a little bit of my mission among the Lamanites.

I was called to serve in the Guatemala, Guatemala City Mission to work directly with the Lamanites, who are direct descendants of Father Lehi. For the first part of my mission, I enjoyed working among the Latins who are of Spanish heritage. But had no idea of the experiences that were in store for me when I was called in February 1975 to work among the Cakchiquel Indians. They are a group of about 400,000 people who live in the country of Guatemala.

There are royal people and a humble people. Compared to our standard of living, they live in poverty. The average man earns between 75 cents and \$1.00 a day and most of that money is used for food. What is left over buys clothing or other needs.

I will try to explain how the Cakchiquels helped me have some of the most cherished experiences of my life.

President Spencer W. Kimball once said, "We become more substantive as we serve others—indeed, it is easier to 'find' ourselves because there is so much more of us to find!" ("[Small Acts of Service](#)," Spencer W. Kimball, *Ensign*, December 1974) Indeed, it is easier to find ourselves when there is more of us to find! I've seen that happen in my mission. I have really found myself because there is more of me to find. Through service to my fellow man, I feel that I've grown a great deal. And there is a lot more of me than there was when I left from this ward two years ago. Some people have said that I haven't changed a bit, but they are wrong. I may look the same or talk the same, but the experiences that I have had have really changed my life for the better. They have added a lot more to my character. They have filled the empty spaces that existed before my mission. And I'd like to try to tell you how all that came about.

It all started in the month of February 1975 with 12 elders and a professor from BYU named Dr. Robert Blair. He learned the language about nine years ago on a Peace Corps project and he wrote a textbook about it. It is the only modern textbook of the language. He was asked by the Church to come down on his sabbatical leave from BYU and teach us 12 elders for about three weeks. This mini Language Training Mission started again a Lamanite program in Guatemala. It existed about 10 years ago, but was discontinued mainly because of the difficulty of learning the language. Of these 12 elders who started, there were only six of us who finished our missions still in the program, because it was very easy to become discouraged.

After four months in the mission speaking Spanish, they asked me to learn Cakchiquel, which is not at all related to Spanish. They might as well have asked me to learn Chinese. I was asked to live and work among a people who live in the same country as the Latins, but who are very different culturally and linguistically.

Some elders were hesitant to learn the language or to live among the poverty. Very few homes had a cement floor. The walls were made of adobe bricks. Most families cook on a small fire in the corner of the one-room home. Some didn't want to do that. I had some of those same thoughts at first, but I looked at it as a new challenge. And I had many choice experiences among these beautiful people.

Cakchiquel is a language that isn't typically written. Some Protestant groups have translated parts of the New Testament, which to date is the only scripture that has been translated in Cakchiquel. I was privileged to spend the last month of my mission in a translation office, where we finalized translations of the missionary discussions. On my way home from Guatemala, I stopped in Mexico City to deliver the translation of those discussions to Brother Eb Davis, who is in charge of all the new translation work for Mexico and Central and South America. Now, these discussions will be printed for use by the missionaries to teach to people in their native tongue. The work there so far has been going very slowly, mainly due to the language barrier. In the country of Guatemala with 5 million people, there are 42 different languages spoken. That a major reason that the Church hasn't progressed in Guatemala to the extent it could.

I would like to take you on a virtual trip to Guatemala, so you can meet a few of the Cakchiquel Indians and see what kind of people they are.

I'd like to take you back to February of this year. At the time, I was assigned to the town of Comalapa. It was a town of about 20,000-25,000 people. Four elders

were assigned to that town and I was the only one among the four who spoke Cakchiquel. The mission president had decided to have another LTM the teach more missionaries to speak Cakchiquel. So, the other three elders that were in my town went to this LTM four days a week. The mission president assigned as my temporary companion a 19-year-old young man (Eber Carranza) from the nearby town Patzún. He was getting ready to go on a mission and the mission president thought it would be a good experience for him to work with me those four days during the week when my companion was in another town at the LTM.

In the evening on February 3, 1976, we went to bed just like any other night. That was the night of the massive earthquake in Guatemala. As the earth started to move, two of the four walls in our room fell over—the wall across the room fell to the outside of our room and the wall next to my bed fell over on top of me. So, there I was having a nice dream, and all of a sudden, I felt trapped. I couldn't move my arms or legs. At first, I thought it was just a dream—a nightmare where everything is terrible and then you wake up and find that everything's just fine. Well, I thought, I'd better wake up. But when I did wake up, I realized that everything wasn't fine, and I was actually trapped. The ground started shaking again and crumbles of the adobe wall started to fill my face with dirt. I quickly realized that I had better get out of that bed if I was going to stay alive. So, I pushed some of the dirt away from my face. And I started calling for help, but quickly realized that there wasn't anyone to help me. Everyone was experiencing the same problem. So, I wiggled and squirmed and slid out through the top of my blankets. I found my companion and we both scrambled out the other side of the of the room through the hole that was left in the wall. And we found our way into the garden patio in the center of the property. We were forced to stay in the garden patio all night until it got light.

In Latin America, they build the houses right next to the street. In the back of the house is where they have some kind of garden or patio. So, we were unable to see where we could escape. We weren't able to climb back through the house to get out into the street until the morning hours when it became lighter.

So we stayed in the garden patio all night, in our pajamas, with bare feet on cold wet grass. But that was the least of our worries.

The ground kept shaking so bad, that we could not stand up. As we scrambled from our bedroom to the garden, we fell down several times because the earth was shaking so bad.

I've read about earthquakes before and I imagined it to be that the ground shakes around a little bit and some people get scared and that's about it.

But I never realized what an earthquake is really like. In movies, they show that the ground opens up and swallows people. But the real danger of earthquakes is that people die because things fall on them—things like houses made of 40-pound adobe bricks.

I was the only native English speaker in the town that night and everyone around me (the young man who was my temporary missionary companion and the owners of the house) were yelling that it's a "terremoto." I didn't know the word "terremoto" because up until then, I'd never had occasion to learn the word. But I soon recognized that it meant "earthquake."

So, there we were, standing in the middle of the property, hanging on to a tree to stand up, blocked by the crippled house between us and the street, and listening to people across the town begin to cry and wail over their injured or dead brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers, and children. And for about two or three hours, we could hear a blood-chilling sound of someone chopping with an axe at a post that inevitably trapped someone's loved one.

As soon as we could get out onto the street, we headed straight for the house of the Miza family. Some of you may have read about them in the Church News. They were the first and only member family in the town of Comalapa where I was working. They were baptized just six days before the earthquake. So, we rushed right over to their house to see if they were okay. All along the road as we went, we could see dead bodies lying all over. And those that weren't dead were crying for help, with broken arms and legs and ribs and crushed collarbones. There wasn't really anything we could do because there were people lying all over the place in the same condition. Our first responsibility was toward the members.

Once we found that they were okay, we then evaluated what we could do to best help all the people. There were so many injured, the best thing we thought we could do is to try to find a doctor. There was no hospital in Comalapa, but there is a well-established health center there. They work on somewhat of an internship with medical students from Guatemala City. Doctors and nurses come and work there about six or eight months. Well, the shift had ended on February 3, so all the doctors and nurses that had been in town had gone home that afternoon before the earthquake, and all the new doctors and nurses were supposed to come that morning. So, when the earthquake happened in that town of 25,000

people, there was not one doctor or one nurse in the town. And there were very few medical supplies that could be found among the pharmacies.

So, after talking with the mayor of the town, we decided the best thing we could do is go to try to find some medical help. So, we left the town on foot about seven o'clock that morning, to go and do just that.

Well, to make a long story short, the 16 elders who were in some of the more heavily damaged areas congregated in Patzicía at the chapel. We set up base camp as a headquarters from which we could help the members. Our immediate worry was to get food, clothing, and shelter to the members, which we did quite rapidly, through the help of things sent down from the Church Welfare Department. They sent blankets, food, and other necessities. There were two other stakes in the country who weren't hit very badly by the earthquake. And they really came through bringing food and clothing and all kinds of things to meet immediate needs.

Once those immediate needs were met, then we as elders worked every day going to the members houses and helping them recover some of their valuable things out of their homes. We helped them dismantle the roofs and save the corrugated tin from the roofs. And we helped them clean out their houses.

You know, brothers and sisters, a lot of times in our lives we build up dreams. We build up imaginary castles in our minds and those castles are our hopes and our plans for the future. But all the castles and all the hopes and dreams of these people were suddenly ended the night of February 3. They suddenly came to a violent end when an earthquake shatters those castles—not just the imaginary castles that they had in mind—but their castles of adobe. Their entire life investment is in their homes. And worse than that, many of them lost members of their own family.

I would like to tell you a short story now about a young man named Daniel Choc. This young man was born in the small town Patzicía, Guatemala. Daniel was born to a very good family—to a very strong mother and father. And that strong mother and father accepted the gospel wholeheartedly when the missionaries came. It took the mother some two years more to accept the gospel after her husband was baptized, but she eventually accepted it and embraced it wholeheartedly.

And that family grew in the church, until one day that father was able to save enough money to go to Mesa, Arizona, to be married in the temple. A trip from

Guatemala to Mesa, Arizona, is a long way. And when a person in Guatemala earns 75 cents to \$1 a day, and it takes about 70 to 90 cents a day to feed your family, that doesn't leave much leftover to put towards a trip. But, because of the blessings of the Lord, he was able to take his wife and four kids. It was simply because of the blessings of the Lord. The Lord always opens a way when there is a strong desire. And he opened the way for this family to go and be sealed in the temple.

Later, this father and mother gave birth to 11 children, only six of which are living now. The family raised all their children in the Gospel and the man became the president of the branch in Patzicía.

His young son, Daniel reached 20 years of age, and because of his love for the Lord and because of his strong testimony, he desired to fill a full-time mission. With his determination, he became the Church's first native Cakchiquel missionary.

Daniel Choc became my companion and we worked together in Comalapa for about six weeks. I wish it could have been six years. He taught me life lessons that I could not have learned from anyone else.

Before I began my mission, I thought I had a pretty good understanding of charity, brotherly love, and concern for my fellow man. But after spending a few weeks with Daniel, I came to learn a much deeper understanding. He taught me through his example what those concepts meant. Since there were no members of the Church in Comalapa (until six days before the earthquake), it could be discouraging. It seemed that every investigator we taught would progress until just before baptism, and then would be led astray. The power of Satan was leading all these people away from the truth. But do you think Daniel Choc ever got discouraged? I don't remember a time when I heard him complain. Often, we would have been knocking on doors all day, and even into the night and we couldn't find anyone who was willing to listen to us. People would say that the father wasn't home or that they were busy. But do you think that discouraged him? Without exaggeration, there were many nights that we would literally run from one door to the next. If we found that the man wasn't there or they weren't interested, we would thank them and turn around and run to the next door to try to find someone to teach. There were very few nights that we went through a whole night without giving a lesson.

Well, after six weeks, Elder Choc was assigned to another town, and I got another companion

Then the earthquake came along. After we took care of the immediate needs in the towns where we were serving, our thoughts turned to the rest of our mission companions and how each of them were in their towns. We really had no idea how widespread the earthquake was. We heard reports on the radio that the earthquake had wiped out all of Central America (which wasn't true). So that got us concerned about our missionary companions. My thoughts, of course, turned to Elder Choc and how he and his companion was. They had no members in their town and their town didn't have many deaths. (In Comalapa, where I was, 5,000 people died out of a population of 25,000.) So, Elder Choc and his companion were able to leave their town soon after the earthquake and they went straight to Patzicía (Elder Choc's hometown) to find out how his family was. He found that his house was leveled nearly to the ground. Nothing was standing over three feet high. And as he approached his father, he found that his mother (who was pregnant) and two of his younger brothers had died in the earthquake. They had been buried alive trying to get out of the house in time. This would be an extremely difficult thing to experience. Most missionaries would become discouraged and want to end their mission. They would want to go home. He wanted to be able to support his father who had just lost his wife and two young sons. His father was also the branch president, responsible for all the members in the town who had lost family members and all their worldly possessions. You can imagine the thoughts of this young man to want to stay there and help his father. But he also felt his missionary duty. He soon left with some of the zone leaders to check on missionaries in other towns.

All the missionaries from surrounding towns set up a camp at the church in Patzicía. For two months, he worked with us day and night to help clean up the homes of people in his hometown—the very people that he had grown up with. I had several good talks with him, and I know it was hard for him having his mother and two younger brothers die. He was reminded of it every hour he helped neighbors clean out the rubble from their crumbled homes. But he kept a good spirit and worked cheerfully, and never once complained. Although sometimes in personal talks with him, he let his emotions out about how hard it was for him. But never once did he complain. Never once did he question God because he knew that's the way the Lord wanted it. He knew that the Lord was directing his life and the life of his family also.

Well, we worked every day in the camp at Patzicía for two months, before being reassigned back to other towns. As you know, Mondays are preparation days for the missionaries—the day they have to write letters and take care of other things. But since the earthquake, there really hadn't been any time to sit down and relax. As my parents can testify, they were lucky if they got a short note each week, because there really wasn't any time to sit down and write letters or do other things because there was so much work to be done.

So, each Monday, the mission president called in most of the missionaries from the mission to go in force to a town that was badly hit by the earthquake. We would work an entire day in that town helping the people. The first Monday, we went to the town of Comalapa. We arrived in several buses and 100 missionaries marched down the street. We would assign four to six missionaries in each house to help some nonmember family for the day. We would help them dismantle the remains in their house and save some of their possessions. Then, we shoveled the dirt from the broken adobe bricks out in the street where tractors would pick it up and haul it away.

We had done this continuously each Monday since the earthquake. At the end of the two months, we were anxious to get back to other towns and ease back into missionary work. We planned a big work day in the town of Patzún for that last Monday. That night we had planned a celebration with a steak dinner to end the camp before we went our separate ways to other towns. It was to be a happy day for us.

The work we did that day was like all the other Mondays. We would knock down any remaining walls of the houses because they were all unstable and dangerous. People there build their houses with adobe bricks, which is nothing more than dried mud. They then lay the bricks, using mud as mortar between the bricks. The bricks are about a foot or more wide and about three inches thick. And they weigh 25 to 45 pounds each. You can imagine the weight that would be in a wall. Well, Elder Choc was working on a house that last day in Patzún. They were preparing to knock down a 15-foot wall. To do so, you chip away the layer of plaster that they put on the side of the wall. You take a pick and chip away the plaster all along the bottom of the wall on both sides. And you have to chip in about a third of the distance on each side of the wall to make it weak enough to be able to push it over.

As they were chipping away at this wall, it weakened prematurely and the wall started falling. Everyone scattered for safety. And everyone reach safety, just barely, except Elder Choc. Her choke was caught by a cement and brick column that supported a doorway. It crushed his back and about 10 minutes later, Elder Choc died.

It was quite a traumatic experience for everyone because we were all excited about the celebration that night to recognize the work we had done the past few months. None of us went to Patzún that day thinking that we may not come back. Little did we know that when we went to Patzún that day, we would lose our friend Elder Choc.

I would like to read a letter to the editor that was published in a Provo newspaper, submitted by Dr. Robert Blair, who came down last February to help us learn the language. This is what he wrote:

“It was with sorrow that I learned of the death March 29 of Elder Daniel Choc of Patzicía, Guatemala, a full-time missionary in the Guatemala Mission. He was crushed by an adobe wall which fell as he and 60 other missionaries were helping clear away rubble in the earthquake-devastated town of Patzún....

“The first Cakchiquel missionary in the Church, Elder Choc gave distinguished service during his year of labor in Patzún, Comalapa, Sumpango and Patzicía. He was loved and respected by his missionary companions and associates. Patiently he taught them to understand the Cakchiquel people and to speak the difficult Mayan dialect. From his own love and understanding of the native culture, he was able to communicate with great power and clarity the message that was so precious to him....

“Our brother, Daniel choc, now joins his mother and two young brothers who were victims of the tragic earthquake that struck last February.

“Daniel’s father, Pablo Choc, president of the Patzicía Branch of the LDS Church, who has suffered such a loss, to Daniel's beautiful Indian sweetheart, to the Cordell Andersens, who held him as one of their own family and gave of themselves so unselfishly to bring out the greatness of this young man, to his missionary companions and members of the church who loved Daniel Choc and feel keenly his absence, I send my love and heartfelt sympathy.

“May the memory of this remarkable saint and missionary be blessed, and may God raise up others to serve as he did. Humbly submitted, Robert Blair, Provo.”

I was privileged to speak at Elder Choc's funeral. It was something very hard for me to do, but an opportunity that I very much appreciated. One thing I mentioned in my talk at his funeral, was the fact that he was the Church's first Cakchiquel missionary here in this world—a blessing and an opportunity that he very much deserved. And now he has an even greater opportunity and blessing—that of being the first Cakchiquel missionary in the spirit world—an opportunity and blessing that he also very much deserves.

Our mission president made a comment that was very interesting. Right after the funeral, he came up to me and said, “well, we don't need to worry about Elder Choc at all. I just hope I'm in as good a shape when I die as Elder Choc was.”

I want to testify to you, brothers and sisters, today that I know that Elder Choc lives. And I want to tell you also, that the very day that he died, I knew exactly what he was thinking. I was his companion for only six weeks, although I knew him in Patzicía before he became a missionary. But I imagined exactly the thoughts that were going through his mind, almost as if his own voice were speaking them. I can even hear him in his own way of saying things, as I know he would have said it. He must have been out there just thinking. “I can't believe it. It's all over. I went down to live and to get a body. And I was supposed to live there for a long time. I was supposed to do a lot of things in my life, but it's all over. I was supposed to finish the other year of my mission. I was supposed to go home, and I was supposed to get married. And there were many other things I was supposed to do. It's all over. I can't believe it.” I just know those were the thoughts that went through his mind—that he just couldn't believe that his life had ended.

Well, there was no better way that his life could have ended. He was as prepared as he could have been. And I have a personal testimony that I know he was prepared. And I know the mission president knows he was prepared. He testified all the people there at the funeral, that he had the chance to interview Elder Choc and had a chance to know of the intimate details of his life. And he told each one of us that the Elder Choc left this world completely pure and clean. Brothers and sister, I think that is something important for each of us to think about. If our lives were to end today, could that be said of us? Could it be said of us that we left this life completely clean and pure? I regret to say that I couldn't say that about myself.

And I'm afraid that if many of us search out our lives, too, we wouldn't be able to say that for ourselves either. It is something very serious to think about. Many of us think we will live to be 60, retire from our occupation, then have a nice, quiet retired life. And by that time, I will have everything worked out, and things straighten out in my life, and everything will be about right when I when it's time to die. Then I'll be ready. Brother sisters, we don't know if we will live another 60 years. We don't know if we're going to live another 20 years. I cannot tell anyone of you if I'm going to be alive tomorrow.

Brothers and sisters, we have to be ready every single day of our lives—just as Elder Choc was ready. He had no idea when he went to Patzún to work that day that he was going to die. But yet it happen just like that. He lost consciousness at the very moment the bricks fell on him, and 10 minutes later, he died. He had no time to repent. We have to have our lives in order. And we have to be ready at any time. This is a great lesson in life that I've learned because of the earthquake. In 32 seconds of the earth's moving, it killed 23,000 people. And I'm sure that's nothing compared to the calamities that we're going to experience in the future. I'm sure that this was something to prepare me for other things in my life and that I'm going to see worse things before my life is over. Believe me, brothers and sisters, when I get married and have a family, we are going to have our year's supply of food and we're going to be ready for calamities that will come. And we better sisters must be ready every single day of our lives also, for whatever might happen. Be at a calamity or be a debt.

I'd like to read you a scripture from Doctrine and Covenants 42:60, "And he that doeth according to these things shall be saved, and he that doeth them not shall be damned if he so continue." Now, "damned" is kind of a strong word. I had a mission president that used that word a lot because it scares people. And rightly so, it should scare us into doing something about it. What does it mean to be damned? A lot of us think to be damned means that we will be cast into some fiery pit to endure endless torment. But that's not really what it means to be damned. What does it mean when we dam water? We put some sort of blockage there so the water can't go any further. All the water coming down the stream comes to a certain point. And then that's as far as it can go. It has to stop there and can't go any further. Well, that's exactly what will happen to us if we are damned. There will be a blockade put there, and we will be able to progress to a certain point, but then that's all. That's pretty scary to think about when you consider all of eternity. Eternal damnation is a pretty scary thing to think about. I

would hope that all of us will be prepared each day of our lives to be eternally exalted.

I'm sure my dad would not give me a ride home if I didn't bear my testimony in Cakchiquel. So, I'd like to finish my talk bearing my testimony in Cakchiquel.

Translation into English: Dear brothers and sisters, I would like to leave you my testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I know, and feel a certainty in my soul, that this is true. That this is the Church of Jesus Christ. And in his Church is His law and everything else we need. Now if we live our lives well and obey the commandments of God, we will be saved. There will be no way that Satan will get ahold of our souls but we will gain salvation. But just if we are righteous and live our lives well, keeping the commandments. I know that this is true and that we are in the Church of Jesus Christ. And thus, we can be saved. I leave this testimony and my love for you. And I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord, and in His name. Amen.