CHAPTER 6

The Dynamics of LDS Growth in the Twenty-First Century

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INTRODUCTION

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) has somewhat improbably become a quintessential American faith. Members of the LDS Church have been lauded for socially constructive and civic-minded behaviors. Even the faith’s critics have acknowledged that modern Latter-day Saints are well known for their high moral code, chastity, honesty, observance of the Sabbath Day, emphasis on family life, generosity, and care for the poor. Social research has found that LDS Church members are among the most educated US Christian groups, have higher average incomes, experience increased longevity, and a list of additional social virtues. Whereas religiosity has tended to decline with higher education among most other groups, highly educated members of the LDS faith tend to be more active in their church. Many LDS members have achieved considerable business success. The state of Utah has become a contemporary place of opportunity and economic mobility, at least in part due to aspects of its dominant Mormon culture.

Expansion of Mormonism around the world figures prominently in LDS theology. Joseph Smith, the faith’s founding prophet, stated in 1834 that “This Church will fill North and South America—it will fill the world.” The LDS Church teaches that it is God’s earthly organization, tasked to gather faithful believers in preparation for Christ’s Second Coming. It represents itself as the biblical book of Daniel’s stone, “cut out of the mountain without hands,” which will roll forth to fill the earth, although “its members will still be
relatively few.”9 Mormon scripture cites that proclaiming the gospel is the activity of greatest worth to believers.10 Representative of many other LDS Church proclamations, President Spencer W. Kimball affirmed that sharing the faith’s message of Christ’s gospel represents “a universal need, and there must be universal coverage.”11

How well has the LDS Church fulfilled its own mandates for growth, and what are its future development prospects in the world at large?

Both institutional (or intrinsic) and societal (or extrinsic) factors offer insight into future growth prospects of the LDS Church. Projections based on the forward extrapolation of current growth rates are bound to fail, because the assumption of constant rates does not correspond either to historical church data or to likely future outcomes. Rates across a range of LDS growth indicators have in fact changed markedly over the past several decades. Contemporary social and institutional dynamics suggest likely substantive changes in LDS Church approaches to growth-related issues in the future. Any projection must acknowledge uncertainties, including currently unforeseen developments that may materially impact future results. Nonetheless, today’s realities reflect the consequence of yesterday’s choices, and tomorrow’s results will arise in large part from factors currently at work. The aggregate consideration of growth dynamics, current trajectories, and influencing factors can offer a framework for evaluating likely future outcomes.

Growth will also reflect future institutional decisions. Organizational decisions made by religious faiths facing similar external conditions have at times led some to thrive and others to falter. While considerable uncertainty also applies to future organizational decisions yet to be made by the LDS Church, the collective evaluation of the Church’s current needs, historical practices, contemporary priorities, and internal deliberative processes can help to inform projections of future institutional initiatives and adaptations relevant to church growth.

This chapter will briefly review recent LDS international growth data and trends before examining various institutional and societal dynamics which impact this growth. These data will then be considered together to assess LDS future growth prospects and to make recommendations that could improve these prospects.

**HISTORICAL SUCCESS VERSUS PRESENT REALITIES**

*Growth Trajectory*

Joseph Smith formally organized the Church of Christ (later renamed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) in 1830 with a total of only six members, including himself. At year-end 2018, the LDS Church reported 16,313,735 members in 30,536 congregations, including 65,137 full-time missionaries and 37,963 church service missionaries.12 For a period covering less than 200 years, these are impressive growth numbers per se. In 1984,
Sociologist Rodney Stark concluded that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was emerging as a “new world religion … on the threshold of becoming the first major faith to appear on earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the desert.” Stark projected approximately 4 percent annual membership growth going forward from 1980 (based on prior growth rates reported by the LDS Church up to that time). His most conservative formulation estimated that, within approximately 100 years (2080), LDS total membership worldwide would be close to 64 million. Keeping track of his projections, Stark noted in 1996 that growth over the prior fifteen years had exceeded his “highest projection by almost a million members.” Also in 1996, Bennion and Young projected that there would be between 36.4 and 121 million LDS members worldwide, while acknowledging that “this prediction … may well prove wrong.”

Since that time, LDS membership growth has decelerated rapidly, falling from over 5 percent in the late 1980s to 2.03 percent in 2013 and 1.21 percent in 2018. Annual convert baptisms per missionary halved from 7.6 in 1990 to 3.6 in 2018. In 2017, LDS growth rates declined to their lowest levels since 1937, and convert baptisms fell to a thirty-year low. In 2018, growth receded further as baptisms of “children of record” (i.e. children belonging to already member parents) dropped to 102,102, and convert baptisms changed little from the prior year at 234,332 (compared to the 1990 total of 330,000, the highest number of one-year convert baptisms reported in LDS history). The suspension of in-person proselytism and recall of many missionaries worldwide at the time of this writing, due to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, will likely lead to a further decline in church growth.

More concerning, only a fraction of members claimed by the Church are active. It is unclear what it means to refer to over 16 million members of the LDS Church today, or what projections based in official membership numbers mean, when only a fraction of nominal members participate in church activities or identify the LDS Church as their faith of preference. Many of the trends which factored in the decline in LDS Church growth over the past two decades were present, and information was available about them at the time, but they were not considered in the projections of Stark, Bennion and Young, and some others. Issues dampening LDS growth were systematically identified in this author’s 2003 report. These trends have been further expounded in part by other researchers. Systematic and robust evaluation of both institutional and societal data is necessary for a realistic appraisal of future growth prospects.
REAL GROWTH

Nominal Membership Growth Versus Activity and Congregational Growth

The challenges of LDS growth are much greater than official membership numbers suggest: church-reported membership statistics do not take into account the actual level of participation or current belief in LDS teachings of members of record. Phillips observes that “the church meticulously counts those who join but does not attend to those who leave.”23 There is thus a substantial gap between counting people who are formally baptized as members of record and counting people who actually consider themselves to be LDS. Census and sociological data from other sources indicate that LDS official figures correlate with self-identified religious preference at a rate of 90 percent for LDS members in the United States but only 28 percent for international members of record.24 Church leaders have cited theological reasons for their membership counting practice, which is unlikely to change.25

A majority of new members in fact are not retained. Many years ago, sociologist Armand Mauss observed that LDS congregational growth trending far below nominal membership growth was a “clear indication of a retention problem.”26 Subsequently Mauss observed in 2001 that “75 percent of foreign [LDS] converts are not attending church within a year of conversion. In the United States, 50 percent of the converts fail to attend after a year.”27 International convert retention rates have been low for decades prior to these observations.28

Based on weighted data from national censuses, Lawson and Xydias estimated the number of self-identified Latter-day Saints worldwide in 2017 at 8.6 million, or just over half of the Church’s nominal 16.1 million members at the time (compared to 27.7 million self-identifying as Adventists and 17.2 million as Jehovah’s Witness).29 LDS Church attendance rates are lower than self-identified religious preference, although member participation varies widely by country. In 1992, weekly church attendance was estimated to be approximately 40–50 percent in North America, 35 percent in Europe and Africa, and 25 percent in Asia and Latin America.30 Activity rates have declined modestly since that time. Overall member activity worldwide, or the number who attend at least once monthly, is now estimated at approximately 30–33 percent, or approximately 5 million of the 16.4 million nominal LDS members of record.31 Another 10–15 percent may be “less-actives,” that is, those who attend occasionally.

Congregations cannot be formed without active members. Between 1981 and 2017, nominal Mormon membership increased nearly 3.3 times, from 4,936,000 to 16,118,169 (a 2 percent annual increase), while the number of LDS congregations increased only 2.3 times, from 13,213 to 30,506.32 (By comparison, over this same period, Jehovah’s Witness congregations nearly
tripled from 43,000 to 120,000\(^3\) and Seventh-day Adventist congregations quadrupled from 21,861 to 86,576.\(^4\)

In 2005, 180,000 or 10 percent of LDS members in Utah\(^5\) and (as one example) 200,000 of the 535,000 nominal members in Chile (37 percent)\(^6\) were on what is termed the Address Unknown File, meaning that the Church cannot locate them. Those without a known address are maintained on the LDS membership rolls until age 110,\(^7\) some 38 years longer than the median worldwide life expectancy in 2016.\(^8\) Ministering to the church’s many lost and disaffiliated members is not a costless activity. It drains energy and resources that could otherwise be directed to community outreach and can sap the enthusiasm of active members in local congregations. Statistical analysis of recent LDS growth demonstrates that countries with higher rates of LDS member disaffiliation experience an inhibitory “drag” on their future membership and congregational growth that is in excess of merely a “free rider” effect.\(^9\)

**Fertility and Demographics**

The birth rate of LDS members in the United States averaged approximately one child more than the national average in the late twentieth century.\(^10\) This birth rate has been a key driver of church growth and increase in the full-time missionary force. The Pew Research Center reported in 2015 that eight in ten US Mormons had a spouse or partner within the faith and that Mormons age 40–50 had an average of 3.4 children.\(^11\) Few LDS members outside of the United States, however, have large families. Heaton reported in 1989 that Latter-day Saints in Britain and Japan had higher fertility rates at that time than the national average in their countries, but fertility was lower than the national average in other countries, like Mexico.\(^12\)

However, contemporary Mormons have been marrying later and having fewer children. The 2016 Next Mormons Survey found that adult LDS members in the United States had a mean of 2.42 children, and that 57 percent of Mormon Gen X-ers had zero, one, or two children.\(^13\) LDS couples today are divorcing more frequently than non-LDS couples a generation ago. This trend was already emerging some years back; sociologist Timothy Heaton reported from his studies in the late 1990s that the divorce rate of US Mormons lagged only 5–10 percent behind the national average of 50 percent.\(^14\) The increasing uncertainty of Mormon marriages, intended to endure for “time and all eternity,” coupled with modern financial pressures, have made higher education and full- or part-time employment necessities for most LDS women. Brigham Young University sociologist Marie Cornwall noted back in 2002 that US Latter-day Saint women “have one more child than the national average, [and] are in the labor force at the same rate as other women, but [are] more likely to be in low-paying jobs.”\(^15\) Declining viability of traditional gender roles in modern societies makes a substantial increase in future LDS birth rates unlikely.

The LDS Church’s emphasis on marrying within the faith has posed a challenge for members in Europe and other areas with small LDS populations and
therefore few eligible marital partners. European members (and presumably in other countries as well) sometimes feel pressured into marrying an LDS partner who may not be an ideal match and with whom they have had limited opportunity for acquaintance; others remain single. Those who choose to marry a non-member often struggle to remain active in the church and to transmit LDS beliefs and values to their children.

**Retention of Children**

The LDS Church has historically retained most of its US member children. In the 1990s, Albrecht noted that 22 percent of US Latter-day Saints remained active lifelong, whereas another 44 percent returned after periods of inactivity. The Pew Research Center reported in 2015 that 64 percent of US adults raised as Mormons still identified as Mormons. The Pew study reports that Mormons are remaining stable as a proportion of the US population, but this proportion is no longer growing.

The LDS Church has maintained higher levels of vitality and member commitment relative to other Christian groups also experiencing attrition. US Mormons are more likely to be politically conservative than the general population, and those who are moderately politically liberal are more likely to disaffiliate. Some Christians (including some Mormons), especially well-educated ones, have been able to reconcile their faith with support for socially progressive causes, arguing that the differences are matters of tradition and interpretation and not the core Christian message. Nevertheless, LDS youth retention is eroding. Riess reports that whereas approximately 50 percent of members in prior generations remained active in the LDS Church, only 25 percent of Millennials remained active, with an average age of 19 at disaffiliation.

The combination of declining birth rates and declining youth retention creates a demographic “math problem” for the LDS Church. The intergenerational transmission of Mormonism in its heartland (the intermountain-west area of the United States) has now fallen below the replacement rate. Based on demographic data, sociologist Ryan Cragun predicts that members of the LDS Church are likely to be a minority in Utah by the 2040s. These demographic facts have an impact on convert growth through proselyting: The LDS missionary effort has experienced diminishing results from compounding factors of declining birth rates, which result in fewer young people available at mission ages (18 for males, 19 for females), fewer young people serving missions (due to lower youth retention), and fewer converts per missionary.

**LDS International Growth Prospects in Different Regions of the World**

How do the general LDS demographic and growth trends reviewed above play out in different areas around the world?
Africa

The contemporary LDS Church has achieved some of its highest growth rates in Africa (as well as its highest member activity rates for an area of convert-based growth) and also high rates of native missionary service. Over half of world births from 2010 to 2050 are expected to be in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is expected subsequently to be the only world region experiencing substantial population growth. Africa will therefore be one of the LDS Church’s key future markets. In 2019, just 35 of the 399 LDS missions worldwide were in Africa, yet mission resources are increasingly being allocated there: four of the eight new LDS missions announced in 2020 were in Africa.

Among 47 nations of Sub-Saharan Africa, the LDS Church reported 620,960 members in 2018, up from 153,451 in 2000 (an increase of 305 percent). Over this period, the number of congregations grew commensurately from 564 to 2145 (281 percent increase). Activity across the region was estimated at approximately 43 percent in 2013, with wide variation from a low of approximately 23 percent in Uganda to 75–80 percent in Rwanda, Gabon, and Burundi. These higher rates reflect areas where congregations have been established relatively recently and are likely to diminish in time.

LDS membership is skewed toward West Africa and South Africa. In 2018, the LDS Church reported 730 nominal members in Burundi, 748 in Rwanda, 1726 in Tanzania, 1933 in Ethiopia, and 16,823 in Uganda. The LDS Church has a larger presence in West Africa, reporting 83,651 members in Ghana and 177,280 in Nigeria. (By way of comparison, the Seventh-day Adventist Church reported an average weekly church attendance in 2017 of 133,362 in Burundi, 542,057 in Rwanda, 400,045 in Tanzania, and 154,200 in Ethiopia, 251,815 in Uganda, 171,767 in Ghana, and 205,929 in Nigeria.)

The LDS Church did not convey its lay priesthood to individuals of African descent before the “1978 Priesthood Revelation.” Thus organized LDS proselytism in Sub-Saharan Africa has only been possible for about forty years, and missionaries did not, in fact, enter a number of African nations for many years following the 1978 policy change. Due primarily to its delayed entry over several decades, compared to its religious competitors, the LDS Church remains very small in Africa.

Salt Lake Tribune Religion editor, Peggy Fletcher Stack, has reported that the LDS Church is referred to by some in Ghana as the “rich church” due to its large Western-style meetinghouses. But the “rich church” is also the small church, as the high financial cost of the LDS paradigm, which requires intensive foreign investment in each local congregation, poses barriers to expansion and allows only slow, measured growth. There are also questions about the scalability of the LDS growth model. Whereas the American LDS Church may be able to carry the expenses of construction and maintenance of the current number of foreign meeting houses, allowing room for gradual expansion, it is less clear that this model would be financially sustainable if there were ten or a hundred times as many new meetinghouses.
In Botswana and other nations of Sub-Saharan Africa, LDS young women struggle with the requirement for chastity in societies in which bearing children out of wedlock is the norm, and marriage involves an ongoing negotiation between extended families over a period of years.\textsuperscript{63} LDS Church groups support and fellowship young women who have children out of marriage and encourage ongoing church activity. But converting and retaining whole nuclear families, with male heads of household as potential lay priesthood holders, is an elusive objective (as it is in many African countries).

Overall prospects remain favorable for continued LDS growth in many predominately Christian regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the absolute number of African members remains small, and the high foreign investment in individual congregations constrains growth potential.

\section*{Asia}

The LDS Asia mission region contains approximately 60 percent of the world’s population and is home to twenty LDS mission fields in mainland countries (which is only about 5 percent of total extant LDS missions). By comparison, in the islands of the Philippines, there are a total of twenty-three missions. Nominal LDS membership in East Asia rose from 731,647 in 2000 to 1,164,069 in 2018, an increase of 59 percent. However, it is estimated that only around 226,000 East Asian members are active. Correspondingly, the number of congregations increased just 3.6 percent during this same time frame, from 1860 to 1928. Most LDS members of record are in the Philippines, with sizable numbers also in Japan (129,858), South Korea (88,418), and Taiwan (61,034).

In the Philippines, nominal LDS membership grew 67 percent—from 470,486 in 2000 to 785,164 in 2018—while the number of congregations increased just 6 percent, from 1157 to 1227. Active Philippine membership is estimated at just under 20 percent, or about 150,000 people who attend church regularly and fulfill church-assigned “callings.” Apostle Dallin Oaks was assigned to the Philippines in the early 2000s to troubleshoot problems of convert retention and member attrition. Recent reports suggest that convert retention rates have risen markedly with better teaching and preparation of new converts. The LDS Church thus seems to have modest prospects for future growth in the Philippines, although vast numbers of inactive and disaffiliated members will continue to divert time and resources away from new outreach, and it will take decades for active LDS membership to approach current member activity norms.

\textit{China} requires separate congregations for LDS native and foreign members, but proselytizing outreach is highly restricted, and official church statistics are not published.

In \textit{Indonesia}, a nation of 264 million, the LDS Church reported 7477 nominal members in 2018, up from 5375 in 2000, but current active membership is estimated at fewer than 3000. (By contrast, in 2017, the Seventh-day
Adventist Church reported average church attendance of 146,351 in its two Indonesian Unions.\textsuperscript{64}

In South Asia, the LDS Church is located mainly in India, with some members in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Membership in these countries increased from 3964 in 2000 to 15,592 in 2018, with an estimated 6000 currently active members. The number of congregations over this same period increased from thirty-one to sixty-five. The recent growth trajectory suggests that the LDS Church is unlikely to gain significant traction in India. Among other obstacles, the Indian government only permits into the country a limited complement of foreign missionaries from a particular religious faith. From 2014 to 2018, LDS membership in India increased from 12,257 to 13,570, an increase of just 2.6 percent annually. If LDS growth were to continue at this rate into the future, by 2068 there would still be under 50,000 nominal Latter-day Saints in India, including fewer than 20,000 active members. Relative to the overall population of India (which stood at 1.33 billion in 2018), the number of Mormons, active or not, will be tiny. (In contrast, in 2017, the Seventh-day Adventist Church reported average church attendance of 791,398 in India.\textsuperscript{65})

Low LDS growth in major population centers of Asia does reflect a number of external obstacles, including government restrictions and lack of cultural receptivity in largely non-Christian nations. Nonetheless, the LDS Church has erected additional barriers to growth, including mandating that most church services be held in English, entering few new areas that would be open to proselytizing, and failing to translate church materials into major languages spoken by tens of millions (which would require recruitment of many native speakers to assist in such an enterprise). Few native missionaries have been recruited, and local member missionary programs remain weak. Such outcomes do not appear to comport with the Church’s professed mandate for reaching every individual in their own language.\textsuperscript{66} Contemporary LDS paradigms do not appear to allow for more than meager growth and auger no real prospect of achieving wide outreach or becoming a major faith in the Asian region.

Europe

LDS membership in Western Europe was reported as being 378,114 members in 2000, which grew to 456,327 by 2018. Of the current number, an estimated 99,000 are active members. However, the number of Western European congregations over this period declined from 1320 in 2000 to 1109 in 2018, reflecting a decline in active membership. This decline is well illustrated in Holland, where, in 1996, Van Beek observed that “almost all older [LDS] couples have one or more, sometimes all, of their children inactive or disaffiliated.”\textsuperscript{67} With low birth rates and high attrition of member children continuing for several decades throughout Western European countries, the natural growth of multi-generational Mormon families is below replacement level. The impact of this shortfall is acutely felt to the point that many congregations cannot be maintained. Missionary operations are also impacted. Between the
mid-1990s and early 2020, approximately half of LDS European missions were closed or consolidated; those that remained saw a reduced missionary complement.

For the past four decades, the majority of converts in many Western European missions have been foreign immigrants rather than native peoples. Van Beek noted that “during ... the ‘80s and ‘90s, the number of Dutch converts declined, only to be partly replaced with immigrant conversions as European societies became immigration societies.” While this has made the LDS Church more diverse in Western Europe, it has also been a factor in low retention. Many migrants are transient, and language and culture differences have presented challenges for fellowshipping and assimilation. In Eastern Europe, nominal membership has nearly doubled, from 34,718 in 2000 to over 60,000 in 2018 (with an estimated 15,000 of these being active members). Even though some cities have been opened in Eastern Europe over the past two decades, the number of congregations declined from 296 in 2000 to 273 in 2018 as a result of member attrition.

Overall, the LDS Church in Europe is receding. The future is likely to see further declines in active membership and the closing or consolidation of additional congregations in Europe, even as nominal membership continues to increase. While the church has a strong base of committed members in European countries, the small number of converts and their subsequent low retention are not enough to compensate for existing member aging and attrition rates.

**Latin America**

Nominal LDS membership in South America increased 60.5 percent, from 2,548,991 members in 2000 to 4,093,352 members in 2018 (of whom approximately 82,600 are estimated to be active). Over this period, the actual number of LDS congregations fell slightly from 5562 to 5541. During these same years, Central American membership rose 66 percent, from 1,356,109 to 2,253,198 (an estimated 486,000 of whom are active), but the number of congregations increased only 3 percent, from 2878 to 2964. In the Caribbean, membership increased 76 percent, from 115,518 to 203,647 (with 4500 estimated to be active), whereas the number of congregations increased only 18 percent, from 287 to 340. Although LDS missions in Latin America have traditionally reported high baptismal numbers, convert retention has historically been low, and the number of congregations formed has lagged far behind official membership growth rates.

These trends (high conversion numbers, offset by low retention rates and slowed congregational growth) reflect historical missionary approaches in this region that focused on achieving quick baptisms rather than making lasting converts and building strong congregations. Convert retention has improved markedly in many areas in recent years with the implementation of basic standards to improve preparation for baptism. Part of the failure to achieve
meaningful congregational growth over the past two decades reflects the consolidation or closure of hundreds of units in the early 2000s in areas most affected by rampant quick-baptize practices followed by initial rapid expansion of congregations that lacked the necessary convert retention rates to make them viable in the 1980s and 1990s. Continuation of such practices in many Latin American missions, long after the 2004 publication of the *Preach My Gospel* manual officially altered mission practices and objectives, has correspondingly contributed to continuing slow congregational growth in recent years.

Increased active membership in the Latin America region is expected going forward. There should also be modest increases in congregations, as convert retention improves with better methods of teaching to prospective converts, preparing them to be committed members, are utilized. Rates of native missionary service have risen in some nations of the region, which is another plus. At the same time, the LDS Church in Latin America continues to heavily depend on the US church for both missionaries and finances. The vast number of inactive and disaffiliated Latin American members will continue to be a drag on Church growth for decades to come.

**North America**

From 2000 to 2018, LDS membership in North America rose 28 percent, from 5,367,350 to 68,795,399 (2.7 million of whom are estimated to be active members). During this same time period, LDS congregations increased 22.7 percent, from 12,031 to 14,766. Fifty-nine percent of all LDS congregations, worldwide, created in this period were in North America. The United States continues to be home to a majority of the faith’s active members, notwithstanding larger nominal membership outside the United States. North America and Sub-Saharan Africa are the only two world regions where congregational growth has come close to keeping pace with growth in nominal membership.

The LDS Church continues to highly prioritize North America for missionary work. North America counts less than 5 percent of the world’s population, but, in 2019, 28 percent of the 399 full-time LDS missions were located in North America (109 missions in the United States and 6 in Canada). However, much of the LDS growth in North America has represented an increase in baptism of member children, whereas over 80 percent of convert baptisms occur outside of the United States. While the Mountain West region of the United States is likely to remain the faith’s heartland, Mormons are losing their dominance in Utah and are expected, in the not too distant future, to become a minority population in the state that their pioneer ancestors initially settled. Falling LDS birth rates and youth retention problems pose a “double hit” to increasing active North American membership and also to fielding and maintaining a full-time missionary force of the size desired by church officials. In time, these trends are likely to lead to slowing of new congregation formation in North America and to increasing divergence between nominal membership
(that will increase fairly rapidly) and congregational growth rates (that will slow down).

**Oceania**

Nominal LDS membership in Oceania rose from 373,683 in 2000 to 562,341 in 2018 (a 50 percent increase), whereas congregations grew from 1048 to 1253 (a 19.5 percent increase). **Tonga** (60.1 percent) and **Samoa** (41.8 percent) have the highest rates of nominal LDS membership growth in the world, although member activity across the Oceania region is estimated at approximately 35 percent. Recent data suggest some improvement in member activity. However, potential for growth is limited due to the region’s small population and increasing saturation of the religious marketplace by other, successfully competing evangelical faiths.

**Critique and Prescriptions**

**Competition for Growth in Nominally Unfavorable Religious Markets**

Claims that declining Mormon growth is inevitable as a result of external factors beyond its control are disconfirmed by the more rapid growth of other Christian restorationist faiths. Over the past three decades, Mormonism has been overtaken and has fallen increasingly behind its primary restorationist competitors, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Seventh-day Adventist Church baptized 1.2 million new members in 2016, followed by 1.27 million baptisms in 2017. Back in 1998, the LDS Church reported more members than the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but twenty years later, the SDA Church reported 21,414,779 members at year-end 2018 compared to the LDS Church’s 16,313,735. Likewise, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have experienced steady world growth throughout the 2000s, including in areas like Eastern Europe that have difficult religious markets and an overall decline in Christian self-identification. These faiths quite apparently have found ways to thrive in many challenging areas where other faiths are stagnant or declining, while navigating the same or similar external challenges facing the LDS Church.

Seventh-day Adventists have adjusted differently than Jehovah’s Witnesses by deemphasizing competition against other Christian denominations. Adventists have retained a strong presence worldwide but have reduced outreach efforts in competitive, stagnant, and shrinking religious markets—including those in much of Europe—to focus on social service activities among non-Christian populations in highly receptive regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and India; these regions now account for over half of the faith’s current converts. Educational and health outreach programs constitute a major fraction of Advent focus. In 2018, there were 6106 Adventist primary schools, 2549 secondary schools, and 118 tertiary institutions around the world that
altogether tallied 1.88 million students among them. There are also over a hundred Adventist hospitals around the world, which, along with the extensive Adventist school system, have contributed significantly to sustainability, outreach, and branding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Jehovah’s Witnesses have continued to focus on reaching potential converts with their Christian, bible-based message but have adapted to decreasing receptivity in many countries by emphasizing intensive proselyting efforts made by local members, particularly women.

**Institutional Issues Unfavorably Impacting LDS Growth Prospects**

Mormonism began as a competitive disruptor, an agile and innovative faith promising ongoing revelation to people whose life circumstances motivated them to seek meaningful changes for themselves and their families. However, today it struggles to adapt to new circumstances. The circumstances of the faith’s founding, as well as subsequent organizational decisions, continue to impact current growth. Each organizational decision involves trade-offs. Legacies that were helpful in the settling and initial propagation of the Utah Zion pose increasing trade-offs today. Some of the most consequential LDS organizational legacies are identified below.

**Historical Gathering to Zion Theme**

A key organizational decision, which has impacted all downstream development, was the early Mormon theme of “gathering to Zion,” first in the American Midwest and then in the Mountain West. In an attempt to create a religious utopia and limit outside interference, Mormons were “separated from the world” in their own communities, achieving greater cohesiveness and organizational control. Isolation allowed Mormon leaders to shape an entire society. Member retention in the faith’s heartland was promoted by cultural as well as religious institutions. The regional dominance of the LDS Church over time generated political and economic influence, which by the mid-twentieth century began having national overtones.

Gathering and isolation in the Utah Zion achieved an initially desired disconnect from non-Mormons generally, but there is a downside to this disconnect over time. The perceived conditions of missionary work in a Mormon-dominated culture are very different from those prevailing in other cultures.

**American Versus International Gospel Culture**

Rigal-Cellard noted that “Mormonism is in a class of its own for it displays cultural influences far more than any other religious group born in America.” Binding the institutional LDS Church to American Utah culture, rather than to an international gospel culture, and giving prioritization to adherents in the
faith’s homeland over international membership and the yet unreached, has had unanticipated consequences. As but one example, Chen points out that, in Taiwan (as in much of the world), “English becomes another, if not the, official language in Church buildings,” and in the same vein observes an “unwitting effort to import American/Utah youth culture as a gospel norm.”

Scholars of Mormonism … point out that international success has, in fact, led to central control from Church headquarters. The claim of being a universal church often deemphasizes the need to integrate the Church into local societies. This universalistic view tends to overemphasize the similar, compatible parts of local culture (e.g., family values in Confucianism) but shuns the incompatible parts of local tradition.

Instead of engaging in substantial adaptations and allowing broad local autonomy to find indigenous expressions of faith, LDS leadership has doubled down on the primacy of the American church. In consequence, LDS members “in many places outside the American continent … face a double marginalization, a marginalization manifest both inside the Church and in their own country,” and international converts have consequently experienced low retention.

Currently, the LDS Church experiences a vast needs-resource-allocation mismatch that reflects the priority afforded to the American-based church and more generally to LDS missionary enterprises in the Western Hemisphere and Latin America. In early 2020, 115 (28.8 percent) of the Church’s 399 full-time missions were located in the United States and Canada, which account for less than 5 percent of the world’s population. In like manner, 154 (38.5 percent) of missions were located in Latin America, home to just 8.4 percent of living humans. Fewer than one-third of missions serve the remaining 87 percent of the world’s population.

Itinerant Missionary Work

Although the LDS Church began encouraging members to stay in their own lands to build up the church since the early twentieth century, the former doctrine of gathering to the Utah Zion (and subsequent development of a dominant Mormon culture) came at a cost to future missionary outreach efforts. The emigration of most early converts from their native lands, first to Nauvoo, Illinois and then to the Utah territory, left few members behind to build up the Church locally. Mormonism thus defined itself early in its history as an American faith dependent for growth on the preaching of foreign missionaries rather than on the personal evangelism of local members.

In exchange for building a cohesive Mormon society in the Utah homeland, the faith’s missionary approach was focused on reaping an immediate harvest rather than sowing for the long-term growth of local congregations. Itinerant
missionaries are not connected to local communities and are often disconnected from how non-Mormons in these communities think and feel. They lack accountability and incentive for emphasizing quality converts and for building strong local congregations, since these outcomes are not their primary mission objectives. This dynamic gave rise to a colonial mentality and eventually helped fuel the low-retaining, quick-baptize practices that characterized LDS missionary efforts in the mid- and late twentieth century.76,77,78

In short, itinerant missions served important needs during the nineteenth-century gathering to Zion period, but continuation of this model entails drawbacks today. Full-time missionaries incur higher expenses for travel, housing, and board than in-place members preaching locally. They also experience a learning curve with culture and often learning a foreign language, which lessens their effectiveness for a portion of the relatively short term of their mission calling. Severe limitations on missionary visas to populous nations like India, the constitutional prohibition of foreign religious proselytizing in China,79 laws in Russia forbidding public proselytism and requiring the identification of missionaries as “foreign agents,” and other restrictions elsewhere, make reliance on foreign missionaries impractical for most unreached areas of the world. Faiths that evangelize primarily through the efforts of local members, however, are able to establish congregations in many areas not accessible to foreign missionaries.

Preaching the Gospel as a Priesthood (Adult Male) Duty

Itinerant Mormon missionary work has been designated, from the faith’s inception, as a priesthood duty of adult males. In the twentieth century, full-time missionary service became a rite of passage specifically for young LDS men transitioning to adulthood before assuming presumed obligations of marriage and family life. As a corollary norm, prior missionary service of prospective husbands has often been represented by church authorities to young LDS women as an essential prerequisite for marriage. These expectations of missionary service for LDS young men helped to build the largest full-time missionary force of any major Christian denomination throughout the world. Up until 2012, LDS women (although permitted at later ages than young men, upon request) were not encouraged to seek missionary service. Rather they were instructed to marry worthy young men, especially ones having completed a prior successful mission, and then bear children during their fertile years, thus fueling higher birth rates and larger families.

Due to a paucity of non-Mormons to preach to in the Mormon heartland during the mid-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, personal evangelism became largely compartmentalized as a short-term, itinerant missionary duty to the outside world, performed by adult males, rather than being taught as a gospel habit to be implemented regularly by all members in their daily lives. Research has shown that LDS members in the United States are in fact less likely, in their routine life circumstances, to participate in personal
evangelism than other evangelical Christian groups. LDS women and youth of both genders are not systematically engaged in personal evangelism, whereas research indicates that women in other faiths are more likely than men to share their faith. For instance, the Pew Research Center recently found that approximately two-thirds of Jehovah’s Witness proclaimers in the United States are women. As LDS women are the traditional nurturers and educators of children in their homes, it seems likely that LDS children are not typically taught how to share their faith or to consciously show positive examples to non-members. Most young LDS men arrive at the age of full-time missionary service with little or no prior experience in personal evangelism.

**Leadership Gerontocracy**

Joseph Smith and most of his co-founding associates were young and able men without much prior experience or tenure in religious leadership positions. Today, the LDS Church is the only US-based faith whose leader typically assumes his position of ultimate authority at a relatively old age and then continues to function in this position until death. This practice has helped to avoid disputes over succession and has lessened the risk of apostasy of senior leaders, both of which were real challenges that confronted the LDS Church in its early days (see Prince’s chapter for more details on this issue).

As human life expectancies have increased over time, LDS leaders have acceded to the church presidency only in their twilight years. Scholars of Mormonism have noted that most LDS Church presidents of the past half-century have experienced long periods of physical and/or mental decline before their deaths, leaving them as nominal figureheads while key decisions are made by others in the leadership hierarchy: “The severity of the medical problems increasingly experienced by Church presidents has been hidden from the general Church membership for as long as possible, and generally quite successfully.” Consequently, “a power vacuum at the top, caused by the incapacitation of the Church president, can put the entire church at risk of damage that might otherwise be prevented by a competent president.”

Organizational paralysis and dysfunction from incapacitated leadership have hampered missionary outreach efforts. Several signature missionary mandates have been proclaimed by LDS Church presidents over the last sixty years, including David O. McKay’s “Every Member a Missionary” (1959), Spencer W. Kimball’s strategic planning and global coordination for world missions (1974), and Ezra Taft Benson’s “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon (1984).” Little or no systematic or rigorous, institutional implementation of these declarations subsequently occurred, due to the leaders’ declining health after these announcements were made. Generally speaking, a layered corporate bureaucracy, centered around a self-perpetuating, geriatric core leadership, typically attempts to compensate for the incapacity of senior leadership by simply perpetuating status quo policies. However, a caretaker
bureaucracy is not typically forward-thinking and lacks a mandate for instituting bold changes when circumstances require timely, adaptive responses.

The 2015 Exclusion Policy, which prohibited children of LGBTQ couples from baptism and LDS Church fellowship, was not well received, to say the least, by many younger members. This episode may also reflect gerontocracy issues. Identity-based discrimination is anathema to many people born in the last half-century, who were raised amid secular mantras of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. By contrast, today’s senior LDS Church leaders grew up in an era of racial segregation, gender chauvinism, and widespread homophobic prejudice. The unhappily formulated Exclusion Policy was reversed in 2019, but only after four years of sustained protests, especially among younger LDS members. Riess and Knoll found that the policy had acted “as one of several factors that, when added together, contributed to higher levels of disillusionment and disaffiliation,” and that “for some, particularly those who were already on the fence to begin with, this resulted in resignations and inactivity.”

Celebrification and Cloistering of Church Leaders

Latter-day Saints believe that their modern church leaders, like early apostles, are literally called by Jesus through modern revelation. Church leaders, especially the prophet-president, have wide-ranging authority and can speak on any matter. Their individual counsel in individual situations is considered virtually on par with scripture when they claim revelatory guidance by the Holy Ghost. However, when matters of momentous portent for the whole church are involved, it is only the president—typically in concert with his counselors (“The First Presidency”) and sustained by unanimous support of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles—who can officially alter or replace existing teachings (or teaching-based policies). These attributions permit much potential flexibility in policy making, allowing new teachings to be introduced for new circumstances rather than relying exclusively on the interpretation and continued implementation of ancient scriptures. But this sort of change is typically slow-coming in practice, hindered as it is by devotion to traditions, bureaucratic caution, and the restraining, long-held assumptions of elderly leadership.

LDS dominance in the Mormon Cultural Region has contributed over time to the “celebrification” and simultaneous cloistering of church leaders. The leaders of what was once a geographically isolated Church, who were immediately accessible to ordinary members, gradually became walled off behind a dense bureaucracy. Today LDS Church leaders have little interaction with lay membership and the outside world beyond stage-managed appearances at conferences and public events. Access to leaders—and the information that gets through to them—is carefully controlled.

The celebrity status of LDS Church authorities makes it difficult for even able-bodied leaders to directly observe and participate firsthand in missionary outreach activities rather than primarily being the recipients of red-carpet
treatment when mission field visits are made. The upper echelon of church leadership especially appears to have been genuinely unaware of the mission practices that were fueling a severe worldwide convert retention crisis until apostles Jeffrey R. Holland and Dallin H. Oaks were assigned to live in Chile and the Philippines, respectively, from 2002 to 2004.88

Leaders Versus Managers

The remoteness of the Utah Zion from the mission field, the fragile health of aging church leaders, and attempts of the institutional bureaucracy to mask the decline in function of aging leaders, appear to have contributed to the normalization of leader non-participation in direct mission outreach. Modern LDS Church authorities are administrators with little or no personal involvement in finding and teaching non-Mormons.

This disconnect has been propagated downstream to lower-level functionaries. The LDS Church has had a good deal of dedicated and skilled pastoral leadership in its mission fields, but, although committed, there is decidedly less proficient leadership supervising mission outreach efforts at headquarters in Salt Lake City. Based on interviews, this author has found that core principles of mission outreach are a “black box” to many mission leaders, who continue to hold stylized views of outreach and conversion methods propagated in the absence of their own regular personal involvement in these activities. Almost all mission presidents I have known have formulated policies and issued directives without ever having gone door to door to make new contacts and without teaching a single missionary lesson to a prospective convert. This lack of leadership involvement in frontline implementation limits insights and impairs responsiveness to emergent outreach needs. Policies that, retrospectively, prove to be problematic, may be less likely to be implemented if mature leaders are regularly engaged in proselytism and thus in a position to develop broader insights and more effective approaches.

Nondisclosure and Secret-Keeping

A culture of nondisclosure and secret-keeping regarding the practice of polygamy (or plural marriage in LDS parlance) among leaders arose in the LDS Church’s early days. This practice was not disclosed to ordinary members or recent converts until after the followers of Brigham Young reached the Utah Territory.89 Polygamy separated Mormons from non-Mormons, galvanized commitment among members, and increased the cost of maintaining belief. After LDS plural marriage was officially ended in the 1890s, the institutional practice of secret-keeping continued in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including—most pertinently for the focus of this chapter—efforts to mask the poor health of church leaders, a lack of candor about levels of member activity and convert retention, and nondisclosure of church finances.
Between 1977 and 1987, the LDS Church successively removed multiple fields from its annual statistical reports which pointed to declining member activity rates. LDS Church News stories in the 1990s and early 2000s lauded the faith’s international growth as “astronomic,” “dynamic,” “miraculous,” and “spectacular” while failing to disclose that only a fraction of converts remained active. Some Latter-day Saint scholars wrote glowing missionary accounts with only faint allusions to difficulties, which, “while faith-confirming, tend to fall short in providing insights that come from grappling seriously with uncomfortable data.” Awareness and attention to the shortcomings of an institutional missionary program, engineered to achieve “quick sales” rather than developing long-term converts, was hampered for decades by non-disclosure of meaningful indicators of member activity.

As the older era of church secret-keeping grudgingly yields to a new age of whistleblowers, the revelation of certain institutional secrets—that could have been more favorably disclosed on the Church’s own terms at an earlier time—has fueled anger and resentment by some members and former members while hampering outreach as well. For example, to counteract widespread negative social media criticisms, the LDS Church published, in 2014, a series of authoritative essays on its official website in order to provide “reliable, faith-promoting information that was true about some of these more difficult aspects of our history.” Among a number of problematic topics, acknowledgement is made, for instance, that, yes, founder Joseph Smith had indeed established and practiced polygamy on a large scale. Concerning a more contemporary issue, many LDS leaders (not to mention most ordinary members) were reportedly unaware of the Church’s accumulation of over $100 billion in investments. These monetary resources have not been tapped to meet vast outreach, infrastructure, and development needs, reflecting a caretaker bureaucracy which demonstrates prudent stewardship in some spheres, while lacking a clear mandate for implementing visionary action programs to better address present human and structural needs.

Mission Ethics

The great shortcoming of twentieth-century Mormon missions, and, in some cases, still today, has been the prioritization of obedience over ethics in the pursuit of conversions. From the “Baseball Baptism” era in the United Kingdom to the Australian “Pentecost” to similar instances in Japan, Latin America, and the Philippines, and to quick-baptize practices that persist in the official missionary program today, the institutional missionary program has often objectified prospective converts. Van Beek noted that “the missionary organization is complete with corporate Americanisms: numerical goal setting, the almost strangling focus on baptisms.” Divergence of the institutional missionary program from professed principles of unswerving ethics in imitation of Christ has been repeatedly cited as a central factor in low convert retention rates worldwide.
Policies in official missionary materials, or articulated by mission or area leaders, have unswervingly been viewed as correct, not because they were consistent with impartial morality or timeless principles, but because the official missionary program or mission leaders said so. Some missionaries found themselves in the position of suspending rational judgment and personal conscience to simply follow orders. Although traditional LDS teachings assert that only the church president will not lead the church astray, official church policies—such as returning missionary letters sent to higher church authorities, unopened, back to their local mission president and routinely overruling objections of local members—impute *de facto* infallibility to lesser authorities and offer no remedy or appeal in either missions or congregations.

This author has noted four ethical pillars of mission outreach, including (1) the Duty to the Unreached; (2) Nonmaleficence, or the duty to do no harm; (3) Beneficence, or the duty to act in the hearer’s best interest, and (4) Continuous Quality Improvement. Recent missionary program reforms have demonstrated meaningful progress toward greater compliance with these pillars.

**Moral Authority**

Nietzsche lamented that “the Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed them,” and saw the tenet of “justification by faith” as “only the consequence of the Church’s lack of courage to profess the works Jesus demanded.” In the void left by the rejection of belief in God, Nietzsche premonished “the advent of nihilism,” noting that Western culture was “moving as toward a catastrophe.”

The LDS Church fills a theological and practical void in its strong emphasis on life implementation of Christian teachings and has ironically been accused by some Christian competitors as being “non-Christian” as a result. Mormons are widely known for broad-ranging service and humanitarian activities, personal integrity, hard work, and subscribing to traditional Christian values. The LDS Church has participated in humanitarian causes around the world, from sending relief supplies to Ethiopia during famine times to Haiti following a devastating earthquake, and much more.

However, the LDS Church’s record on stances or statements involving human rights has been mixed, at times appearing to reflect corporate self-interest rather than a transcendent ethic. Van Beek observed that “The Domestic [US] Church has also become a major player in the American political and religious arena, while almost never being seen as criticizing American actions or issues.” He cited the “decline in American credibility” and noted that “the absence of LDS church warnings against war and in favor of peace were sorely missed with the American decision to wage war on Iraq.” The 2015 Exclusion Policy, for instance, which blocked children of gay couples from fellowship in the LDS Church until its reversal in 2019 following
widespread criticism, contravened the church’s own scripture\textsuperscript{105} and offended the moral sensibilities of many people inside and outside of the Church.

In 2018, the LDS Church spoke out against the separation of immigrant families at the US-Mexico border,\textsuperscript{106} but only after the practice had been condemned by scores of human rights organizations. Statements of the LDS Church advocating congressional action to prevent deportation of millions of undocumented immigrants to the United States\textsuperscript{107} are clouded by substantive conflicts of interest. These include the Church’s history in assisting illegal immigrants to evade immigration officers in exchange for accepting baptism,\textsuperscript{108} that an estimated 50–75 percent of immigrants in Utah’s Spanish-language congregations are in the country illegally,\textsuperscript{109} and the importance of Latin Americans for convert growth. The number of Spanish-speaking Mormons in the United States doubled from 2000 to 2013, including many undocumented immigrants.\textsuperscript{110} The Church has routinely arranged for undocumented immigrants to serve full-time missions in the United States and has noted that illegal immigration status does not preclude issuing a temple recommend.\textsuperscript{111} In Utah, the LDS Church has repeatedly been “taking whatever steps are necessary to advance [its] interests while operating behind the scenes” and has exerted heavy pressure on legislators “to vote for illegal alien friendly-bills” notwithstanding personal beliefs, constituent positions, and consequences to the community.\textsuperscript{112}

The LDS Church has been far less vocal about human rights when self-interest has not been at stake. For instance, not a word of condemnation was issued regarding a worsening crisis of violence setting new highs annually with over 25,000 murders in Mexico in 2017, 33,000 in 2018,\textsuperscript{113} and 35,000 in 2019,\textsuperscript{114} primarily at the hands of criminal cartels which engage in drug trafficking and human smuggling. Gender violence in Mexico kills some ten women per day,\textsuperscript{115} producing only shrugs from government officials, but there has been no LDS Church condemnation or appeal for greater government intervention, even though Mexico is home to over a million and a half nominal members. The LDS Church has been equally silent about human rights abuses in nations like China and Venezuela, where it has sought favorable treatment for the faith and its members.

Christian communities are shrinking across the Near East and in some nations are nearing extinction due to systematic persecution and genocide. Yet the LDS Church has offered no statement of concern for Christians in these nations, notwithstanding significant political clout that could mobilize relief efforts and muster support. No moral guidance was offered in regard to Saudi Arabia’s sectarian war in Yemen, in which millions were displaced and an estimated 50,000 children died of starvation in 2017 alone,\textsuperscript{116} nor were there protests against the sale of US arms subsequently used against civilians.

While the LDS Church has a right to advocate for its own interests, a selective morality based on self-interest demonstrates neither moral authority nor righteous courage. Contemporary church leaders have been perceived as lacking the moral authority and resonance of spiritual figures like Mother Teresa,
Gandhi, or the Dalai Lama. Moral authority cannot be manufactured by public relations campaigns or the projection of stage-managed personas. It arises from deeply authentic and selfless concern of right rather than expediency, requires a sustained record to build, and can be eroded rapidly by missteps. The faith’s moral authority is an important consideration for both LDS Church members and prospective converts.

**INITIAL LDS INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTATIONS TO CHANGING WORLD CIRCUMSTANCES**

The LDS Church has recognized many challenges to its expansion in the world and has instituted changes and adaptations in an effort to remedy some perceived problems. Although the Church had previously embraced the terms “LDS” and “Mormon,” including for its flagship internet sites, church leadership jettisoned both in 2018 as part of a sweeping re-branding initiative that emphasizes the centrality of Jesus Christ to the church’s purpose and functioning. Among other responses, Church-owned bookstores have subsequently phased out books containing “Mormon” or “LDS” in their title. The LDS Church’s efforts to increase Christian mainstreaming of its identity and message may achieve moderate success in some arenas, as the public space previously occupied by Christianity is increasingly abandoned in many Western nations and traditional definitions of religious orthodoxy are challenged elsewhere around the world.

In 2019, the LDS Church transitioned from a three-hour to a two-hour Sunday meeting block of time. The Church has intentionally stepped back to reduce peripheral programming, diminish burnout, and free up more together-time for individuals and families. Latter-day Saints have fewer church callings and are being directed to be more focused on ministering to the community. The recognition that there is a healthy limit to the number of required burdens that are placed on church members, and giving more priority to implementation of core values, represent substantial, adaptive insights.

In April 2018, the LDS home and visiting teaching programs were retired, and the “Ministering” program was introduced. Utah-based home and visiting teaching programs had previously been dysfunctional, with low participation rates occurring particularly in international settings. Mauss acknowledged poor prospects of reactivating inactive international members and noted that US practices of home and visiting teaching were often viewed as unwanted intrusions. Lay “ministering” emphasizes Christian service and prayerful consideration of the needs of each individual, and encourages members to engage in open conversations with others with sincere warmth and caring. The ministering program promotes interactions which are more natural, responsive, and involve real listening in contrast to earlier scripted dialogues that emphasized delivering a designated gospel message. The new emphasis is
on working to support spiritual development and temporal needs through social and material help in a supportive and low-pressure environment.

In October 2012, the age of eligibility for full-time missionary service was lowered to 18 (from 19) for men and to 19 (from 21) for women. These changes have implications on a number of levels, but at least one practical result is allowing completion of mission service for young people prior to university study (and military service in some countries).128

The 2004 publication of the *Preach My Gospel* manual represented a major missionary program reform. Elements of American culture and psychology from prior missionary manuals were removed, and the missionary role in convert retention was emphasized. However, many remedies in this manual represent half-measures, and substantial problems remain.129 For instance, notwithstanding an ostensible emphasis on the preparation and retention of prospective converts, teaching time was shortened from six lessons to four lessons, each lasting thirty to forty-five minutes; abbreviated summaries were included that can be taught in as little as three to five minutes and counted as full lessons. The *Preach My Gospel* manual continues to instruct missionaries to ask listeners to commit to baptism at the end of the second lesson, unless missionaries specifically feel guided by the Holy Spirit not to do so (even though most investigators receiving this lesson likely have not attended church and have read only a few selected passages in the Book of Mormon). Prohibitions against alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee are raised only in the last lesson before baptism. Not one of the recommended nineteen baptismal interview questions asks whether the prospective convert is currently adhering to the LDS health code (“The Word of Wisdom”), attending church, reading scriptures, and keeping other commitments taught by the missionaries. Quick-baptize practices continued widely after the publication of the *Preach My Gospel* manual and continue in some mission areas today.

Over the past three to five years, more substantial standards for baptism and more realistic evaluation of the preparation of prospective converts have begun to achieve broader implementation. Large areas, including the Philippines and parts of Latin America, have experienced major improvements in convert retention. Contemporary Mormon missionaries are probably better listeners, more sensitive to individual needs and more focused on helping individuals develop gospel habits and achieve meaningful spiritual experiences instead of being singularly focused on a rush to baptism.

Similar reforms are needed for the member-missionary program. This author served as a ward mission leader and ward missionary in the late 1990s and 2000s, during which time numerous official missionary programs were rolled out. Offers for free books, free videos, the distribution of pass-along cards, media and internet campaigns, and more, came and went. Stake mission presidencies were called and then dissolved, eliminating coordination of missionary activities among nearby congregations and devolving responsibility for member engagement in mission outreach upon local bishops. A colleague who served as a ward mission leader at this time noted the flurry of programs which
came and went without changing the underlying dynamics, and opined that church leadership was simply “flipping switches” in the hope that something would work. Stake quorums of seventy, a priesthood office enumerated in Mormon scripture and assigned to assist with mission outreach, were discontinued in 1986. The LDS Church has still not found a solution to meaningfully mobilize lay members in personal evangelism in their own communities.

The LDS Church today in many ways offers increased individual attention, spiritual mentoring, and support compared to the Church of a generation ago. Recent institutional adaptations have overwhelmingly been necessary, thoughtful, and constructive, although further adaptive responses are clearly needed.

Even when meaningful improvements are introduced, old practices may hold influence for many years. Generations of missionaries and members have been taught prior systems; many of today’s mission presidents are those who served youth missions decades ago. Establishing habits of personal evangelism is difficult for adult members brought up with little or no prior participation in these activities. Significant inertia exists in favor of perpetuating the status quo. Consistent effort over time with regular oversight is necessary to broadly implement new initiatives.

It remains to be seen whether these and other changes will be enough to reverse negative trends in increasingly competitive and shrinking religious spaces around the world. Improved preparation of converts for church activity could have had a dramatic impact on active LDS membership today had these measures been implemented broadly in the 1980s or 1990s. Such initiatives are welcome today but benefit a smaller number of converts, as receptivity to proselyting efforts has declined worldwide, and church outreach efforts face a number of additional inhibiting factors.

**Future Prospects**

While expectations for future LDS growth are subject to considerable uncertainty, various factors at work today both direct and constrain the range of likely outcomes. Although the LDS Church has grown considerably during its relatively brief existence on the world stage and has developed a presence in many new countries since the end of World War II, both institutional and larger societal factors suggest, as we have seen, that the Church is less well positioned today for extensive future growth.

Some of these factors include the following. Only about 30 percent of LDS nominal members (about 35–40 percent in the United States, 15–25 percent internationally) regularly attended church, and this figure has trended downwards over time. Many “members of record” officially claimed by the LDS Church outside of the United States do not self-identify with the faith. The increasing accumulation of inactive members on official membership rolls exerts an inhibitory “drag” on church growth. Membership growth rates have experienced progressive decline for both converts and member children. At the same time, convert growth rates have fallen markedly as the number of
baptisms per missionary has dropped. The fertility of LDS US women in the United States has continued to decline. Fewer member children become active adults, leading to proportionally fewer missionaries. All of these trends have continued in a declining mode since the 1980s. Stabilization of these trends, and even some recovery, would be necessary to provide confidence that the bottom has been reached. This has not yet occurred, and the trajectories suggest that further declines are likely. On a positive note, international data do show improving convert retention rates in many nations where more stringent preparation for baptism have been implemented.

On the policy side of this growth issue, LDS Church officials still seem to be somewhat influenced by the historical “Gathering to Zion” theme promoted until the mid-twentieth century, as evidenced by the continued skew of active membership toward the Great Basin region of the American West. Competing needs and demands between the Church’s base in the LDS cultural region and the international church appear to result in prioritizing the Church’s US membership over other areas around the world. US prioritization has made it difficult for the Church to take the steps needed to achieve greater international growth, especially outside of the Americas and Oceania. The LDS Church continues to field a large, young, full-time missionary force, yet struggles to engage lay members in personal evangelism and has not systematically involved lay youth and women in member-missionary training and outreach.

The Church has suffered from extended incapacitation of senior leaders from health-related complications of advanced age, as well as a gap of nearly two generations between the faith’s leaders and its average members. The normalization of leader non-participation in frontline outreach—in part because of the isolation of the Utah Zion and in part because of the fragile health of senior leaders—has hampered leadership efforts to gain practical insights. A layered bureaucracy assists with corporate functions that tend to perpetuate status quo policies.

Decades of exaggerated official reporting of LDS growth and success, combined with a culture of nondisclosure and secret-keeping, have fueled member complacency and have undermined awareness and remedy of critical shortcomings of an institutional missionary program that has historically been focused on making large numbers of “quick sales” rather than developing long-term adherents. Some institutional policies have raised questions regarding the faith’s moral authority and have been among the factors contributing to member disaffiliation.

Although there are prospects for future improvement, the LDS Church is substantially disadvantaged compared to several competitors. This is especially true of Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, who already have productive member missionary programs, higher convert retention, successful records of building largely indigenously sustainable and self-perpetuating international congregations, and greater responsiveness to local needs.

Following World War II, the LDS Church experienced the convergence of numerous factors favorable for growth: the US baby boom, numerous
heretofore unreached nations with newly receptive populations, improving human rights in much of the world, and later in the twentieth century, the fall of the Iron Curtain separating communist nations from the West. However, across a range of indicators, societal factors impacting church growth are considerably less favorable today than in the late twentieth century. Christianity is in sharp decline in Europe with the United States following behind, and religious nominalism is prevalent across much of Latin America. Fewer young people are attending religious services, and perceptions of Christianity are less favorable than a generation ago. These trends reflect changing societal norms as well as rising perceptions that associate traditional Christianity with hate, bigotry, and intolerance. Human rights are also now waning in large areas of the world, which include increasing restrictions on expressions of religious freedom, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, as competing political groups seek to consolidate power and control over information, trusted information sources break down, polarization worsens, and misinformation abounds.

Freedom of speech, press, religion, and conscience are basic human rights, recognized as self-evident and universal by the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined in many (but certainly not all) national constitutions. Religious freedom includes the right to freely adopt or abandon faith without prohibition or coercion; to practice one’s chosen faith (or none at all) while respecting the rights of others; to share one’s beliefs; to critique and disagree both publicly and privately; and to receive equal treatment. Other human rights are essential to personal freedom as well as providing religious faiths the opportunity to rise or fall on their merits through fair and ethical proselytism. The status of these rights around the world is important to the LDS Church’s future growth prospects. Freedom of press and freedom of speech have been integral to the spread of Mormonism. Unfortunately, press freedom in large portions of the world is waning. Reporters without Borders reported in 2019: “The number of countries regarded as safe, where journalists can work in complete security, continues to decline, while authoritarian regimes continue to tighten their grip on the media.” Prospects for improvement are dim, as human rights violators, including states which have engaged in arbitrary and extrajudicial executions, have been largely accommodated quid pro quo by Western governments.

Presently, only a few nations which allow proselytism (primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa) do not have an LDS Church presence. But prospects for missionary entry into restricted nations appear considerably dimmer than for the Church’s entry into Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Van Beek documented that the LDS Church’s “USA connection … in just a few decades has shifted from an asset to a liability” not only with regard to geopolitical rivals like China and Russia, or populous nations like India, but even for receptivity in European nations with positive relations.

Most completely unreached nations are Muslim-majority nations, where sharing of non-Islamic faiths is typically restricted not only by government
regulations, but by orthodox Islam’s death sentence prohibitions of blasphemy and apostasy. These prohibitions not only prevent the public preaching of other religious traditions but also suppress critical inquiry and restrict Muslims from leaving their faith. The United Nations Declaration on the elimination of religious discrimination was revised in November 1981 under pressure from Islamic nations to delete the right “to adopt” (or to change) religion and referred only to the right “to have” religion. Christians in Muslim countries experience systematic discrimination and persecution; converts face intimidation, harassment, and at times, violence. Indigenous Christian populations, the principal groups in these nations with prospects for Mormon proselytism, are shrinking in numbers. Christians have experienced persecution and genocide while Western governments have “look[ed] the other way” and have even treated them as “enemies.” Their plight has also been largely ignored by the US and European press. Although women make up a slight majority of LDS converts worldwide, women in many Islamic societies are “governed by a set of patriarchal beliefs and laws” regarding which “only the elite and the minority of highly educated women have the luxury of choice, of rejecting or challenging these beliefs and laws.” The plight of female dissidents and objectors in many Islamic societies has similarly been ignored by Western activists.

Outreach to Muslims is an important key to fulfilling the Great Commission, but meaningful improvement in this regard is unlikely in at least the medium term, leaving a substantial fraction of the world’s population virtually impervious to LDS proselyting.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REVITALIZATION OF GLOBAL MORMONISM

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has reformulated its mission through a growing network of thousands of schools and numerous clinics and hospitals worldwide and in carefully coordinated global outreach to underserved areas. The Jehovah’s Witness organization has found success through its intensive member missionary proselytism and has become a dominant protest movement to national faiths in a growing number of nations. Both of these religious movements, which were organized decades after the LDS Church, have substantially overtaken it in active membership. Future years will see this gap widen as LDS growth flattens while Adventists and Witnesses pull away.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints struggles to project a contemporary identity that transcends being just an “American church,” in the view of international critics, that will resonate more broadly among populations outside of North America and in a few other predominately island nations. Whether the LDS Church is able to successfully implement effective changes that could produce a more palatable international identity will greatly impact its trajectory over the remainder of the twenty-first century. The LDS Church
has already taken some meaningful steps, and more are likely needed. Not all eventualities can be anticipated, and new challenges will require further adaptations. Even optimal changes instituted very late may be less impactful than approximate adjustments instituted early.

A detailed analysis of needed changes, with a correspondingly detailed set of recommendations, is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, several broad areas of concern and potential partial solutions, based on the summary materials presented throughout this chapter, may be adduced.

First is the establishment of personal evangelism as a regular habit of gospel living for all able LDS Church members. David O. McKay’s “Every Member a Missionary” mandate has remained largely an empty slogan to this day. While much can be done to enhance engagement and improve member skills and participation in personal evangelism, the status quo is difficult to change when most members have systematically “tuned out” earlier member-missionary exhortations, and leaders themselves rarely participate. The new ministering program provides an important step in this direction, although further development is needed. Asking members as part of the temple recommend interview if they are making regular efforts to share the gospel with others, to the extent of their health, opportunity, and ability, would reflect its importance as a core scriptural obligation and could stimulate engagement in a way that empty admonitions from the pulpit have not.

Second, the Church needs competent and healthy leadership. A mandatory age of emeritus status, with retirement from official duties (which is already in place for lower-level authorities), would avoid the organizational paralysis and dysfunction which has repeatedly arisen from the age-related incapacitation of senior leaders.

Third, missionary outreach would be strengthened by abolition of non-participatory mission leadership. Missionaries, and local members and communities, have a right to be supervised by mission leaders who are regularly engaged in frontline missionary work, who have real understanding and insights into contemporary conditions, and who lead by example instead of decree. A requirement for mission and area leaders to spend a meaningful amount of their time in direct finding and teaching activities with non-Mormons, as well as in new convert retention efforts, would greatly improve the quality and responsiveness of mission leadership worldwide as well as the confidence and motivation of the people under them.

Fourth, the enshrinement of inviolable mission ethics and a focus on missionary obedience to broader gospel principles, rather than an emphasis on unquestioned obedience to the decrees of program directives, would help prevent exploitative practices which lower convert retention and degrade missionary spirituality. In turn, higher convert retention would help build stronger congregations.

Fifth, the shift in the center of gravity of nominal membership outside of the United States, with significant challenges and needs for local adaptation, would warrant permanent or regular long-term assignments of senior church leaders.
abroad as part of a comprehensive, coordinated, and strategic approach to global outreach. The assignment of two apostles to Chile and to the Philippines in 2002–2004 was a crisis response, related to low convert retention and member activity levels, that produced significant improvement in these areas. But rather than stop-gap measures, there are many similar extant needs around the world which would be better addressed proactively and which require long-term local experience to accurately appraise and develop insights to resolve. Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, with the currently highest LDS growth rates, would benefit from long-term assignment of one or even two apostles. Substantial challenges remain across Latin America, which also warrant long-term assignments of senior church leaders. With over 1.3 billion people, India would surely warrant the long-term assignment of an apostle, which would undoubtedly help remedy the current neglect of outreach and unproductive mission policies. Indonesia, with over 264 million people (twice the population of the Philippines, where the LDS Church has 23 missions), would also benefit from the assignment of senior leaders to address the pattern of stagnation and the lack of any serious growth strategy. Even Europe, where the Church is experiencing contraction, would benefit from the insights of a senior leader, who could evaluate and implement new approaches to support existing members and to promote a sustainable future for the European church.

Sixth, mechanisms of checks and balances are needed for systematic oversight and remedy of critical issues arising in both international congregations and missions. Mission presidents would also benefit from local insights obtained through an advisory council of local members and pastoral leaders, similar to the high council and auxiliary councils of LDS stakes.

Finally, although many external circumstances are beyond LDS control, much could be done to enhance the Church’s role as an admired voice for ethics and integrity. The LDS Church expanded its mission in 2008 to include care of the poor and needy. An extension of this mission to include broad-based, nonpartisan advocacy for protection of human rights worldwide, on the basis of need and severity (rather than often advocating in order to advance or protect its own corporate interests), could help raise awareness and effect real change while building the LDS Church’s moral authority in the eyes of the world.

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