CHAPTER 10

Changing Religious and Social Attitudes of Mormon Millennials in Contemporary American Society

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While the subject matter of this book is global Mormonism, it should not be forgotten that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah and is still a predominantly American church. Like other organized religions in twenty-first century America, the LDS Church faces significant institutional challenges in a society that continues to become more urbanized, ethnically diverse, more highly educated, and less religious—at least in terms of conventional denominational loyalties and orthodox obedience on the part of younger Americans to the moral and behavioral dictates of ecclesiastical authorities. In what follows we spotlight emerging generational differences in the religious orientations of “Millennial” Americans in general and those of Latter-day Saint Millennials in particular. These generational shifts of religious orientation arguably portend significant institutional adjustments and change for conservative religions like the LDS Church in the twenty-first century.

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The Ascendancy of Millennials in American Religion and Politics

As the 2010s drew to a close, Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) officially overtook Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) as America’s largest generational cohort.¹ Millennials also now constitute a strong plurality of the workforce² and will become the largest generational cohort of the voting electorate after the 2020 election.³ In their mid-twenties to late thirties at the time of this writing, Millennials are beginning to assume prominent positions of political and social power. Millennials who won in the 2018 midterm elections, for example, include Republican Senator Josh Hawley from Missouri, Democratic Congresswoman Abby Finkenauer of Iowa, and Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York. Millennials Pete Buttigieg of Indiana and Tulsi Gabbard of Hawai‘i both competed in the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination contest. And as his daughter and son-in-law, Millennials Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner are two of President Donald Trump’s closet advisors and White House staffers.

The growing ascendance of Millennials in American society coincides with one of the most significant religious trends of the last half-century, the rise of religious “Nones” who do not identify with any particular religious denomination or institution. Currently, more than a third of Millennials claim to be religious Nones; by way of comparison, only one in ten Americans over the age of 65 claim no denominational attachments.⁴ This movement away from organized religion coincides with another key shift in America’s religious and political landscape in the twenty-first century: frequency of church attendance has become one of the strongest predictors of a person’s political party affiliation and voting preferences.⁵

Within the larger context of generational changes currently underway in the United States, what may be said about generational comparisons both within the LDS Church and between its members and their religious counterparts in other denominational segments of the American religious economy? While currently comprising only 1.5 percent of America’s population,⁶ Latter-day Saints constitute an excellent case study for illuminating some of the complexities of broader national trends. Thus, for example, while in previous generations the LDS Church appears to have done a better job of retaining its members into adulthood than many other American denominations,⁷ there is mounting evidence that Mormon Millennials are bucking that trend and leaving the LDS Church at significantly higher rates than in the past.⁸ Even though the LDS Church and a majority of its members have a monolithic reputation for being deeply conservative—religiously, socially, and politically—cracks are beginning to show. Mormon Millennials who maintain their LDS membership nonetheless are distancing themselves from many of their elders’ traditional religious views and practices while, simultaneously, maintaining continuity in their conformity to other aspects of the Mormon faith tradition.⁹
With this in mind, our goals in this chapter are twofold. First, we document and describe basic patterns of generational continuity and change among American Mormons based on findings from American public opinion surveys. In what ways are Millennial Mormons similar to or different in their religious commitments compared to their parents and grandparents’ generations? Second, we document how Mormon generational differences are both similar to and different from those of other selected American comparison groups. In doing this we may ask: To what extent are Mormon generational shifts unique and to what extent are they primarily a reflection of larger patterns of social change taking place in contemporary American society?

Answering these questions is important for our understanding of twenty-first century Mormonism because Millennials are beginning to assume a plurality (soon to become a majority) of leadership positions within the lay ecclesiastical organization of the LDS Church.

The agenda of the LDS Church, including its priorities, values, and initiatives, is set jointly by its First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. As of this writing, the average age of these top officials is 76 and ranges from 61 to 95 years of age. Senior leaders of the LDS Church came of age during World War II, the postwar world of the 1950s, and the tumultuous era of the 1960s. If recent appointment trends hold, the first Millennials will be called into the governing councils of the LDS Church starting around 2040 and will continue filling top-tier leadership positions for the next several decades. By 2060, Millennials will be senior members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and occupy other upper echelon positions in the Church’s ecclesiastical organization. What might the LDS Church’s institutional priorities and policies look like when it is governed by people whose formative life experiences were not WWII and the postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s, but instead the 9/11 attacks on American soil, the election (and re-election) of President Barack Obama, the Global Economic Crisis of 2007–2008, and the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020?

We explore these questions by way of the Millennial studies offered in Paul Taylor’s 2016 book, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* and Stella Rouse and Ashley Ross’s 2018 book, *The Politics of Millennials: Political Beliefs and Policy Preferences of America’s Most Diverse Generation*. Taylor’s data show that Millennials experience distinctively lower levels of engagement and identification with religious organizations while, at the same time, they express significantly more liberal social and political views than previous generations of Americans. Rouse and Ross argue that the primary lens through which Millennials see and interpret the world is one of diversity. Most Millennials take it for granted that diversity—especially when it comes to personal identity—is a core social value that should be prioritized in politics, religion, business, and other areas of contemporary life. In our own analysis of Mormon Millennials we will focus particular attention on three related aspects of what it means to be a religious person: Belief orthodoxy (e.g., literal versus metaphorical interpretation of scripture); religious behavior (e.g.,
frequency of church attendance); and group belonging (e.g., identification with a specific tradition or denomination). In the concluding section of this chapter we will also consider Millennial Mormons’ social and political views and the extent to which their views correspond (or fail to correspond) with those of other U.S. Millennials.

**DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS**

In our analysis of Mormon Millennials we rely on two key surveys of public opinion. The first is the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey (RLS), a nationally representative telephone interview sample of more than 35,000 American adults fielded in the summer of 2014. For our purposes, this survey included 651 respondents who self-identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This Mormon sample from the RLS has a ±5.0 percent margin of error. For many of the religious and political measures we discuss in this chapter, we draw comparisons to one other religiously conservative subgroup represented in the RLS: Self-identified Evangelical Protestants, who, with 8,417 RLS respondents, give us a ±1.2 percent margin of error. Finally, for purposes of larger comparison, we also include in our analysis the entire RLS sample of all adult Americans, including those whose religious affiliations, are unspecified. This group consisted of 35,071 respondents, providing a ±0.6 percent margin of error when discussing them in our comparative analysis. Unless otherwise noted, we have employed Pew’s recommended sample weighting to ensure that survey results are as representative as possible.

While the RLS is an excellent data source in many ways, it is designed to describe Americans’ general religious orientations and thus lacks questions about beliefs and practices specific to any one particular religious group. To compensate for this, we supplement our data analysis in this chapter with findings from the Next Mormons Survey (NMS), a nationally representative online survey of U.S. Latter-day Saints that we designed and fielded in the autumn of 2016. The NMS includes survey questions designed specifically for Latter-day Saint respondents. The sample for this survey was gathered using a “panel-matching” technique that invited panel respondents within a specified set of quotas (including religious identity, age, gender, and geography). Ultimately, we obtained 1,156 completed responses from self-identified Latter-day Saints. After the survey was collected we compared our respondents’ demographic, religious, and political characteristics to Latter-day Saints surveyed in Pew’s Religious Landscape Survey and found that, in most respects, our NMS survey was satisfactorily representative of the Mormon population in the United States. We then employed a post-survey weighting procedure similar to that used by the RLS to correct for response biases associated with gender, education, and age, which resulted in a final ±3.0 percent margin of error for our national Mormon sample.

A few other things should be kept clearly in mind as we report and interpret the findings from these two surveys. First, the LDS Church defines members as
those who have been formally baptized and confirmed. By this definition, as of 2020, there were more than 6.6 million Latter-day Saints in the United States. In contrast, social scientists most often define religious membership by means of self-identification: What do survey respondents say their religious affiliation/identity is? Given that this is how most public opinion surveys define and measure religious affiliation, it is also the way that we do in this chapter. As might be expected, self-identified Latter-day Saints are a smaller and more committed population than that which the LDS Church claims as its total U.S. membership.

Second, both the RLS and NMS are cross-sectional surveys, meaning that they are snapshots of our subjects at one point in time. Prior research has shown that there has been a high degree of religious “churn” in American society over the last several decades, as more than half of Americans currently identify with a denomination or religious tradition different than the one they were raised in. Thus, self-identified Mormons in both our surveys may not have always identified as such, nor will all of them continue to do so in the future. This has important implications for how we interpret the findings from these surveys. The generational differences we report are those that were manifest at the time the surveys were conducted and we must therefore exercise caution when making predictions about the future (or explanations about the past) based on our snapshot data. For example, we document below that young Latter-day Saints who participated in the 2014 RLS reported they attended church at roughly the same frequency as their elders, which is different from the decline in generational attendance reported by other Americans. This could mean: (1) there is, in fact, no decline in church attendance among younger Latter-day Saints, or (2) there is decline but it is masked because many young people who have ceased attending have left the church altogether, and are no longer included as self-identified Mormons in our survey data.

For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on describing differences between self-identified Millennial Mormons and other LDS generational cohorts, namely: GenXers, Baby Boomers, and Silent Generation Mormons as they are classified in the RLS and NMS data. At times we use the descriptor “GenX+” to characterize members of all three older generations combined; at other times we may refer to them—in comparison to Millennials—as their “elders” or parents/grandparents’ generation. We again note that these data were collected in 2014 and 2016 and thus reflect trends present in the mid-2010s. We look forward to conducting future surveys shedding light on how Latter-day Saints’ religious and political views continue to change (or not) in the early 2020s and beyond.

**Demographic Characteristics of Mormon Millennials**

One consistent theme from research on American Millennials is their demographic diversity. As previously noted, Rouse and Ross also argue that diversity is the organizing lens through which Millennials interpret everything else in
society. Whereas approximately two-thirds of GenX+ Americans identify racially as white, only a little over half of Millennials do. According to Rouse and Ross’s demographic categories, by 2018, Hispanics (21 percent), blacks (14 percent), Asians (6 percent), and multi-racial (2 percent) made up most of the other half of America’s young adults. To what extent do these and other demographic variables displayed in Table 10.1 also describe LDS Millennials and older GenX+ Latter-day Saints?

Here and throughout the remainder of the chapter we compare Mormons to Evangelical Protestants as another prominently conservative, Christian subculture in the United States, and also to religiously undifferentiated Americans

### Table 10.1  Demographic characteristics of U.S. Mormons, Evangelicals, and other Americans per the Pew Religious Landscape Survey

|                      | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ | Evangelical Millennial | Evangelical GenX+ | U.S. Millennial | U.S. GenX+ |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------|
| **Gender**           |                             |                        |                        |                   |                |
| Male                 | 50.5                        | 43.5                   | 45.2                   | 45.7              | 51.0           | 47.7      |
| Female               | 49.5                        | 56.5                   | 54.8                   | 54.3              | 49.0           | 52.3      |
| **Race**             |                             |                        |                        |                   |                |
| White                | 83.8                        | 85.0                   | 65.0                   | 79.1              | 55.6           | 70.4      |
| Black                | 1.3                         | 0.4                    | 8.0                    | 5.5               | 13.3           | 10.8      |
| Hispanic             | 8.0                         | 8.5                    | 17.3                   | 9.6               | 20.0           | 12.7      |
| Other                | 7.0                         | 6.0                    | 9.7                    | 5.8               | 11.0           | 6.0       |
| **Education**        |                             |                        |                        |                   |                |
| High school (>24)    | 56.3                        | 64.1                   | 71.8                   | 78.8              | 66.7           | 70.8      |
| College (>24)        | 28.5                        | 22.6                   | 16.6                   | 12.7              | 20.3           | 15.5      |
| Post college (>24)   | 15.3                        | 13.3                   | 11.6                   | 8.5               | 13.0           | 13.8      |
| **Marriage and family** |                       |                        |                        |                   |                |
| Currently married/ widowed? | 47.5                     | 80.6                   | 32.6                   | 72.1              | 22.9           | 66.9      |
| Average children     | 0.9                         | 3.2                    | 0.8                    | 2.3               | 0.6            | 2.1       |
| **Immigration status** |                        |                        |                        |                   |                |
| Immigrant (born outside U.S.) | 6.8                       | 7.9                    | 11.6                   | 7.9               | 16.1           | 14.1      |
| Second-gen immigrant (either mother or father born outside of U.S.) | 14.8 | 14.7 | 25.2 | 14.0 | 32.4 | 23.1 |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category
in general. We have organized Table 10.1 to permit comparisons between these three groups, divided by generational cohorts according to the following demographic variables: gender, race, education, marriage/family size, and immigration status. By making these comparisons we can determine which generational trends in religious commitment are representative of Americans in general, which are representative of conservative Evangelicals in particular, and which, if any, are specific to Latter-day Saints.

Gender comparisons from Table 10.1 show that females outnumber males in all three comparison groups among older, GenX+ respondents, while in the LDS and U. S. Millennial samples the gender ratio is virtually even for males and females. This latter finding, however, is not the case for Evangelical Millennials, among whom females outnumber males by almost 10 percentage points. For the Pew Survey as a whole, females outnumbered males by over 5 percentage points, reminding us that women typically make up a larger, active proportion of most religious communities than do men.24

With respect to race, Table 10.1 show that Millennials are more racially diverse than older Americans in general and that this is also the case for Evangelical Protestants. This, however, is largely not the case among Latter-day Saints. Whereas we see 14-point differences in white identity between both Evangelical and U. S. Millennials and their parents/grandparents, for Latter-day Saints there are virtually no generational differences in racial identity: Both LDS Millennials and their elders in the sample are disproportionately white—84 and 85 percent respectively. Keeping in mind that our data come from American and not international surveys, this finding could be related to corresponding differences in respondents’ immigrant backgrounds. Millennial Evangelicals are 16 points more likely to identify as second-generation immigrants than their older Evangelical counterparts, and there is a 9-point generational difference for Americans in general. By contrast, there is no corresponding difference in immigrant status between younger and older Latter-day Saints in the United States. It should also be pointed out that, while LDS growth in parts of Africa, the Philippines, and Latin America has been substantial, missionary recruitment of racial minorities in the U. S. has always been considerably less successful.

Educationally, we should note that Mormon survey respondents (both Millennials and GenX+ Mormons) are more highly educated on average than their Evangelical and U. S. counterparts. This is especially true of Mormon Millennials, 43.8 percent of whom reported having either a college or post college education. By way of comparison, Evangelicals had significantly lower education levels (28.2 percent of Millennials having a college education or higher, and GenX+ Evangelicals reporting the lowest education levels of all our comparison groups, with 78.8 percent reporting a high school education and only 21.2 percent having any higher education).

Furthermore, we see that younger Latter-day Saints are much more likely to be married (or have been married) than the national average. Whereas less than a quarter of U.S. Millennials in general are married (22.9 percent), almost half
of Mormon Millennials report that they are currently married or have been married (47.5 percent). This also is significantly higher than the third of Evangelical Millennials in the sample who were married (32.6 percent).

LDS theology emphasizes procreation as a key function of marriage and, like Catholics, Mormons are well known for having larger families than most other Americans. Our data for older cohort comparisons bear this out. Older Mormon respondents reported having 3.2 children on average in comparison to older Evangelical parents (2.3 children) and U.S. GenX+ parents (2.1 children)—a Mormon difference that amounts to an extra child per married household. Among Millennials, however, the Mormon birth-rate distinction fails to hold. LDS Millennial parents are virtually on par with their counterparts when it comes to children (on average, 0.9 children for younger Mormons, 0.8 for Evangelicals, and 0.6 for U. S. Millennials). It may be, of course, that younger Latter-day Saints in this sample are planning to have more children than their non-Mormon counterparts down the road, eventually duplicating their parents’ norm. However, when we asked Millennials in the 2016 Next Mormon Survey about their ideal number of children they reported an average of 2.8 children. In contrast, for GenX+ Mormons in that same survey, we calculated their ideal to be 3.5 children. It seems, then, that LDS Millennials are indeed planning smaller families than their parents and in ways that are closer to national trends, with their projected ideal family size of 2.8 children roughly in line with a national average of 2.6.

To recap, based on RLS data, Mormon Millennials are divided equally between males and females and, educationally, they have the highest average educational level among their Evangelical and U. S. peers. At the same time, they are significantly less diversified racially than the national average, even when compared to conservative U.S. Evangelicals. Millennial Latter-day Saints seem to be as enthusiastic as previous Mormon generations about getting married at higher rates than most other groups, but they also appear to be moving much closer to national averages with regard to the number of children in marriage and ideal family size. This is notable given that the global economic recession of 2007–2008 was a major formative event in the lives of American Millennials, leading many of them to espouse a more cautious and risk-averse approach concerning economic decisions and their personal finances. Personal cost, it should be noted, is routinely cited by Americans as a decisive factor for deciding how many children to have.

**Generational Continuities and Differences with Respect to Religious Belief**

While Mormon theology includes distinctive tenets that are rejected by other Christian faiths, Latter-day Saints share fundamental notions with other Christians about God, the sanctity of scripture as an expression of God’s will, and aspirations for salvation and eternal life. These kinds of generic beliefs
allow us to make statistical comparisons between self-identified Latter-day Saints, their Evangelical counterparts, and other, religiously undifferentiated Americans who responded to the Pew RLS, as summarized in Table 10.2.

By and large, Latter-day Saint Millennials’ generic religious beliefs show more consistencies than differences when compared to older LDS generational cohorts. In some areas, they even report slightly higher degrees of orthodoxy. For example, as shown in Table 10.2, younger Latter-day Saints are only marginally less certain than their elders when it comes to their strength of belief in God: 84.1 percent of Millennial Mormons express absolute certainty in this belief, compared to 87.7 percent of their elders. Moreover, Mormon Millennials and their elders are almost equally likely (92.4 percent and 91.2 percent) to comprehend God as a person (rather than an “impersonal force”) with whom they can have a relationship. This should come as little surprise given the basic LDS doctrine of divine embodiment in which God is believed to be an exalted person “of flesh and bone.” At the same time, Millennial Mormons are almost 10 points more likely than their elders to believe that scripture should be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally (although majorities of both LDS cohort groups, in fact, agreed with metaphorical interpretations of scripture). This finding is, perhaps, reflective of the LDS Church’s 8th Article of Faith which says, in part: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” Most significantly, Mormon Millennials were also 10 points more likely than older Latter-day Saints to prefer adjusting their faith’s practices and teachings in the light of “modern circumstances.” This latter difference is also descriptive of cohort comparisons among Evangelicals and other Americans who are undifferentiated by denominational identification. In this respect, Mormon Millennials, like other young Americans, seem less dogmatic and more open to religious change than their parents or grandparents.

One area where Millennial Latter-day Saints were more orthodox than their elders in the RLS was the extent to which they agreed (67.7 percent to 57.0 percent) that “My religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life.” Surprisingly, this reverse trend of Mormon Millennials showing stronger belief in the ultimate salvation claims of their own religious faith was also true for the Evangelical and undifferentiated U. S. samples. Taken at face value, this could betoken a growing commitment to religious particularism among younger Americans. Alternatively, this finding could again mask the fact that many young people who disagree with the exclusive truth claims of their parents’ faith tradition are more likely to identify as religious “Nones” instead of Latter-day Saints, Evangelicals, or with some other religious community.

Another way we can compare LDS religious beliefs across generations is on matters of religious authority. The LDS Church promotes a complex and somewhat paradoxical understanding of individual versus institutional religious authority. On one hand, Mormons are routinely counseled to “follow the promptings of the Spirit” and seek personal and individualized revelation from God to help guide them in their day-to-day lives. On the other hand, they also are routinely reminded that their ecclesiastical leaders—from the
Table 10.2  Generic religious beliefs among Latter-day Saints, Evangelicals, and other Americans, per the Pew Religious Landscape Survey

|                             | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ | Evangelical Millennial | Evangelical GenX+ | U.S. Millennial | U.S. GenX+ |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------|
| **Theistic belief**         |                             |                        |                        |                   |                |           |
| Belief in God: absolutely certain | 84.1                        | 87.7                   | 83.9                   | 89.7              | 53.5           | 69.1      |
| Belief in God: fairly certain | 14.1                        | 9.6                    | 14.3                   | 9.0               | 22.4           | 19.4      |
| Belief in God: not too certain | 1.0                         | 2.4                    | 1.7                    | 1.0               | 8.3            | 4.5       |
| Do not believe in God       | 0.8                         | 0.3                    | 0.1                    | 0.2               | 15.8           | 7.1       |
| **Relationship with God**   |                             |                        |                        |                   |                |           |
| God is a person with whom we can have a relationship | 92.4                        | 91.2                   | 84.4                   | 85.7              | 65.1           | 70.1      |
| God is an impersonal force  | 7.6                         | 8.8                    | 15.6                   | 14.3              | 34.9           | 29.9      |
| **Scriptural interpretation** |                            |                        |                        |                   |                |           |
| Interpret holy text literally | 28.7                        | 38.1                   | 43.2                   | 64.6              | 46.4           | 32.7      |
| Interpret text metaphorically | 63.8                        | 55.7                   | 45.1                   | 28.0              | 30.3           | 29.1      |
| Interpret holy text as a human book | 7.4                         | 6.2                    | 11.7                   | 7.5               | 23.3           | 38.2      |
| **Religious tradition versus change** |                       |                        |                        |                   |                |           |
| My religious community should maintain traditional beliefs and practices | 66.3                        | 75.6                   | 52.6                   | 68.4              | 42.0           | 50.9      |
| My religious community should adjust beliefs and practices in light of modern circumstances | 29.8                        | 20.8                   | 35.9                   | 23.8              | 40.0           | 35.2      |
| My religious community should adopt modern beliefs and practices | 3.9                         | 3.6                    | 11.5                   | 7.8               | 18.0           | 13.8      |
congregational level up the organizational ranks to the prophetic pinnacle of the LDS hierarchy—are apportioned unique “priesthood keys” that entitle them to receive divine guidance and revelation on behalf of whatever group or community they preside over. It is commonly assumed that members’ own personal revelations will support and confirm the decisions of church leaders so that (theoretically) the two should never conflict. There is, however, a notable lack of cultural and doctrinal consensus on what the appropriate course of action should be when these two sources of religious authority do come into conflict.

In the Next Mormons Survey (NMS), we asked self-identified Mormon respondents to “pick a side,” as it were, to this question: “Which comes closer to your view, even if neither is 100 percent accurate? (1) Good Latter-day Saints should obey the counsel of priesthood leaders even if they don’t necessarily know or understand why. (2) Good Latter-day Saints should first seek their own personal revelation on a matter and act accordingly, even if it is in conflict with the counsel of priesthood leaders.”

As shown in Table 10.3, Millennial Mormons are split almost perfectly down the middle: 51 percent agreed with Statement 1, while 49 percent agreed with Statement 2. In contrast, GenX+ Mormons were almost 10 points more likely to defer to institutional authority over individual revelation. It is interesting to note that there is no clear agreement on this issue among either Millennial or GenX+ Latter-day Saints, indicating that the issue of individual versus institutional authority seems alive and well in contemporary Latter-day Saint communities. But the data also suggest movement toward greater reliance on

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Table 10.2 (continued)

| Exclusive salvation | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ | Evangelical Millennial | Evangelical GenX+ | U.S. Millennial | U.S. GenX+ |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------|
| My religion is one true faith leading to eternal life | 67.7 | 57.0 | 50.9 | 44.3 | 37.7 | 30.6 |
| Many Christian faiths can lead to eternal life | 3.4 | 7.3 | 10.7 | 22.2 | 7.9 | 15.3 |
| Some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life | 28.9 | 35.7 | 38.4 | 33.6 | 54.4 | 54.2 |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category.
individual authority among Mormon Millennials in comparison to their parents and grandparents.

While Millennial Latter-day Saints seem somewhat more likely to put their trust in individual over institutional authority, Table 10.3 also indicates that they are much more willing to seek counsel and advice from their local congregational leaders (bishops or branch presidents). Nearly a quarter of LDS Millennials said they seek out advice from their bishops regularly, while another half said “sometimes,” leaving only about a third who never seek their local leaders’ counsel. In contrast, only about one in ten GenX+ Latter-day Saints solicit regular counsel from their bishops and a full half (51 percent) say they never do. These findings could, of course, reflect a lifecycle pattern more than a cohort effect, with individuals feeling less need for regular pastoral guidance over time as they move through their adult lives.

To summarize our generational analysis of religious belief: In most respects, Millennial Mormons appear to be fairly close to their elders when it comes to acceptance of generic beliefs about God, scripture, exclusive truth, salvation, and respect for authority. More finely grained comparisons suggest, however, that Millennials are slightly less orthodox than GenX+ Latter-day Saints, which is also true for Americans of other faith traditions. Supplementing Pew RLS findings with our own from the NMS, we have other evidence suggesting that younger Latter-day Saints take a somewhat more individualistic approach to religious authority while, at the same time, they are more likely than their elders to regularly seek counsel and advice from local congregational leaders.

### Table 10.3 Views of authority and seeking counsel among Latter-day Saints, per the Next Mormons Survey

| Decision-making authority                                                                 | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| “Good Latter-day Saints should obey the counsel of priesthood leaders even if they don’t necessarily know or understand why.” | 50.7                       | 59.2                   |
| “Good Latter-day Saints should first seek their own personal revelation on a matter and act accordingly, even if it is in conflict with the counsel of priesthood leaders.” | 49.3                       | 40.8                   |

### Seeking counsel

| Seek counsel from Bishop: very often | 22.6 | 10.6 |
| Seek counsel from Bishop: sometimes | 46.7 | 38.3 |
| Seek counsel from Bishop: hardly ever/never | 30.7 | 51.1 |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category
generational continuities and differences with respect to religious behavior

In religious communities, people’s behavior is normatively shaped to a greater or lesser degree by their shared beliefs. To be religious is not only a matter of professed belief but also of religiously mandated conduct. Latter-day Saints are frequently identified (and even praised) as being among the most religious people in the United States. In 2014 the Pew RLS reported that more than three-quarters (77 percent) of Mormon respondents claimed to attend religious services at least once a week, a higher level than for all major denominations in the United States, and second only to Jehovah’s Witnesses. The RLS also found that Utah (which, per the RLS, is 55 percent Mormon) is one of only three U.S. states in which more than half of adults report attending religious services weekly. Utah also routinely leads the nation in terms of per capita charitable giving and volunteer service hours. A key question for us, then, is whether Millennial Mormons are showing any signs of slowing down when it comes to standard measures of religious behavior such as church attendance, personal prayer, and scripture reading.

As shown in Table 10.4, at over 75 percent, Mormon Millennials are virtually on par with their elders’ high rate of church attendance. There is also very little generational difference in church attendance among Evangelicals (whose overall church attendance, however, is almost 20 points lower than it is for Mormons). It is among the religiously undifferentiated respondents that we see the most striking comparison results: Neither U.S. GenX+ nor U.S. Millennials are regular church attenders—especially not Millennials, whose weekly church attendance rate is only 27.2 percent (12 points lower than their elders’ 39.2 percent).

We should note, though, that our own NMS study offers a more nuanced view. While the NMS showed attendance rates similar to those reported by RLS for Mormons claiming attending church “at least weekly,” when asked if they had attended church in the last month, only 47 percent of Millennials said yes, compared to 57 percent for GenX and 69 percent for older Latter-day Saints. This follow-up finding suggests there may be some degree of inflation in Millennial Mormons reporting on the frequency of their church attendance.

A more nuanced view of Mormon Millennials’ behavioral religiosity also comes from the NMS in which respondents described themselves as being “active” members or not. In Mormon parlance, those who attend church regularly and fulfill volunteer ministry assignments are categorized as “active,” whereas those who attend less frequently and/or don’t accept church callings are considered “less active” or even “inactive.” The NMS asked respondents whether they considered themselves to be “very active,” “somewhat active,” “not too active,” or “not at all active.” When viewed alongside the self-reported frequency of their church attendance, Millennial Latter-day Saints were somewhat less strict in their definition of “active.” Among those who self-described as “very active,” two-thirds (67 percent) said they attended church weekly,
Table 10.4  Selected religious behaviors among Latter-day Saints, Evangelicals, and other Americans, per the Pew Religious Landscape Survey

|                                | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ | Evangelical Millennial | Evangelical GenX+ | U.S. Millennial | U.S. GenX+ |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------|
| *Church attendance*            |                            |                        |                        |                  |                |           |
| Attend weekly or more          | 75.7                       | 77.2                   | 56.4                   | 58.4             | 27.2           | 39.2      |
| Attend a few times monthly/yearly | 18.8                      | 12.0                   | 33.1                   | 29.1             | 37.2           | 32.2      |
| Attend seldom/never            | 5.6                        | 10.8                   | 10.5                   | 12.5             | 35.7           | 28.7      |
| *Prayer, scriptures & spirituality* |                        |                        |                        |                  |                |           |
| Pray daily or more             | 83.5                       | 85.7                   | 73.3                   | 80.8             | 42.4           | 60.6      |
| Read scripture weekly or more  | 75.1                       | 78.1                   | 56.6                   | 64.8             | 27.2           | 38.7      |
| Feel deep sense of spiritual peace/well-being | 80.3                      | 82.7                   | 69.8                   | 76.8             | 51.8           | 62.3      |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category

with another 13 percent saying they attended once or twice a month. Among older Latter-day Saints who considered themselves to be “very active,” three-quarters (75 percent) said they attended weekly, compared to just 5 percent who attend once or twice a month. This suggests that younger Mormons may be modestly expanding what they consider to be acceptable attendance norms for members in good standing; thus they are a little more likely than their elders to consider themselves active church members, even if they do not attend church as frequently.

When it comes to other religious behaviors, the RLS shows more continuity than change between younger and older Latter-day Saints (which is not as strongly the case among Evangelicals or other Americans as a whole). Thus, we see in Table 10.4 that frequency of personal prayer, reading scripture outside of religious services, and experiencing a general sense of spiritual peace or well-being are just as common among Millennial Mormons as among older Latter-day Saints. As already mentioned, there may be some degree of over-reporting on these items among Mormon Millennials. Generally speaking, though, the
trend is clear: Much like their elders, Mormon Millennials continue to project themselves as strong on a variety of religious behavioral indicators.

NMS data presented in Table 10.5 allows us to take a deeper dive into differences between younger and older Latter-day Saints with respect to a set of specifically Mormon behavioral norms. These data suggest that, in just a few areas, Millennials are more orthoprax than their LDS parents or grandparents. Thus, for example, they are about 13 points more likely to wear formal church clothes all day on Sunday and 20 points more likely to have served a full-time LDS mission. On most orthodoxy indicators in Table 10.5, however, Millennials are somewhat less religiously observant than their elders. With regard to pornography, for example, 18.5 percent of Millennials (admittedly a small minority) reported that they recently had viewed pornography. In general, Mormon Millennials were more likely to have more permissive views than older Mormons on abortion, sex reassignment surgery, premarital sex, and (married) homosexual sex, all of which are strongly discouraged or officially forbidden by the LDS Church. Millennials were also 14 points less likely to have recently watched “General Conference” and 8 points less likely to have a temple recommend. Furthermore, Millennials were more likely to recently have consumed non-herbal tea, alcohol, and caffeinated coffee as well.

| Table 10.5 LDS religious behaviors among millennial and older Mormons, per the Next Mormons Survey |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Latter-day Saint Millennial**               | **Latter-day Saint GenX+**                     |
| **Religious behaviors that are encouraged in the LDS community** | **Religious behaviors that are discouraged and/or prohibited in the LDS community** |
| Viewed general conference in the last 6 months | Agree that abortion is morally acceptable     |
| Served a proselyting mission                  | Agree that premarital heterosexual sex is morally acceptable |
| Possesses a current temple recommend          | Agree that marital homosexual sex is morally acceptable |
| Regularly tithe 10 percent (net or gross) of income | Agree that sex reassignment surgery is morally acceptable |
| Stay in formal church clothes all day on Sundays | Viewed an “R-rated” movie in the last 6 months |
| **Religious behaviors that are discouraged and/or prohibited in the LDS community** | **Consumed non-herbal tea in the last 6 months** |
| Agree that abortion is morally acceptable     | 20.7                                          |
| Agree that premarital heterosexual sex is morally acceptable | 27.4                                          |
| Agree that marital homosexual sex is morally acceptable | 33.7                                          |
| Agree that sex reassignment surgery is morally acceptable | 19.5                                          |
| Viewed an “R-rated” movie in the last 6 months | 41.9                                          |
| Viewed “explicit pornography” in the last 6 months | 18.5                                          |
| Consumed non-herbal tea in the last 6 months | 26.8                                          |
| Consumed alcohol in the last 6 months         | 28.9                                          |
| Consumed coffee in the last 6 months          | 39.3                                          |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category
Comparing the findings in Table 10.4 with those in Table 10.5, a fair summary might be that Millennial Mormons are generally similar to their elders when it comes to common religious behaviors like church attendance, prayer, scripture reading, etc. But, at the same time, they are somewhat less rigorous when it comes to specific Latter-day Saint behavioral norms. In other words, there is some evidence that a non-trivial proportion of Mormon Millennials may be attempting to renegotiate what it means to be an “active” Latter-day Saint in good standing in their church.

RELIGIOUS BELONGING AND MORMON IDENTITY

Many American Millennials are disproportionately becoming religious “Nones” (claiming no religious affiliation) or “Dones” (withdrawing their participation from organized religion altogether). Much also has been written about the increase among Millennials who claim to be “spiritual but not religious,” providing some evidence that “Nones” are not necessarily irreligious, but rather eschew traditional denominational identification in favor of more personalized and individual approaches to spirituality. To what extent is this true for contemporary American Mormons? How do members understand their identification with the LDS Church and their own personal spirituality? And, especially, how do these understandings vary between Millennials and older church members? To shed light on these questions, in Table 10.6 we summarize respondents’ answers to several LDS identity indicators obtained from the Next Mormons Survey.

Our NMS findings support the conclusion that there is solid, generational consistency among American Mormons with regard to a shared, Latter-day Saint identity. As shown in Table 10.6, Mormon Millennials were about equally likely, with older church members, to agree with religious identity statements such as: “When I talk about Mormons, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’”

| Identity statements                                      | Latter-day Saint Millennial (%) | Latter-day Saint GenX+ (%) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| “When I talk about Mormons, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’” | 82.9                            | 82.4                        |
| “Being a Mormon is an essential part of who I am.”       | 80.0                            | 81.8                        |
| “I’m similar to other Mormons in many ways.”             | 75.8                            | 79.0                        |
| “If a Mormon were elected president, I would feel proud.” | 82.6                            | 84.4                        |
| “When someone criticizes Mormons, it feels like a personal insult.” | 77.8                            | 72.1                        |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category.
(82.9 and 82.4 percent respectively): “Being a Mormon is an essential part of who I am” (80.1 and 81.8 percent respectively); and, “I’m similar to other Mormons in many ways” (75.8 and 79.0 percent respectively). These statistics indicate that Millennials are almost as strongly committed to an LDS identity as are older Mormons in the United States. We must, of course, again remind readers that survey results showing robust solidarity between generations could, in part, be an artifact of disillusioned or inactive members failing to self-identify as church members to survey researchers. To qualify our conclusion, we can say this much: Among those who did self-identify as LDS, the great majority of our respondents, both younger and older, see their religious identities as Latter-day Saints as core and central to their personal identities.

We can also assess important aspects of Latter-day Saints’ shared sense of religious belonging by how widely or narrowly church members draw the boundaries of what it means to be a “good Mormon.” To measure this we asked NMS respondents to consider a variety of Mormon behavior and belief norms and indicate whether they thought they were “essential, important but not essential, not too important, or not at all important” for being a good Mormon. Table 10.7 displays the percentage of both Millennial and GenX+ Latter-day Saints who said “essential” for each item on the list.

In some respects, Millennial Latter-day Saints differed little from their older counterparts in how they think about their community’s moral boundaries. They were about equally likely to say that good Latter-day Saints should work to help the poor and the needy (59.7 percent vs. 61.0 percent), hold regular Family Home Evenings (51.7 percent vs. 47.4 percent), and avoid R-rated movies (29.0 percent vs. 27.7 percent). At the same time, we see that Millennials

| Essential beliefs/practices                                      | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Believing that Joseph Smith actually saw God the Father and Jesus Christ | 56.5                       | 68.2                    |
| Not drinking coffee and tea                                     | 31.2                       | 40.9                    |
| Working to help the poor and needy                             | 59.7                       | 61.0                    |
| Having regular family home evenings or family nights            | 51.7                       | 47.4                    |
| Not watching R-rated movies                                    | 29.0                       | 27.7                    |
| Believing that Jesus Christ is the Savior                       | 76.3                       | 89.6                    |
| Obeying the counsel of the LDS prophet and other general authorities | 58.8                       | 65.2                    |
| Attending church regularly                                     | 54.0                       | 63.9                    |
| Believing that the LDS Church is the only true church           | 48.7                       | 61.6                    |
| Not drinking alcoholic beverages                                | 45.0                       | 63.2                    |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category
were a little less likely to say that obeying the LDS prophet and General Authorities (58.8 percent vs. 65.2 percent) or attending church regularly (54.0 percent vs. 63.9 percent) are “essential.” The largest differences we observe in Table 10.7, however, have to do with specific doctrinal beliefs and obedience to the “Word of Wisdom” (Mormonism’s dietary law). Only a little over half (56.5 percent) of Millennials agreed that believing Joseph Smith literally saw God the Father and Jesus Christ in his First Vision is essential to being a good Mormon, compared to 68.2 percent of GenX+ respondents. Similarly, three-quarters (76.3 percent) of Millennials agreed that belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior of humanity, compared to nine in ten (89.6 percent) of older respondents. Less than half of Millennials (48.7 percent) said it was essential for good Mormons to believe that their faith is the only true faith, compared to 61.6 percent of GenX+ (which is an interesting contrast to evidence presented earlier from the RLS that younger Mormons were a little more likely than their elders to believe this). When it comes to the LDS Word of Wisdom, Millennials were less likely than older Mormons to say that abstaining from coffee and tea (31.2 percent to 40.9 percent) or alcohol (45.0 percent to 63.2 percent) were essential to being a good Latter-day Saint.

Thus, while Millennial Mormons appear to be committed to their religious identity at rates similar to those of their elders, they also tend to be more tolerant of those who do not adhere to orthodox standards of church belief and practice—broadening the boundaries of what it means to be a “good Latter-day Saint” to include those who may violate normative standards like the Word of Wisdom. These latter findings aligns well with other research showing that Millennials tend to be more tolerant of difference and open to diversity in society. Similarly, Mormon Millennials seem to be more willing than older Latter-day Saints to express tolerance for greater diversity in thought and practice within the Mormon community.

**Mormon Political and Social Values**

By some measures, Mormons are among the most consistently conservative religious groups in American society when it comes to politics, and so we should expect Latter-day Saints—both young and old—to be more conservative on average than their generational cohort counterparts in the larger society. At the same time, numerous studies of contemporary American political preferences show that Millennials are consistently more likely than GenX+ Americans to identify as Democrats or liberals and to support progressive political policies—especially when it comes to social diversity, immigration, and same-sex marriage. For our purposes, the most important question to ask is not whether Mormons are politically or socially more conservative than other groups. Rather, we want to focus on the extent to which Mormon generational differences politically and socially are the same or different compared to generational differences among Evangelicals and other Americans. Thus, the last four columns of Table 10.8 (which display the political views of Evangelical
Table 10.8  Social and political preferences among Latter-day Saints, Evangelicals, and other Americans, per the Pew Religious Landscape Survey

| Views on political and social issues | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ | Evangelical Millennial | Evangelical GenX+ | U.S. Millennial | U.S. GenX+ |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|----------------|------------|
| Prefer bigger government with more services over smaller government and fewer services | 28.7 | 19.3 | 43.1 | 28.8 | 53.5 | 41.4 |
| Agree that stricter environmental laws are worth the cost | 51.5 | 41.2 | 57.5 | 45.8 | 66.2 | 57.8 |
| Agree that government aid to the poor does more good than harm | 32.4 | 32.5 | 46.9 | 38.6 | 57 | 51.2 |
| Agree that abortion should be legal in most/all cases | 28 | 27.3 | 33.5 | 34.3 | 57 | 55 |
| Agree that a growing population of immigrants has changed American society for the better | 31.4 | 23.9 | 30 | 14.8 | 38.5 | 24.5 |
| Agree that more women in the workforce has changed American society for better | 62.3 | 48.7 | 73.4 | 57.4 | 77.6 | 67.2 |
| Same-sex marriage should be legal in the U.S. | 26.6 | 27.6 | 57.9 | 25.3 | 72.7 | 51.8 |
| Identify as a Democrat | 15.6 | 20.4 | 30.2 | 27.7 | 46.6 | 43.8 |

(continued)
and generic Americans) provide a “baseline” for comparing generational political and social differences among Latter-day Saints.

For some of the political and social opinions itemized in Table 10.8, generational differences among LDS respondents are not terribly unique when compared to the Evangelical and generic U. S. Samples. Thus, generational differences were roughly the same for all three comparison groups on the following items: Millennials were more likely to support bigger government, stricter environmental laws, and women in the work force. (There were virtually no generational differences with respect to the issue of abortion; modest majorities of both Millennial and GenX+ generic Americans supported a woman’s legal right to abortion in all or most cases, whereas only statistical minorities of Millennials and GenX+ respondents in both the LDS and Evangelical samples expressed approval). Similarly, generational differences with respect to political party preferences were also relatively small within comparison groups (Mormons and Evangelicals, regardless of generation, were most likely to self-identify as Republicans and, regardless of generation, generic Americans were more likely to self-identify as Democrats).

There were, however, some clear differences in generational change among Mormons compared to either Evangelicals or Americans as a whole. For example, Latter-day Saints of all generations were closer in their views on immigration than either of their Evangelical and generic American counterparts. Older, GenX+ Latter-day Saints were only 7 points less likely than LDS Millennials to agree that a growing population of immigrants has changed America for the better, whereas the generational differences among Evangelicals and generic Americans on this item were 15 and 14 points respectively. Similarly, there are no discernable generational differences among Latter-day Saints when it comes to attitudes toward government aid to the poor, whereas younger Evangelicals

### Table 10.8 (continued)

|                  | Latter-day Saint Millennial | Latter-day Saint GenX+ | Evangelical Millennial | Evangelical GenX+ | U. S. Millennial | U. S. GenX+ |
|------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Identify as Independent | 9.8                         | 10.9                   | 18.7                  | 14.9              | 21.0            | 16.9        |
| Identify as Republican | 74.6                        | 68.7                   | 51.2                  | 57.4              | 32.3            | 39.3        |
| Political ideology |                             |                        |                       |                   |                 |             |
| Identify as liberal | 10.7                        | 8.8                    | 17.9                  | 12.4              | 32.4            | 23.6        |
| Identify as moderate | 31.2                        | 26.2                   | 37.1                  | 26.1              | 39.2            | 34.0        |
| Identify as conservative | 58.1                       | 65.1                   | 45.1                  | 61.5              | 28.3            | 42.3        |

Note: Figures shown as percentages of column totals in each row category
and Americans are slightly more supportive of this aid than their older counterparts. Finally, the great majority of Millennial Mormons refrained from adopting a liberal political label, identifying instead as conservative to a greater degree than either their Evangelical or generic American counterparts.

Perhaps the most telling comparative difference in Table 10.8, however, concerns respondents’ views on same-sex marriage. While there are major differences between Millennial and GenX+ attitudes among Evangelicals (Millenials were in greater support by 33 points) and generic Americans (Millenials were in greater support by 21 points), attitudes among Millennial Mormons are virtually identical to those of their GenX+ counterparts: Only 26.6 percent of Mormon Millennials supported legalizing same-sex marriage—a mere 1-point difference when compared to the 27.6 percent support of GenX+ Mormons. Mormons across generations appear unified in their opposition to same-sex marriage, whereas we see wide generational differences among other Americans and even among Evangelical Protestants.

We should note, though, that the RLS was conducted in 2014, one year before the Supreme Court made same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states. Given the rapid change in American attitudes on this issue, we suspect Latter-day Saints attitudes are also changing, which is indeed what other recent data suggests. Even though Latter-day Saint support for same-sex marriage is consistently lower than national averages (not surprising given the strong opposition to same-sex marriage legalization by LDS Church leaders), a 2017 survey by the Public Religious Research Institute showed Mormon support for same-sex marriage in the United States had reached 40 percent. Especially notable in this survey was that Mormon Millennials supported same-sex marriage by a margin of 52 percent. Whereas Mormon Millennials in 2014 were in lock-step with GenX+ members in opposition to same-sex marriage, by 2017 they had nearly doubled their support from 27 percent to 52 percent (older Mormons in the survey were changing their views too, only more slowly).

**Summary and a Look to the Future**

We end by returning to the generalizations about contemporary American young adults that we summarized at the outset of this chapter. Previous research on Millennials has confirmed several key themes that characterize this generation. Broadly speaking, Millennials in the United States are less religious, more politically liberal, and more likely to interpret the world through a diversity lens than older Americans.

In many ways, Mormon Millennials are out of alignment with these demographic trends. Compared to their Evangelical counterparts and younger Americans in general, we see more generational continuity than change among Latter-day Saints. By and large, self-identified Mormon Millennials continue to be as religiously “active” as their elders (though there is evidence that some are beginning to define “activity” more generously to include reduced levels of church attendance). They pray, read their scriptures, and feel deep spiritual
peace at roughly the same rates as older Mormons. They also are impressively
observant compared to other young Americans and even to young Evangelicals.
That said, Millennial Latter-day Saints are more open to change in their reli-
gious community than their elders and more likely to say that the Church
should adjust its beliefs and practices in light of modern circumstances. Most
love being Mormon and take great pride in their religious identity. While hav-
ing a somewhat more individualistic orientation in their views of religious
authority than their elders, they also are much more likely to have regular inter-
action with local congregational leaders and seek their guidance and counsel.
Both the RLS and NMS show that, while rapid secularization and an upsurge
in religious “Nones” may increasingly characterize American society, self-
identified Millennial Mormons are generally happy with their religious com-
unity and take great pride in being part of it.

In terms of politics and social attitudes, we might characterize Millennial
Latter-day Saints as somewhat more liberal and progressive than their elders
but, from an objective standpoint, they are still considerably more conservative
than their Millennial counterparts in American society. Where we see change in
more progressive directions, it is often at rates similar to those reported for
both Evangelical Millennials and younger Americans more broadly. This, of
course, indicates, that Mormons are subject to the same shaping pressures for
generational change as other groups in contemporary society. As we have
pointed out, one issue in particular for gauging generational change concerns
attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

Triangulating from a variety of public opinion surveys, it appears that, prior
to 2015, Mormon Millennials were closely aligned with GenX+ Mormons in
opposing same-sex marriage (with support from either age cohort never
exceeding 30 percent). After 2015, however, the data tell a story of rapid
acceptance of same-sex marriage among many Latter-day Saints, even doubling
support among Millennials, despite opposition from the LDS hierarchy. Given
the strong tendency of Latter-day Saints to “follow counsel” and especially to
obey the General Authorities when they publicly take united stands on an
issue,\footnote{46} the noncompliant attitude of many Millennial Mormons on this issue is
noteworthy indeed.

When it comes to diversity—the keynote theme in describing American
Millennials—LDS Millennials are notably not more racially/ethnically diverse
than their GenX+ elders. They, in fact, continue in the United States to be part
of a predominantly white church in which 86 percent of both Millennials and
GenX+ members identify as white. By contrast, in the 2014 RLS data set, a
little over two-thirds of Americans as a whole identified as white, but among
Millennials the proportion of white respondents dropped to little more than
half. In other words, there is a substantial racial gap in the United States
between Mormon Millennials and their non-LDS peers. The findings of our
2016 NMS are also consistent with this picture: Mormon Millennials in the
NMS were slightly more racially diverse than their elders, but not nearly as
diverse as their counterpart Millennials outside the LDS Church.
At the same time, one consistent data theme from the NMS was that LDS Millennials are somewhat more generous and tolerant in how they define what it means to be “a good Mormon.” Broadening their religious “in-group” circle to include those less orthodox and scrupulously observant than LDS leaders advocate, may be one small way in which they express their age cohort’s positive valuation of diversity. Millennial Mormons are more willing than their elders to say that drinking alcohol, coffee, and tea is not “essential” to judging a person’s good standing in the religious community. And they are less likely to say that belief in key doctrinal claims, such as Joseph Smith’s First Vision or the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ, is essential to being considered a good Mormon. In these ways, Mormon Millennials appear to be moving the needle in the direction of greater diversity of contemporary thought and practice in the LDS Church.

Returning to one of our original questions: What might the values and priorities of the LDS Church be once Millennials move into the Church’s highest governing councils, starting around 2040 and through the 2060s? While we can only speculate, the trends identified in our research suggest more continuity than change. LDS religious culture will likely continue emphasizing high levels of religious engagement and church activity for lay members. It will likely continue emphasizing evangelism and missionary work and focusing on LDS-specific teachings regarding priesthood authority, temples, and modern-day prophets. But unless there is a substantial shift in demographic trends, the LDS Church in the United States will also continue functioning as a predominantly white church in a society that is rapidly diversifying racially and ethnically—a society that by some estimates will become a “majority-minority” country by 2045.47

Perhaps the most interesting unknowns regarding future trends in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints revolve around questions concerning the continuity of LDS orthodoxy and orthopraxy. American Mormons are known for relatively high levels of religious conformity in both belief and practice—a reputation supported by much of the survey data we have presented in this chapter. While current Millennial Mormons still rate relatively high on various orthodoxy measures, we also have seen here that they are more tolerant of religious diversity within larger boundaries of what it means to be “a good Mormon.” They also have a higher incidence of leaving the Church than previous generations. Among those who remain—as they increasingly assume prominent and influential leadership positions in coming decades—we might anticipate growing institutional efforts to “widen the tent” of Latter-day Saint identity. Perhaps, for example, LDS dietary restrictions might be reclassified as “recommendations” rather than virtual commandments; it’s also possible to plausibly imagine greater official tolerance for diversity of independent thought and speech in religious settings. Time will tell in this regard when eventually the LDS Church is governed by leaders whose generation expressed greater support than the opposition for legalizing same-sex marriage.
This assumes that in coming decades Millennials who are invited into the LDS Church’s highest governing councils will continue to hail primarily from the United States. However, there are currently more Latter-day Saints living outside the United States than within. Perhaps as the Church’s center of gravity continues to shift toward Latin America, Africa, and Asia, more leaders will be called from those areas who are often more orthodox and theologically conservative than their European and American counterparts. In that case, we could actually see a reverse trend: a global church that becomes more racially and ethnically diverse but even more narrow in how it defines its membership boundaries and behavioral expectations.

**Notes**

1. Richard Fry, “Millennials Expected to Outnumber Boomers in 2019,” Pew Research Center (blog), March 1, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/.
2. Richard Fry, “Millennials Are Largest Generation in the U.S. Labor Force,” Pew Research Center (blog), April 11, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/.
3. Anthony Cilluffo and Richard Fry, “An Early Look at the 2020 Electorate,” Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project (blog), January 30, 2019, https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/an-early-look-at-the-2020-electorate/.
4. Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study,” 2014 Religious Landscape Survey (blog), 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.
5. Luis Lugo, “Religion & Public Life: A Faith-Based Partisan Divide” (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2005), https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2005/01/religion-and-politics-report.pdf.
6. Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study,” 2014 Religious Landscape Survey: Gender Composition (blog), 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/religion-landscape-study/.
7. Pew Research Center, “Religious Switching: Change in America’s Religion Landscape,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (blog), May 12, 2015, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-2-religious-switching-and-interrmarriage/.
8. Jana Riess, The Next Latter-day Saints: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5–6.
9. Riess, The Next Mormons.
10. Paul Taylor, The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown, Reprint edition (PublicAffairs, 2016).
11. Stella M. Rouse and Ashley D. Ross, The Politics of Millennials: Political Beliefs and Policy Preferences of America’s Most Diverse Generation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
12. Corwin Smidt, Lyman Kellstedt, and James L. Guth, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics, 1st edition (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), chap. 1.
13. Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study,” 2015.
14. In other words, there is a 95 percent chance that the actual value in the population of adult Latter-day Saints is within 5 percent above or below of the indicated statistics, but the margin of error increases when looking at subsamples (example: Millennials vs. those older than Millennials). Thus, we recommend that readers interpret the results presented here with this in mind.

15. This is necessary because individuals often do not participate in public opinion surveys in the same degree to which those similar to them are represented in the wider population. The statistical weighting procedure artificially inflates or deflates responses from individuals in the proportion to which their demographic groups are under- or over-represented in the survey sample, respectively.

16. Benjamin R. Knoll and Jana Riess, “The 2016 Next Mormons Survey,” in The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church (Oxford University Press, USA, 2019), 237–248.

17. More specifically, with an online “panel-matching” procedure, surveyors specify criteria for responses which the survey firm then uses to recruit responses until those criteria have been satisfied. For example, a surveyor might specify that half of the sample must come from the western portion of a particular region and the other half must come from the eastern portion. The survey firm would then recruit respondents until 50 percent of the total sample self-identified as being from the west and the other half from the east. When employed using relevant criteria and in combination with other procedures (such as the post-stratification weighting approach described here), this allows surveyors to correct for the non-randomized nature of the online sampling procedure to ensure a representative sample of a given population.

18. For more information about the Next Latter-day Saints Survey, see www.thenextmormons.org.

19. This number includes some young children who have been blessed as babies but not yet baptized. If they reach the age of nine and have not yet been formally baptized, their names are dropped from the rolls of the Church. Mormon Social Science Association, “What are ‘Children of Record’ and Are They Included in the Total Membership of the LDS?” MSSA website, May 22, 2008, https://www.mormonsocialscience.org/2008/05/22/q-what-are-children-of-record-and-are-they-included-in-the-total-membership-of-the-lds/.

20. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Facts and Statistics,” https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/country/united-states.

21. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), chap. 6.

22. Rouse and Ross, The Politics of Millennials, chap. 1.

23. William H. Frey, “The Millennial Generation: A Demographic Bridge to America’s Diverse Future,” Brookings (blog), January 24, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/research/millennials/.

24. Pew Research Center, “The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (blog), March 22, 2016, https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/.

25. Numerical mean and standard deviation reported.
26. Frank Newport and Joy Wilke, “Desire for Children Still Norm in U.S.,” Gallup.com, September 25, 2013, https://news.gallup.com/poll/164618/desire-children-norm.aspx.
27. Newport and Wilke.
28. Newport and Wilke.
29. Terryl L. Givens, Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), chaps. 8, 11.
30. We qualify this, though, with findings from the NMS that Millennials are about 10 percent less likely than those in the Boomer/Silent generation believe that scriptures should be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally.
31. Terryl L. Givens, People of Paradox: A History Of Mormon Culture, Reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Usa, 2012), chap. 1.
32. Pew Research Center, “Attendance at Religious Services – Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (blog), 2014, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.
33. Karsten Strauss, “The Most and Least Charitable States in the U.S. In 2017,” Forbes, December 4, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/karsten-strauss/2017/12/04/the-most-and-least-charitable-states-in-the-u-s-in-2017/.
34. Riess, The Next Mormons, 155.
35. It should be noted that this is an informal standard that is unevenly emphasized in Mormon communities.
36. Young Latter-day Saint men are strongly encouraged to serve a two-year proselyting mission (or equivalent) as part of their “priesthood duty,” while young Latter-day Saint women are enthusiastically invited to serve an 18-month proselyting mission but without the same degree of obligation as are men.
37. General Conference is a semi-annual gathering of LDS Church members to hear discourses by Church General Authorities.
38. This is a certificate from an ecclesiastical leader attesting to the individual’s orthodoxy and orthopraxy so as to gain entrance to temples which are separate buildings from standard local congregational meeting houses that Latter-day Saints refer to simply as “churches” or “church buildings."
39. These are all forbidden by the Mormon dietary code known as the “Word of Wisdom,” along with tobacco and illicit drugs.
40. Taylor, The Next America, chap. 10.
41. Taylor, The Next America.
42. Rouse and Ross, The Politics of Millennials.
43. David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
44. Taylor, The Next America.
45. Alex Vandermaas-Peeler et al., “Emerging Consensus on LGBT Issues: Findings From the 2017 American Values Atlas,” May 1, 2018, https://www.prri.org/research/emerging-consensus-on-lgbt-issues-findings-from-the-2017-american-values-atlas/.
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