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Latter-day Saint Expansion

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The End of Growth? Fading Prospects for Latter-day Saint Expansion

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Abstract. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints faces diminished prospects for growth in the twenty-first century due to both institutional and societal factors. Growth rates in congregations and active membership averaged below one percent annually from 2009–2019.

Fertility, retention of member children, and new conversions have experienced ongoing declines. Institutional decisions that were once adaptive have become liabilities hindering growth and internationalization. The dichotomy between the Mormon "homeland" and the "mission field" has fueled asymmetric information, misaligned incentives, principal-agent problems, and a culture of nonparticipation in personal evangelism by leaders and members. Reforms have sent mixed messages without resolving underlying pathologies.

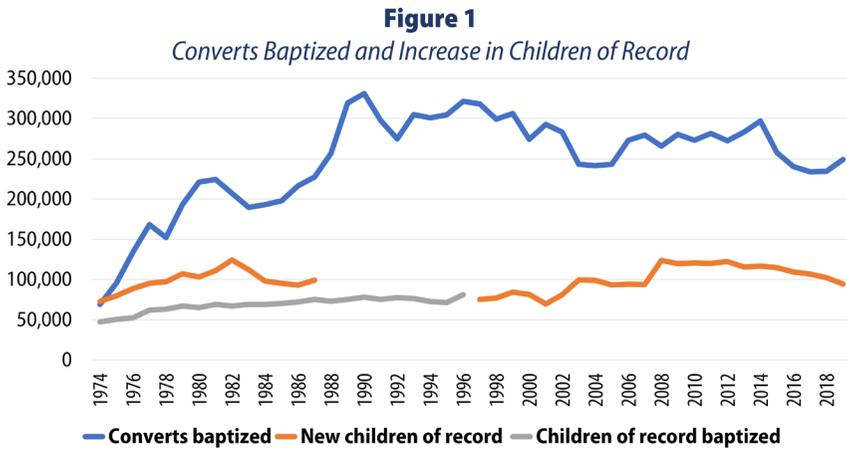
Societal conditions are decidedly less favorable for LDS growth than in the late twentieth century. The human rights situation has deteriorated worldwide, Christianity is experiencing proportional decline in most world regions, and prospects for mission outreach in unreached nations are dim.

Medium-term growth in active LDS membership and congregations is likely to average below one percent annually. Over longer periods, losses may occur. The faith experiences its brightest prospects in Africa, where it is likely to achieve active growth. The LDS Church has lost its competitive advantages and is likely to continue to underperform its major competitors.

"New World Faith" No More

In 1984, Sociologist Rodney Stark predicted 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 Islam (Stark 1984). Projecting approximately 4% forward annual LDS membership growth, Stark concluded that the LDS Church's path to becoming a major world religion was

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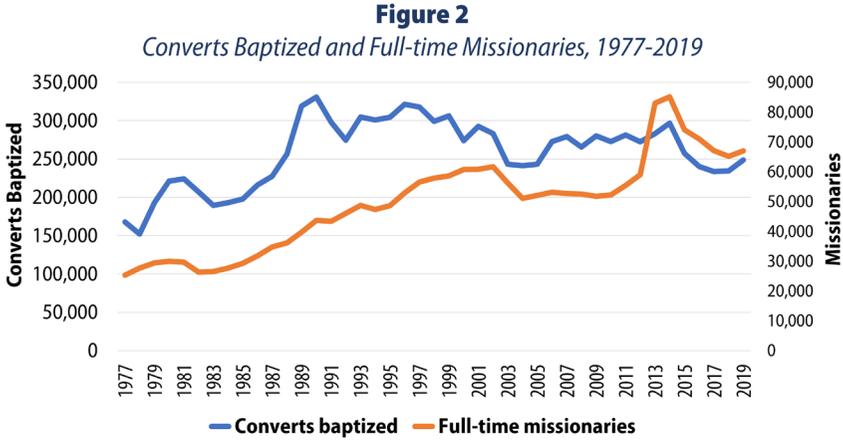


all but inevitable: “In historical terms, [Mormons] must lose their conversion capacities very quickly if they are *not* to become a major world faith.” In 1996, he noted that growth over the prior fifteen years had exceeded his “highest projection by almost a million members” (Stark 1996, 177). That same year, another study projected that by 2020, there would be between 36.4 and 121 million LDS members worldwide, while acknowledging uncertainty (Bennion and Young 1996).

Since that time, LDS membership growth has decelerated rapidly. In recent years, the LDS Church has been adding fewer members than it was thirty years ago through both convert baptisms and children of record (Figure 1). In 2017, LDS growth rates declined to their lowest levels since 1937, and convert baptisms fell to a thirty-year low.¹ Growth receded further in 2018. Year-end 2019 LDS membership was reported as 16.5 million, less than half of Bennion and Young’s lower estimate. The LDS Church reported 16,663,663 members at year-end 2020, marking the lowest annual percentage increase since 1857 and reflecting reduced proselytizing during the coronavirus pandemic.

The decline in absolute growth has occurred faster than any increases from larger membership or institutional adaptations. The fertility rate among North American Latter-day Saints has dropped sharply. Annual increase in children of record born to member parents has declined from 20.6 to 24.1

¹ Annual statistical reports are presented at the April session of LDS general conference and published in the *May Ensign* magazine of each year online at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/magazines/ensign>



per 1,000 LDS members in the 1970s to 5.69 in 2019. Retention of member children has waned. Average annual convert baptisms per missionary fell from between 7.1 and 8 in the 1980s to between 3.4 and 3.7 from 2015 to 2019. The full-time LDS missionary force has plateaued and started to slump. Two sociologists of religion noted in 1996 that “the single best predictor of the annual Mormon conversion rate is the size of the LDS missionary force” (Shepherd and Shepherd 1996, 38–39). That correlation no longer holds (Figure 2).

LDS congregational growth has substantially lagged nominal membership growth (Figure 3). Between 1981 and 2017, nominal Mormon member-

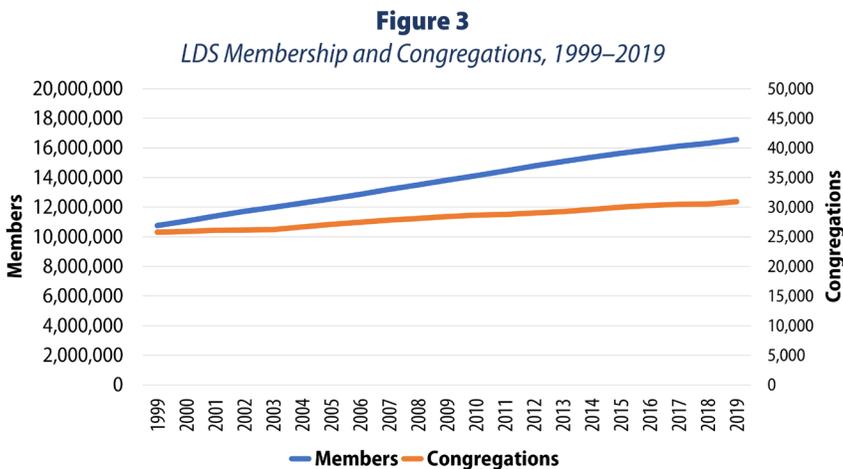
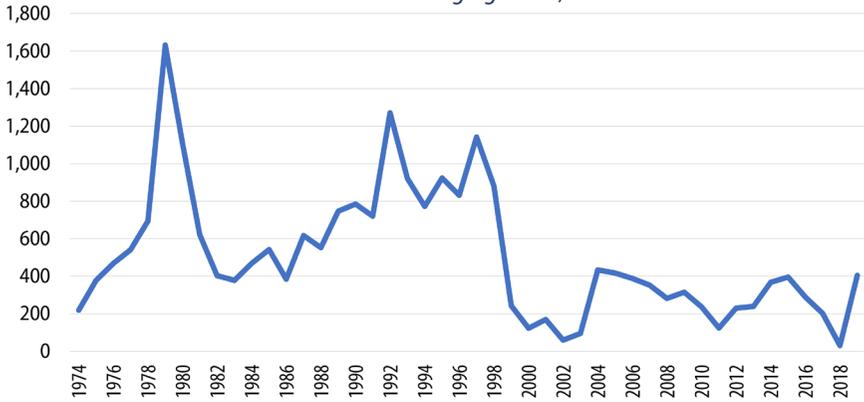


Figure 4
Net Annual Increase in Congregations, 1974–2019



ship increased nearly 3.3 times, from 4,936,000 to 16,118,169, while the number of LDS congregations increased only 2.3 times, from 13,213 to 30,506. The number of new congregations organized annually increased throughout the late 1970s, rising again from the early 1980s to the late 1990s before crashing down in a wave of consolidations and closures, and has never recovered (Figure 4). From 2000 to 2019, the increase in LDS congregations averaged less than 1% annually. Sociologist Armand Mauss noted that the gap between membership increase and the creation of stakes, or administrative groups of congregations, is “clear indication of a retention problem” (Canham 2005).

Figure 5
LDS Membership by Region

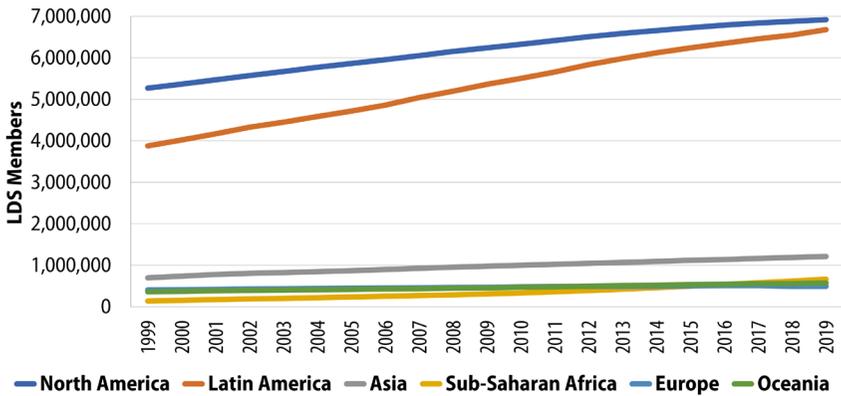


Table 1
LDS Membership by Region, 1999–2019

	1999	2009	2019	Change	Change % [†]
North America	5,269,998	6,238,727	6,920,086	1,650,088	31.3%
Central America	1,301,875	1,812,828	2,289,184	987,309	75.8%
South America	2,464,785	3,378,958	4,178,365	1,713,580	69.5%
Caribbean	110,212	166,701	209,071	98,859	89.6%
Latin America Total	3,876,872	5,358,487	6,676,620	2,799,748	72.2%
East Asia	693,699	964,461	1,187,100	493,401	71.1%
South Asia	2,715	9,596	16,159	13,444	495.1%
Middle East/N Africa	403	1,799	3,634	3,231	801.7%
Central Asia/Caucasus	656	3,158	4,055	3,399	518.1%
Asia Total	697,473	979,014	1,210,948	513,475	73.6%
Sub-Saharan Africa	136,635	308,255	665,301	528,666	386.9%
Oceania	363,470	455,239	572,895	209,425	57.6%
Western Europe	374,201	420,433	459,539	85,338	22.8%
Eastern Europe	29,941	51,657	33,869	3,928	13.1%
Europe Total	404,142	472,090	493,408	89,266	22%
World Total*	10,748,590	13,811,812	16,539,258	5,790,668	53.8%

[†]Change (absolute number and percentage change) is calculated from the 20-year period of 1999–2019.

*A small discrepancy (less than 1%) is noted between regional totals from country data and global figures. The LDS Church reported 16,565,036 members globally at year-end 2019, 0.15% more than the total of 16,539,258 from countries with available data. This discrepancy likely reflects membership in countries for which the Church does not report statistics.

Regional Trends

Growth trends have varied by region (Figure 5). Between 1999 and 2018, nominal LDS membership increased by 5.8 million. Of that membership growth, 48.3% (2.8 million) occurred in Latin America whereas 28.5% (1.65 million) occurred in North America (Table 1). An additional 9.1% of membership growth happened in Africa (528,000 members), 8.9% in Asia (513,000 members), 3.6% in Oceania (209,425 members), and just 1.54% in Europe.

Congregational growth figures are sharply different (Figure 6 and Table 2 on the following page). Over this period, 62.1% of congregational increase

Figure 6
LDS Congregations by Region

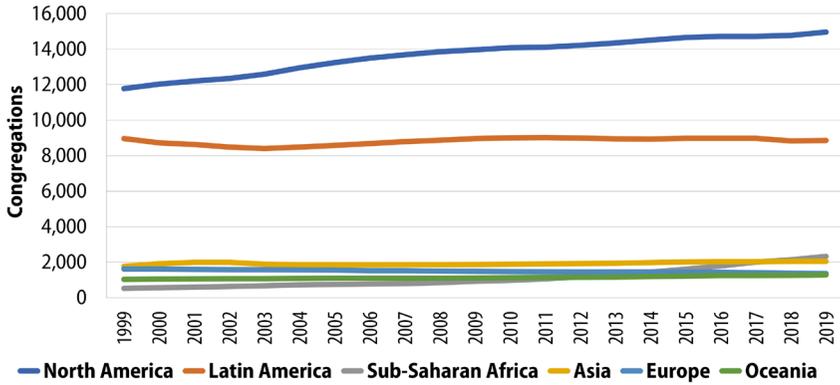


Table 2
LDS Congregations by Region, 1999–2019

	1999	2009	2019	Change	% Change
North America	11,770	13,957	14,956	3,186	27%
Central America	2,779	3,080	2,954	175	6.2%
South America	5,908	5,544	5,570	-338	-5.8%
Caribbean	279	339	333	54	19.3%
Latin America Total	8,966	8,963	8,857	-109	-1.3%
East Asia	1,739	1,800	1,926	187	10.7%
South Asia	20	35	66	46	230%
Middle East	7	23	33	26	371.4%
Central Asia/Caucasus	5	18	16	11	220%
Asia Total	1,771	1,876	2,041	270	15.2%
Sub-Saharan Africa	532	933	2,322	1,790	336.4%
Oceania	1,036	1,107	1,283	247	23.8%
Western Europe	1,354	1,158	1,099	-255	-18.9%
Eastern Europe	267	330	267	0	0%
Europe Total	1,621	1,488	1,366	-255	-15.8%
World Total*	25,696	28,324	30,825	5,129	19.9%

(3,186 units) occurred in North America and 34.9% (1,790 units) in Africa. Just 5.2% of new congregations (270 units) were organized in Asia and 4.8% (247) in Oceania. Congregations experienced net declines in Latin America (109 congregations closed) and Europe (255 closed), offsetting some gains elsewhere.

While Latin America accounted for nearly half the increase in nominal LDS membership, the number of congregations in the region declined due to ongoing retention problems. Notwithstanding nominal regional membership that will soon surpass North America, the flood of converts in Latin America has done little more than replace losses.

In Europe, the LDS Church is in decline as active membership experiences attrition (Mauss 2008), intergenerational transmission of the faith is low (Decoo 1996, 107–108; Van Beek 1996), and converts among native peoples are sparse. Migrants have been more receptive, but often struggle to assimilate due to cultural, social, and linguistic barriers (Lobb 2000). In Eastern Europe, the LDS Church has experienced two “lost decades” with active membership and congregations peaking between 1995 and 2000 in most nations and experiencing no real growth since that time, notwithstanding increases in nominal membership (Stewart 2020). Vast population centers in Asia have accounted for scant LDS growth. Oceania has long been disproportionately served with LDS missionaries, and congregations have increased even more slowly than nominal membership.

Only in North America and Sub-Saharan Africa has the LDS Church experienced significant congregational growth closely paralleling nominal membership. From 1999 to 2019, the number of LDS congregations in the U.S. and Canada increased by 27% while national populations increased by approximately 17.5%. Yet the LDS Church faces headwinds in North America which make continuation of historical growth trends unlikely.

The LDS Church experiences its brightest growth prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it has achieved higher convert retention with primarily native missionaries. From 1999 to 2019, LDS membership in Africa grew nearly fivefold from 136,635 to 665,301 while the number of congregations increased more than fourfold from 532 to 2,322. Vast opportunities remain. In 2013, about 25% of Africans lived in municipalities with an LDS congregation (Stewart and Martinich 2013). By 2019, 20 nations in Sub-Saharan Africa with a combined population of approximately 725 million people had ten or more LDS congregations. Fourteen Sub-Saharan African nations and territories

with an estimated 203 million people had fewer than ten congregations, and 17 nations with 163 million inhabitants had no reported LDS congregations. The United Nations projects that more than half of the 2.2 billion global population increase anticipated by 2050 will occur in Africa, which will thereafter be the only world region expected to achieve substantial population growth (United Nations 2019).

Latter-day Saint membership in Africa is more than an order of magnitude below its major competitors. At year-end 2019, the Seventh-day Adventist Church reported 9.56 million members in 34,253 churches in Africa (SDA 2020). Average weekly SDA Church attendance in Africa was 5.27 million, more than estimated average LDS attendance worldwide (Stewart and Martinić 2013), and the faith baptized over 619,000 converts: nearly as many as the entire LDS membership on the continent. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported 30,090 congregations in Africa, 1.7 million proclaimers, and 6.26 million annual memorial attendees in 2019 (Watch Tower 2020a).

In time, LDS membership in Africa may be likely to reach millions, and to comprise a substantial proportion of the faith's global adherents. Yet there are obstacles. Locals have termed it the "rich church" due to its expensive Western-style chapels (Stack 2014), and it is heavily dependent on financial subsidization by the North American church, constraining growth and capacity. Nor does the faith's growth in Africa portend bright futures elsewhere. It is the exception that demonstrates the rule, as one of the few regions where faiths declining in the West still find fertile fields. This, too, will not be so indefinitely.

Why Did Predictions Fail?

The vision of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints becoming a major world faith has become increasingly implausible. While the Church will continue to be influential in North America, a prominent fixture in Latin America, a leading faith in parts of Oceania, and emerging in Africa, a future of sustained worldwide growth can no longer be assumed.

The growth analyses of Stark and Bennion and Young represented important scholarship offering valuable insights. They fell short primarily due to underlying assumptions. Straight-line predictions of LDS growth assumed constant rates of fertility, convert growth, and retention. Stark's projection of 4% annual LDS growth rates started to fail shortly after his 1996 follow-up (Stark 1996). Stark articulated the importance to LDS growth of "fertility ... sufficiently high to offset both mortality and defection," yet did not consider

ongoing declines. He noted that “the majority of Mormons today were not born in the faith, but were converted to it” but did not explore the differences in participation between foreign converts and lifetime North American Mormons (Stark 1984).

Stark’s acknowledgment that “straight-line projections are risky” was followed by an appeal to historical trends rather than forward-looking analysis. He did not closely consider societal trends because, rejecting the secularization hypothesis, he did not believe that they were disruptive to LDS growth. In support, he cited his prior research findings that “Mormon growth is very positively associated with measures of modernization and industrialization” and that “Mormons thrive in the most, not the least, secularized nations.” To Stark, Mormonism was the ascending faith of the modern age. Even as traditional faiths declined, he reasoned, Mormonism would grow to fill the spiritual void of secular societies.

However, LDS growth is indeed affected by secularization trends. Cragun and Lawson demonstrated a negative correlation between the Human Development Index, an aggregate of dimensional indices of per capita income, education, and health, and the growth of Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists (Cragun and Lawson 2010). A multivariate regression analysis of international Mormon growth from 1997 to 2017 found that HDI was the largest single (inverse) correlate of growth rates, correlating with 49% of variance in membership growth and over 60% of congregational growth (Stewart 2019).

Writing in 1996, Bennion and Young projected high and low LDS membership growth rates from 1990 to 2020 which compound to 9.6% and 5.2% annually (Bennion and Young 1996, 17). In fact, annual compounded LDS membership growth over that thirty-year period averaged 2.56%, falling to 1.6% for the decade of 2009–2019. They cited key drivers of growth, including birth rates and the size of the missionary force, and briefly acknowledged inhibitors, including low retention and member activity rates, membership growth “outstripping the leadership base,” and challenging political conditions. Yet these factors were nowhere incorporated into their statistical projections. They questioned whether to “ignore the early 1990s” during which “growth rates dropped by at least half in every region except Africa” as “a brief aberration or consider them the beginning of a new downward trend.” Discarding their own caution, they took average growth rates from these years as the lower limit for the next twenty-five.

Bennion and Young's lower-end projection of 36.4 million LDS members in 2020 proved exuberant, overshooting the officially reported number of 16.5 million by more than double. Their model's assumptions were optimistic in view of known trends at the time, including ongoing secularization, struggles with retention of converts and member children, and declining US Mormon fertility rates. The LDS policy of "building from centers of strength," which sharply limited the Church's outreach into new areas, had been rolled out worldwide by 1993, making the claim of an aggressive "Open Door" policy seeking "any opening that would allow [the Church] to establish a new mission field" obsolete at its writing.

The formulations of Stark and Bennion and Young assumed the LDS Church to be an intrinsically healthy organization, while disregarding evidence of institutional dysfunction. Other projections based on historical data have fallen short. The full-time missionary force, for example, has not expanded by 50% per decade since the mid-1990s, nor grown commensurate with nominal membership (Shepherd and Shepherd 1996, 43–44).

Claims that declining Mormon growth is an inevitable result of external factors are disconfirmed by the more rapid growth of other Christian sects. Over the past three decades, both the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses have overtaken and pulled far ahead of the LDS Church. The Seventh-day Adventists baptized a record 1.2 million new members in 2016 and 1.27 million in 2017 (SDA 2016, 2017) even as LDS growth fell to record lows. In 2019, 91,140 Seventh-day Adventist churches were attended weekly by an average of 9.5 million of the faith's 21.4 million members (SDA 2020). Also in 2019, the Jehovah's Witnesses operated 119,712 congregations and baptized over 300,000 converts (Watch Tower 2019a); more than 20.9 million attended their annual Memorial of Jesus Christ's Death (Watch Tower 2019b). An average of 8,471,008 Jehovah's Witnesses spent over two billion hours proselytizing and taught more than 9.6 million investigators monthly. These faiths have found ways to thrive while navigating similar external challenges.

Predictive models for complex phenomena are no more accurate than their underlying assumptions and have often failed, and not only in sociology. While statistical modeling provides the appearance of rigor, attempts at calibration with historical data often introduce new errors based on the authors' assumptions, biases, and decisions regarding which factors to model and which to ignore (Freedman 2011, Ioannidis 2005). Trends influencing growth

are systematically evaluated here without any attempt to formulate a statistical model. Thoughtful assessment of current and expected future trends will not take us further from the mark than straight-line projections of historical growth rates.

What is Growth?

Research has illuminated gaps between the LDS Church's membership claims, self-reported religious participation, and member activity (Knowlton 2005, Phillips 2006, Stewart and Martinich 2013). Phillips (2006, 54) noted that "the church meticulously counts those who join, but does not attend to those who leave." As a result, nominal LDS membership tends to increase even when active membership is stagnant or declining. Lawson and Xydias (2020) found that Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses tend to undercount members, whereas the LDS Church overcounts international adherents by a wide margin. They documented from national censuses and sociological surveys a correlation between self-reported LDS Church membership and self-identified religious preference of 90% in the United States, but only 28% internationally. A substantial proportion of members claimed by the LDS Church, including approximately 10% in Utah and 37% in Chile, cannot be located (Canham 2005, Stack 2006). Unless found, their records are maintained in the "Address Unknown File" until age 110 (Phillips 2006), some thirty-eight years longer than the median worldwide life expectancy in 2016 (WHO 2020).

Shepherd and Shepherd (1996, 45) noted that due to low international activity rates, the number of stakes formed is a more reliable indicator of active membership. LDS congregations vary in size from small branches to large wards, whereas stake formation requires a minimum number of active adult priesthood holders. Yet many nations have no LDS stakes, and the formation of stakes in nations with a small church presence may lag growth trends by many years. While imperfect, the number of congregations may be a more sensitive indicator of real growth trends.

Evaluating Growth Prospects

The deceleration of LDS Church growth over the past two decades reflects institutional and societal factors for which information was available at the time, but which were not closely investigated or accounted for in published projections. Today's realities reflect the consequences of yesterday's choices,

and tomorrow's results will arise in large part from factors currently at work. Future institutional decisions, societal trends, individual choices, and stochastic events all influence growth. Systematic evaluation of growth dynamics, current trajectories, and influencing factors can offer a framework for evaluating the likely range of future outcomes. Not all outcomes are possible, and some outcomes are far more likely than others.

Institutional Issues

Mormonism began as a competitive disruptor, an innovative faith promising ongoing revelation and spiritual guidance. Yet historical decisions that offered benefits when initially adopted have increasingly become liabilities that hinder the faith's ability to adapt and internationalize. Institutional factors have long indicated that the membership growth rates of the 1980s were not sustainable. This also appears to be the case for even more modest contemporary growth.

Fertility and Demographics

US Latter-day Saint families averaged one child more than the national mean in the late twentieth century (Heaton 1989). The Pew Research Center reported in 2015 that eight in ten US Mormons had a spouse or partner within the faith, and that Mormons between age forty and fifty had an average of 3.4 children (Lipka 2015). Contemporary Mormons are marrying later and having fewer children. The Pew Research Center's 2014 American Religious Landscape Study found that the number of adult US Mormons who were parents of children under age 18 fell from 49% in 2007 to 41% in 2014. Moreover, 19% of Mormon adults were never married, up from 12% in 2007 (Pew 2014). The average age of Mormon adults in the US rose from 41 in 2007 to 43 in 2014. US converts also tend to be older. In 2007, 48% were over 50 and 61% had no children living at home (Pew 2009). The 2016 Next Mormons Survey found that adult US Mormons had a mean of 2.42 children, and that 57% of Mormon Gen X-ers had zero, one, or two children (Riess 2019b).

Based on demographic data, sociologist Ryan Cragun (2018) projected that members of the LDS Church are likely to be a minority in Utah by the 2040s. Outside of the US, few LDS members have large families (Heaton 1989). LDS women in Mexico and Brazil "have noticeably fewer children (15 to 20 percent)" than the national average, and are on par with the national average in Chile (Heaton and Jacobson 2015). Further declines loom. Medi-

um-term increases in LDS birth rates are unlikely due to reduced viability of traditional gender roles and changing societal norms.

Missionary Service

Large Mormon families historically fueled church growth and expansion of the full-time missionary force. Trends in reported children of record, which has historically correlated with full-time missionary numbers nineteen to twenty years later, suggest that the number of full-time missionaries is likely to increase in the immediate future before plateauing between 2028 and 2032 and then declining. An earlier peak is possible due to rising youth attrition and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Reliance on full-time missionaries as the primary driver of Mormon growth poses competitive disadvantages in populous regions where North American missionaries face restrictions but local adherents can evangelize more freely. In India, foreign missionary numbers are severely restricted, but Seventh-day Adventists had over 1.1 million members by year-end 2019 with over 670,000 attending weekly (SDA 2020). The constitution of China prohibits “foreign domination” of religious affairs, whereas laws in Russia forbid public proselytizing and require identification of missionaries as “foreign agents” (Stewart 2020). Foreign missionaries incur a learning curve with culture and often language as well as higher expenses than outreach by locals. Demographic flattening of full-time LDS missionary numbers poses limitations in human resources. Even if the doors of restricted nations were to suddenly swing open, the LDS Church would have no one to send without reassigning missionaries from other fields.

Member Retention

In the late twentieth century, only about 25% of international LDS converts and 50% of US converts were attending church a year after baptism (Willis 2001). Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted that “attrition is sharpest in the first two months after baptism” (Oaks 2003). It has been reported that up to 80% of first-year attrition occurs within the first two months, and that in some areas, large numbers of converts did not return to church after baptism to be confirmed (Stewart 2007).

In contrast, the LDS Church has historically retained most of its US member children. Albrecht (1988) noted that 22 percent of US Latter-day

Saints remained active life-long, whereas another 44 percent returned after periods of inactivity. A 1996 national survey found that 86.2% of Mormon youth reported that their views were “very similar” or “mostly similar” to those of their parents, higher than any other group surveyed; 88.7% reported that they already had or definitely would contribute to their church (Smith, Faris, and Denton 2004). Pew’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study found that 64 percent of US adults raised as Mormons still identified as Mormons (Lipka 2015). Subsequent Pew research has found that Mormons remained stable as a proportion of the US population, but the proportion is no longer growing.

International trends were less favorable. Van Beek observed in 1996 that in the Netherlands, “almost all older [LDS] couples have one or more, sometimes all, of their children inactive or disaffiliated” (Van Beek 1996, 133). This trend is increasing in the US. Of thirteen to seventeen-year-olds who identified as Latter-day Saints in 2002, the National Study of Youth and Religion reported that only 61% still identified with the faith at a ten-year follow-up. A quarter of those who had left identified as nonreligious, whereas 5% each identified as conservative and mainline Protestant, 2% as Jewish, and 2% indeterminate (Denton and Flory 2020). These figures were higher than other faiths surveyed (53% of Roman Catholic teens, 46% of conservative Protestants, and 23% of mainline Protestants had retained their adolescent religious identity), yet demonstrate substantial attrition. Riess reported in 2018 that fewer Millennials remained active in the LDS Church than in prior generations, with a median age of 19 at disaffiliation (Riess 2018). Other US surveys have found that between 46% and 64% of those raised as Mormons identify with the faith as adults (Riess 2020). Among those who identify, not all attend or participate.

The combination of falling birth rates and declining youth retention has created a compounding demographic math problem for the LDS Church (Stewart 2007, 25–30). Fewer young Mormons arriving at mission ages (18 for males, 19 for females), lower rates of missionary service, and fewer average converts per missionary have contributed to the decline in convert growth and member children. While the retention of LDS youth has eroded less rapidly than for some other faiths, the intergenerational transmission of Mormonism has fallen below the replacement rate. These factors signal the end of Mormon growth through high fertility and youth retention, and point to future losses.

Decline of Outreach

LDS convert growth is experiencing substantial headwinds, and not only because of flattening and decline of full-time missionary numbers. Surveys

suggest that contemporary LDS missionaries spend less time in traditional proselytizing activities than their predecessors, and more time as pastoral ancillaries.

During my mission to Russia in the early 1990s, the area presidency instructed missionaries across the region to spend at least half their time with members in response to struggles with retention and activity. With the deemphasis and critique of traditional proselytizing as ostensibly “less effective,” convert baptisms declined sharply while member activity rates experienced little improvement. At a conference of the Russia Saint Petersburg mission in late 1993, President Thomas F. Rogers cited his survey finding that the average companionship in the mission reported approaching only five to ten new people a day in a city of nearly five million. One returning missionary boasted that in two years, he had never knocked on a stranger’s door. Many committed missionaries returned repeatedly to investigators who put forth little effort, instead of risking rejection in approaching the millions of unreached.

Surveys of over 200 people I conducted between 1998 and 2009 in seven major Eastern European cities found that only 2% to 6% of individuals reported ever being approached by Mormon missionaries, whereas approximately 65% reported being approached by Jehovah’s Witnesses, often multiple times (Stewart 2020). As I traveled to 56 countries over the past quarter century for field research and have queried hundreds of missionaries and numerous mission presidents, I found that few missions have any plans or directives for systematically reaching local populations. The mandate for broad outreach emphasized in Jesus’s teachings (Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:18–20), in LDS scripture (D&C 19:29, 24:10), and by church presidents (Kimball 1974) has frequently been dismissed as impractical or unimportant. Christ’s directive for the word to be preached widely, with those prepared manifesting by their conduct, has often been supplanted by expectations of miraculous success with little effort by sharing the message with a pre-selected few. Mirroring paradigms of the full-time missionary program, member-missionaries also spend far more time “attending meetings, planning, and coordinating” than in personal interactions with non-members (Ballard 2000). These attitudes contrast with the no-excuses focus of Jehovah’s Witnesses on reaching large numbers through personal evangelism, and with the Adventists’ strategic vision for world outreach.

Decades of low missionary contacting effort reflect institutional directives. Independent missionary finding techniques were designated as “less effective” in the 1986 *Missionary Handbook* and the 1988 *Missionary Guide*. The

2004 manual *Preach My Gospel* (2004, 156) offers an ostensible improvement, instructing missionaries to “talk with as many people as you can each day.” Yet the accompanying statement that “nothing happens in missionary work until you find people to teach” discounts the value of outreach beyond the corporate bottom line of baptisms, as well as the scriptural mandate to present all people with the opportunity to accept or reject the message (D&C 30:11, 80:3). Prior missionary department research has noted that finding people to teach constitutes up to two-thirds of missionary work. Elder Dallin Oaks reported in 2003 that the average LDS missionary in North America spends only nine hours a week teaching investigators (Oaks 2003).

No indicator of independent missionary finding efforts or people reached is included among the “key indicators” that LDS missionaries report. The *Preach My Gospel* manual references street contacting only once, to note that it is not a “key indicator”; tracting is twice mentioned incidentally as an activity that some missionaries do (PMG 2004, 138–9). No guidance is offered into these or similar activities. LDS missionaries are instructed to “set goals for how many new investigators you will find this week,” but no credit is given for reaching people. These “goals” emphasize others’ responses rather than missionaries’ efforts, fueling moral hazards. In contrast, Jehovah’s Witnesses consider outreach measures among the most important. One Jehovah’s Witness I interviewed noted that if one is constantly meeting new people, growth will follow. Broad vision for outreach and a tireless work ethic have been central to the Witnesses’ growth, even in challenging religious markets like Europe where other faiths have experienced declines.

Gerontocracy

The LDS Church is the only major Western faith in the US in which the highest leaders serve until death (Prince, Bush, and Rushforth 2016). As health care and longevity have improved, LDS leaders have ascended only in their twilight years. Most have experienced long periods of physical and/or mental decline, requiring a caretaker bureaucracy to support administrative roles. Prince et al. (2016, 99) observed that “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.”

Contemporary Latter-day Saints increasingly expect ethical and responsive church policy. The 2015 Exclusion Policy, which prohibited children of LGBTQ couples from baptism and church fellowship, may reflect gerontocracy issues of the Church’s senior leaders who grew up in an era of homopho-

bic prejudice. This policy was reversed in 2019 after three and a half years of sustained protests, and contributed to resignations and inactivity (Riess and Knoll 2019).

Organizational dysfunction and paralysis from incapacitated leadership have hampered outreach efforts. Signature mandates of LDS Church presidents, including David O. McKay's 1959 speech "Every Member a Missionary" (Holman 2009), Spencer W. Kimball's call for strategic planning and global coordination of world missions (Kimball 1974), and Ezra Taft Benson's "Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon" (Benson 1984), experienced little implementation or follow-through due to the leaders' declining health.

In this void, the LDS faith lost competitive advantage and market share to younger and nimbler competitors. Sixteen years after LDS President Kimball's unheeded mandate, the Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted a "global Strategy ... to mobilize every believer and all church organizations and institutions in achieving our global mission" (SDA 1990). This coordinated and strategic approach to global missions facilitated a new era of accelerating growth from the early 1990s to the present even as LDS growth declined. Following LDS President Benson's call for far greater printing and distribution of the Book of Mormon, less than one dollar per member was spent annually by the LDS Church on printing missionary copies of the Book of Mormon in the early 2000s (Stewart 2007, 372-376). Yet literature strategies have been successfully implemented by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Their signature *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines are by far the most widely distributed magazines in the world, with a per-issue circulation of over 42 million copies in more than 190 languages and 41 million copies in more than 80 languages, respectively (Watch Tower n.d.). By late 2019, the Witnesses had translated their literature into over 1,000 languages, including some languages with no other available online content (Watch Tower 2019c).

Institutional Dynamics

The LDS Church's dual nature as a regional and global faith, and differences between the homeland "Zion" and the "mission field," have posed competing demands. The Utah church, and the American church generally, have enjoyed privileged status, while generating negative externalities for the international church and the unreached.

The nineteenth-century policy of "gathering to Zion," first in the American Midwest and then in the Mountain West, facilitated the development of a cohesive Mormon culture (Arrington 2004). Isolation allowed Mormon lead-

ers to shape a society and to exercise political and economic clout. The legacy of the gathering involved tradeoffs and unintended consequences, some of which have become liabilities for internationalization and growth. Historical dynamics have tended to reinforce each other while undermining potential alternatives.

There were few non-believers to preach to in early Mormon communities. Almost from the faith's inception, missionary work was understood as sending rather than being. Personal evangelism was compartmentalized as an itinerant, short-term duty of priesthood-holding adult males rather than being instilled as a gospel habit to be implemented regularly by all members. LDS women and youth were not systematically engaged in personal evangelism. Women in other faiths may be more likely than men to share their beliefs (Stewart 2007, 421–23); approximately two-thirds of US Jehovah's Witness proclaimers are women (Lipka 2016). As LDS women are the traditional nurturers and educators of children in the homes, many LDS children were not taught how to share their faith with others. Young LDS men and women arrived at the age of full-time missionary service with little if any prior experience in personal evangelism.

Conditions of missionary work in a Mormon-dominated society are very different than elsewhere. Mormons who were born and raised in the faith lost track of how non-Mormons think and feel. This disconnect has hampered growth and retention. Itinerant missionaries focused on reaping an immediate harvest rather than sowing for long-term local growth. The emigration of most nineteenth-century converts from their native lands left few behind to build congregations. Mormonism defined itself early in its history as an American faith that depended for growth on the preaching of itinerant missionaries rather than on the personal evangelism of lay members.

Due to the paucity of non-Mormons in Utah, the celebrity status of church authorities in Mormon communities, and the declining health of senior leaders, the mantra of “leadership by example”—elsewhere considered a core principle—had been largely discontinued with respect to personal evangelism by the mid-twentieth century. The faith was deprived of the insights and experience of participatory mission leadership. Mandates and initiatives based on stylized notions of the conversion process became the norm in missions worldwide, and in key cases, were incorporated into the institutional missionary program. The limited testing of churchwide programs was conducted almost exclusively in North America, where it was heavily skewed toward the “Mormon Cultural Region.”

Members assimilated what they saw rather than what they heard, and could safely tune out exhortations to personal evangelism. The mantra “every member a missionary” introduced by President David O. McKay in 1959 has remained an empty slogan, with actual performance reflecting nearly the opposite. Elder Russell M. Ballard noted (2000) that only 3% to 5% of US LDS members regularly participate in missionary work, and that Latter-day Saints are more uptight than non-Mormons in religious discussions.² Other research has found that US Latter-day Saints are far less likely to participate in personal evangelism than non-denominational Christians (Barna 2001). Numerous member-missionary initiatives have come and gone without changing this dynamic.

LDS Church culture was closely bound to US culture (Rigal-Cellard 2018, 199), which was exported as “a gospel norm” (Chen 2008). English became an official language in LDS chapels worldwide. The need for integration into local societies and for differentiation of the faith’s teachings from the American cultural milieu were deemphasized by claims to universality. International members faced “double marginalization . . . manifest both inside the Church and in their own country” (Chen 2008, 3), and have experienced low retention.

The privileged status of the American-based Church has fostered disproportionate attention to some mission fields, especially the United States, Northern Europe as the ancestral land of many early Mormons, and Latin America and Oceania as ostensible lands of Book of Mormon peoples (Mueller 2017). 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. Another 154 (38.5 percent) of missions were located in Latin America, home to just 8.4 percent of humans. Fewer than one-third of LDS missions serve the remaining 87 percent of the world’s population. Such inequities are ethically problematic from the perspective of the Church’s exclusivist claims. In economic terms, the high concentration of LDS mission assets in slow-growth, religiously saturated nations and the minimal presence in receptive nations where most Christian growth is occurring, represents a lack of diversification that inevitably leads to lower long-term growth than a more balanced, diversified mission portfolio.

² The figure of 3 to 5 percent given by Elder Ballard in the August 1999 Conversion and Retention Fireside is incorrectly reported as 35 percent in the subsequent Ensign article. I have confirmed with the LDS Church Missionary Department that 3 to 5 percent is the correct figure.

Moral Hazard and Adverse Selection

Mormon dominance and isolation in the Utah region led to greater *moral hazards* in missionary outreach than for faiths integrated as minorities within larger cultures. In contrast to local members with a vested interest in building strong congregations, itinerant missionaries are not connected to local communities, have little incentive for quality, and experience no accountability for convert loss. The costs of their failures are borne by the people they teach and by local congregations. The “almost strangling focus on baptisms” (Van Beek 2005) as the principal indicator of Mormon growth fueled *principal-agent problems*. Incentives of missionaries and their leaders became misaligned with the needs of those they were commissioned to serve and with the long-term growth of the institutional church.

The isolation of the Utah Zion, as well as the institutional culture of secret-keeping and nondisclosure that had arisen during the polygamy era (Bartholomew 2019), created an *asymmetric information* gradient. Birthright Mormons had little access to the church experience in the “mission field,” and relied largely on Church-controlled publications for information. Official LDS membership statistics do not distinguish between retained and unretained converts, and baptizing unprepared converts who were not retained required far less effort than making lasting conversions.

Exploitation of asymmetric information fueled *adverse selection* in missionary program leadership. The focus on high baptismal numbers without regard to convert retention favored those willing to abrogate ethics. Many who advocated for rushed baptisms were assigned to influential positions in the Missionary Department and church leadership (Quinn 1993). Rather than being locally contained and remedied, elements of rush-baptize approaches were systematized by the institutional missionary program and propagated worldwide (Stewart 2007, 432–444). For example, a generation of missionaries and mission leaders were taught the “Rector System” by former LDS general authority Hartman Rector, Jr. In his widely circulated accelerated baptism manifesto *Already to Harvest* (1988), Rector presented the example of missionaries in Mexico who covenanted to baptize 25 people in one month. Led by “the spirit,” the missionaries engaged in a whirlwind push for baptisms. To meet their quota, missionaries made “font calls” on the last day of the month to baptize individuals with no prior teaching. No mention is made of how many became active members. In later years, Rector fell victim to a Ponzi scheme that shared much in common with the system of missionary work he advocated,

including high-pressure calls for immediate decisions based on charismatic testimonials (Peterson 2009).

The Accelerated Baptism Program

The “Accelerated Baptism Program” reflects a stylized notion of conversion as a one-time charismatic event based on “feeling the spirit,” rather than as a spiritual, intellectual, and emotional process requiring work over time. Admonitions of the faith’s scripture regarding the qualifications of prospective converts (e.g., Moroni 6:1–3) were set aside for a high-pressure race to baptism.

Economist George Akerlof’s classic paper “The Market for ‘Lemons’” found that asymmetric information that cannot be accurately discerned by the less informed party leads to low-quality products (“lemons”) displacing quality ones (“peaches”) in the market (Akerlof 1970). Many periods of apparently rapid increase in international LDS membership, including in the United Kingdom (Quinn 1993), Japan (Numano 1996), Australia (Newton 1996), Portugal, and across much of Latin America and the Philippines, resulted from high-pressure rush-baptize tactics which left long-term burdens of inactivity while adding few participating members.

Less sensational but more broadly influential has been the extent to which elements of the “accelerated baptism program” were incorporated into the institutional missionary system. The 1988 Missionary Guide and accompanying missionary discussions of the *Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel* were billed as departures from the “aggressive salesmanship of earlier plans in favor of a more ‘human relations’ form of persuasion” (Shepherd and Shepherd 1996, 38–39). Yet the teaching program was calibrated to a window of about two weeks between first acquaintance and baptism. This period allowed little time for life change, development of new habits, or member fellowshiping, and disadvantaged even sincere converts taught by dedicated missionaries adhering to official guidelines (Stewart 2007, 432–44).

Official lesson plans instructed missionaries to make daily contact with investigators and to seek short-term baptismal commitments on the first or second visit. At this point, most listeners had not attended church or read more than brief selections of LDS scripture. Individuals who wished for more meaningful periods of study and preparation had to decline repeated baptismal challenges; the teaching relationship often did not survive.

Missionaries felt pressured to keep arbitrary baptismal dates, even when investigators failed to follow through with church attendance and other core

commitments. The program's focus on baptisms as the key indicator not only of the success of missionary labors, but of the spirituality and worthiness of the missionaries themselves, fueled a belief that "God wants everyone to be baptized." Ostensible standards were rarely permitted to impede, and were routinely waived at baptismal interviews for expressions of belief and future promises. Those baptized with minimal preparation experienced high attrition. Many were not "active investigators" and never became active members (Clark 1998). The spirituality of missionaries suffered and some lost their faith entirely (Quinn 1993, 39–40).

Accelerated baptism programs fed a vicious circle of convert loss. Although some international converts became committed and believing Latter-day Saints, asymmetric information, pressure for missionaries to meet monthly baptismal goals, and lack of accountability fueled similar dynamics worldwide. The number of international converts lost to attrition came to outstrip those who became active members by a wide margin. Millions were lost to the church soon after baptism. Concerns about high-pressure rush-baptize tactics were dismissed with official assurances that the programs were inspired (Newton 1996). Fractional convert retention arising from official teaching programs went unreported in church publications and reports beyond the occasional vague, often euphemistic, acknowledgment.

Vast numbers of inactive members on the rolls exerted an inhibitory drag on membership and congregational growth in excess of a "free rider" problem (Stewart 2019), sapping the energy, resources, and enthusiasm of local members while diverting missionary and member time from new outreach. Members, traumatized when converts they had worked to befriend exited almost as quickly as they had entered, came to maintain emotional distance and were reluctant to warmly fellowship new people as a defense against the psychological trauma of loss. Others were overwhelmed and "waited to see 'who the good ones were'" (Moore 2002). Louder admonitions from the pulpit without underlying remedies failed to improve these dynamics. Failures of promises accompanying programs prescribed by American authorities, many of which were culturally problematic, led to a "backlash of guilt and frustration" with little evidence of quality improvement or institutional insight (Mauss 2008, 46).

The standardized LDS missionary program systematized an objectification of prospective converts that would have been unthinkable in relation to one's own friends and acquaintances, prioritizing pursuit of baptisms over

timeless ethics and the best interests of those being served. The “I-It” as opposed to “I-Thou” paradigm (Quinn 1993) facilitated exploitation of prospective converts and *could not* have been long implemented by a faith whose leaders were regularly engaged in frontline proselytism, but arose from the leveraging of asymmetric information by unaccountable functionaries detached from the human cost. The relentless push to baptism, prioritization of institutional programming over individual needs, and the revolving door of baptism and inactivity, were incompatible with members’ needs to maintain positive relationships with acquaintances even if religious teachings were not fully accepted. Consequently, lay Mormon members have been, and remain, deeply reluctant to invite friends and acquaintances to be taught by full-time missionaries. For similar reasons, full-time LDS missionaries have been largely ineffective in mentoring member-missionaries, notwithstanding massive time investment.

The “accelerated baptism program” lacked solid theological or philosophical rationale. It did not arise from practical insight or durable success, but from misaligned incentives, principal-agent problems, and the exploitation of asymmetric information. The theses that rushed baptism of converts “to get them the Holy Spirit before Satan could get to them” would lead to personal epiphany and active church membership, or that “getting them on the rolls” would help “the Church to better meet their needs,” were always at odds with the results. Economist Lawrence Iannaccone documented “why strict churches are strong,” noting that “any attempt to directly subsidize the observable aspects of religious participation (such as church attendance) will almost certainly backfire” (Iannaccone 1994).

To the extent that the size of the LDS Church has made some corporatization inevitable, proper models must be selected. America’s leading corporations are overwhelmingly ones that focus on developing long-term customers through demonstration of value. High-pressure sales tactics never represented “best practices” of American business, and had been roundly repudiated by leading companies and business thinkers long before the rise of the Mormon “Accelerated Baptism Program.” In 1947, *Harvard Business Review* editor Edward Bursk acknowledged that “salesmen in many lines decry ‘high-pressure selling’ as a crude relic of bygone days” (Bursk 1947). Bursk detailed the effectiveness of “low-pressure selling” in which the salesperson allowed the prospective clients to reach a decision freely and independently, supporting their natural inclinations to buy rather than driving a decision.

Contemporary Jehovah's Witness and Seventh-day Adventist approaches to conversion have long utilized principles of "low-pressure selling" (Stark and Iannaccone 1997, 140). These groups have implemented more rigorous baptismal standards, baptized more converts, and achieved higher convert retention than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses typically conduct baptisms only three times annually, and emphasize "a strong, rational basis underlying their wish [for baptism], rather than just emotion" and firm, demonstrated commitment to keeping one's promises (Secaira 2016). Witness converts typically attend for six months to a year before baptism, and some longer. Seventh-day Adventists do not prescribe a specific period, but for decades have required "a radical change in the life" of prospective converts. Candidates must complete dedicated Bible study and receive approval of the local church board to safeguard from "unknown problems in a candidate's life that should have been taken care of before baptism" (SDA 1981). Many prospective converts attend for months; the most enthusiastic are rarely baptized with less than six to eight weeks of study. These deliberate, unpressured approaches emphasize full implementation of required life changes before baptism and help prospective converts to "count the cost" of discipleship, with the sober recognition that parting ways is better for all parties than the baptism of unprepared converts.

Rarely in modern times has the LDS Church achieved convert-based growth consisting of both high quality and quantity, although there have been some bright spots, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Institutional acceptance of the false dichotomy between quality and quantity posed by quick-baptize proponents, and long perseverance in this path, will be understood by future historians as a fateful decision by which the LDS Church abdicated its potential to become a major world religion.

Philosophy and Worldview

Two potentially problematic philosophies I have often heard in field work shall be designated as Mormon *determinism* and *authoritarian positivism*. These philosophies are far from universal, yet pose barriers, and warrant further research. Mormon determinism affirms the inevitability of the Church's continued world growth and eventual triumph over external obstacles. It asserts that even if members and missionaries put forth little effort, or well-intended programs miss the mark, the Holy Spirit will nonetheless guide positive outcomes. Weak-form determinism makes some allowance for free will, but minimizes the consequence of personal choice. Setbacks and errors are seen as

temporary and largely devoid of lasting consequence. Determinism has fueled complacency while impeding accountability, institutional insight, and process improvement.

Authoritarian positivism imputes that administrative directives are right, not because of consistency with timeless principles, nor because of meritorious results, but because they are proclaimed by inspired authorities who hold priesthood keys. Spiritual impressions of leaders have at times been prioritized over principles, relevant data, and the need for insights from direct personal involvement in the missionary process. Claims of being “guided by the spirit” have granted vast latitude, but have not infrequently demonstrated “confirmation bias,” and pose downsides when untethered from lucid understanding and responsiveness. Poor results have unswervingly been attributed to external impediments or poor “followership,” rather than flawed guidance.

Missionary Program Reforms

The LDS Church has recognized many challenges and has instituted adaptations and reforms. While offering some insights, many ostensible reforms have consisted of half-measures or mixed messages (Stewart 2007). Yet the rush to baptize poorly prepared converts who have received only minimal teaching has not been repudiated by the LDS Church. A more abbreviated teaching program and scaled-back official standards have actually lowered the bar.

Some contemporary LDS missions have achieved meaningful improvements in convert retention through the implementation of local standards. Requirements to attend church for six weeks before baptism in some missions in the Philippines and Latin America have been reported to dramatically boost one-year convert retention rates. These improvements have generally reflected local mission or area guidance, rather than robust institutional reforms, and have rarely survived changes in mission leadership. LDS missions in much of the world continue to struggle with cursory teaching, rushed baptism, and low retention.

The 1988 *Missionary Guide* conveyed First Presidency directives that prospective converts must “attend regular Sunday church meetings and feel unified with Church members” (LDS 1988), which would presumably require regular attendance over time to achieve. In 2002, the First Presidency proclaimed that all prospective converts must have attended several sacrament meetings prior to baptism, meet the bishop or branch president, and meet other standards (FPL 2002). This guidance scales back the prior directive. Pro-

spective converts are no longer required to attend any church meetings other than sacrament meeting, and need only meet the bishop or branch president rather than attend and engage sufficiently to “feel unified with Church members.” Just as the prior mandate was routinely ignored in LDS missions, the 2002 directive has widely been set aside or creatively interpreted. “Several” is defined as “more than two; three or more.” Nonetheless, many mission and area presidencies represented the requirement as attending only twice (and in some cases, once) before baptism, and encouraged baptism as soon as minimum thresholds could be met.

The 2004 *Preach My Gospel* (PMG) manual provided missionaries with limited education regarding their role in convert retention. Yet PMG’s abbreviated curriculum, directives for daily contact, and key indicators have led to ongoing pressure for missionaries to baptize prospective converts as soon as possible. Officially-sanctioned directives to impose arbitrary baptismal dates within about two weeks of the first or second lesson have often denied prospective converts opportunities for unpressured church attendance and integration with local members.

The 1937 *Missionary’s Hand Book* lacked a systematic teaching program, instead incorporating tracts and films, including problematic relics of the Mormonism of its day (MHB 1937). Notwithstanding limitations, the *Hand Book* contained numerous insights regarding finding, teaching, and time management absent from contemporary manuals.

The standardized LDS missionary lessons arose from the adaptation of missionary Richard Lloyd Anderson’s *A Plan for Effective Missionary Work* developed in the Northern States Mission in approximately 1946. The LDS Church published *A Systematic Program for Teaching the Gospel* in 1952 with seven lessons (149 pages), *A Uniform System for Teaching Investigators* in 1960 with six “discussions” (91 pages), *The Uniform System for Teaching Families* in 1973 with seven lessons (219 pages), and the *Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel* in 1986 with six discussions (117 pages) (White 2010).

With just four lessons that can be taught in short (3–5 minute), “medium” (10–15 minute), and “full” (30–45 minute) versions, the contemporary *Preach My Gospel* manual (published in 2004, with minor revisions in 2018 and 2019) presents the most abbreviated teaching in the history of the standardized missionary program (PMG 2004, 29–81). The “short” and “medium” lesson plans provide official mandate for so-called “doorstep discussions,” an accelerated baptism tactic in which missionaries would mention key concepts

in the course of brief conversations and count it as an official lesson. Many individuals whom missionaries have engaged in casual conversation are reported as “investigators” who have received teaching lessons, unbeknown to the individuals themselves and without formal acceptance of a teaching relationship. The manual acknowledges that some converts may need additional teaching, and offers the opportunity to teach partial lessons, yet nowhere disavows the three- to five-minute “lessons” as satisfying ostensible requirements for baptism. Previous lesson plans typically required a minimum of 45 to 60 minutes for each of the six or seven lessons and had no approved abbreviated version.

After baptism, converts are to be “taught the first four lessons again” by either full-time or ward missionaries. A fifth lesson (“Laws and Ordinances”) is added after baptism, often with ward missionaries or home teachers present. *PMG* notes that “baptismal candidates should at least be aware of these laws and ordinances before baptism,” while implying that more than brief mention would be exceptional.

Instructions for the four missionary lessons to be routinely re-taught to all converts after baptism provide official acknowledgment of the cursory teaching and fragile understanding of many converts at the time of baptism. Many converts continue to fall away without completing the post-baptismal lessons. Drastically scaling back the teaching of prospective converts, even while continuing to push short-term baptismal commitments from the second or even first lesson, is a curious “reform” for a faith experiencing a crisis of convert loss.

As well, “the missionary organization is replete with corporate Americanisms” (Van Beek 1996). *Preach My Gospel* has removed some Americanisms while retaining its corporate mindset. The 2019 *PMG* manual centers missionary planning and time management on four “key indicators” that focus exclusively on baptism and its immediate requirements: the number baptized and confirmed, the number with baptismal commitments, the number of non-members attending sacrament meeting, and the number of new people being taught. Lessons taught to new converts were reported as a “Key Indicator” in the 2004 *PMG* manual, but this item has been dropped with the 2019 update. Neither reported church attendance of recent converts for any period after baptism. Missionaries are instructed to “set goals and make plans for people to be baptized in the coming week,” to discuss “any commitments these people may be struggling with,” and to make daily contact. No mention is

made that prospective converts struggling days before an arbitrary baptismal date are likely to experience relapse and attrition, and may be better served with more preparation and less pressure.

Official church manuals have presented problematic tactics, even as leaders have downplayed institutional culpability. For instance, in his explanation to mission presidents in 2019 of why “missionaries shouldn’t invite people to be baptized without feeling the Spirit,” Apostle M. Russell Ballard articulated difficulties with the practice, imputed it to naïve missionaries, and stated that “Church leaders don’t know where these practices began” (Weaver 2019). Yet the LDS Church’s *Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel* used by missionaries worldwide from 1986 to 2004 instructed missionaries at the end of the second lesson: “Unless otherwise prompted by the Spirit, you should at this point invite the investigators to be baptized on a specific date” (LDS 1986). Revisions have offered little improvement. The 2004 *PMG* manual instructs missionaries from the first lesson: “do not hesitate to invite people to be baptized and confirmed ... The invitation ... should be specific and direct,” including a proposed baptismal date (*PMG* 2004, 40). Similar instructions are reiterated after the second discussion, with no mention of a requirement to first “feel the Spirit” or implement necessary life changes. The revised 2019 *PMG* manual directs missionaries to extend the baptismal invitation after the second discussion “as directed by the Spirit” but without the nuance noted by Elder Ballard. The short, “medium,” and “full” lesson plans all instruct missionaries to invite listeners: “Will you follow the example of the Savior and be baptized on (date)?”

President Gordon B. Hinckley counseled missionaries: “if you will work hard, the matter of converts will take care of itself ... give it your very best” (Hinckley 1997). Yet the corporate missionary program poses relentless pressure for baptismal numbers. Missionaries are instructed that “their goal should be to have increasing numbers for every key indicator” (*PMG* 2004, 139). One’s best effort is never good enough. In the twentieth century, demands for ever-increasing production output in some command economies led to widespread falsification and even famine (Livi-Bacci 1993). Goals and quotas based on the response of others rather than personal effort are inherently manipulative. On my own youth mission, the decision to disregard institutional goal-setting demands and to be satisfied with our best efforts was a turning point that lifted a heavy psychological burden and improved productivity.

The LDS Church’s missionary program reforms have rearranged the furniture without remedying core pathologies. After more than a fifty-year

retention crisis resulting in the loss of millions of converts and multiple iterations of missionary program “reform,” the LDS Church today presents just four lessons that can be taught in as little as three to five minutes. That this is viewed as satisfying teaching requirements for prospective converts bodes poorly for the faith’s future. A gap persists between policy directives and the ostensible standards for baptism proclaimed in LDS scripture and by senior leaders. LDS missions that have broken the mold to achieve higher convert retention have implemented higher standards. Some contemporary Mormon missionaries appear to be better listeners, more sensitive to individual needs, and more focused on helping individuals develop gospel habits and achieve meaningful spiritual experiences. More realistic evaluation of the preparation of prospective converts has achieved local, often transient, implementation. Yet worldwide, low convert retention reflects the continued push for baptism over short periods with minimal teaching and preparation.

Other Institutional Adaptations

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 (Stack and Schencker 2012), transiently boosting missionary numbers but achieving no sustained increase in convert baptisms. Other adaptations have included jettisoning the terms “LDS” and “Mormon” to emphasize belief in Christ in 2018 (Stack and Pierce 2018) and transitioning from a three-hour to two-hour Sunday meeting schedule in 2019. Home and visiting teaching programs, long noted to be dysfunctional in the international church (Mauss 2008), were replaced with a more flexible “ministering” program in April 2018 (FPL 2018).

Lay “ministering” emphasizes Christian service and prayerful consideration of individual needs, and encourages members to engage in open conversations with others with sincere warmth and caring. The ministering program promotes interactions that are more natural, responsive, and involve real listening in contrast to earlier scripted dialogues that emphasized delivering a designated message. The LDS Church’s extensive and at times overwhelming demands—it is a “greedy institution,” as acknowledged by the faith’s leaders (Van Beek 2005)—have contributed to burnout, feelings of inadequacy, and attrition, especially among international members. The recognition that there is a healthy limit to the burdens placed on church members is adaptive, as is the understanding that non-essentials must be pared down or eliminated to ensure priority to core missions.

These reforms offer constructive but limited remedies. Several offer “quality of life” improvements to the church experience for members, and may help to strengthen and stabilize membership. However, they do not address core pathologies underlying declining LDS growth.

Quality Improvement Processes

President Russell M. Nelson noted in April 2018 that “good inspiration is based on good information” (Nelson 2018). Virtually all successful organizations implement robust quality improvement processes. Yet LDS missions have traditionally operated behind an informational firewall. Acceptance of fractional convert retention as inevitable, *a priori* attribution of retention problems to local congregations, and circular logic defining official programs as inspired, became rationalizations for actively disregarding crises and doubling down on accelerated baptism tactics even as losses mounted.

The personal loss and disillusionment experienced by countless unretained converts in few cases resulted in process improvement. Pockets of insight have been transient, rarely surviving personnel rotations. Instructions for outgoing mission presidents not to talk to incoming ones about their mission experiences and policies prevented meaningful collective learning. Concerns from local members have been systematically disregarded until crises reach a point that they can no longer be ignored, often with lasting damage (Newton 1996). By policy, letters from missionaries to higher church authorities are returned unopened to the local mission president. Although the faith’s leaders have taught that the current church president is the only individual who will never lead the Church astray (Benson 1981), these and other policies treat mission and stake leaders *de facto* as infallible, preventing meaningful accountability and undermining possibilities for quality improvement.

The LDS Church’s conversion and retention crises have thus lingered far longer, and have been remedied less decisively, than for Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses (Paulsen 2002). The lack of credible, consistent, and responsive institutional quality improvement mechanisms weighs heavily on future forecasts. Less responsive organizations inevitably lose competitive advantage to more agile challengers.

Future Adaptations

Future institutional responses will influence growth prospects. For any organization, not all theoretical choices are feasible. Each decision or policy moves

the organization in the chosen direction at the cost of potential alternatives. Young organizations typically have more policy choices than older organizations, which may be constrained by precedent, expectations, and established interests. The best that is reasonably achievable under internal constraints and external circumstance is called a constrained optimum (Morgan 2015; Prosser 1993). The constrained optimum may still be far from the global optimum. Boundaries may change over time as the organization embarks in new directions, opening new possibilities. As circumstances change, the optimum may also change. Policies formulated for yesterday's needs may be unhelpful or even counterproductive under new circumstances.

Substantive reform can occur, but organizations can experience a “status quo effect,” “sunk cost effect,” and “switching costs” when departing from history and practices. Ashby and Theodorescu noted that decision-makers tend to demonstrate “choice inertia” and may “repeatedly choose suboptimal options while neglecting to explore for the existence of better options” (2019). They further observed that “choice-inertia can lead to poor performance even if the original choice was the best alternative available. This occurs when changes in the environment make the original choice obsolete but the choice strategy does not adapt.”

The adaptations and reforms of the LDS Church to date have demonstrated only narrow excursions on established themes. Variations have principally involved matters of form, such as the age of eligibility for missionary service, the length of church services, the faith's preferred nomenclature, and regimented versus flexible ministering. Little change is attested in underlying paradigms, such as the perception of LDS missionary work as compartmentalized to special and often itinerant callings rather than as a universal duty, the rush to baptize prospective converts over short periods, and leadership non-participation in frontline proselytism. These factors suggest that the LDS Church will continue to experience “choice inertia” and that full remedies are unlikely.

Societal Factors

Following World War II, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experienced the convergence of numerous favorable factors for growth, including the US baby boom, improving human rights and personal freedoms in many nations, generally favorable attitudes toward Americans, and opportunities for outreach in numerous previously unreached nations. Contemporary con-

ditions are far less favorable across these and other indicators. Fertility rates have plummeted, Christianity is in deep decline, human rights and freedoms are receding, and prospects for unrestricted proselytism in unreached nations are remote.

Secularization and Materialism

Religiosity has tended to decline with increases in the Human Development Index (HDI), an aggregate of dimensional indices for average per capita income, education, and life expectancy. Increased material prosperity and scientific explanations for natural phenomena have lessened the sense of dependence on the divine. Cultural institutions have furthered secularization trends, and Sunday entertainment may directly compete with religious services (Cragun et al. 2019). Variability has been documented in the relationship between religiosity and health (Zimmer et al. 2019), education, and income.

Declining Fertility

A global “fertility crash” (Tartar et al. 2019) has seen world fertility rates drop from approximately five children per woman in the five-year period from 1950 to 1955 to 2.5 in the period from 2010 to 2015 (Pew 2015a). Further decline to 2.1, the replacement level, is projected by 2050. US Millennials are less likely to marry and have children than prior generations (Bialik and Fry 2019). Most US young adults in a cohort studied from 1997 to 2011 had their first child out of wedlock (Cherlin et al. 2016). While birth rates have fallen among almost all groups, the decline has been particularly steep among the non-religious. Religious people have more children on average than non-religious people, and fertility rates of non-religious populations worldwide are below replacement fertility rates (Lipka and McLendon 2017). The stagnation of population growth and disruption of family structures present challenges for a faith that has focused much of its public messaging on traditional nuclear families, and in which singles have experienced low retention (Riess 2016).

Human Rights

The spread of democracy and pluralism to expanding areas of the world in the second half of the twentieth century led to greater respect for human rights. Many nations broadened freedom of conscience, speech, and the press and

facilitated an environment in which individuals could choose to affiliate with the faith of their choice or no faith at all. While ostensibly acknowledged as universal and self-evident by signatories of the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, these rights peaked worldwide in the early twenty-first century and have been progressively infringed since that time. The Pew Research Center reported that from 2007 to 2017, “laws, policies and actions by state officials that restrict religious beliefs and practices have increased markedly around the world. And social hostilities involving religion—including violence and harassment by private individuals or groups—also have risen since 2007” (Pew 2019a).

Freedom of speech has also been receding. The Higher Education Research Institute has found that today’s US college students are “more openly hostile to free speech than earlier generations of collegians” (Rampell 2016; Eagan et al. 2016). Activists have conveyed intolerance to dissenting views “as if free speech were zero sum,” and speakers with dissenting views have repeatedly been “disinvited or forced to withdraw from campus speaking engagements.” An absolute majority of incoming college freshmen favored restrictions on speech for the first time in 2019 (Stoltzenberg et al. 2020, 41). Professor Emeritus Guenter Lewy observed that “today’s students identify speech as violence and feel they can meet it with coercion,” creating an “atmosphere of harassment and intimidation” that “undermines the tradition of free inquiry that used to be the hallmark of higher education” (Lewy 2018).

Freedom of the press has been integral to the spread of Mormonism, yet it is waning worldwide. Experts interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corporation identified “the breakdown of trusted information sources” as one of the “grand challenges we face in the 21st Century” (Gray 2017). Americans of different political persuasions share “little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust” (Mitchell et al. 2014). A majority of Americans say that fake news has caused “a great deal of confusion” about basic facts (Barthel et al. 2016), and they do not expect the situation to improve (Anderson and Rainie 2017).

Reporters without Borders reported in 2019 that “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” (Reporters without Borders 2019). In 2015, the group noted that as “conflicts proliferated ... all warring parties without exception waged a fearsome information war” in which “media, used for propaganda purposes or

starved of information, became strategic targets” to be controlled or silenced (Reporters without Borders 2015). Religious pretexts were prominent in restrictions of the press and of speech: the “criminalization of blasphemy endangers freedom of information in around half of the world’s countries,” serving as “an extremely effective way of censoring criticism of the government in countries where religion shapes the law.”

Decline of Democracy

Of the seventy-five nations rated as “full democracies” or “flawed democracies” by the EUI Democracy Index in 2019 (DI 2019), the LDS Church reported at least one hundred local members in all but two (Tunisia and Timor Leste), but in only ten of fifty-four “authoritarian” countries.³ Nations with representative democracies tend to uphold human rights and freedom of conscience better than authoritarian nations, in which state press and religion (or philosophical indoctrination) often facilitate political control.

Freedom House reported that “countries with net declines in their aggregate “Freedom in the World” score have outnumbered those with gains for the past 14 years,” during which “more than half of the world’s established democracies deteriorated” and “the US has fallen below traditional democratic peers” (Repucci 2020). The struggle for democracy has been leaderless as traditional guardians in Western governments and the press have been silent or ineffective. Forbes ranked China’s Xi Jinping and Russia’s Vladimir Putin as the world’s first and second most powerful people in 2018, citing “the consolidation of power in the hands of an elite few” worldwide (Ewalt 2018). Constitutional coups in China (Doubek 2018) and Russia (Kara-Murza 2020) in 2018 and 2020, respectively, have positioned autocrats to “rule indefinitely,” marking the end of national reform eras (Wong 2020). Suppression of democratic uprisings against authoritarian regimes in Iran (2019), Hong Kong (2019), and Belarus (2020) evoked little outcry in the West. The decline of freedoms and democracy worldwide limits prospects for LDS growth and expansion in unreached nations, and has posed increased restrictions even in nations like Russia where open proselytism had previously been permitted.

³Authoritarian nations with over one hundred reported LDS members include two in Latin America (Nicaragua and Venezuela), seven in Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Togo, Zimbabwe) and Cambodia. Nicaragua and Venezuela were more open societies when most LDS growth occurred. Russia has LDS membership, but no statistics were reported by the LDS Church in 2019. China and Pakistan have a small number of LDS members, but these figures were not reported. Kuwait, which has a congregation for expatriates but without native members, is not counted. Figures for nations with hybrid regimes were intermediate.

Decline of Christianity

The Pew Research Center projects that “in the next half century or so, Christianity’s long reign as the world’s largest religion may come to an end” (Lipka and Hackett 2017). By 2050, its share of the population is expected to decline in all world regions except Asia and the Pacific (Pew 2015a). Although Christianity is gaining adherents in Africa, its growth is outpaced by higher Muslim birth rates.

The 2014–2016 European Social Survey found that more young people identify as nonreligious than as Christians in most nations (Bullivant 2018). Van Beek noted that Christianity declined in much of Europe with erosion of societal “pillars” of faith (1996). Roles traditionally filled by churches, including care for the poor, education, socialization, and others, have been assumed almost entirely by secular institutions. French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut described the loss of his nation’s best-known religious monument as a metaphor for European Christianity: “The Notre-Dame fire is neither an attack nor an accident, but a suicide attempt” (2019).

In the United States, Christianity is declining at a “rapid pace” (Pew 2019b), and only about one-third of Millennials report attending church at least monthly. While North American religious institutions are not as “pillarized” as in Europe, ongoing role replacement has occurred. For example, faith-based schools have seen declining enrollment across the US (Harsh 2018), and LDS pastoral leaders are now instructed to encourage the needy to seek assistance from government programs, with financial assistance from the Church often secondary (LDS Handbook 2020).

As Christianity has declined, so has the efficacy of LDS outreach approaches, which have historically assumed that listeners had a Christian background. The faith has experienced only meager pockets of success in proselytizing non-Christians. C. S. Lewis observed in 1948 that “The greatest barrier I have met [to evangelism] is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin,” deflating the perceived need for Christianity’s prescribed remedy (Lewis 1947, 243). In 2019, Jana Riess wrote that “‘which Church is true’ isn’t the right question anymore,” and noted that traditional Mormon messages are less effective for Millennials (Riess 2019c).

Christianity’s decline also reflects a perceived loss of moral authority. Barna Group president David Kinnaman cited research that “84% of young non-Christians say they know a Christian personally, yet only 15% say the lifestyles of those believers are noticeably different in a good way” (Kinnaman

2013). In the void left by the declaration that “God is dead,” Nietzsche premon-
ished in 1888 “the advent of nihilism” and noted that European culture was
“moving as toward a catastrophe” (Nietzsche 1901, 3). Yale scholar Juan Linz
noted that secularization created a void that could be filled by “total ideologi-
cal dedication” and that “once simplified and reduced to slogans by a political
movement, such ideas became the basis for a pseudo-religious political cause
that justified totalitarianism and made it possible” (Griffin 2005, 7).

Notwithstanding varying interpretations, Christianity’s teachings of
God rather than the state as the source of human rights, assertion of transcen-
dent truth and ethics, and teachings of the sanctity of family, among others,
made it a target for those seeking to supplant religious faith with political or
philosophical indoctrination. The Reign of Terror following the French Revolu-
tion included violent anti-clericalism and de-Christianization (Tallett 1991;
Latreille 2002) perpetrated by the Jacobins in the name of “equality, brother-
hood, and the happiness of future generations” (Solzhenitsyn 1973, 77). Com-
munism sprang up as an ostensibly scientific and rationalist system imposing
state atheism. Karl Marx saw conscience as a product of society, and wrote:
“the first prerequisite for the happiness of the people is the abolition of reli-
gion” (1844). Vladimir Lenin “demanded that communist propaganda must
employ militancy and irreconcilability toward all forms of idealism and reli-
gion” (Froese 2004). The persecution of religious believers in the Soviet Union
has been cited as the largest martyrdom event in world history (Barrett and
Johnson 2001). Church attendance in Russia fell from approximately 52% of
parents and 40% of children in the 1920s to less than 3% by 1980 (Froese 2004,
Table 2; Iannaccone 2002). Anti-Christian ideas of social Darwinism under-
pinned Hitler’s crusade against ethnic minorities.

In contemporary society, Jewish author Bruce Abramson observed that
Christians are the “first target” of an “ascendant cultural secularism” (2015).
Christianity has increasingly been blamed for social and historical ills, even
as its positive contributions have been discounted. The Pew Research Center
reported in 2014 that 74% of Democrats and 83% of Republicans agreed that
religion is losing influence in American life; 44% of Democrats and 71% of
Republicans expressed that religion does “more good than harm in American
society” (Lipka 2019). During the coronavirus pandemic, US Supreme Court
Justice Samuel Alito cautioned that religious freedom in the US is “in danger
of becoming a second-class right” (Barnes 2020).

Open Doors USA reported that 2019 was the “worst year yet” for perse-
cution of Christians: “260 million Christians experience[d] high levels of per-

secution” (World Watch List 2020), up from 215 million in 2018. The report noted that “in the most populated countries on earth, Christians live in a surveillance state,” and that “violent Islamic extremism” is “the global, dominant driver of persecution, responsible for initiating oppression and conflict in 35 of the 50 countries” where Christians experience severe persecution (Zylstra 2018).

Indigenous Christians in restricted nations often constitute the primary, and sometimes the only, audience for LDS proselytism. Christian populations in the Near East, some of the oldest in the world, have declined markedly due to persecution and are “on the verge of disappearing in Iraq and Syria” (World Watch List 2020). Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda noted that Western Christian leaders bear responsibility for their silence in the face of genocide against Middle Eastern Christians (Kiely 2019).

The Unreached World

The opening of new mission fields in the second half of the twentieth century brought the LDS message to wider audiences. Whereas the US origin of most missionaries opened doors in the postwar years due to international goodwill, Van Beek noted that the church’s “USA connection ... in just a few decades has shifted from an asset to a liability” not only with regard to geopolitical rivals, but even for traditional allies (2005).

In 2019, fifty nations with a combined population of 3.23 billion (42% of the world’s population) prohibited or severely restricted proselytizing. Another seven nations with 1.44 billion inhabitants (18.7% of the world’s population) allow limited proselytizing but severely restricted foreign missionaries or imposed moderate restrictions on outreach. Reported LDS membership in restricted and limited nations constituted only 0.26% of the world total. When unreported estimated membership (primarily in Russia and China) is included, this figure increases to approximately 0.6%.

Today, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not report an official church presence (excluding expatriate communities) in only a few countries in which proselytizing is broadly permitted. In mid-2019, these nations had a combined population of 53 million, constituting less than 1% of the world’s estimated 7.71 billion people. Excluding microstates, they include in descending order by population Burkina Faso, Chad, South Sudan, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Equatorial Guinea. Burkina Faso, Chad, and The Gambia are Muslim-majority nations and Guinea-Bissau is a Muslim plurality

nation. South Sudan experienced a civil war that achieved ceasefire only in 2020; Christians in Burkina Faso have faced violent attacks.

Prospects for entry into restricted nations appear considerably dimmer than was the case for the Church's entry into Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Many unreached countries are authoritarian and appear poised to remain such. Economic reforms in China, in conjunction with state press and surveillance, have deflected impetus for human rights reforms. In India, foreign missionary visas are tightly limited. Faiths with strong member-missionary and media outreach have achieved considerable growth, whereas the LDS Church has struggled to utilize these opportunities.

Most completely unreached nations are Muslim-majority nations. The vast number of Muslims worldwide—1.8 billion in 2015, according to Pew (Lipka 2017)—and expectations of further increase make outreach to Islam a key area for future LDS growth prospects. World population growth rates are expected to decline from 1.1% in 2010 to 2015 to 0.4% in 2045 to 2050 (Lipka 2017), whereas Muslim populations are expected to nearly double (Pew 2015b), due mainly to high fertility rates (Lipka and Hackett 2017). The Pew Research Center projects that “during the next four decades, Islam will grow faster than any other major world religion,” and will overtake Christianity by 2055 (Pew 2015a).

Among the fifty-one Muslim-majority nations, forty with a combined population of 1.43 billion prohibit or severely restrict Christian proselytism. Segregation along sectarian and ethnic lines is often enshrined in law and practice. The LDS Church reported combined 2019 membership of 23,667 in seven of these nations (with 78% of those members living in Malaysia and Indonesia), where outreach is conducted almost exclusively among the non-Muslim minority. In the Gulf States, membership consists of foreign expatriates and migrant workers with few if any native members. Another four nations with 61.6 million people impose moderate legal or societal limitations on missionary work. Only seven—three in Europe and four in West Africa—with 31.2 million people allow relatively unfettered proselytism.

Demographic data show few “out-switchers” from Islam. The Pew Research Center reported that “religious switching—which is expected to hinder the growth of Christians by an estimated 72 million between 2015 and 2060—is not expected to have a negative net impact on Muslim population growth” (Lipka and Hackett 2017). From 2010 to 2015, Christianity lost 9 million adherents to religious switching worldwide, whereas Islam gained a half million. Even in Europe (Pew 2017) and the US (Mohamed and Sciupac 2018), few

Muslims leave the faith. The few LDS converts from Islam have primarily been immigrants to Western nations with attenuated Islamic institutions, or have come from marginal groups.

Sharing of non-Islamic faiths in Muslim-majority nations is typically restricted not only by government regulations, but by fundamentalist Islam's capital prohibitions on blasphemy and apostasy. These prohibitions block the public preaching of other religious traditions, suppress critical inquiry, and prevent Muslims from leaving their faith (Pew 2013). Islam thus asserts a privileged position for itself which does not permit competition or critique. Kramer noted that nowhere in the Muslim world is religion separate from politics, thus political Islam is a tautology (2003). Most allow Muslims to proselytize Christians and other religious minorities, whereas Christians are not permitted to proselytize Muslims. Attitudes toward intermarriage vary by country but tend to restrict marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men more than of non-Muslim women to Muslim men (Van Niekerk and Verkuyten 2018); children of intermarriage are traditionally raised as Muslims. These and other asymmetric measures have led to ongoing Islamization and declines in non-Muslim populations across the Islamic world (Fargues 2001).

Even if legal barriers to proselytism were swept away, outreach would still be severely limited due to high levels of social hostility, as evaluated by the Pew Research Center's Social Hostility Index on religious restrictions (Pew 2019a). Majorities in Pakistan, Egypt, and some other populous Muslim-majority nations support the death penalty for those who leave Islam (Pew 2013). US military adventurism in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s to "make the world safe for democracy" unleashed ethnic and sectarian violence instead of facilitating open societies. The Arab Spring in the early 2010s toppled several dictators yet ameliorated human rights only in Tunisia. A large portion of the world's population will likely remain inaccessible to LDS proselytism, with little medium-term prospect for improvement.

Muslims and other minorities should be accorded full rights, protections, and respect in Western societies. Fear and hate against any group are abhorrent, whereas tolerant diversity benefits societies. Yet the challenges faced by religious minorities in many Islamic nations are substantive. Religious and political leaders need the courage to boldly advocate equal rights and protections for members of oppressed minorities—religious, ethnic, and otherwise—as Pope Francis did on a trip to Iraq in March 2021 (Rocca and Adnan 2021).

Conclusion

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, once lauded for rapid growth and high member devotion, has experienced slowing growth and high attrition. These trends have arisen from a combination of institutional and societal factors. Institutional factors have resulted in the LDS Church losing the large majority of its international converts over the past fifty years. Societal conditions in much of the world are decidedly less favorable for LDS growth prospects than in the late twentieth century, and are likely to worsen. In a challenging landscape, only the most efficient and agile faiths will continue to achieve strong growth. Among the Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the LDS Church, the latter has fallen to a distant third in active membership.

LDS congregational growth averaged below one percent annually from 1999 to 2019. Between 2009 and 2019, nominal membership growth averaged less than 1.6% annually; active membership growth has almost certainly been under one percent over this period. In 2020, the LDS membership growth rate fell below the world population growth rate. Aggregate trends suggest that the LDS Church is likely to experience meager growth in congregations and active membership over the next forty years. Annual "real growth" in congregations and active membership is likely to continue to average around one percent or less. Contemporary trends offer no major developments that appear likely to reverse these dynamics outside of modest growth prospects in Africa, where the LDS Church remains far behind its peers. Based on the current trajectory, active LDS membership may peak at or below six million, and would require a major shift in dynamics to rise above seven million. The number of LDS congregations worldwide is unlikely to much exceed 45,000 by 2060 without sustained improvements in growth and retention, or a policy of smaller congregations.

In the United States, the influence of the LDS Church is likely approaching its zenith. Gradual plateauing is likely to be followed by some decline. This may already be occurring, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Core membership will persist across Latin America with varying national trends, but nominal membership increases are likely to remain uncoupled from congregational growth with new converts principally replacing losses. Further congregational contractions across Europe are all but certain. The faith's "second harvest" will not be in Europe, nor likely even in the United States or Latin America.

With a longer horizon, even the assertion of sustained real growth for the international LDS Church is questionable. Meager growth is likely to be precarious. Due to the multiplicative effect of fertility and youth retention, as well as of convert baptisms and convert retention, compounding over time, a decrease in any factor can tip the balance from slight growth or stable maintenance into decline. If the LDS Church is able to stave off eventual declines in congregations and active membership, it will likely be due to gains in Africa offsetting losses elsewhere.

LDS growth is inhibited by deeply-rooted challenges toward which there are limited adaptive responses and no panaceas. The faith's traditional competitive advantages of high fertility, youth retention, and a large full-time missionary force continue to erode. Few active members participate in personal evangelism. Much of an increasingly sparse harvest has been lost to rush-baptize programs that have failed to fortify prospective converts with habits of regular church attendance and other lifestyle changes prior to baptism. The burden of inactivity has discouraged international members and diverted resources and manpower from outreach. These practices have left the LDS Church numerically deprived of the active membership that it could have achieved with a timely focus on convert preparation and retention.

Few positive trends have the potential to reverse portents of future decline. 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, including the shortening of the Sunday meeting schedule, the transition to the ministering program, and reduction in the minimum age of missionary service, have helped promote retention of youth while enhancing the experience for active members. Local standards have improved convert retention in some missions. Yet global convert retention remains low.

Nor is the LDS Church's reported accumulation of over \$100 billion in investments (Carlisle 2019) an unabashed positive, as the faith's wealth has subsidized less efficient practices. For decades, the LDS Church has outspent its competitors by at least an order of magnitude per convert, even while achieving far lower convert retention and denying international congregations the opportunity to become self-sustaining (Stewart 2007, 403–406). These finances may help the LDS Church to maintain broad infrastructure even with a potential waning of active membership, yet it is not clear that the faith has the expertise to effectively leverage funding into sustainable organic growth.

Principal-agent incentives continue to be misaligned, and accountability remains elusive. Multiple revisions of the missionary manual provide no indication that the LDS Church will abandon longstanding policies pushing the baptism of prospective converts over short periods with cursory teaching. Nor have new initiatives breathed life into low member participation in personal evangelism. Small changes that appear safe to policymakers may cushion the decline, yet these adjustments lack the power to transform the dynamics. Mixed messages have undermined ostensible standards.

More efficacious remedies may fall beyond the constraints of an organization already demonstrating senescence. Even if more substantive reforms were to be implemented, the LDS Church would still face a difficult path. Practices that have been inculcated into generations of members, missionaries, and their leaders have considerable inertia that does not vanish with the issuance of new guidance. The impact of late and partial reforms is much diminished compared to timely, forward-looking ones.

Additional research on key topics is needed. Many have been represented here only briefly, each of which could fruitfully be explored in dedicated works. The dysfunction of the Mormon member-missionary program and the faith's growth and positioning in Africa are two key areas regarding which little systematic research has been published to date.

Trends point to continued underperformance of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints compared to its competitors. While a range of possibilities exist, the default path is for further decline of growth rates. The LDS Church is unlikely to regain its former growth trajectory. Prospects of becoming a major world faith have faded and are likely beyond reach.

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