

Costs, Tradeoffs, and Unintended Consequences of International Mormon, Seventh-day Adventist, and Jehovah's Witness Growth

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Abstract

The LDS (Mormon) Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Jehovah's Witness faith are Christian restorationist movements originating in the nineteenth century United States. Each has sought to achieve widespread outreach and world growth. The rejection of more recent Christian traditions by these faiths by claims of revelation or inspiration has allowed wide opportunities for innovation, while incurring additional risks.

Historically, these faiths have implemented different approaches to growth which have also had implications for race, culture, and gender. Seventh-day Adventism has sought to develop strong indigenous churches worldwide while remaining true to core values and beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses have positioned themselves as diverse and multicultural while implementing a highly standardized and centrally controlled religious experience. Mormonism emphasized building a Zion "homeland," which allowed greater latitude in the development of its cultural institutions, but has experienced difficulty in relating to other cultures in a globalized world.

Jehovah's Witnesses work primarily through member-missionaries and distribute vast quantities of outreach literature. Whereas nearly two-thirds of U.S. Jehovah's Witnesses are women, the LDS Church has long taught that missionary work is primarily a priesthood (male) responsibility. Mormon outreach has been conducted primarily by young full-time missionaries, yet member-missionary participation has been below average for all U.S. Christians. Adventists have implemented the most diverse outreach, widely mobilizing members, outreach pioneers, radio, television, and educational and medical institutions.

Data is analyzed in a multidisciplinary analysis informed by missiology, sociology, and economics. Costs, tradeoffs, synergies, and unintended consequences are evaluated. Key findings are analyzed and implications are discussed. Potential "best practices" will be identified in a follow-up presentation.

[Slide 1] Costs, Tradeoffs, and Unintended Consequences of International Mormon, Seventh-day Adventist, and Jehovah's Witness Growth

[2] Conflict of Interest Disclosures

No external funding was received for this research

[3] Level of Evidence

This presentation consists of Level of Evidence IV and V research on a scale of I to V, with I representing the most methodologically robust research and V represented the least.

[4] Data and Sources

Data and sources are as follows

[5] Author Background

My background related to this topic comes from the study of church growth, or missiology.

[6] Areas Visited

I have traveled to over sixty countries to date for ethnographic and religious research.

[7] Economics as a Social Science

Since my own experience as a Mormon missionary in Russia from 1992 to 1994, I have been intrigued by the study of church growth, and questions regarding why some faiths thrive while others falter. I have attempted to understand as to why some faiths have been able to implement successful models with apparent ease, whereas others have struggled to implement basic steps to improve chronic problems with outreach and retention.

The social science of economics provides a powerful explanatory tool for human and organizational behavior.

[8] Disruptive Innovation

At times, organizations become sufficiently constrained by prior policy decisions that they are unable to adapt to changes in external circumstances in a timely and responsive way. New and less differentiated organizations have more flexibility and freedom to adopt practices more optimized for contemporary circumstances, whereas some faiths are still fighting yesterday's wars. Most new organizations fail, but from their ranks are born the victors of disruptive innovation.

[9] Christian Restorationist Movements

The present research evaluates three major outreach-oriented Christian restorationist movements: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon or LDS Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Jehovah's Witnesses or Watchtower Society. These faiths were all founded by prophetic figures in the Northeastern United States in the 19th Century in the background of the Second Great Awakening. All three taught that a return to early Christian practices and beliefs was needed, and expounded apocalyptic views of the destruction of the wicked and Second Coming of Christ as close at hand.

[10] Christian Restorationist Movements

At their founding, all three faiths were disruptive innovators. These groups have historically been marginalized by mainline Christian churches due largely to their claims of religious exclusivity, designation of other forms of Christianity as corrupt, and their role as religious disruptors who achieved much of their growth by proselytizing other Christians. Notwithstanding salient differences, these movements have been distinguished by high member commitment and global outreach.

[11] Adherent Growth

All three faiths have followed an upward trajectory in membership, although Mormon growth has decelerated even as Adventist growth has accelerated and Jehovah's Witness growth has remained steady. In 2017, LDS growth rates fell to their lowest levels since 1937, and convert baptisms dropped to a thirty-year low. In 2018, a new low for growth rates was set as baptisms of children of record fell to 102,102 and convert baptisms changed little from the 2017 number at 234,332. In 2016, the SDA Church baptized 1.2 million and net membership increased by 882,000; a record 1.27 million were baptized in 2017.¹

[12] Congregational Growth

Growth in congregations paints a bleaker picture for Mormons and corroborates observations of low member activity and convert retention. Whereas the number of Jehovah's Witness congregations nearly tripled from 43,000 in 1981 to 120,000 in 2017² and Seventh-day Adventist congregations quadrupled from 21,861 in 1981 to 86,576,³ Mormon congregations increased only 2.3 times from 13,213 in 1981 to 30,506 in 2017.⁴ Most Mormon congregational growth occurred by 1998, when there were 25,551 congregations. Over the past twenty years, the number of LDS congregations has increased by less than one percent annually. Although nominal membership is likely to increase, active Mormon membership in many areas is stagnant or declining.

Notwithstanding increasing secularization that has resulted in the decline of many mainline Christian churches, the fact remains that Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have found solutions which facilitate continuing or even accelerated growth, whereas Mormons have not.

If anything, the situation may be less favorable than charts demonstrating some continuing growth reflect. The nature Mormon congregations has changed in a manner which is less conducive to ongoing growth. In my own congregation, I am one of the youngest people in adult Sunday school, and approximately half of those administering the sacrament weekly are adults. As recently as five years ago, the sacrament was administered almost exclusively by the youth. Mormons are no longer having such large families, Mormon youth are increasingly not being retained, and convert retention has remained low.

¹ Seventh-day Adventist statistical reports are found at the annual yearbooks at <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>. Additional statistics and analysis are available at [adventistarchives.org](http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2018.pdf) and adventiststatistics.org. The 2018 report (for the 2016 and 2017 years) is online at <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2018.pdf>

² Jehovah's Witness Statistical Reports are available as the annual "Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide" and in Annual Yearbook of the Jehovah's Witnesses online at <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/>

³ Annual Yearbooks of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are available online at <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

⁴ 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>

The focus on Mormon disaffiliation of many sociological conferences does not appear to be disproportionate or gratuitous, but reflects a pervasive trend. Forward projection of current trends suggests that there may be fewer active Mormons in thirty years than there are today, whereas there will certainly be more Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Why is Mormonism stagnating, in spite of the largest full-time missionary force of any Christian denomination?

[13] Insights from Economics

These trends do not result from a single policy decision, but from an organization's cumulative history. One must look back to earlier stages of organizational development for causality underlying current results and to understand its incentives and tradeoffs.

New and relatively undifferentiated organizations harbor a wide range of possibilities, but as they select one path for development and resource allocation, alternative pathways close off. This is not to say that established organizations lack the capacity for change, but that they are constrained to a narrower set of possibilities. The more established an organization's practices, the more difficult fundamental change becomes, and some pathways become altogether unavailable.

While comparisons can be valuable, successful policies of one organization are often not directly transferable to another. This may be because one organization has greater or less opportunity for certain types of development based on prior structural and policy decisions than others. This does not mean that good ideas and effective practices of one organization cannot be profitably adapted to another, but that successful implementation is likely to require structural change rather than merely a new policy directive.

[14] Incentives and Tradeoffs

Whereas faiths have traditionally conveyed their policy decisions as reflecting divine inspiration or revelation, economics involves the study of incentives as motivating human and organizational behavior. Policy choices involve trade-offs. Few are all positive or negative. The net effect can depend greatly on circumstances. Each policy carries a cost, and who bears the cost can alter the incentives for decision-makers.

I have presented on ethics elsewhere,⁵ and will not evaluate practices on the basis of their ethics in this paper. Please understand that I am not indifferent to the ethics of policies discussed, but the language of economics requires that we speak in terms of costs, tradeoffs, and externalities. Similarly, my intent is not to challenge a faith's official stance that its policies are matters of inspiration or revelation. Rather, the lens of economics can offer new and constructive insights to a holistic appraisal of institutional policies.

[15] Gathering to Zion

A key organizational decision which has impacted all downstream development was the Mormon gathering to Zion, first in the American Midwest and then in the mountain West, whereas Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses built indigenous congregations with the intent of permanency.

⁵ Stewart DG, "Best Practices in Mission Ethics: History, Theology, and Social Research," American Society of Missiology, Saint Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana, 15 June 15 2019.

Mormons were “separated from the world” in their own communities, achieving greater cohesiveness and organizational control in an attempt to create a religious utopia and limit outside interference.

Nonetheless, the “Gathering to Zion” came at a high cost. In exchange for building a cohesive Mormon society in the Utah homeland, the faith’s missionary approach was to reap an immediate harvest rather than sowing for the long-term growth of local congregations. The emigration of most early converts to Utah territory left few behind to build up the Church locally. Mormonism thus defined itself early in its history as an American faith dependent on the preaching of foreign missionaries for growth rather than on the personal evangelism of local members.

[16] **Isolation vs. Integration**

Isolation allowed Mormon leaders to shape an entire society, not just a church. The regional dominance of the Mormon church created political and economic clout which has persisted to the present, whereas the Adventist Church is largely a non-entity in politics and most Jehovah’s Witnesses do not participate in the political system at all.⁶ Mormon retention was promoted by cultural as well as religious institutions.

The trade-offs included a disconnect from non-Mormons generally. There were few non-Mormons to preach to locally, and the conditions of missionary work in a Mormon-dominated culture are very different.

[17] **Missionary Work as Itinerant**

The Mormon policy of Gathering to Zion obligatorily led to itinerant missionary work being adopted as the permanent growth model. In contrast, Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses send itinerant preachers to found congregations, but quickly transition outreach responsibilities to local adherents.

Itinerant Mormon missionary work could be neatly compartmentalized and engaged on demand. Full-time missionary service became a rite of passage for young Mormon men transitioning to adulthood and subsequent family life.

While itinerant mission as a cultural institution for Mormon young men has helped to create the largest full-time missionary force of any major Christian denomination, it carries heavy downsides. Full-time missionaries incur higher economic costs for travel, housing, and board than locals living at home, and experience a learning curve with culture and often language. Itinerant missionaries are not connected to local communities and are often disconnected from how non-Mormons think and feel. Itinerant missionaries lack accountability and have no incentive for quality or for building strong local congregations, fueling a dynamic which favors quick baptisms over lasting conversion. The itinerant model of missionary work has led personal evangelism to be viewed as a compartmentalized activity rather than as a norm of gospel living, leading to low rates of member-missionary participation among Mormons.

⁶ Lipka, Michael. “A closer look at Jehovah’s Witnesses living in the U.S.” Pew Research Center, 26 April 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/26/a-closer-look-at-jehovahs-Witnesses-living-in-the-u-s/>

Research has shown that American Mormons are less likely to participate in personal evangelism than Christians in general.⁷ The Mormon nomenclature distinguishing between the Utah homeland as “Zion” and outlying areas as the “mission field” implies not only that mission outreach is performed in areas where Mormons constitute a minority, but that it does not occur – at least not as a widespread activity among Mormons themselves – in the Zion homeland.

[18] Preaching the Gospel as a Priesthood (Adult Male) Duty

A correlate to Mormon missionary work as itinerant is its designation from the faith’s inception as a priesthood duty of adult males. Male missionary service has been presented by church authorities as a requirement, or at least as a highly desirable quality, for marriage to a Mormon young woman. Mormon women were not encouraged in missionary service, but were instructed to marry and bear children during their fertile years. This encouraged larger families in higher birth rates. Research shows that US Mormons have one more child than the national average, although this trend does not hold among international Latter-day Saints.⁸

Trade-offs include that Mormon women are not systematically engaged in personal evangelism, notwithstanding research from other faiths that women are more likely to engage in personal evangelism than men.⁹ The Pew Research Center found that approximately two-thirds of Jehovah’s Witness proclaimers in the United States are women.¹⁰ International data suggests similar ratios.

Women are typically the primary nurturers and educators of children in the home. The Mormons’ failure to systematically engage women in outreach also means that Mormon children are not taught to share their faith, and most young men who arrive at the age of full-time missionary service have little or no prior experience and personal evangelism.

The emphasis on full-time missionary service as a universal male duty leads to a trade-off of quantity over quality, as many young men serve due to cultural or social expectations rather than for spiritual reasons.

[19] Celebrification and Cloistering of Church Leadership

The status of LDS leaders not only as spiritual guides, but as community leaders and even political figures, has resulted in the celebrification of church leadership. Church leaders, Mormons believe, are literally called by Jesus Himself like the apostles of the early Church. As a result, church leaders have wide-ranging authority and can speak on any matter. The current counsel of church leaders is considered on par with scripture. This allows teachings to be introduced for new circumstances rather than relying exclusively on the interpretation of ancient scripture.

The celebrification of Mormon leaders has also come with trade-offs. The leadership of the already isolated Church became increasingly cloistered, walled off from lay Mormon membership and much of the outside world behind layers of bureaucracy, with stage-managed

⁷ Barna, George, “Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity,” Barna Research Update, July 9, 2001, <https://www.barna.com/research/protestants-catholics-and-mormons-reflect-diverse-levels-of-religious-activity/>

⁸ Heaton, Tim B., “Religious Influences on Mormon Fertility: Cross-National Comparisons,” in James T. Duke, ed., *Latter-day Saint Social Life*, Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1998, 425–440.

⁹ See Stewart DG (2007), *Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work*, Cumorah Foundation, 421-423. <https://cumorah.com/lawoftheharvest.pdf>

¹⁰ Lipka, Michael. “A closer look at Jehovah’s Witnesses living in the U.S.” Pew Research Center, 26 April 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/26/a-closer-look-at-jehovahs-Witnesses-living-in-the-u-s/>

appearances at conferences and public events. Access to leaders and what information gets through to them is carefully controlled. The upper echelon of church leadership appears to have been genuinely unaware of the mission practices that were fueling a severe worldwide convert retention crisis until two of the apostles (Jeffrey R. Holland and Dallin H. Oaks) were assigned to live in Chile and the Philippines in the early 2000s to observe matters firsthand.¹¹

The celebrity status of church authorities makes it genuinely difficult for them to participate firsthand in mission outreach and to observe things as they are instead of receiving red-carpet treatment. This disconnect has propagated downstream to lower-level functionaries. Most if not all mission presidents I have known have formulated mission policies without ever going door to door to make new contacts and without teaching a single missionary lesson to a prospective convert. This disconnect hampers the quality of insight. The mantra of “Leadership by Example” is apparently deemed not to apply to Mormon missionary work. There are many managers, but few leaders.

[20] Meetinghouse Policy

The LDS Church’s policy is to build expensive US style meeting houses for small international congregations, whereas Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses seek or construct locally sustainable meeting places with local funds and volunteer time, supplemented when needed with limited international donations and labor. The Mormon practice of building expensive Western-style meetinghouses throughout the developing world arises from the paradigm of missionary work as an itinerant rather than indigenous activity. North American leaders have sought to re-create the Utah church worldwide instead of facilitating indigenous identity and expression.

In 2001, one news outlet estimated the cost of a Mormon meetinghouse in Ufa, Russia, at \$2.5 million.¹² In contrast, by 2003, Seventh-Day Adventists in Russia and Ukraine had purchased 291 church meeting places, including apartments, cottages, and other sites, for a total of \$3.5 million.¹³ Religion reporter Peggy Fletcher Stack reported that in Ghana, many refer to the LDS Church as the “rich church” because of its Western-style chapels which could not possibly be constructed on local funds.¹⁴

The high costs of constructing Western-style Mormon chapels throughout the developing world comes at the opportunity cost of precluding further expansion into receptive areas. This colonial practice makes international congregations perpetually financially dependent on the American church and hampers attempts to build local self-sufficiency, autonomy, and indigenous identity. The “rich church” is also the small church.

[21] Mormon Polygamy

Nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy has also presented long-term costs and tradeoffs. The origins and intent of polygamy are controversial even among Latter-day Saints scholars, and I offer no opinion.

¹¹ Moore, Carrie A., “Elder Holland ‘a Student’ in Chile,” Deseret News, 13 October 2002, <https://www.deseret.com/2002/10/13/19682857/elder-holland-a-student-in-chile>

¹² “Mormonsky Khram Otrkylsya v Ufe,” [Mormon Church Opens in Ufa— Russian], Mir Religii, May 30, 2001.

¹³ Kellner, Mark, “Russia: Church Planters Near Goals in Former Soviet Union,” Adventist News Network, 17 June 2003, <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2003-06-16/russia-church-planters-near-goals-in-former-soviet-union/>

¹⁴ Stack, Peggy F., “Why Mormonism, US-Born Faiths are Growing in Ghana,” Salt Lake Tribune, 6 June 2014. <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=58004010>

The environment in which polygamy could be instituted was influenced by Mormon isolation in communities of believers. The high costs of Mormon membership incurred by polygamy galvanized commitment and sharpened cultural distinctions between Mormons and non-Mormons. The demand for Mormons to separate themselves from the world helped to create a religious culture that could be shaped by the teachings of church leaders. As Mormons were already social pariahs, Church leaders would have perceived relatively lower costs from further departure from the cultural norms of American society. A portion of its costs were shifted from its practitioners to future generations.

A negative externality is a cost suffered by a third party not involved in a transaction. Mormon polygamy generated lasting negative externalities for generations of future Mormons and prospective converts who were never involved in its practice. Host societies' perception of Mormonism have been largely defined by the legacy of polygamy more than a century after its cessation. While polygamy mobilized Mormon commitment, it has galvanized opposition since the early days of the faith, and continues to be widely cited as a stumbling-block to belief in the Church's revelatory claims. It is likely at least in part because of this association that President Nelson has been eager to jettison the faith's traditional nickname.

Contemporary game theory provides insights into Mormon polygamy, among other topics. The Prisoner's Dilemma suggests that although mutual cooperation can offer a win-win situation for both parties, short-term gains can sometimes be achieved when one party adopts an adversarial position towards the other when trust is absent, and cooperation in the absence of reciprocity leads one to be harmed and exploited.¹⁵ However, when durable coexistence between two groups is needed, anti-cooperative actions on the side of the weaker group incur long-term costs. The practice of polygamy might have had fewer negative externalities if it occurred in a society which was truly isolated and not dependent on outside converts for growth, as was historically the case for some Muslim-majority states.

[22] **Utah Reformation (1856-57)**

Brigham Young's 1856-1857 Utah Reformation was ostensibly intended to promote Mormon orthodoxy and to maintain "purity" from outside influences. The Reformation is credited with achieving greater cohesion of church membership and an increase in the practice of polygamy.

However, heavy-handed policies led to up to 7,000 non-Mormons and dissidents fleeing Utah. Some shared their experiences with the press or lodged complaints with the U.S. government. Brigham Young was removed as the territorial governor, and the United States sent an army to Utah for enforcement.

As dissidents left Utah and shared their stories with the press, tales of polygamy and mistreatment of non-Mormons led to a sharp increase in negative media coverage of the LDS Church. Ron Bartholomew and Austin Cary demonstrated that five to seven times as many articles on the LDS Church were printed in the British press as in the prior decade, with 80% negative and only 1% positive.¹⁶ Convert baptisms in the United Kingdom plummeted by 55,000 in the prior decade (1846-1855) to 18,000 during the decade of the Utah Reformation (1856-

¹⁵ Principles of the relevance of game theory to institutional practices are expounded in Shy, Oz (1996), "Basic Concepts in Non-Cooperative Game Theory," in *Industrial Organizational Theory and Applications*, MIT Press, pp. 11-42, and in Corchon KC and Marini MA eds (2018), *Handbook of Game Theory and Industrial Organization*, Volume II: Applications, Edward Elgar Pub.

¹⁶ Bartholomew, Ronald, "Economic Inequality, Classism and Stewardship in 19th Century LDS Mission," and Austin Cary, "Social Injustice and Class Structure: Confluence of Negative and Positive Forces," American Society of Missiology, Saint Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana, 15 June 2019.

1865), and membership in the United Kingdom fell from 22,500 to 15,000. These negative externalities principally affected missionaries, British members, and prospective converts who were not parties to the Utah Reformation.

Had the LDS Church been truly isolated and not dependent on Gentile communities for growth, or in an authoritarian society without press freedom, the cost and benefit ratio of the Utah Reformation might have been different. As it was, the results were precisely what one would expect from analysis of tradeoffs. Repressive behaviors towards non-Mormons were counterproductive for a faith which depended upon proselytism for convert growth.

[23] **Religious Exclusivism vs. Christian Pluralism**

Theological teachings also involve trade-offs. One example is the religious exclusivism of the LDS church and the Jehovah's Witnesses, consisting of claims to be the "Only True Church" or "God's organization on earth." Similar claims were important to Christianity supplanting paganism in the Roman Empire, and remain important to global Islam. Exclusivist denominations have greater impetus for worldwide outreach, and are better able to enforce orthodoxy of doctrine and practice. However, they also face opposition and ostracism from other groups for so-called "sheep stealing." Under Russia's 2016 "anti-terrorism" legislation, claims to religious exclusivity are prohibited as allegedly constituting "religious extremism," even without threat or violence.¹⁷

[24] **Dynamics of Non-Exclusivism**

Non-exclusivism facilitates different global dynamics, as demonstrated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which backed off of exclusivist claims decades ago to mainstream. This has facilitated pragmatic decision-making, as Adventists have focused resources on outreach to receptive areas with few Christians, rather than feeling an obligation to invest heavily in saturated religious markets with low receptivity. The low-cost and high-yield approach has generated a high return on outreach investment. Membership is heavily skewed toward the developing world, with over half of Adventist living in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, especially in India.

In contrast, the Mormon missionary program has always assumed a Christian background. Outreach remains concentrated in predominately Christian areas, with little attempt by mission planners to find effective methods of outreach to non-Christians.

[25] **Family Policies**

The LDS Church's emphasis on the patriarchal family and traditional gender roles also has trade-offs. It promotes marriage within the faith, ostensibly strong families, and a higher birth rate which facilitated membership growth independent of proselytism. It offers church leadership wide control over cultural institutions.

This emphasis comes at the cost of marginalization of those who do not fit the ideal. While much recent research and reporting has focused on challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals, other groups also experience marginalization. Many who cannot find a suitable spouse or lack opportunity experienced challenges as singles in a family church. Some outside of the Utah heartland with few potential Mormon partners are pressured into marriage with unsuitable mates

¹⁷ Chandler MA, "Missionaries are struggling to work under new Russia law banning proselytizing," Washington Post, 20 September 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/20/missionaries-struggle-to-work-in-russia-under-new-law-that-bans-proselytizing>

based on the overriding criterion of religious activity.¹⁸ Divorcees are excluded from church leadership. It is easier for the institution to categorically exclude those who do not fit the ideal rather than to individually evaluate the merits.

I have at times wondered about this in my own extended family. My mother's family was raised outside of Utah, and three of her five siblings never married due to the inability to find suitable Mormon partners. I could not help but wonder if they might not have lived happier and more productive lives if they had been allowed to consider dating and marriage beyond the very small pool of local Mormons. Yet for the faith to endorse marriage to non-Mormons would result in fewer families with two Mormon parents and is therefore unlikely, notwithstanding the cost to those on the margins. These challenges can be difficult to understand and appreciate for those who live in the Mormon heartland and are awash in social opportunities for themselves and their own children.

[26] **Spiritual vs. Secular Engagement**

Watchtower Society Founder Charles Taze Russell wrote: "the human institutions called churches, while containing some members of the true Church, are merely social clubs. There is but one Church, and it is scattered everywhere."¹⁹ The Jehovah's Witness organization has emphasized constant preaching as the principal duty of adherents. There are no ecclesiastically-sponsored social activities or sport; witnesses eschew civic participation.

The singular focus of all effort and resources on proselytism has achieved impressive results. In 2018, over 8.3 million Jehovah's Witness proclaimers logged over 2 billion hours of field work²⁰ - an average of 20.6 hours of preaching per month, with some Witnesses devoting far more time. The Witnesses have achieved continuing growth even in difficult fields like Eastern Europe where other outreach-oriented faiths are stagnant or declining. No other religious group achieves the reach or per capita effort of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Yet these accomplishments come at considerable cost in the lives of adherents. The Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study (published 2015) found that in the United States, the Jehovah's Witnesses have the lowest rate of higher education of any major religious group: 63% had a high school education or less, and only 9% completed an undergraduate college degree - less than one-third of the national average.^{21,22} Witnesses were also among the lowest earners of any faith. Those who leave the faith have cited financial hardships and limited career prospects due to forgoing educational opportunities in young adulthood to engage in preaching.²³

By largely compartmentalizing mission outreach to periods of full-time missionary service, the LDS Church has promoted a life cycle which promotes full subsequent attention to education,

¹⁸ Decoo, Wilfried, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," *Dialogue*, 29/1 (Spring 1996): 97-113.

¹⁹ Russell, Charles T. *Expanded Biblical Comments 1879-1916, Commentary of the Old and New Testament*. Ephesians 4:4, R4878:6

²⁰ 2018 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide. <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/2018-service-year-report/>

²¹ Lipka, Michael. "A closer look at Jehovah's Witnesses living in the U.S." Pew Research Center, 26 April 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/26/a-closer-look-at-jehovahs-Witnesses-living-in-the-u-s/>

²² Pew Research Center, Religious Landscape Study, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/jehovahs-witness/>

²³ Vander Ploeg, Luke, "Lack Of Education Leads To Lost Dreams And Low Income For Many Jehovah's Witnesses," National Public Radio, 19 February 2017. <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/19/510585965/poor-education-leads-to-lost-dreams-and-low-income-for-many-jehovahs-Witnesses>. Accessed 5 November 2017.

family, and career. The Pew study found that U.S. Mormons are the most educated major Christian group, whereas Jehovah's Witnesses are the least educated. Yet Mormons struggle with low member-missionary participation and declining convert growth.

[27] **Organizational Failures – “Every Member a Missionary”**

We can appreciate the impact of institutional history by considering organizational failures of the LDS church in implementing the teachings of three of its presidents. In 1959, President David O. McKay introduced the directive “every member a missionary.”²⁴ Sixty years later, there is little indication of any progress towards this goal. LDS apostle M. Russell Ballard cited church missionary department research in 2000 that only 3-5% of LDS members in the US regularly participate in missionary work, and that Mormons were generally much more anxious and uptight in gospel discussions than non-Mormons.²⁵ George Barna reported in 2001 that only 26% of Latter-day Saints in the United States report any effort to share their faith with others over the prior month, compared to 61% of Pentecostals and Assemblies of God members, 57% of non-denominational Christians, and 30-35% of all Christians.²⁶

The prophetic directive was unable to overcome prior institutional choices, including that of missionary work as an adult male responsibility for compartmentalized periods of full-time callings and not as a regular element of gospel living for all members, the perception of missionary work as itinerant instead of indigenous, of sending instead of being. The Gathering to Zion reinforced Mormon cultural isolation from non-Mormons. Leaders and members alike had little if any experience of sharing their faith with friends and neighbors – only with strangers far from home.

[28] **Organizational Failures – Global Mission Planning**

LDS President Spencer W. Kimball's vision of strategic global mission planning²⁷ has never been seriously implemented. Whereas Pres. Kimball envisioned outreach into new areas as fast as possible and the allocation of resources and manpower to areas where they would make the most difference, the church bureaucracy has gone in the opposite direction.

The Mormon “Building from Centers of Strength” policy implemented in 1993 restricts outreach into new areas and concentrates efforts on often stagnant areas with large existing member bases, while making little if any account of time-sensitive opportunities and the duty to the unreached.²⁸ Radio, television, print, and other media have been utilized little for Mormon evangelism outside of North America. The Mormon missionary program lacks coherent global planning, ostensibly due to delegation of authority to area presidencies who hold the “priesthood keys” for that area, but lack any meaningful discretionary outreach budget or coordination with wider church departments.

Although the world's major people groups and most spoken languages are well known, the LDS Church makes no attempt to develop language resources in advance of entering an area.

²⁴ Holman, Marianne, “‘Every Member a Missionary’ for 50 Years,” Ensign, April 2009,

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2009/04/news-of-the-church/every-member-a-missionary-for-50-years>

²⁵ Ballard, M. Russell, “Members Are the Key,” Ensign, September 2000.

²⁶ Barna, George, “Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity,” Barna Research Update, July 9, 2001, <https://www.barna.com/research/protestants-catholics-and-mormons-reflect-diverse-levels-of-religious-activity/>

²⁷ Kimball, Spencer W., “When the World Will Be Converted,” Ensign, October 1974, originally presented at Regional Representatives Seminar, April 4, 1974.

²⁸ see Stewart DG, “Correlates of International Church Growth and Member Activity, 1997-2017: Multivariate Regression Analysis,” UVU MSSA Conference, 6 March 2019, <https://cumorah.com/2019-Stewart-UVU-MSSA.pdf>, and accompanying charts at <https://cumorah.com/2019-Stewart-UVU-MSSA-PPT.pdf>

Official policy reflects circular logic. Language translations are made only when there is a sufficiently large pool of members speaking that language, yet there is no obvious mechanism for attracting converts when no meaningful church literature is available in their language. Among countless examples of problems that could be cited with this policy, the Georgian-language translation of the Book of Mormon was completed only in 2018, after more than twenty years of proselytism in the country.²⁹ At the time, there were only 268 LDS members in the country in a single congregation, compared to over 18,000 Jehovah's Witnesses. These poor results in receptive areas hold no mystery, and represent the predictable result of institutional policies.

In contrast, the Seventh-day Adventist Church implemented a strategic Global Mission initiative in 1990,³⁰ sending Global Mission Pioneers to unreached areas and coordinating satellite broadcasts, radio, print and other media to expand their outreach. With careful coordination and planning, Seventh-day Adventists have experienced increasing world growth with record numbers of converts even as LDS growth has declined to record lows.

[29] Organizational Failures – “Flooding the Earth” with the Book of Mormon

LDS President Ezra Taft Benson's admonition to “flood the earth with the Book of Mormon”³¹ in 1988 was widely disavowed by Church bureaucrats who felt that Benson's emphasis was “wasteful.”

In the early 2000s, approximately 5 to 5.6 million copies of the Book of Mormon were printed annually,³² representing an expenditure of less than one dollar per year per LDS member. The average full-time LDS missionary distributes less than one copy of the Book of Mormon per week when utilization by members is considered.

In contrast, the Jehovah's Witness Watchtower and Awake! Magazines used in proselytism have print runs of 42 and 41 million copies per issue.³³ In the early 1990s, the Jehovah's Witnesses were distributing over 5,000 tons of literature annually in Russia, while the few LDS missionaries contacted an average of only 5-10 people per day.³⁴

“Every Member a Missionary” and “Flood the Earth with the Book of Mormon” have been little more than empty slogans for Mormon outreach, whereas “feel-good, do nothing” programs like the missionary dinner program have taken on a life of their own. Why was Ezra Taft Benson's prophetic mandate “dead on arrival,” with distribution of the Book of Mormon amounting to barely a trickle?

²⁹ Martinich, Matthew. “Georgian Translation of the Book of Mormon Completed and Published.” LDS Church Growth Blog, 15 November 2018. <http://ldschurchgrowth.blogspot.com/2018/11/georgian-translation-of-book-of-mormon.html>

³⁰ Global Strategy Resolution,” First Business Meeting, Fifty-Fifth General Conference Session [of Seventh-day Adventist Church], 5 July 1990, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1990-07.pdf> The document notes: “VOTED, To accept and enthusiastically endorse the concept of Global Strategy, as adopted by the 1989 Annual Council, and to mobilize every believer and all church organizations and institutions in achieving our global mission.” Another key element of the global mission strategy is the SDA Church's: “Official Statements-Guidelines. Engaging in Global Mission,” 1 June 2003, <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/guidelines/article/go/-/engaging-in-global-mission/>. As relevant to higher SDA retention worldwide, the guidelines require regular church attendance and integration of prospective converts into local congregations before baptism: “A candidate must be guided by the local community of believers until the community can testify that the candidate has reached an adequate knowledge and experience of the Seventh-day Adventist faith.”

³¹ <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/10/flooding-the-earth-with-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

³² “Taking the Scriptures to the World,” Ensign, July 2001: 24.a

³³ *The Watchtower*. September 2019, p.2

³⁴ As reported from a missionary survey by President Thomas F. Rogers, Russia Saint Petersburg Mission Conference, 1993.

While several factors were involved, the imprint of the organization's early circumstances figures prominently. The LDS Church of the gathering was a Utah-based community which published literature primarily for local devotees. In contrast, the parent organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, was founded by Charles Taze Russell as a printing house and distribution network for outreach literature.

[30] **Implementing Change**

Some express frustration at the slow and often inadequate institutional change in response to societal needs. Economics informs us that organizations do not have the freedom to adopt any policy. The range of feasibility is influenced by its history, structure, and prior organizational decisions. An organization incurs greater switching costs for changes at the boundaries of its constraints. Only the most focused organizations are able to achieve their optimums.

[31] **Constrained Optimum**

The most interesting and decisive phenomena in economics occur at the margins, under boundary conditions. The best that is reasonably achievable for an organization under current internal constraints and external circumstance is called the constrained optimum.³⁵ The constrained optimum may still be far from the global optimum. Boundaries may change over time as the organization embarks in new directions, opening up new possibilities.

[32] **Changing Conditions**

As circumstances change, the global optimum also changes. Policies formulated for yesterday's needs may be unhelpful or even counterproductive under today's circumstances. For example, Mormon outreach approaches tailored to traditional families of Christian background have less traction among young people who are less likely to identify themselves as Christian or to have been raised in a traditional family.

[33] **Conclusion**

These are just a few examples of the tradeoffs involved in the organizational policies of contemporary Christian restorationist movements. Each policy has a cost. As we have seen, many deliver unintended consequences or negative externalities. Institutional culture, history, and prior policy decisions can help us to understand why some organizations effectively implement positive change and why others fail.

In each policy area, organizations should seek to achieve a "constrained optimum," which is the best reasonably achievable under current circumstances. Achieving the best results requires a stretch, as optimum is often at the boundary of feasibility. Multiple factors must be analyzed and coordinated to find the true optimum and to minimize or avoid unintended consequences.

In a future paper, I will discuss the process of identifying potential "best practices" to achieve specified objectives under varying circumstances while minimizing negative externalities and respecting ethical principles. For now, I leave this topic for individual contemplation.

³⁵ Morgan, Peter (2015), *An Explanation of Constrained Optimization for Economists*, University of Toronto Press. For a more mathematical approach, see Prosser, Mike (1993). "Constrained Optimization by Substitution," in *Basic Mathematics for Economists*. New York: Routledge. pp. 338–346