

# MORMON SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

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Michael E. Nielsen, Editor

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### President's Message

The current newsletter does a nice job of illustrating the past and future activities of the Mormon Social Science Association. The "Albuquerque Highlights" and "Business Meeting Minutes" sections, along with the abbreviated text of the 1995 Vernon Lecture given by Jim Duke do a nice job of summarizing our major 1995 activities. In addition, the enclosed "Proposed By-Laws" point to the future activities of the association. I strongly encourage all members to read the proposed by-laws carefully and return your ballot along with your dues for 1996.

Although the bi-annual Vernon Lecture will not be a part of our 1996 annual meeting in Nashville, we do anticipate two exciting MSSA sponsored sessions along with the MSSA Business Meeting/Breakfast on Sunday morning, November 10th. Look for more details on the specifics of the sessions in our next newsletter. Finally, let me express my thanks to the many individuals who help with the work of the association. MSSA's overall good health is owing to your efforts. I look forward to focusing some of my energies over the next two years to helping to sustain that good health.

Larry Young

### Music City Awaits

Nashville Tennessee is the site of the MSSA's next meetings, to be held in conjunction with the SSSR and RRA November 8-10, 1996. You probably know Nashville as the home of country music, but it boasts several other attractions such as fine restaurants, antebellum homes, a system of caverns, and other activities to fill your hours away from the convention. The site of the meeting, the Loews Vanderbilt Plaza, has a reputation for good service. Plan to join us for a weekend of interesting research and relaxing social life.

### Albuquerque Highlights

The 1995 MSSA meetings featured many interesting papers on Mormon studies. Several sessions of the conference focused on LDS church growth rates, factors associated with the growth, and some of the implications of that growth. In a standing-room-only crowd, Rod Stark discussed his predictions of 40% LDS church growth.

Jim Duke continued this theme in his Glenn M. Vernon Memorial Lecture. In addition to the factors cited by Stark, Duke finds several other factors contributing to LDS growth rates. An abbreviated version of his lecture is included in this issue of the newsletter.

Several other sessions were conducted by MSSA scholars or dealt with Mormon themes. Many addressed issues of church growth and the

problems associated with high growth rates in diverse cultures. Also common were presentations on the general theme of gender and identity. Social scientists interested in Mormonism had many stimulating sessions to attend.

### **1995 Business Meeting Minutes**

The 1995 Business Meeting was held Sunday morning. A continental breakfast was provided to stimulate attendance at the early hour. (Several scholars were added to our ranks, suggesting that the experiment was successful!) Business discussed at this year's meeting included the following items:

- Lynn Payne's report on finances urged us to move money from a checking account to an interest-bearing account. The total balance, \$1650, was divided so that \$1000 is now in a savings account.
- Following up on items since the last meeting, the name of the organization was changed to Mormon Social Science Association; Dues were increased to \$5.00; the newsletter has been published on a regular basis; the by-laws were updated and will be voted on (see this issue of the newsletter); and our relationship with SSSR remains strong.
- Armand Mauss was thanked for his contribution of the annual bibliography that is published in the newsletter. Armand asked for assistance in identifying books and articles on the topic of Mormon social science.
- There was interest in publishing an abbreviated version of Jim Duke's Glenn Vernon address in an issue of the newsletter.
- There was discussion regarding the balance between having MSSA sessions focusing on Mormon social science, and integrating Mormon presentations with the broader SSSR conference.
- David Knowlton announced that there

will be a session devoted to Latin America in the 1996 SSSR meetings, and that there will be a conference in Guadalajara in early 1997. He urged people to consider attending.

- Grant Underwood has tabled his efforts to organize an "International Mormon Conference." He plans to develop interest in the topic in the future.
- There was interest expressed in establishing a Mormon Studies internet site. No assignments were made on this intriguing idea.
- Lynn Payne will discuss with Marie Cornwall the possibility of exchanging mailing lists with SSSR.
- There currently are 144 names on our membership mailing list. Approximately 55 % are current on their dues.
- Lynn Payne and Perry Cunningham will develop a 3-fold flyer that will be used as a marketing piece for MSSA.
- New officers will be nominated at the 1996 meetings. New officers will be needed to begin serving in the fall of 1997.
- Officers serving terms from 1995-1997 are Larry Young, President; Gary Shepherd, President Elect; Perry Cunningham, Past President; Lynn Payne, Secretary-Treasurer; Jim Duke, Jesse Embry, and Daryl White, Board Members; and Mike Nielsen, Newsletter Editor.

### **Announcements**

**Kudos to Marie Cornwall.** Marie Cornwall of BYU's Sociology Department has been selected as the new executive officer of SSSR. Please offer Marie your congratulations on this prestigious appointment.

**Revised By-laws.** Included in this edition of the newsletter is a copy of our revised by-laws. Perry Cunningham, outgoing MSSA President, along with other MSSA officers, have worked hard to update the by-laws, and have placed these for our vote. Please read carefully the revised by-laws, and

send in your vote for or against accepting them.

**Dues Notice.** Annual dues were increased at the last business meeting from \$3.00 to \$5.00. The increase is the first in several years. Please send in your dues promptly in order to reduce the expense of sending additional mailings. If you wish, you may pay dues for as many as three years (\$15.00) at a time.

**New "Web" Site.** A new internet "world-wide-web" site that may be of interest to MSSA members is Mike Nielsen's psychology of religion web page. It is found at <http://www.gasou.edu/psychweb/psyrelig/psyrelig.htm> (Type the address into your web browser as one line, with no spaces.)

**Newsletter Feedback.** Contact Mike Nielsen to give feedback about the newsletter. Errata, announcements and other correspondence should be addressed to Mike at Department of Psychology, Georgia Southern Univ., Statesboro, GA 30460-8041. Phone: (912) 681-5344 email: [mnielsen@gasou.edu](mailto:mnielsen@gasou.edu)

### **Vernon Lecture**

*Glenn Vernon, for whom this lecture is named, was the first president of the Society for the Sociological Study of Mormon Life (SSSML), now called the Mormon Social Studies Association. Jim Duke offered the Glenn M. Vernon Lecture at the 1995 MSSA meeting in St. Louis. The following is an abbreviated version of Duke's paper.*

### **The Determinants of the Growth of the LDS Church: A Test of Rodney Stark's Model of the Success of Religious Movements**

James T. Duke, Brigham Young University

### **Conditions for Growth**

In a forthcoming book, Rodney Stark discusses ten social conditions necessary for the growth of a religion. Elsewhere (Duke 1996a,

1996b), I have discussed the first two conditions Stark identified: (1) continuity with the religious institutions of the society, and (2) a medium level of tension with the host society. Here I discuss the other eight conditions and will add five others that I believe contribute to the success or decline of a NRM.

Stark argued that, sociologically, the LDS Church "got it right" and has consequently shown remarkable membership growth since 1830. In the decade of the 1980s, it grew 67 percent. My purpose is, I believe, similar to Stark's--to learn from what the LDS Church has done. Below I discuss each condition identified by Stark.

### **Non-Empirical Doctrines**

All religion teach non-empirical doctrines because they can't be disconfirmed, which would destroy the religion's legitimacy. Many of the doctrines of the LDS Church have an empirical referent, including the Word of Wisdom and the claim that The Book of Mormon is a record of people who lived on the American continent. Many other aspects of gospel living have practical applications in real lives. Many scholars today are making important studies of the empirical side of Mormonism, such as Donald Parry's (1992) studies of parallelistic poetic forms in The Book of Mormon, including about 300 chiasms (see also Welch 1992, Sorenson 1991). Such studies add substantial weight to the empirical claims of the LDS Church.

However, most of the doctrines of the LDS Church are non-empirical in nature, including the existence of God, the atonement of Christ, the possession of the priesthood, the plan of salvation and life after death, the eternal efficacy of living the commandments, and the holy calling of prophets. Latter-day Saints, like people of other denominations, believe that faith is necessary for exaltation and must be exercised within the arena of doubt and uncertainty. The LDS Church possesses many characteristics that are subject to falsification, while having many other non-empirical doctrines.

### **Adequate Legitimate Authority**

Stark identified three factors that make the authority of church leaders effective: (1) adequate legitimate authority, (2) doctrinal justifications, and (3) member participation. The LDS Church is especially effective in all three areas. While some critics believe the Church is too authoritarian, in my judgment it maintains a balance between too much and too little authority. Church leaders possess sufficient legitimacy that they can act "strongly" in enunciating doctrines, calling people to positions, and exercising church discipline. Typically they also are given high legitimacy by church members. Still, such legitimacy depends on the priesthood leader acting with care, dispatch, inspiration, and in a righteous manner as judged by the members.

The doctrinal claims of priesthood authority are among the strongest aspects of LDS doctrine. The priesthood lineage of any priesthood holder is easily identified and can be traced back to Joseph Smith, Peter, James and John, and Christ himself. The unpaid lay priesthood organization of the LDS Church inspires legitimacy and high rates of conversion because leaders are drawn from the same social backgrounds as members. Also, lay leadership encourages more committed voluntary service, as Finke and Stark have argued.

### **Motivated Membership and Missionary Service**

One obvious truism is that the more a church proselytes, the greater will be its rate of membership growth. The LDS Church send a remarkable number of its members on missions. In 1992, all Protestant churches in the U.S. and Canada had 44,713 missionaries (Mission Handbook 1995). At the end of 1993, the LDS Church had 48,708 missionaries in the field (Ensign May 1994:23), more than all Protestant churches combined. What is unique is that the LDS Church is able to motivate such a high percentage of its youth and older adults to give such missionary service.

### **High Fertility**

In his initial model, Stark emphasized a

normal demographic distribution of members. He now believes that demography is less significant than fertility. The LDS Church for many years has had higher than average fertility in the United States, although this is not true of LDS people in all nations. The average mean number of children ever born to LDS parents is approximately one child higher than the U.S. average (Heaton, Goodman and Holman 1994). Heaton (1989) found that LDS women had more children than the national average in the U.S., Great Britain, and Japan, but fewer children than the national average in Mexico. The decline in Mormon fertility in recent years is a concern, but LDS fertility is not likely to fall below the national average in most nations of the world due to the emphases on families and natality.

### **Weak Alternative Faiths and an Unregulated Religious Economy**

Barry Johnson and I (1993; 1989) investigated the influence of specific social factors on the rate of conversion to any religion in 198 nations and colonies. The most important influence is the presence of an open religious market that is not dominated by a single religion. When the majority religion is declining in market share, new religious movements will grow rapidly.

### **Strong but Non-Exclusive Social Attachments**

Substantial research demonstrates that social networks are significant in attracting converts and even more influential in the retention of converts. Many NRMs such as the Unification Church tend to recruit "isolates," but such converts do not bring other believers into the movement. However, LDS converts maintain close ties to family, friends, and neighbors, so they are able to reach out to these other people and share the gospel with them.

### **Avoiding Secularization**

The continued growth and viability of a denomination depends on avoiding secularization. Many indicators show that Mormons are less secularized than most other people in the United States, but changes in some indicators of secularization, such as premarital sexual relations,

suggest that Mormons are becoming more secularized than they were previously.

On the traditional dimensions of personal religiosity, especially belief and church attendance, there has been little decline in recent years in the United States (Princeton Religion Research Center 1994:4). On life-style and moral issues, however, there has been a substantial trend toward moral permissiveness and what Roof and McKinney call the New Morality.

Latter-day Saints follow the same trends-- stability and religious commitment on most dimensions of religiosity, accompanied by a decline in some of the indicators of personal morality. However, the LDS decline in these moral behaviors is slower than that of the United States as a whole, which indicates that LDS people are becoming increasingly different from other Americans.

Data that support a secularization trend among Latter-Day Saints include the following:

- fewer LDS youth engage in premarital sexual relations than American youth generally, but there has been an increase in the percent of LDS youth engaging in premarital sexual relations.
- There has been an increase in the percentage of Mormons obtaining a divorce, an indicator of the declining force of religion in their lives (Goodman 1992).
- An increasing percentage of married Mormon women with children are gainfully employed, which some regard as an indicator of secularization.
- There has been a decrease in the LDS birth rate and in the size of Mormon families, although whether this trend is evidence of secularization is questionable.
- The percent of young men who receive their temple endowments before the age of 26 has declined. The peak came between 1956 and 1963 at about 47% , and then declined to 35% by 1980.

Other data present a different picture with no indication of secularization.

- There has been an increase in the number of LDS members serving missions every decade since 1930. A higher percentage (4.35%) of LDS members served missions in the 1980s than any time since the decade of the 1840s, when 8.62% of Church members served missions.
- There has been a long-term increase in attendance at LDS Church services, from below 15% in 1900 to about 60% in the U.S. and perhaps 30-35 percent outside the U.S.

To explore the possible secularization of LDS people further, we used the General Social Surveys and divided LDS respondents into three cohorts (1972-1982, 1983-1988, 1989-1994). Although this cohort analysis covers a very short time period, we investigated whether the last cohort is more secularized or less conformist than the first cohort. The data show quite clearly that the first cohort is the least religious and conformist to LDS standards, that the second cohort is the most religious, and that the third cohort is only slightly less religious than the second cohort. These slight differences are probably due entirely to sampling effects. Some findings from the cohort analysis:

- LDS people are strongly religious.
- There is a consistent trend through the three cohorts of increasing favorability to women's issues.
- LDS people also respond to abortion issues by strongly rejecting abortion for any reason, while supporting abortion for rare conditions such as the threat to the mother's life, the threat of serious deformity to the child, and pregnancy because of rape.

### **Socialization of the Young and of Converts**

In a society in which religion is being challenged by unfavorable media portrayals and by the enticements of drugs, sex, and easy abortions, it is not easy to socialize a child to the standards and values of the LDS church. The appeal of reduced strictness and of diminished standards of conduct and morality is great. The "rising generation" tends to forget the sacrifices and commitments of the

previous generation (Mosiah 26). Secularization is often very appealing to both young and old.

### **Other Conditions That Foster Growth**

There are five other conditions not discussed by Stark that I believe have a substantial influence on the growth of religious movements in general and the LDS Church in particular.

### **Theological Doctrines**

Stark acknowledged that "doctrines matter," but also recognized that his model did not deal specifically with doctrinal issues. I believe the LDS doctrines most likely to be attractive and comforting to people include (1) the concept of a personal God and of the relationship of God to human beings, (2) the plan of salvation, including the purpose of mortality, the role of sin and suffering, the atonement of Christ, and what happens after death, (3) the belief that the atonement of Christ was efficacious for all and that God forgives people who repent of their sins, (4) the belief that all people will be worthy to live in one of the three degrees of glory, and the rejection of the notion that evil people will burn in hell for eternity, (5) the emphasis on love, faith, service, sacrifice, and obedience, (6) the belief in continuing revelation through modern prophets and the truth of modern scriptures, (7) the belief in the perfectibility of human beings, (8) the belief in salvation through both grace and works and the accompanying notion that people are responsible for their own destiny, (9) the strong emphasis on family relationships and commitments, including the belief that we live with relatives and loved ones in the after-life, (10) the code of health that leads to longer life and better health, and (11) the belief that there is one true church and one code of conduct approved by God, and that membership in this true church brings blessings and the promise of future happiness.

### **Appeal to All Socioeconomic Classes**

One of the major themes in The Book of

Mormon is the harmful effect of pride (Alma 4:6-13). The LDS Church currently appeals to a wide spectrum of people, including the very poor (e.g. in Brazil, the working class, the middle class, and educated professionals and business-people (in Korea, for example). The Church must continue to appeal to many socioeconomic segments of the population and not become identified with a single class.

### **Solving the Cultural Divisions in the International Church**

One theme emphasized by Church leaders in recent years is the challenge of growth and the expansion into new nations. Even more significant is the challenge of uniting people from very different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural traditions, and political and national doctrines. The test is to develop unity while not requiring all people to think and act like Americans. The essential doctrines of the gospel of Christ must be pursued while avoiding the Utah or American mentality and customs that are not part of the essence of the teachings of Christ. How much of the local culture and customs can be allowed in church programs or meetings is a crucial question. People of different nations may incorporate gospel teachings into their own traditions and still remain faithful to the essence of Christian living.

### **Avoid Schisms and Internal Dissension**

The history of religion is the history of schisms, and schisms predominate in The Book of Mormon. The most notable contemporary schism is the division into "Utah" LDS and RLDS churches, but the LDS Church has also been subject to schisms throughout its history. Melton (1989) listed 45 Mormon schismatic groups (in addition to the RLDS), with 8 Utah-based, 15 Missouri-based, 12 who practice polygamy, and 10 others. However, the LDS Church has been able to maintain strong unity among the great majority of its members. The defections have been relatively minor and have not appealed to broad segments of the Mormon community.

### **Effective Response to Current Issues**

Every organization confronts a series of current issues that must be dealt with successfully if it is to grow and adapt. The LDS Church has faced many crises in its history, including (1) the crisis of leadership following the assassination of Joseph Smith, (2) the conflict over polygamy, and (3) "the confrontation with modern skepticism and hedonism and the counterculture of youth" (Arrington 1972:168-169). I would add to Arrington's list (4) the crisis over the conferral of the priesthood to all worthy males, and (5) conflict concerning what may be called "women's issues."

The LDS Church has dealt effectively with the first four crises. It lost some members during each of the previous crises, and the defections seemed significant at the time, although today they seem relatively minor. There have and will be defections over women's issues, but we have yet to see whether this crisis will reach the proportions of some previous ones. I expect that many other crises will arise in the

future, and the response of the Church will influence its future growth rate.

In conclusion, there is ample evidence that the LDS Church is continuing to grow and prosper. But such growth is not inevitable and will not be accomplished without wisdom and effort. Prophets and most members of the LDS Church believe the Church will continue to grow and not decline in these latter days. But such can only occur if the social and religious conditions that led to decline in former times can be avoided in the future, and the conditions that have contributed to growth in the past 165 years can be understood and replicated. I believe that all fifteen conditions discussed here contribute significantly to LDS Church success. I am optimistic concerning the future growth of the LDS Church.

[Interested persons may write to Jim Duke for references and tables @ Department of Sociology, 884 SWKT, BYU, Provo, Utah 84602.