

MORMON SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

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Ryan T. Cragun, Editor

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President's Message

I hope this newsletter finds each of you well, that your work is progressing and that if you are in the Northern hemisphere, you are thawing out a little bit. (The sun has finally poked out in Salt Lake City.) Our 2004 meetings will be held in Kansas City, Missouri on October 22-24. The theme for the SSSR Meetings is *Overcoming Boundaries in the Scientific Study of Religion*. The Mormon Social Science Association (MSSA) will be sponsoring two sessions and our annual business meeting. Jan Shipps has agreed to present the bi-annual Glenn M. Vernon Lecture. She will direct her presentation towards current research on the renewal of external adverse opinion towards the LDS Church. Our second session will include a paper from Mike Nielsen on *Peace, Psychology and Religion: The Example of Mormonism*. He will be joined by Ryan Cragun presenting: *A Re-examination of Stark's LDS Church Growth Projections by Individual Countries*. We are planning on the other two papers coming from our first MSSA Student Paper Competition. Entries are currently under review. The MSSA Business Meeting will likely be held on Friday, October 22nd at noon. The time and date will be confirmed in a couple of months. We hope that you can attend these meetings and participate with us. Kansas City is a very central location and is quite accessible from most points in the US. I have also heard that other papers regarding Mormon topics are planned and will

be presented outside our two sessions.

I would like to summarize a few items from our most recent business meeting held in Norfolk, Virginia last October. Our membership hovers around 100 with about half of the members being active dues payers. That said, dues for 2004 are now payable. You should receive a reminder enclosed with this newsletter mailing.

We continue to consider ways of building our membership. Also enclosed in this mailing is a membership form for you to share with a colleague. Additionally, I will be contacting people who have presented papers on Mormonism in the past during SSSR meetings and invite them to join the association. Ryan Cragun, Armand Mauss and Mike Nielsen have been the driving force behind the student paper competition. This should yield some new members also. Should you have colleagues or students who might be interested in joining MSSA, please direct them to Cardell Jacobson at cardell@byu.edu

Enclosed in this newsletter is information about our 2004 elections. Please vote and return your ballots to Cardell Jacobson, MSSA Secretary/Treasurer.

Many thanks to Ryan Cragun for his terrific work in editing and compiling this newsletter. He has a big job and we can all make it easier on him by sending along possible content and material that could be considered for inclusion in the next newsletter. He can be reached at mssa@genesoc.com

Lynn Payne

MSSA Sessions at SSSR

Session 1: The Glenn M. Vernon Lecture

Current Research on the Renewal of External Adverse Opinion Towards the LDS Church

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Focusing on growth, development, conflict and change in religious organizations, Jan will use Mormonism as a case study to explore to what extent there is a renewal of external adverse opinions towards the LDS Church. She will reflect the perspective of outsiders, some who have recently written influential books in the national media concerning the LDS Church.

Session 2: MSSA sponsored paper session

Peace Psychology and Religion: The Example of Mormonism

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Religions historically have taken pains to be involved in society, at times in ways that exacerbated conflicts or violence and at other times easing them. In this paper I analyze religion's role in peace using Mormonism as a case study. Peace psychology focuses on violence in two ways. Direct violence emphasizes immediate, pressing concerns that may result in injury or death directly, whereas structural violence arises from societal inequities and causes injury or death over long periods of exposure to the inequality. Direct violence is addressed by peace-making, interventions intended to reduce the conflict between parties. Structural violence is reduced by peace-building interventions that reduce disparities among groups of people. Mormon Church involvement in society illustrates each of these concepts, as well as the competing demands religions face in engaging society while meeting organizational needs for distinctiveness within society.

A Re-examination of Stark's LDS Church Growth Projections by Individual Countries

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In 1984, Rodney Stark made some bold predictions about the growth rates of Mormonism (Review of Religious Research, 25, 1, 18-27). A follow-up publication on these predictions (Stark 2001:13-23, in Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives) illustrated that the straight-line growth projections had been surpassed by the actual growth of the LDS religion during the 1980s. However, Stark did not examine the growth rates of Mormonism within individual countries in light of the characteristics of those countries. Using current growth data of the Mormon Church, I re-examine Stark's predictions in individual countries and propose several revisions to his hypotheses.

Psychosocial Predictors of Attitudes toward Gay Men and Lesbians: Gender, Social Contact, and Religion

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The present investigation examined predictors of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Participants (N=204) completed measures assessing demographics, social contact, religious orientation and affiliation, and attitudes and beliefs toward gay men and lesbians. Gender, social contact, intrinsic religious orientation, LDS affiliation and the belief that being gay is a sin were significant predictors of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians ($R^2 = .72$ and $R^2 = .67$, respectively). Path analyses showed that the underlying belief that being gay is a sin was an important mediator of the relationships between intrinsic religious orientation, LDS affiliation and attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Belief fully mediated the association between intrinsic religious orientation and attitudes toward gay men and partially mediated all other associations between religious variables and attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

"Without a Prophet at our Head":
A Sociological Explanation of Schisms in the
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,
1844-1860.

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When Joseph Smith, founder and prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was murdered in Carthage, Illinois in June 27, 1844, he left a thriving and growing religious movement behind. However, as one might expect, the Mormon Church destabilized after the death of its founding prophet. It was, as Shields (1991: 61) writes: "The single most divisive issue the Latter-day Saint Church ha[d] ever dealt with." Without a divinely appointed leader and facing serious threats from non-Mormon elements in the surrounding culture, the Church found itself at a crucial stage in its history. That the Mormon Church survived this crisis and is currently viewed as a respectable denomination in the American and, indeed, the world's religious landscape needs no elaboration. What is less well-known, however, is that in the aftermath of the murder on Smith, the Church had to cope with internal dissent and several schisms. In this paper I examine five schisms.

Paper Summary: *Second but Equal? Gender, Growth, and Transformation in the LDS Mission Field*
by Shauna Sweet

I am not a member of the LDS church, but became interested in the LDS missionary experience as part of a larger investigation into contemporary rites of passage. Because I was interested in missionary work as a rite of passage, the issue of gender was not one on which I intended to focus. At first I dismissed gender entirely, concentrating only on young men's experiences in the mission field. When I began my project I viewed Elders and Sisters¹

¹ Throughout this essay I capitalize the first letters of 'Sister Missionaries.' They are not always capitalized in the mission field, and whether this is considered an official title or not is uncertain, further underscoring many of the issues being addressed in this

as "separate but equal;" it wasn't until after several weeks 'in the field' that my perspective changed. The change in focus is likely related to the fact that I am a woman and, as a result, do not have equal access to men's and women's experiences in the mission field.

The turning point in my focus – from rites of passage to gender – was a Zone Conference training session where I was confronted by the degree to which gender does matter in LDS missions. A Sister with whom I had been working, Sister Erickson, was called to give a training on how she and her fellow missionaries could work to be more like the legendary missionaries of old. This was a particularly difficult assignment for this Sister as all of these legendary missionaries were men. Despite their presence in the field, Sister missionaries were absent from the historical narrative told again and again by mission leadership. When it came time for her to give her talk, Sister Erickson stood up and glanced around the room. She laughed nervously and made a joke about feeling the spirit, concluding, "... so you can't say I didn't touch your heart folks."

Gaining confidence in the laughs among the assembled missionaries, Sister Erickson continued with what was meant to be a rhetorical question,

Sister Erickson: What is the difference between me and Parley P. Pratt? (pause)
Member work... and faith –
Elder Nobles (very loud): And he was a guy.

Stunned by the interruption, I looked around the room. The Sister missionaries in the audience were angry; several were looking at one another and a few of them glared at the back of Elder Nobles's head. Up to this point, my experiences with missionary trainings had resulted in me concluding that missionaries

paper. The title 'Sister' in the mission field is ambiguously understood to be a mixture between the regular nomenclature used in everyday Mormonspeak to refer to a female member of the religion as well as being used as a title on par with the title 'Elder.' This admixture speaks to the awkwardness – socially and structurally – of women in the mission field: somewhere between an official position and an unofficial opportunity to serve.

were always respectful of one another at meetings, particularly at Zone Conferences. As far as I had seen, nobody had ever interrupted a training. But other than the unrest among the other Sister missionaries, nobody in the room seemed to notice anything had happened. The Elders didn't say anything and even the mission leadership was silent. It wasn't as if they hadn't heard it; the interruption was loud and clear. Sister Erickson, flushed red, looked around the room, hesitantly this time, before continuing,

Sister Erickson: Thank you for that poignant point.

The point Elder Nobles had clearly made was that she, along with her fellow Sister Missionaries, was second among equals. The others in the room had made the same point by omission.

Divorced from the culture surrounding it, one might think that women's ambiguous status within the mission would provide Sister Missionaries with a unique opportunity to exercise authority in ways that would not otherwise be possible. However, missionary work is a masculine institution into which women fit only awkwardly; in the mission field women's marginal status makes them second among equals.

Presented below are two summarized arguments from my paper: *Second but Equal? Gender, Growth, and Transformation in the LDS Mission Field*. My findings are based on extensive field work conducted during a four-month period (July-October 2003). During that time I worked closely with a local area mission in the Northeastern U.S., conducted interviews and focus groups, attended Zone Conferences and District Meetings, as well as attending weekly Sacrament Meetings and baptisms. Also during that time I spent 9 weekends with different Sister missionary companionships throughout the mission.

"Do as I say, not as I do"

Becoming a missionary is at odds with being a Sister. Based on my observations while working with the missionaries, as the time to

serve a mission draws nearer, Elders' doubts about serving a mission gradually disappeared. Sisters reported often having the opposite experience.

Sister Johnson: I always thought, oh yeah, if I'm not married by the time I'm 21, I'm going on a mission. And all of a sudden as I got closer I realized that wasn't the only option... I wanted to make sure I was going because that's what Heavenly Father, that's what God, wanted me to do. Not because I was just 21, and cheating myself.

Serving a mission is considered to be a deviation from a woman's intended life plan; the decision to serve is framed as a choice between marriage and service. Marriage, however, is the more desirable, more appropriate choice.

Sister Choong: It's been said, if you're worthy, go. But family is so important... don't put off family. Family is the most important goal.

And, on some level, serving a mission still reflects negatively on the Sisters who choose to go, as this Sister points out in reflecting on how Sister Missionaries are viewed,

Sister Stevens: They're out there because they can't get married or they're a little bit weird, and it really always was true.

Women also face pressure from people outside of the LDS community to not serve because of the timing with respect to their education and career.

Men are asked to go beyond their limits; women are asked to stay within them.

In the mission field, "rising to the challenge" is a vehicle for personal growth and spiritual transformation. However, the leadership structure of missions does not provide women with equal opportunities to challenge themselves. However, this is also not what Sister Missionaries are being asked to do.

Missionary culture is characteristically normative, emphasizing achievement and “doing your best.” At the first meeting I attended, the Mission President’s wife² told the missionaries,

This will be something wonderful for you... it will not be easy. It will be hard... You ultimately get back more than you give... [to become] men strong in leadership, men in great capacity.”

The Assistants to the President (APs) gave a powerful training on focus, dedication, and success in the field, insisting,

APs: ... that’s when we’re the missionaries that our moms think we are; the kind of missionaries that baptize hundreds and thousands... truly converted to the Book of Mormon.

Although a high number of convert baptisms is not considered an accurate measure of a missionary’s success, a good missionary nonetheless “gets results.” This message was consistently reinforced by mission leadership. Elders are routinely recognized for high numbers of convert baptisms. The encouragement of high numbers is bolstered with the presentation of a *Marvelous Missionary Award* that is presented at each Zone meeting to a missionary for “always having baptisms on his mind.” Companionships are encouraged to set high weekly and six-week (transfer) goals for convert baptisms as a way for missionaries to continually challenge themselves and each other.

Conversely, at a Sisters’ Conference³ held in October, the Sisters were told not to focus on numbers. Talks emphasized caring and nurturing, themes that were not central to and

² The Mission President’s wife does not have a title of her own that is independent of her husband’s responsibilities as president. Her role in the mission is defined in relation to the role of her husband, powerfully reinforcing the notion that women are “second among equals” in the LDS mission field.

³ It is interesting to note as well, that the Sister Missionaries did not open or close their own conference, nor did the President’s wife feature prominently at the conference. The greatest emphasis was placed on trainings delivered by the male leadership, the APs and the Mission President.

sometimes not even present in large group meetings. These themes were identified as the domain of Sister Missionaries. Despite the roles of Elders and Sisters being distinct, the intended message seemed to be that the roles were still equal; Sisters responsibilities are equal to the responsibilities of their male counterparts. According to the talks presented during the Conference, the focus of a Sister’s efforts should be on the well-being of investigators, because “especially as Sisters we need to care for the people being taught.” Ironically, rather than offer clarity of purpose, the conference revealed the degree to which task assignment is formally gendered, and further reinforced Sisters’ ambiguous status in the mission.

Sister Missionaries often encouraged one another not to focus on numbers, but instead on the act of teaching. During the Conference, senior Sisters took the lead in explaining why, describing the competition that was supported/ encouraged at other meetings as negative, “unnecessary pressure.” Or as one Sister put it,

Sister Chavez: You’re not judged on how many people you teach or what kind of converts they are. All you’re judged by is how well you teach.

In the Sisters’ Conference, being a “good missionary” was placed at odds with being a good Sister, but outside of that conference Sisters were given little support for these unique responsibilities. Connections between challenge, growth, and achievement are reinforced and legitimated by the leadership structure within a mission. Leadership positions are given to the best missionaries for “getting results.” But Sisters are not given leadership positions, and there is no system of rewards that similarly legitimates their efforts in the mission field.

Even though Sister Missionaries perform the same tasks as do Elders, they are involved in a fundamentally different project.

Included in the conversations I had with missionaries with whom I worked was the idea that Elders come into the mission field immature and not quite “ripe.” Accordingly, a mission is designed so that Elders overcome these weaknesses, through challenging themselves and their faith. Sisters are not asked to do the same.

Sister Cabot: Elders are sent out for more reasons [than women], to gain a sense of self [they] need to gain experiences... our duty as Sisters is to support them... They need to grow.

While young men grow and progress through missionary work, Sister Missionaries “naturally embody” these same virtues. The way in which Sisters were recognized and praised continually reinforced this distinction. The mission leadership routinely praised the Sisters for their dedication and work ethic. They set an example for the Elders in humility, caring, selflessness, and charity. The implication was that the Sisters “already knew” what Elders needed to learn. Serving a mission as a means of personal growth, spiritual progress, and ultimately transformation, appears to be gender-specific (i.e. exclusively male).

For the young women who serve missions, a mission does not mark a collective rite of passage from one stage of life to another, largely because the dimension of transformation and transcendence a mission entails for men is lacking for women. Both men and women who serve gain powerful testimonies and have deeply religious experiences, as noted by this Sister’s comments,

Sister Akimbo: I have a confession: before my mission I didn’t know who Jesus Christ was... I am so grateful for this opportunity, I needed it so badly.

But a rite of passage is more than personal transformation, however dramatic or profound. The change that takes place must be expected and recognized as legitimate by the community at large. That this transformation doesn’t take place for Sister Missionaries is illustrated in this conversation between a returned missionary

and a sister missionary,

Returned Missionary: One of the biggest expectations that’s probably the hardest for a lot of people [is] they expect you to be a person maybe you don’t want to be. Sister Epstein: I kind of don’t know about that, because when I got home I felt like everybody expected me to be who I was before my mission and I was different... People didn’t understand that [I changed]. That was really hard, and I had a really hard time – I still have a hard time.

Or as one Sister put it, being a missionary is “overrated.” Her roommate agreed: she didn’t serve a mission because she didn’t see the point. At the end of a mission, “you’re [just] older.”

“Writing women into the mission field”

Women are largely absent from the official history of missionary work, but they feature prominently in different kinds of stories. This distinction is important because the stories missionaries tell reinforce the larger LDS cultural understanding of male leadership.

Mission leaders never addressed physical safety in the District or Zone meetings I attended. There is also little discussion of personal safety in the mission handbook, and the additional materials that were handed out during the time I was with the missionaries did not include any information on this topic. Important to missionary work is the understanding and the knowledge (not merely ‘belief’) that missionaries are protected by Heavenly Father for doing His work. For this reason, real threats to missionaries’ physical safety are themselves threatening to missionary work.

Though there was a lack of dialogue acknowledging threats to physical safety while I was working with the missionaries, the missionaries seemed to delight in swapping stories about the dangers they encountered. “Crazy Encounter” stories, which are just one kind of tale that missionaries tell, dramatize uncertain circumstances and narrow escapes as evidence for divine intervention. In a

compelling 'crazy-encounter' story the audience should wonder how the missionary possibly lived to tell his/her tale. Examples of these kinds of stories generally involve diligent missionaries who find themselves suddenly overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their control and who only narrowly escape crazed dogs, violent locals, and/or reckless motorists. The more unexpected and bizarre the circumstances, the better the story.

I was made privy to a number of narratives dramatizing danger and crazy encounters with Sister Missionaries as the primary characters. Interestingly, stories with Sister Missionaries as the primary characters are told by both Elders and Sister Missionaries alike. These stories often followed patterns like the following,

Sister Wilkinson: We're like, booking it down the stairs and we come to the [outside] door and the door is like, huge – one of those big, heavy, wooden doors. We couldn't even open it. We opened it and I was stuck in the middle! My backpack got stuck! I don't know how it got stuck, I don't know. It was so scary. And so we finally got out... I said, "I seriously felt like that guy was going to kill us." And she said "All of a sudden I just saw my whole life pass before my eyes... the Spirit really talked to me very strong that something was wrong." Just experiences like that, you know? ... You know the Lord is blessing us and watching over us all the time.

The success of 'crazy encounter' stories depends upon certain "truths." Somewhat surprisingly, in both Elders' and Sister Missionaries' crazy encounter stories, the innocence and naiveté (or incompetence) of Sister Missionaries is common and positioned as one of these 'truths.' Feminine frailty is a key narrative element in these stories as it illustrates the protective presence of God in the mission field, as well as the notion that Sister missionaries are not heroes but rather damsels in distress who are in need of rescue.

But what is lost in the telling of these narratives is the very real vulnerability and fear felt by the Sisters in these situations. This vulnerability and fear is compounded by the fact that Sisters

are powerless to remove themselves from threatening situations that are the direct result of their assignments. Because missions are hierarchically organized along a male chain of command, Sister missionaries do not hold leadership positions and are not in a position to remove themselves from a threatening situation at their own discretion. Safety concerns, like most other information, are communicated and addressed only through specific channels. Sister missionaries need to first contact their District Leader, who must then recognize the Sisters' concerns as legitimate. He then contacts the Zone leader to request a transfer.

Not only is this process protracted and complicated, but it is also riddled with obstacles. Because LDS missionary culture celebrates risk while assuming there is no "real" danger, Sisters' safety concerns were sometimes interpreted as a lack of faith or feminine frailty rather than a legitimate concern. If mission leaders do not have personal memory of a previous situation, individual incidences appear as isolated cases and Sister Missionaries shoulder the burden of proof. It becomes their responsibility to prove the seriousness of the case and to demonstrate that they are not just "causing trouble."

The results of this arrangement can be seen in one experience I had while tracting with a pair of Sister Missionaries. Unwittingly, the Sisters and I were placed in a very dangerous situation involving both alcohol and drugs. Nevertheless, after leaving the house, although she was visibly shaken, the Senior Sister announced she would not call attention to the incident because it would be tantamount to admitting failure.

Conclusion:

Gender is an organizing principle in the LDS community generally, and this is also the case in the mission field; gender is not neutral. The missionary identity is traditionally a masculine identity. Sister missionaries occupy a uniquely ambiguous status in a culture that is otherwise stringently regulated and rule-bound. Role ambiguity does not necessarily result in a

marginal status, but in the mission field Sister Missionaries are in a precarious position: caught oddly between being a sister and being a missionary. Their responsibilities are unique and sometimes contradictory, thereby creating a very different "missionary experience" for the women who serve.

(Shauna Sweet is a graduate of Hamilton College and is currently preparing her research for publication. Comments and suggestions can be forwarded to shaunajsweet@hotmail.com.)

Announcements

Cardell Jacobson, a long time member of the MSSA and the current treasurer, has recently published an edited book on race and ethnic voices in the LDS Church entitled, *All God's Children: Racial and Ethnic Voices in the LDS Church* (Cedar Fort Press, 2004). If you would be interested in reviewing this book for the September issue of the newsletter, please contact Ryan Cragun at: ryan@genesoc.com.

News Items

A recent news article in the Salt Lake Tribune may be of interest to readers of the newsletter. The article examines the study of religion in higher education in Utah. The online article even includes photographs of a member of the MSSA, David Knowlton. The article can be found here: <http://www.sltrib.com/2004/Feb/02212004/Saturday/saturday.asp>

There have been several additions made to the MSSA website since the last newsletter. These additions include Armand Mauss and Dynette Ivie Reynolds's bibliography of social science research on Mormonism as well as an 'ask an expert' section, which has received several questions. In February alone the website had over 1500 visitors. www.genesoc.com/mssa

FUTURE SSSR MEETINGS

2005: November 4-6, Rochester, New York

2006: October 20-22, Portland, Oregon

Remember to return dues and your ballots to
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