

The Reorganized Church, the Decade of Decision, and the Abilene Paradox

Roger D. Launius

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DOES THE MARCH OF HISTORICAL EVENTS MEAN? I would argue that this is the fundamental question of all historical study. But like unto it is a corollary question that I have been asking more and more often of late and struggling to discover an answer or answers. Why do reasonably intelligent, well-meaning, and commonsensical people make decisions that bring ruin upon themselves, on others, and on the ideals they embrace? In addition, once they have determined courses that lead to the collapse of their goals, why do they persist in them to their (il)logical conclusions?

These are, I believe, important questions that are neither neatly contemplated nor readily answered. For the history of the Reorganized Church, a field of study where I have invested considerable effort, I keep puzzling over the developments of a theological and cultural reformation that began to be apparent in the 1960s and what it has meant for the church and its membership at the end of the twentieth century. In this essay I intend to build on my earlier work on the Reorganized Church and the decade of decision it faces in the 1990s.¹ Among other points I make, I believe this reformation in the church has undercut the traditional belief system that had pretty much held sway for more than one hundred years. While one can debate the necessity of some type of transformation of that RLDS consensus, it has led to an identity crisis of capital significance. Furthermore, the loss of a traditional RLDS identity has precipi-

1. Roger D. Launius, "The RLDS Church and the Decade of Decision," *Sunstone* 19 (Sept. 1996): 45-55.

tated important changes in the demographics of the Reorganized Church, as many wedded to ideas of traditional RLDS uniqueness left the movement behind and ripped out a key source of institutional strength. I will relate declines in membership, contributions, and priesthood ordinations to show the demographic shift over time. Finally, I will explore the response of church leadership when faced with these declines and use organizational dynamics theory to form possible explanations for the course of the church's policy from the mid-1980s to the present.

THE THEOLOGICAL REFORMATION AND THE PROBLEM OF RLDS IDENTITY

It has become something of a truism to suggest that during the period since the 1950s, but especially since the 1960s and with rising thrust thereafter, Reorganization liberals relentlessly demythologized church history, theology, and assorted traditions, and in the process overturned the church's traditional ideological consensus.² Using a variety of tactics, those committed to modernity in the RLDS church fought a series of internecine battles with the forces of tradition and in virtually every instance succeeded in gaining the upper hand. In no small measure this resulted from a coopting or coercing of the leadership of the church, who allowed it to take place. In the end this broad-based reformation struck at the very core of the Reorganized Church's origins and reasons for existence since the 1850s.³

The collapse of the Reorganized Church's philosophical synthesis, and the failure to create another, led to crisis in the organization. It created a problem of church identity not present to any real degree before the 1960s, and since the 1980s it has become more and more apparent that the church as an institution is adrift, without mission, ideal, or hope for the future. This crisis ensures that the Reorganized Church is facing a decade of decision in the 1990s as it seeks to find a place for itself in the larger religious community that will be compelling for its membership.

Numerous church officials have cast the evolution of the RLDS church in the context of a transition from sect to denomination, as described in sociological theory, suggesting that this process was a happy metaphor for what had been taking place during the past forty years. "As

2. The first scholars to use the term "RLDS Reformation" and to chart the contours of the subject were Larry W. Conrad and Paul Shupe, "An RLDS Reformation? Construing the Task of RLDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Summer 1985): 92-103.

3. I have discussed this process in "Coming of Age? The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 1960s," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Summer 1995): 31-57; "RLDS Church and the Decade of Decision"; and "Neither Mormon nor Protestant? The Reorganized Church and the Challenge of Identity," in Douglas Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London, Eng.: Cassell, 1996), 52-60.

it once saw its mission and destiny apart from, and in many respects, inimical to society as a whole," wrote W. B. Spillman in 1991, "the church in the latter twentieth century began to see the benefits of cooperation and increased accommodation to societal standards and demands." Spillman specifically argued in favor of the sect to denomination model to explain what had been taking place in the Reorganization, and his analysis was both understanding and complimentary of that transition.⁴

Not using the sect/denomination terminology, though certainly accepting it as a positive development, Apostle Clifford A. Cole told a gathering of high priests in 1971 that "we are shifting from an emphasis on distinctives—that is, on the ways we are different from other [Christian] churches—to a concern for teaching the whole gospel of Jesus Christ and winning persons to committing themselves to Him."⁵ Other church officials, such as former apostle and member of the First Presidency Maurice L. Draper, explicitly employed the sect-to-denomination explanation to justify the transformation of the church in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁶

Some warned of the problems this transition enjoined, however, and advocated caution in embracing the mainstream. Theologian W. Paul Jones from Kansas City's Saint Paul School of Theology, a liberal Methodist seminary, for instance, cautioned Reorganization leaders in the 1960s that this transition to mainstream Protestant denominationalism heralded important consequences for the organization as it would face a difficult identity crisis.⁷ After admitting that he valued the Reorganization's historical uniqueness more than did some senior church officials, Jones more recently lamented the reformation that has taken place in the church. In 1993 he asked the pithy question, "Will the movement discover in a new way an acceptable uniqueness or will it continue to mellow into the ethos of general Protestantism as still another denomination?" He was not sanguine about that prospect, and concluded, "My own un-

4. W. B. Spillman, "Dissent and the Future of the Church," in Roger D. Launius and W. B. Spillman, eds., *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, MO: Graceland/Park Press, 1991), 277.

5. Clifford A. Cole, "Theological Perspectives of World Mission," *Saints' Herald* 118 (July 1971): 11.

6. See Maurice L. Draper, "Sect-Denomination-Church Transition and Leadership in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," M.A. thesis, Kansas University, 1964; Maurice L. Draper, *Isles and Continents* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1982); Howard J. Booth, "Recent Shifts in Restoration Thought," in Maurice L. Draper and Clare D. Vlahos, eds., *Restoration Studies I* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 162-75.

7. Donald D. Landon, *A History of Donald D. Landon While Under General Conference Appointment, 1951-1970: An Oral History Memoir* (Independence, MO: Department of History, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1970), 94.

easiness about the Saints continuing in this direction is that we have no need for another mainline Protestant denomination."⁸

No less than current Reorganized Church president W. Grant McMurray sculpted the contours of the present RLDS identity crisis in stark relief as early as 1981 when he gave his John Whitmer Historical Association presidential address on the RLDS church's presumed identity crisis in the nineteenth century. This has been a theme of historians of the Reorganized Church since the 1960s, but rarely before that decade, and numerous essays have attempted to plough that fertile field from the vantage point of more than one hundred years beyond.⁹ McMurray, however, insightfully concluded "that the identity crisis is not theirs, but ours." He noted that "the earliest interpreters of the Reorganization gave no indication that they were confused about the nature of the movement." This is not apparently as true of present-day RLDS, he intimated, and modern explorations would do well to recognize that the present cri-

8. W. Paul Jones, "Demythologizing and Symbolizing the RLDS Tradition," in Paul M. Edwards and Darlene Caswell, eds., *Restoration Studies V* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1993), 109-15, quote on 110.

9. See, on this score, Richard P. Howard, "Themes in Latter Day Saint History," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 2 (1982): 22-29; Richard P. Howard, "Protective and Learning Images in Latter Day Saint Revelation," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 6 (1986): 3-9; Richard P. Howard, "The Reorganized Church in Illinois, 1852-82: Search for Identity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5 (Spring 1970): 63-75; Thomas J. Morain, "Mormons and Nineteenth Century Iowa Historians," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 1 (1981): 34-42; Alma R. Blair, "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormonism," in F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards, eds., *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1973), 207-30; Clare D. Vlahos, "Images of Orthodoxy: Self-Identity in Early Reorganization Apologetics," in Maurice L. Draper and A. Bruce Lindgren, eds., *Restoration Studies I* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 176-86; Clare D. Vlahos, "Moderation as a Theological Principle in the Thought of Joseph Smith III," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 1 (1981): 3-11; Alma R. Blair, "Tradition of Dissent—Jason W. Briggs," in Draper and Lindgren, eds., *Restoration Studies I*, 146-61; Norma Derry Hiles, "Lamoni: Crucible for Pluralism in the Reorganization Church," in Maurice L. Draper and Debra Combs, eds., *Restoration Studies III* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1983), 139-44; Richard P. Howard, "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983): 14-29; Alma R. Blair, "RLDS Views of Polygamy: Some Historiographical Notes," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 5 (1985): 16-28; Roger Yarrington, "Changes in the Church," *Saints Herald* 137 (Sept. 1990): 10; Charles D. Neff, "The Problem of Becoming a World Church," *Saints' Herald* 121 (Sept. 1974): 554-57; *Position Papers* (Independence, MO: Cumorah Books, 1975); Clifford A. Cole, "The World Church: Our Mission in the 1980s," *Commission*, Sept. 1979, 39-44; Paul M. Edwards, "Leadership and the Ethics of Prophecy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Winter 1986): 77-84; Richard P. Howard, "New Currents in Mormon History," *Saints Herald* 135 (Nov. 1988): 483.

sis of identity emanates from current trends.¹⁰

The crisis of identity enveloping the Reorganized Church at the end of the twentieth century has ensured that the decade of the 1990s is a period of crisis. Church members have to reshape the intellectual underpinnings of the religion or fold their tents and go home. The time left to complete that task is short, for the very real warning signals of a church on the verge of collapse are present even today. They will become even more prominent in the next score of years as the stalwarts supporting the present institution depart the scene and are not replaced with a younger generation of RLDS members bent on sacrificing for the ideals, howsoever they might be interpreted, of the Restoration. Indeed, failure to forge a new dynamic identity will spell the doom of the Reorganization. It is not impossible to view the Reorganized Church of one hundred-plus years from now as an exceptionally small group of adherents linked mostly by kinship and revolving around the Independence temple as the reason for their being. In that respect they could become something akin to many of the other Mormon factions still in existence such as the Cutlerites, Bickertonites, and Hedrickites. They might be interesting and have worthwhile positions on many issues, but they would hardly represent major movements for good in the world.

THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

The theological confusion and thereby lack of identity that have been present for the last twenty years have been manifest in numerous ways for some time. By every quantitative measure one can reasonably use—and those measurements are buried in a mass of data that make it difficult to make an analysis independent of church leaders—the Reorganized Church is on course for extinction. For example, the church has entered a negative growth track in North America and projections for the future are dismal. As shown in Table 1, in all of North America membership peaked at almost 173,000 in 1982; it has dropped 10 percent to about 156,000 since then. At no time in that period has the North American membership been higher than the year before. Membership in stakes, areas where the greatest concentrations of Saints lived and all of which were in North America, peaked at just over 60,000 in 1977 and has dropped 13 percent since then.

An important measure of health in any church is the number of new members gained. In this regard note that there were over 4,500 baptisms in North America in each year from 1960 through 1964, while there were

10. W. Grant McMurray, "The Reorganization in Nineteenth-Century America: Identity or Historiographical Problem?" *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 2 (1982): 3-10.

just over 1,500 baptisms in both 1994 and 1995. North American baptismal rates exhibited a steady decline from over 3 percent in 1960 to just under 1 percent in 1995. Since the church leadership report total membership most of the time, and refrain from breaking it down, total numbers for the church still look about the same as they have been for a generation, hovering at the quarter of a million mark worldwide because of larger numbers of baptisms in the Third World.¹¹

Table 1.
RLDS Membership Trends, 1950-95

Year	N.America / %Total	Abroad / %Total	Unknown / %Total	% Growth
1950	122,909 85.1%	9,058 6.3%	12,168 8.4%	9.0%
1955	133,749 83.6%	9,566 6.0%	15,671 9.8%	10.8%
1960	146,520 82.5%	10,129 5.7%	20,249 11.4%	11.0%
1965	155,800 81.4%	11,198 5.9%	23,749 12.4%	7.8%
1970	163,707 80.8%	13,581 6.7%	24,791 12.2%	5.9%
1975	169,066 79.2%	16,752 7.9%	27,039 12.7%	5.3%
1980	171,467 76.7%	20,923 9.4%	30,313 13.6%	4.8%
1985	171,219 73.0%	29,245 12.5%	33,302 14.2%	5.0%
1990	164,094 67.2%	41,742 17.1%	37,521 15.4%	4.1%
1995	155,913 62.7%	51,465 20.7%	40,636 16.3%	1.9%

Source: Compiled by George Walton from *World Conference Reports*, 1950-96.

Instead of the selected years presented above, however, another way to look at the membership numbers is shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Average Annual Increase in Known Membership

	1951-65	1966-80	1981-92	1993-95
No. America	2,192.7	1,044.5	-1,036.9	-1,894.7
Abroad	142.7	648.3	2,036.1	1,777.0
Total	2,335.4	1,692.8	999.2	-117.7

Source: Compiled by George Walton from *World Conference Reports*, 1950-96.

But total membership numbers are basically trailing statistical indicators, rather than leading ones. They depict all individuals whose names are still formally on the church's rolls. Very few people upset over the direction of the church have taken action to remove their names from RLDS roles. Indeed the chief strategist for the traditionalist dissent in the church, Richard Price, specifically recommended that members not for-

11. These statistics were compiled by George Walton of Washington, D.C., in 1996 from reports to the RLDS World Conference for the period since 1970. I wish to thank George for his work.

mally withdraw from the church so they could remain in a position, among other reasons, to affect Reorganization policy.¹² The Reorganization's leadership also emphasized that "Withdrawals from church membership are at the initiative of the member. Records and pastors should avoid letters or phone calls that have the effect of suggesting to inactive members that they should consider withdrawing."¹³ With both sides of the debate favoring retention of members on RLDS rolls, it is probable that the total official membership is significantly inflated above the number active in the church. If so, the strength of the RLDS church in North America has declined even more precipitously than the real numbers demonstrate.

In general, however, formal RLDS membership numbers tell us very little about the health and vitality of a church since there is no correlation between membership and participation. There is anecdotal evidence, unfortunately statistics do not exist to confirm this, that declines of participation in North America have been much more monumental than the formal membership declines. For instance, former Reorganized Church Historian Richard P. Howard commented, "We have lost nearly 25,000 members to the schism arising over the implications of this [paradigm] shift."¹⁴ Other observers of the RLDS scene, some of whom are senior church officials, contend that the losses are much greater. Perhaps they approach 50,000, according to one former member of the RLDS Quorum of Twelve Apostles who asked for non-attribution. Those are not formal withdrawals, which can be tracked using the membership statistics, but individuals who have "walked" out of RLDS houses of worship and are now attending church elsewhere or not at all. The exact numbers are virtually impossible to ascertain. Worship attendance, Sunday school attendance, numbers of members supporting special events, and the like tell us the most. Questions yet to be explored involve: (1) Are more or less people participating in the North American RLDS church? When and why? (2) Are some geographical areas growing, some declining? Where? (3) If there is regional growth, what are the factors that best explain it? We await further research to learn the answers to these important questions.

Another measure of significant change can be found in the amount of

12. Richard Price, assisted by Larry Harlacher, *Action Time* (Independence, MO: Price Publishing Co., 1985), 162-71. For information on Price, see William D. Russell, "Richard Price: Leading Publicist of the Reorganized Church's Schismatics," in Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 319-42.

13. Leonard M. Young, ed., *Church Administrator's Handbook, 1995 Edition* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 55.

14. In Richard A. Brown, ed., *Theology—Volume 2: Authority, Membership, and Baptism* (Independence, MO: Graceland/Park Press, 1994), 108.

contributions to the RLDS church over the last quarter century. The declines have been dramatic, as shown in Table 3, signalling the near collapse of the RLDS church during this period and portending catastrophe for the future. The general fund went from a condition of regular surplus to mostly deficit in 1983. In the thirteen years from 1970 through 1982, there was an average surplus of \$1,313,000 each year, whereas from 1983 through 1995 there was an average annual deficit of \$690,000. The loss of contributions in real terms is certainly related to the decline in North American membership from where the overwhelming bulk of income has come over the years. The Reorganization's Presiding Bishopric, the chief financial officers of the church, has repeatedly commented on the declining number of contributors. It admitted in 1996 to a 40-percent decrease in the number of contributors between 1984, when there were approximately 62,000 contributors, and 1994 when the number had fallen to about 37,000. Interestingly, the difference between those two numbers (25,000) is almost twice as large as the number of North American members lost during the same period.¹⁵

Table 3.
RLDS General Fund Contribution Trends, 1950-95
(Actual Dollars)

Year	Accounting Stewards		Contributors General Fund		Contributors to All Funds	N. American Members
1950	14,049	11.43%	32,335	26.31%	not reported	122,909
1965	32,395	20.79%	61,459	39.45%	72,758 46.70%	155,800
1980	31,689	18.48%	60,540	35.31%	65,908 38.44%	171,467
1985	27,133	15.85%	55,496	32.41%	59,764 34.91%	171,219
1990	21,451	13.07%	39,671	24.18%	47,210 28.77%	164,094
1995	14,227	9.12%	32,167	20.63%	36,047 23.12%	155,913

Source: Compiled by George Walton from *World Conference Reports*, 1950-96.

The church's monetary losses are also even more striking if adjusted for inflation. Using constant dollars, the contributions available for church programs have declined by essentially 50 percent since 1978. In 1978 the RLDS income was just over \$16 million from all sources, using 1970 constant dollars. By 1993 that had declined to \$9 million when adjusted for inflation to the 1970 constant. A fifteen-year downward trend between 1978 and 1993 is readily apparent when annual income is adjusted for inflation using the consumer price index.

Other measures also demonstrate a general decline in the health of the Reorganized Church during the period between 1980 and 1995. The

15. *World Conference Report*, Apr. 1996, 131, 165, copy available in Library-Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, MO.

number of congregations in stakes and metropolises, all in North America and which should be considered the largest and most stable local jurisdictions in the church, has decreased from 276 in 1986 to 251 in 1995, a 9-percent decline.¹⁶ Anecdotal evidence also confirms this trend. In virtually every congregation in the Reorganized Church in the United States, significant attendance losses have been registered in the last few years. Numerous congregations have been closed and their members merged with others in the same geographical area. Houses of worship have been put up for sale all over the North American church because they are surplus to the present needs of the organization, and in areas around Independence, Missouri, where there is a concentration of RLDS several of those chapels have been purchased by groups of dissident Restorationists to house their worship services.¹⁷ More to the point, new RLDS president W. Grant McMurray acknowledged in January 1997 that only about 40 percent of the total membership “engage meaningfully in the church’s life, splashed and scattered throughout about 35 nations, ...”¹⁸

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR MEASURABLE DECLINE

If the present Reorganized Church hierarchy was the leadership team of a market-driven corporation, its shareholders would have thrown it out of power by this time. For more than a decade using every significant quantitative measure of merit available—and I fully recognize that there are also non-quantitative measures that might mitigate this statement—the RLDS leadership has failed to oversee successful organizational development much less spiritual growth on the part of the Saints. At the first signs of decline, any responsible chief executive officer would have begun efforts at corporate restructuring and product research to determine what had made the commodities marketed by the organization less attractive. I must ask if similar developments happened in the case of the RLDS leadership, for if it did its efforts were both unknown to the majority of the membership and alterations in response to it transparent to the rank and file. This failure to make meaningful product alterations has ensured the continued decline of the church as a viable force for more than a decade, with no end in sight.

16. Again, these statistics were compiled by George Walton of Washington, D.C., in 1996 from reports to the RLDS World Conference for the period since 1970. I wish to thank George for his work.

17. The Restoration Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for example, purchased from the RLDS Presiding Bishopric in 1996 the historic “Second Church” in downtown Independence, Missouri. This building now houses that Restorationist group’s “central congregation.”

18. G. Grant McMurray, “The State of the Church,” 2, unpublished address to the Theology Colloquy-Graceland College, Lamoni, Iowa, 19 Jan. 1997.

Perhaps some will object to my using a corporate metaphor to describe the Reorganized Church. I admit that I have my own problems with this model, but the fact is the church is essentially a corporation and it has a product it offers to the world. Would that the product were more spiritual than tangible, but that too has been one of the negative trends during the Reorganization's theological reformation! As I wrote elsewhere of the present RLDS situation:

[T]oo many people have not understood the experiential nature of its rich tradition. The Reorganization is not just right thinking and doing; it is *feeling* that God is with us just as God was with the prophets and apostles of old. To be RLDS is not just to accept a set of books, a priesthood system, a bureaucracy, a theology, though those have been important symbols for the Saints. To be RLDS is to feel the burning in one's bosom, to personally ask of God and to pray for greater light and wisdom, to hear inspiring preaching, to sing with heartfelt thanks "I have found the glorious gospel that was taught in former years," to feel the warmth of the Holy Spirit as the elders anoint and lay hands for healing, to hope that the love and peace one felt during administration would someday pervade the entire world community as the kingdoms of this world are transformed into the kingdom of God. To be RLDS is to *feel* deep within one's being that one is linked with God's people from every age and to know the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit in one's own life and journey.¹⁹

And the corporate model was one adopted by the RLDS hierarchy in the aftermath of a Booz, Allen, and Hamilton, Inc., study completed in the late 1960s. In this context the First Presidency literally became the counterpart to the president and CEO of a corporation, with the Quorum of Twelve acting as the head of the sales force and the Presiding Bishopric serving as corporate treasurer.²⁰ If the RLDS leadership wishes to be thought of in terms of corporate counterparts, then they should be judged by corporate standards. Unfortunately for them, using those standards one can find only utter failure in North America for nearly the last twenty years.

Numerous causes for RLDS decline have surfaced over the years, many of them advanced by RLDS leaders seeking to explain away their failures to provide viable leadership. Any analysis of why the RLDS North American membership is declining, however, must center on the

19. Launius, "The RLDS and the Decade of Decision," 51.

20. Clifford A. Cole, "An Oral History Memoir," 1985, 179, unpublished manuscript, Library-Archives, RLDS church; W. Wallace Smith, "An Oral History Memoir," 1981, 196, unpublished manuscript, Library-Archives, RLDS church. The report, Booz, Allen, and Hamilton, "Study of Organization and Management Practices," is available in Library-Archives, RLDS church.

collapse of the RLDS theological consensus and the resultant decline in activity of those choosing to worship elsewhere. Choosing not to discuss the losses of active members, however, the hierarchy has offered a few explanations for the abysmal rates of baptism in North America. Former second counselor in the First Presidency Alan D. Tyree suggested four possible reasons in a 1991 editorial.²¹ His most significant reason was, and he chided the membership for this, too few rank-and-file members witnessed to friends and neighbors. He complained that “we don’t know how to share [our testimonies], with whom, when and where, with what wisdom and courage, and how to do so without embarrassment.” Of course, Tyree failed to comment on the RLDS church’s lack of the basic prerequisite for effective salesmanship/witnessing, a valued product for which there is enthusiasm on the part of the sales/missionary force.

Tyree also laid some of the problem at the feet of a general demographic trend in the United States toward families having fewer children. This rationale, of course, points the finger for any responsibility for these trends away from the RLDS leadership. It’s no one’s fault, the general population portends this change. Unfortunately for Tyree, this does not come close to explaining the problem for two important reasons. First, if the trends can be explained on the basis of demographics, then all religious groups should be experiencing the same trends. They are not! Only those that seem to be the most radical in their perspectives, those with strong ideological commitments and beliefs in their own legitimacy as holders of moral and spiritual truth, are growing quickly. Second, through 1983 the baptismal rate tracked the birth rate reasonably well. It averaged 0.6 percent higher from 1960 through 1965 and 0.3 percent higher from then to 1982. However, since 1985 the baptismal rate has been less than the birth rate, reaching 0.6 percent less in 1995. Accordingly, since at least 1983 the baptismal slouch has not been demographic as the church as a whole has not even been baptizing its own offspring.

Tyree also blamed the problem on “western civilization” as a whole. He concluded that society as a whole “has been experiencing an erosion of the importance of Christianity. This is usually referred to as the growth of secularism.” This theme has been repeated many times by church officials. Once again this points the finger of responsibility away from the RLDS leadership. Again it’s no one’s fault, the population portends this change. As recently as January 1996 President Wallace B. Smith said essentially the same thing. “There is considerable indication of a decline of interest in participation in organized religion in general. This decline in the First World is predicted not only to continue but to accelerate,” he noted. “We are already beginning to see some of the ef-

21. Alan D. Tyree, “Why Are Baptisms Down?” *Saints Herald*, May 1991, 3-5.

fects of this pattern in our own movement as our baptismal rates go up in our missions abroad, and stay flat or decline in the United States and Canada."²² Again acceptance of this argument requires an explanation of why the Christian churches with neo-orthodox positions are growing so rapidly. Indeed, while it may have other difficulties such as overbearing rigidity, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has clearly defined what it believes and is growing exponentially by emphasizing those distinctives.

Tyree and other church officials have also sought to explain away the recent trends with an argument that does not seem born out by the evidence, that low baptismal rates are the result of "a general attitude in Western nations that all authority and authorities are subject to question, challenge, and skepticism." However, this explanation not only fails to take into consideration the experience of the less liberal Christian churches in America, but it does not allow for differences on the international scene. Radical egalitarianism was what Aaron Wildavsky called it, and such rampant individualism does seem to be more the norm in the United States, but that does not mean it is also present in other western nations.²³ Such ideology bemuses and entertains Europeans and horrifies many in the Hispanic world, as they wonder how a society can succeed when near anarchy seems to rule. As a legitimate explanation of the state of the church, therefore, it is suspect.

All of these explanations have also been voiced by mainline Christian churches in America, and perhaps it should not be surprising that RLDS leaders use the same rationalizations. They wholeheartedly identify, for good and ill, with that segment of the religious landscape. After all, many RLDS leaders have tried to identify the church with mainline Protestantism for more than a quarter century. This has been less than successful, however, as mainline churches still view the RLDS church as a Mormon sect with a prophet who receives messages from God, the Book of Mormon as scripture, and a religious tradition that cannot be fully overcome even if desirable. Nevertheless, I see the repeated references to the decline of the mainline Protestants and rising secularization and other larger trends in society as rather heavy-handed and hypocritical attempts to formulate excuses for what has taken place rather than as an honest search for reasons. They are essentially ways of saying we are not really doing so badly, or it's not our fault.

Instead, at the center of the problem is a loss of RLDS identity that prompts the membership to ask hard questions about continued RLDS

22. Wallace B. Smith, "Current Missional Issues," *Saints Herald*, Jan. 1996, 7.

23. Aaron Wildavsky, *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1989).

activity. For example, if the Reorganized Church has nothing more to offer than the local Methodist or Presbyterian or Unitarian or other church, why should I drive long distances to worship in small groups struggling just to keep the doors open on Sunday morning? Why not go to any of the many other larger churches in my community where my spiritual needs could be met and my contributions valued?

Sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark made some pointed observations about this general issue as churches have moved from sect to denomination in American history, and suggested that seeds of decline rest with that transformation. Their discussion about the decline of adherence to the so-called mainline Christian churches in America revolves around exchange theory. Instead of accommodating to modernity, something that has been a central part of what has happened to all the major established churches in this century, Finke and Stark argue that a costly faith that refuses to accommodate to secularism is more valued and helps ensure its viability.²⁴ They conclude: "People tend to value religion according to how much it costs—and because 'reasonable' and 'sociable' religion costs little, it is not valued greatly."²⁵

Exchange theory carries real weight for all aspects of human endeavor and for religion it is critical. Without it, no one would bother. It is another way of saying that boundary maintenance, a very common sociological term, is critically important in the health of any religious organization. There must be something that sets the group off from the remainder of society. Without it there is no reason to be a part of the group. The more that is demanded in crossing that boundary, the more it is valued by the members. The event of the exodus of the followers of Brigham Young from Nauvoo to the Great Basin, for instance, with its requirement to work together to survive and the strong sense of shared misery in it, proved to be a kairos experience, an intense, compressed period of great and life-altering events, for those who participated. In doing so the Mormons erected the greatest boundary setting off followers and others that could be fathomed, to be a member in good standing people had to forsake all that they held dear and journey for an unknown time, over an unknown distance, to an unknown land. Mormons have maintained their boundaries carefully since that time. The Reorganized Church has not done so, although reasonable ones did exist until at least the early 1980s, and the result is that there is at present no compelling

24. On the question of modernity, see Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: Volume 1, The Irony of It All, 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), flyleaf.

25. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 250.

reason that I can determine to be an RLDS member.²⁶

THE RLDS AND THE ABILENE PARADOX

With the present crisis in full swing, and unacceptable explanations for it circulating among the hierarchy, at least in my view, what explains the persistence of the course presently being pursued by senior officials? It would seem that rather than persisting along the path that has brought near ruin, the First Presidency would stop and ponder alterations to the church's present course. Not to do so appears foolhardy, especially at present when a decade of negative trends has demonstrated amply the bankruptcy of the present direction. The reasons why the Reorganization seems to be going full throttle on its present path are complex. One explanation, however, seems to offer some understanding. I now turn to an explanation of organizational dynamics based on the model of Jerry Harvey, a professor at George Washington University, first developed in 1974.²⁷

Harvey described what he referred to as the "Abilene Paradox." Stated succinctly it is: "Organizations frequently take actions in contradiction to the data they have for dealing with problems and, as a result, compound their problems rather than solve them."²⁸ He prefaced his observations with an anecdote about his family's horrendous trip from Coleman to Abilene, Texas, on a hot, sticky Sunday afternoon in July 1971 to eat at a down-at-heels cafeteria. His hilarious rendition of this truly hair-raising incident was punctuated by the realization after the fact that no one in the family had really wanted to do it. All had supported it because they believed the others wanted to go. Thus was born the Abilene Paradox.

Harvey noted that an organization's inability to manage "private agreement" proved "a major source of organization dysfunction." He outlined six major symptoms of the paradox at work in organizations; all

26. On this subject, see Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills, "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59 (Sept. 1959): 177-81; Harold B. Gerard and Grover C. Mathewson, "The Effects of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group: A Replication," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2 (1966): 278-87; Jacob E. Hautaluoma and Helene Spungin, "Effects of Initiation Severity and Interest on Group Attitudes," *Journal of Social Psychology* 93 (1974): 245-59; Jan Shippy, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 121-23; Roger D. Launius, "Many Mansions': The Dynamics of Dissent in the Nineteenth Century Reorganized Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 145-69.

27. The following paragraphs are based on the analysis contained in the classic study by Jerry B. Harvey, "The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement," *Organizational Dynamics*, Summer 1974, 17-34.

28. *Ibid.*, 23.

are presently at work in the Reorganized Church. These include:

1. Organization members agree privately, as individuals, as to the nature of the situation or problem facing the organization. ...
2. Organization members agree privately, as individuals, as to the steps that would be required to cope with the situation or problem they face. ...
3. Organization members fail to accurately communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another. In fact, they do just the opposite and thereby lead one another into misperceiving the collective reality. ...
4. With such invalid and inaccurate information, organization members make collective decisions that lead them to take actions contrary to what they want to do, and thereby arrive at results that are counterproductive to the organization's intent and purposes. ...
5. As a result of taking actions that are counterproductive, organization members experience frustration, anger, irritation, and dissatisfaction with their organization. Consequently, they form subgroups with trusted acquaintances and blame other subgroups for the organization's dilemma. Frequently, they also blame authority figures and one another. ...
6. Finally, if organization members do not deal with the generic issue—the inability to manage agreement—the cycle repeats itself with greater intensity.²⁹

Harvey concluded that these dysfunctions were rife in the boardroom, the bedroom, and political institutions. He did not specifically offer comments on this phenomenon in religious institutions, but the Reorganized Church presents a tailor-made case study of the Abilene Paradox run rampant and uncontrolled for two decades.

The bus to Abilene with the RLDS hierarchy aboard departed at least by the early 1980s and it has been careening over the potholes toward a cliff approaching the town ever since. I will develop this case study based on the data already presented and the symptoms Harvey offered. Regarding Harvey's first point, there is little question but that the senior officials of the Reorganized Church, as well as a vast majority of rank-and-filers, agree that the church is presently in disarray and has to face up to a set of circumstances that if not dealt with effectively will bring destruction to the institution. Although not discussed in official church publications except in the most oblique terms, as when the leadership admits that income is down and that the budget will run a deficit for the year, there is ample evidence that the nature of the problem is fully understood.³⁰

29. *Ibid.*, 20.

30. This was stated without explanation in the "World Church Budget Fiscal Year 1997," *Saints Herald* 143 (Nov. 1996): 535-37, when the First Presidency noted that the approved budget for FY 1997 was \$18.55 million while the FY 1996 budget had been \$20.82 million, a greater than 10-percent reduction between the two years.

E-mail discussion lists and informal communications are rife with discussions of portents of disaster. For instance, one senior official in Independence commented privately when presented with the data shown above that the story is well known among the hierarchy, having been presented several times a year for the past several years to senior church officials. He also admitted that some puzzlement existed exactly as to why these losses had occurred in the last few years and it is the central objective of church officials to resolve this issue.³¹ The new RLDS president, W. Grant McMurray, confessed in an interview in the *Saints Herald* that one of the really important tasks of the church in the short term is coming to grips with the "impact of significant changes and looking for answers to questions about the importance to them as individuals and their participation as members." How to accomplish that was unclear from McMurray's remarks, but he recognized the problem.³²

A lot of RLDS leaders and many rank-and-file who remain active in North America privately agree on a general course that will help to resolve the slide, the second bullet in Harvey's Abilene analysis. I have enjoyed close relations with many people inside the RLDS hierarchy and heard them complain privately for years of church policy on various issues and even criticize seriously the leadership of the Joint Council, but remain publicly silent for a combination of reasons ranging from friendship to job security. To his credit, McMurray has said publicly that the hierarchy must rebuild trust with the membership, and vice versa. As he put it, the RLDS must strike in the future "a delicate balance between a historic Restoration faith centered in prophets, revelations, and sectarian community and a contemporary faith centered in Jesus Christ, peace, and global community." He asked the poignant question, "In the divisive religious climate of our time, is it possible to be both a modern-day Christian, respectful of a variety of faith traditions, and at the same time lay claim to a religious and historical community that included Joseph Smith, golden plates, a lay priesthood, modern-day revelation, and a Temple spiraling into the heavens?" McMurray's answer was that with allowance for individuality such was not only possible but necessary.³³ Many people inside the church agree that this is a correct course for the future.

With a basic agreement on the type of problems encountered and the means of addressing them, Harvey contends in bullet three that communication of this information is often ineffective and change does not result. There may be reason for optimism here, especially with the encouraging public statements made recently by Grant McMurray, but a

31. Private communication to author, 12 Mar. 1996.

32. Jim Cable, "New President Looks Beyond Horizon," *Saints Herald* 144 (Jan. 1997): 5-8.

33. McMurray, "State of the Church," 1-2.

concerted campaign of communication will be required to resymbolize the Restoration and to recover viability. This was the basic argument of Paul Jones's recent article mentioned earlier, and as an outsider he perhaps sees the opportunities and challenges more clearly than those in the fray.³⁴ Lawrence Foster, an historian of new religious movements at Georgia Tech, agrees. In a 1994 comparison of the paradigm shifts in the Reorganized Church and the Nation of Islam during the last generation, Foster sees an important point of comparison. In contrast to the Nation of Islam, which methodically shifted its radical black separatism of Malcolm X to a more embracing Islam over the course of twenty-five years through a well-conceived and directed communications effort, the Reorganized Church, in Foster's view, has failed to move from something to something. "The fundamental failure of the RLDS leadership today," he wrote, "is that it is talking about paradigm shifts when it has not articulated and popularized among its members any compelling new paradigm!" He noted that "the current RLDS leadership has shown considerable political astuteness during the past decade in getting what it wanted approved by the membership. Now it is time to clearly articulate and defend the deeper spiritual and prophetic *message* without which any political manipulation, however skillful, is ultimately simply an empty shell." Communication is the heart of that effort, but it has not taken place as yet and the result is Harvey's fourth item, decisions continue to be made that propel the bus toward Abilene.³⁵

Jerry Harvey's fifth and sixth items are also operative. Blame, mistrust, resentment, anger, and ultimately the building of subversive subgroups have all taken place in abundance. Can even the casual observer of the Reorganized Church deny that we have been engrossed in these elements for the last quarter century? It is obvious to everyone! While we can place the best face on this, as church officials routinely do, the fact is that discord has been rife and blame spread to everyone in leadership at every level of church governance. In the end we have seen the cycle repeated again and again with ever greater intensity and escalating repercussions.

STOPPING THE BUS TO ABILENE

There is no easy fix, no quick solution, to challenges facing the Reorganized Church at the end of the twentieth century. The first step is obvious—although Jerry Harvey would caution that it requires real lead-

34. Jones, "Demythologizing and Symbolizing the RLDS Tradition," 109-15.

35. Lawrence Foster, "The RLDS Paradigm Shift: Some Lessons from the Transformation of the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims)," 19, 24, unpublished paper presented at the Mormon History Association Annual Meeting, Park City, Utah, 21 May 1994.

ership quality and a commitment to excellence to take it—gather a group of decision-makers in the organization and openly confront them with the problems of the institution. Not being one of those leaders, I do not know what has taken place inside the Joint Council Chamber at Reorganization headquarters. My suspicion is that such frank discussion is few and far between and exploration of causes of crisis mitigated by defensiveness and excuses. “Working within the context of a group is important because the dynamics of the Abilene Paradox involve collusion among group members,” Harvey wrote; “therefore, to try to solve the dilemma by working with individuals and small subgroups would involve further collusion with the dynamics leading up to the paradox.” For any progress to emerge from a meeting, however, the person in charge has to admit that a crisis exists and “own the problem.”

In such a predicament, the responses to be expected come at two levels. The first is technical. A set of “fixes” can be readily identified and dispensed with. Certainly that is true of individual parts of the problem. For instance, in the case of the Reorganized Church the fact is that the total numbers of members on the rolls have remained about 250,000 for some time, yet in terms of income available for church efforts when adjusted for inflation the amount is about half of what it was in 1978. How might the church address that problem from a technical level? My answer is enormously simple: publish articles in church periodicals, send letters to all church officers, and emphasize the magnitude of the problem in gatherings of the Saints. Explain what has taken place and admit that a crisis exists, asking for sacrifice and charity to expand the mission and program of the church. I believe the Saints would respond to the sense of emergency such a call would suggest. I would think that the crisis documented in these numbers would serve as a vehicle for drawing the membership together and helping to restore a sense of mission and identity.

More critical, nonetheless, are the existential issues raised in the Abilene Paradox and the method of dealing, or not dealing, with them. “The real meaning of that existential experience,” according to Harvey, “and its relevance to a wide variety of organizations, may lie, therefore, not in the scientific analysis of decision-making but in the plight of Sisyphus.” In mythology Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of pushing a large boulder to the top of a mountain, whereupon reaching the summit the boulder returns to its original position at the bottom. Was the perpetual task absurd and devoid of meaning? Camus suggested that it was, and that Sisyphus recognized it upon occasion as such. Perhaps the RLDS as an organization is in the same category, and its leadership occasionally recognize it as such? As Harvey concluded, “Confronting the absurd paradox of agreement may provide, through activity, what Sisyphus gained from his passive but conscious acceptance of his fate.”

Perhaps not, but it offers a tantalizing possibility.³⁶

And what of the brakes on the bus as the twentieth century is near an end? I certainly believe that the present crisis of RLDS identity, necessitated by the theological reformation, has been a more severe issue in church history than even the supreme directional control controversy of the 1920s.³⁷ As one Methodist minister with ties to the Reorganization notes, "[F]or all the moves the Reorganization has made toward the mainline, no one who calls himself a high priest, reads a Book of Mormon, and worships in a temple in Independence, Missouri, will ever be able to convince the average Protestant or Catholic cleric that he belongs in the Christian mainstream."³⁸ From my perspective, in the last quarter century Reorganized Church officials have led the church to a point where it really has almost nowhere to go. And yet the Reorganization seems to hurtle full steam ahead to accomplish something that it cannot accomplish.

The RLDS church has always had a challenge of balancing a certain faithfulness to its Mormon origins on the one hand and yet remaining palatable to Protestants on the other. That created a tension as a people in the middle, and that was a reasonably viable place. The only viable option that I see is a recapturing of that middle ground. That, coupled with a spiritual reawakening, has some hope for the future. Without it the church will continue to drift. Grant McMurray has recently made public statements to the effect that he understands that crisis exists and that the best means of dealing with it is to seek a place on the religious landscape that embraces the best of the Restoration and the best of Protestantism but is really embroiled in neither. An emphasis on core values might emerge in this context that could reaffirm some distinctives that will be reinterpreted for a new age as well as incorporate larger Christian perspectives in a new way. Time will tell, but the clock is ticking.

36. The foregoing is based on the work of Harvey, "Abilene Paradox," 23-34.

37. This crisis has been written about extensively in Paul M. Edwards, "Theocratic-Democracy: Philosopher-King of the Reorganization," in McKiernan, Blair, and Edwards, *Restoration Movement*, 341-57; Larry E. Hunt, *F.M. Smith: Saint as Reformer*, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1982); Paul M. Edwards, *The Chief: An Administrative Biography of Frederick M. Smith* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1988); and Kenneth R. Mullikin, "The Supreme Directional Control Controversy: Theocracy Versus Democracy in the Reorganized Church, 1915-1925," in Laurius and Spillman, *Let Contention Cease*, 91-124.

38. E-mail message, Larry Conrad to George Walton, 1 Feb. 1997, copy in my possession.