

The "Restoration" in British Columbia:
The LDS and RLDS Churches
on Canada's West Coast

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FACTIONALISM AND SCHISM ARE COMMON PROBLEMS in religious movements, problems to which the followers of Joseph Smith were not immune. Their definitive separation came soon after the Prophet's death. A scattering took place as they were driven from Nauvoo, but ultimately two major groups coalesced, one in Utah, the other in Iowa. This essay focuses on the efforts of both groups to establish congregations in Canada's far west and explores why the growth of the Latter-day Saint and Reorganized Latter Day Saint churches in British Columbia became so lopsided after World War II.

No one knows precisely when the first Saint arrived in British Columbia. Brigham Young seriously considered Vancouver Island as a place of refuge in 1846 and again in 1857 (Bancroft 26:238). It is probable that at least one Mormon arrived in British Columbia before 1858 because by that time a gold-bearing gravel bar in Fraser River near Lytton was known as "Mormon's Bar" (Travaillot to Douglas 1858). The first documented arrival was that of William Francis Copley, who landed in Victoria about 1875 after traveling from Utah via Nevada and California with his wife and three small children and established a home near Cobble Hill on Vancouver Island (Copley n.d., 5; McCue 1979, 53). Then in 1886, at the suggestion of President John Taylor, Charles Ora Card looked over the southeastern portion of British Columbia in search of a haven for persecuted Utah polygamists but in the end selected a site across the Rocky Mountains in what is now Alberta (Tagg 1968, 25).

Alex McMullen, a member of the Reorganization who arrived from Ontario in 1897, was the first disciple of the Restoration to attempt to spread his faith among the inhabitants of the remote and rustic land of British Columbia. McMullen was a young school teacher who had secured employment in Chilliwack, a farming community some sixty miles up the Fraser River from Van-

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couver (McMullen 1941, 1; Jewett n.d., 1). The following year William Johnson arrived in Nanaimo from Iowa to work in the coal mines (Johnson 1919, 630). Both men wanted to spread the message of the Restoration and requested that missionaries be sent. In July 1899 Elder Daniel MacGregor arrived from Ontario and became the first missionary of the Restoration in British Columbia. After trying unsuccessfully to attract converts in Nanaimo, MacGregor transferred his activities to the Chilliwack area.

This was the beginning of the work in British Columbia. A school house was secured in East Chilliwack and Brother MacGregor held services each evening and on Sundays with good attendance. The Gospel story was so different from the popular teachings of the day, that much persecution was aroused and many trials endured, but withal the work moved ahead (McMullen 1941, 1).

In spite of the difficulties encountered, Elder MacGregor was persuasive in his preaching, and on 1 October 1899 "the first baptismal service was held in Camp Slough . . . when five persons joined the church" (Jewett n.d., 2)¹ These five — Henry Stade, Isaac and Emily McMullen, R. J. Muirhead, and Alice Mary Smith — proved to be pillars of the RLDS church for the rest of their lives. Other baptisms followed, and on 11 November 1900 Apostle R. C. Evans visited Chilliwack, ordained three men to the priesthood, and organized the first branch of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in British Columbia. Evans called Daniel MacGregor as presiding elder, Henry Stade as presiding priest, John Stade as presiding teacher, and Maggie MacGregor as branch secretary. Three weeks later Apostle Evans organized the New Westminster Branch with Alex McMullen, recently moved from Chilliwack at Evans' request, as presiding elder (McMullen 1941, 1).

At the turn of the century the Utah branch of the Restoration began to take an active interest in British Columbia, this time not as a place of refuge but as a source of converts. From 1886, when Charles O. Card decided there was no suitable place in British Columbia for settlement, until 1902, the Utah Mormons had shown no official interest in British Columbia. Then on 15 March 1902 the Church added British Columbia to its Northwestern States Mission, with headquarters in Portland, Oregon (Northwestern 15 March 1902). The *Victoria Daily Colonist* reported on 13 May 1903 that missionaries had arrived in Victoria under the leadership of the mission president, Nephi Pratt. Although they did not record names, the missionaries reported finding some Latter-day Saints in Victoria (Northwestern 14 May 1903), possibly some of the Copleys.² Like Daniel MacGregor four years earlier, these missionaries faced opposition (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 12 June 1903, 5). Unlike MacGregor, they were not initially successful in making converts, and not until 1904 were they able to form a Sunday School in Vancouver (rather

¹ McMullen lists eight baptisms (n.d., 1). Clara Smith lists only four (n.d., 1). Jewett (n.d., 2) indicates that a second baptismal service followed the first by about a week.

² There is an undocumented tradition among the descendants of W. F. Copley that he baptized some of his children long before the arrival of either RLDS or LDS missionaries (Copley n.d., 11).

than Victoria), after locating Edward Neill and his family, who had moved to Vancouver after joining the Church in Brisbane, Australia. Neill served as the superintendent (Roy n.d., 1).

Meanwhile the RLDS congregation in Chilliwack was growing, and in 1904 Henry Stade donated a small building that was remodeled and used as the first building for worship owned by the Saints (Smith n.d., 1). The following year witnessed the first visit to British Columbia of a president of one of the Restoration groups. RLDS President Joseph Smith III and his family spent several months visiting his wife's parents in New Westminster.³ An energetic program of preaching in public meetings strengthened the spirit of the Saints but produced few converts.

But neither was the LDS missionary effort very successful at that time. An LDS conference in Vancouver in 1909 recorded an attendance of twelve, with only ten at Sunday School. Not until 12 February 1911, more than ten years after the first RLDS branch was organized, did the Latter-day Saints have enough members to organize their first branch in British Columbia. Edward Neill served as the president of this Vancouver Branch (Roy n.d., 1). About a year later the RLDS were able to organize a mission in Vancouver in addition to the branches in New Westminster and Chilliwack (Sudaby n.d., n.p.).⁴

World War I brought mixed results for Mormon groups in British Columbia. The LDS American missionaries who remained in the province during the war found themselves, as able bodied young men, under censure for not being in the military as were so many young Canadians. Two elders who were "working in the country[side] without purse or script, were deported as suspected spies" (Hackney 1950, 151). Nevertheless, an extraordinary number of converts was baptized, and in the summer of 1918 the first LDS Sunday School in Victoria was organized, fifteen years after proselytizing began (Northwestern 2 July 1918). Later that year the elders reported four additional baptisms and commented on their progress:

We feel very good over our success in that city [Victoria], because a little more than a year ago we hadn't a single member there. In fact, for several years we had missionaries in that locality, and, notwithstanding their faithful labors, it was considered

³ Sudaby n.d., n.p.; *Saints Herald* 24 April 1937, 528 and 1 May 1937, 561. The first visit by an LDS Church president was in July 1911, when President Joseph F. Smith, Melvin J. Ballard (president of the Northwestern States Mission), "and party" toured Victoria "after attending a conference of the Union Stake in La Grande, Oregon." No public meetings are mentioned (Northwestern 19 July 1911).

⁴ For the RLDS "mission" denotes a small local congregation. Historically the typical RLDS progression in British Columbia was to establish a group, which grew into a mission and finally became a branch. The RLDS congregations are now all part of a single British Columbia District.

LDS "missions" include a broader jurisdiction which directs proselytizing activity within a defined geographical area and supervises the leadership of local branches. The typical LDS progression in British Columbia has been the establishment of a Sunday School which developed into a dependent, then independent branch. Branches were grouped into districts, which were also supervised by the mission. Ultimately the branches developed into wards which are grouped into stakes. Current missionary work in British Columbia, excluding the Peace River and Cranbrook areas, is supervised by the Canada Vancouver Mission.

a barren field. Now their efforts have been crowned with success and today we have five families, or twenty-one members (Northwestern 10 Sept. 1918).

Before the end of the year at least three more families were baptized (Northwestern 7 Dec. 1918). Melvin J. Ballard, president of the Northwestern States Mission, offered this explanation for the increased interest in religion in general and Mormonism in particular: "When the casualty list appeared each morning there were thousands of fathers and mothers who began to pray who never prayed before in their lives. . . . There have been ten times as many baptisms . . . in the last year, as we have had in any preceding year with the same number of missionaries' (CR 6 April 1918, 64). The RLDS experience in Canada was apparently similar: "It may be a surprise to some of our members to learn that the largest number ever baptised in Canada [by the RLDS] for any one year [prior to 1919] was the year 1918 — 751. The next largest was apparently 1917 . . . and the third largest, 1914" (Burgess 1919, 604).

By 1920 the Reorganized Church was the largest Mormon group, with organized branches at Rosedale and New Westminster, a mission in Vancouver, and a Sunday School in Nanaimo. The Latter-day Saints had succeeded only in establishing a branch in Vancouver and a Sunday School in Victoria.

During the 1920s both groups acquired real estate. By 1925 the Vancouver LDS branch had approximately 100 members, and this growth persuaded the congregation to acquire a proper meetinghouse. So, some twenty years after the RLDS acquired their first building, the LDS purchased an old church at 804 East Fourteenth Street from another denomination for \$3,000. But the satisfaction of owning their own place of worship was tempered by some harsh realities: "The only means of heating [the building] . . . was an ineffective furnace which smoked so badly that the windows had to be opened to clear the fog and then closed again because it was too cold, then the process repeated over again" (Roy n.d., 12).

At about this same time the RLDS mission in Vancouver built a place of worship at Slocan and Dundas Streets (Sudaby n.d., n.p.), and the Rosedale Branch moved from a rented hall into a newly completed building in 1928 in time for a visit from RLDS President Frederick M. Smith (Smith n.d., n.p.).

The 1920s were also a time of membership expansion for the Reorganized Latter Day Saints as the mission in Vancouver became a branch. But the LDS experience was different. Outside of Vancouver the Utah-based Saints struggled for survival. The Sunday School in Victoria died at mid-decade as the members moved away and were not replaced.⁵ The missionaries were withdrawn from Victoria in March 1923 (Northwestern 25 March, 8 Oct. 1923, 16 Aug. 1924, 22 Sept. 1929). Efforts to establish groups in other parts of the province proved unsuccessful. For example, an LDS Sunday School began in Creston in the early 1920s but dissolved in 1927 when the families that started

⁵ The last entry in the Victoria B.C. Sunday School "Minute Book" is dated 3 August 1924. However, George V. Copley indicates that the Sunday School survived until he left Victoria late in 1926 (Copley to McCue 1 and 6 March 1975).

it moved back to southern Alberta (Forsyth to McCue 1982). Another family, moving into the Creston Valley later in the year, expecting to find a functioning LDS branch, was understandably disappointed (K. Luscher n.d., 5; Boehmer n.d., n.p.). Another Sunday School was established in Creston in 1928 and developed into a small branch by 1931, only to dissolve a year or so later as once again members moved away (K. Luscher n.d., 6). LDS missionaries ventured briefly into the south-central portion of British Columbia in 1920 but did not return until 1929 (Tagg 1963, 253). Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, when the first total membership figures are available, the LDS had drawn approximately even with their RLDS counterparts: 257 Latter-day Saints, 252 Reorganized Latter Day Saints (Brunson to McCue 1983; Rowe to McCue 1983).

During the 1930s more durable LDS units began to appear primarily through the migration of Church members from areas where the faith was already flourishing. In 1937 LDS Sunday Schools were firmly established in Nelson, Trail, and Victoria ("Nelson" n.d., 1; Hillier n.d.; Taylor to Luscher 1980). Members moving from other areas of Canada, rather than new converts, provided the nucleus for each of these new Sunday Schools. In 1938 the Vancouver Branch became the first ward in British Columbia and part of the newly created Seattle Stake until it reverted in 1945 to branch status in the Northwestern States Mission (Roy n.d., 14, 16).

In the 1930s the RLDS established a mission on Lulu Island and strengthened its existing units. In spite of the LDS migrations, by the end of the decade the Reorganized Latter Day Saints had 342 members on their rolls and the Latter-day Saints 301.

The 1940s witnessed significant gains by both groups. World War II labor needs caused the Canadian population to become increasingly mobile. Several Saskatchewan RLDS families moved to Victoria in 1940 to work in the shipyards. They began holding church services on 17 November 1940 and were formally organized as a mission four months later (Sudaby n.d.). About the same time a mission was also established in Vancouver's Kitsalano District (Baker and Carson 1982). Later in 1941 the RLDS Church organized the British Columbia District, giving Latter Day Saints in B.C. a greater measure of self-government (McMullen 1941).

This same decade witnessed the beginning of real growth of the LDS Church in British Columbia as branches were established in Cranbrook, New Westminster, Creston, Kimberly, Nanaimo, Nelson, North Vancouver, Trail, and Victoria, as well as Sunday Schools in several other centers.⁶ Like their RLDS counterparts, the LDS central leaders were placing more trust in local leaders to handle local church affairs. In December 1947 British Columbia was detached from the Northwestern States Mission to become part of the

⁶ For this paper's purposes an LDS branch is considered to have been "established" when it began submitting monthly reports to the mission headquarters and was individually listed on the annual statistical report submitted to Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. A Sunday School or a dependent branch commonly existed in a community for some time before this independent reporting status was achieved.

new Western Canadian Mission. The province was in turn divided into districts (K. Luscher n.d., 20; Northwestern 30 Nov. 1947). LDS growth during the 1940s was sixfold (1,793) while the RLDS doubled their membership (711).

To conclude that once organized the branches of either group flourished without struggle would be erroneous. Transportation, both in the days of horse and buggy and in those of motorized conveyances, has often been a problem. Henry Stade "drove with horse and buggy, eight miles to [the RLDS] church, no day was too cold or stormy, no night too dark for him to drive that distance to perform his duty" (Jewett n.d., 3). One Latter-day Saint calculated that he had traveled 12,800 miles in twenty months to "hold my calling true" as first counselor in the Fairmont Hot Springs Branch presidency (Passey to Luscher 1979). Another sister caught the 3:45 A.M. bus to attend church services sixty miles away and the 7:00 P.M. bus to return home (D. Luscher 1983, 1).

Finding suitable meeting places was another common problem: "When Daniel [MacGregor] came with the key [to the Camp Slough school] he wasn't able to get in [because the door had been deliberately blocked from the inside], so he delivered his sermon from the school steps to a large group of people. After this service R. J. Muirhead offered him the use of his workshop in which to hold [RLDS] services" (Jewett n.d., 2). During the summer in Creston priesthood meetings were held out under the trees and even the woodshed was used as a classroom (Boehmer n.d., n.p.)

Often the women held these struggling groups together, as one Creston woman reports: "For what it is worth I should mention the fact that I made the benches (with slanting backs) for our first little [LDS] church down by the river. (I loved carpenter work) so it was a pleasure and a challenge. Sister Craig made our first sacrament trays from wood with coat hangers for handles" (Boehmer n.d., n.p.). Women in the LDS Fairmont Branch organized meetings in the absence of priesthood leaders: "The sisters held Sunday school, Sacrament and Relief Society meetings as best they could. Once in a while some one would come that held the priesthood and we could have the Sacrament. Many times there were only 3 or 4 out to meetings" ("History" n.d., 4).

Early slow growth for the "Brighamites" and "Reorganites" can be attributed to general apathy as well as to the direct persecution some Saints experienced. Disinterest and apathy toward their message frustrated faithful Saints. No one came to a meeting at which Melvin J. Ballard was scheduled to speak. The meeting was moved to a street corner and attracted 200. Although public meetings were seldom totally ignored, lack of interest was typical, and a crowd of twenty-three members and missionaries was considered good attendance (Northwestern 18 June 1910, 14 Feb. 1913).

Though the RLDS arrived earlier in British Columbia, they only maintained their membership edge through the 1930s. Although the 1940s were their best growth decade, they were surpassed fourfold by the LDS who have ever since expanded more consistently and faster than the RLDS. The 1960s were an especially fertile growth period for the LDS, as seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Decade End	LDS	Increase	RLDS	Increase	Ratio*
20s	257		252		
30s	301	44	342	90	1:2
40s	1,793	1,492	711	369	4:1
50s	3,872	2,079	934	223	9:1
60s	10,288	6,416	1,130	196	33:1
70s	14,240	3,952	1,272	142	28:1
1985	16,200	1,960	1,381	109	18:1

Data from Brunson to McCue (1986) and Third Quarter 1985 Activity Reports for the Cranbrook, Vancouver South, Vernon, and Victoria LDS stakes and the Grande Prairie, Prince George, and Terrace LDS districts.

* Ratio refers to the comparative population increases of the two groups.

Why this difference in growth rates? One factor is the way in which the LDS Church has responded to the migratory habits of its members. The pattern is common to many successful LDS branches in British Columbia: a family strong in the faith moved into a community where it sometimes, but not always, found other members of the Church; missionaries were requested; a Sunday School was organized which met first in a home, then, as membership rolls grew, in a rented hall, and finally in a Church-owned meetinghouse. The beginnings of the Trail and Victoria branches are illustrative:

Bill, our eldest son, wanted to go to [the LDS] Church so bad[ly] that I wrote to the Northwestern States Mission in Spokane, Washington, about holding a Sunday School here. Elder Wallace B. Grant came immediately to Trail . . . I think [with] Elder Handy [as] his companion (Taylor n.d., 1).

[We] came to live in Victoria in 1935. For the first two years there was no [LDS] church, and we did not meet any members. . . . [When] Brother Melvin Oxspring and his family moved here from Vancouver he wrote the Mission President and explained our situation, and Elders Owen and Samuelson were sent to work here. On October 17, 1937, a . . . meeting was held at the home of Brother Melvin Oxspring at 54 Government Street. . . . It was decided to organize a Sunday School (Hillier 1969, 1).

As numbers grew in each community a branch was formed, dependent on the nearest firmly established branch. When the dependent branch had acquired enough members, either by conversion or move-ins, it was given independent status. The work of both the missionaries and the local leaders was closely supervised by a mission president, an experienced leader from a more highly developed area of the Church, whose objective was to bring in converts with a goal of eventually organizing a stake.

This relatively aggressive missionary system with its extensive support for emerging branches of the Church has been the key to the comparatively rapid growth of the LDS Church in British Columbia. It should be noted that the initial RLDS foothold can be attributed to a similar process: Alex McMullen requested the help of a missionary, and Daniel MacGregor was sent. Working

together they established branches in both Chilliwack and New Westminster. But after a promising beginning the RLDS missionary effort in British Columbia has consistently been on a smaller and much less aggressive scale than the LDS effort: one missionary in the initial RLDS contingent in 1899 compared to six in the first LDS missionary work in 1903 (*Victoria Daily Times* 13 May 1903, 3; *Northwestern* 14 May 1903).

In 1983 there were 120 full-time LDS missionaries in British Columbia and probably the same number of part-time local missionaries. By contrast, the RLDS depend on a few part-time local missionaries. In other words, the LDS Church, with its larger world-wide financial and membership resources, has devoted more money and labor to missionary work in British Columbia than has the RLDS Church. In addition, the RLDS Church does not seem to have developed an effective support system to aid members, living in isolation from their co-religionists, in bringing in new members and developing new missions and branches.

The economy has also played an important role in the growth of the LDS membership. The 1930s were a period of economic disaster for the world in general as well as a slow growth period in LDS membership in British Columbia. The 1940s saw an increase in LDS membership thirty-four times the previous decade's growth. The 1950s brought nearly one-and-one-half times the increase of the 1940s. The 1960s tripled previous growth. And the growth of the 1970s, though only two-thirds that of the 1960s, was nearly twice that of the 1950s. The 1960s appear to have been a period of exceptional prosperity in British Columbia, and there is some correlation between the increase in LDS membership and net migration into the area (*Historical* 1983, A349). Both figures show a bulge in the 1960s, but the population increase is disproportionately larger than the increase in the general population. (See Figure 1.) However, the same national economic and migratory factors seem not to have affected the Reorganized Latter Day Saints in the same way. RLDS membership increase reached a peak in the 1940s, and the annual increase percentage has since shown a steady decline.

For an explanation one must return to the apparent differences in migratory habits and emphasis on missionary endeavor. The large number of full-time volunteer missionaries that the Latter-day Saints have maintained since World War II, along with substantial immigration of members, seem to have made the difference in the growth patterns of Latter-day Saints and Reorganized Latter Day Saints in British Columbia.

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FIGURE 1

COMPARISON OF LDS AND OVERALL POPULATION GROWTH IN B.C.

