

## An Australian Viewpoint

*Marjorie Newton*

DURING A HISTORY OF religion class I attended at Sydney University a few years ago, another student asked the lecturer when the Mormons first arrived in Australia. He didn't know and, looking round, asked, "Does anyone here know anything about the Mormons?" When I eventually confessed, the class stared at me in much the way science students might peer at the skeleton of a newly unearthed dinosaur, and the lecturer, an authority on the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Australia, beamed. A real, live Mormon! "That's wonderful," he said enthusiastically. "Tell them about the Mormons. Tell them everything! Tell them about Joe Smith and the Irish angel." I looked as puzzled as I felt. "You know, the Irish angel," he encouraged, "Moroney!" I can state unequivocally that Mormonism is not yet a mainline religion of Australia.

Let me define my use of the term "mainline." In Australia, we more often use the term "mainstream" than "mainline," although most Australians would accept the definition of sociologists Wade Roof and William McKinney: "By mainline . . . we mean the dominant, culturally established faiths held by the majority" (in Long 1990, 5). This definition is very similar to the criteria of the Lilly Endowment's advisory committee for mainstream-Protestant studies, namely, "national visibility and prominence" (Long 1990, 5).

Using these criteria, most Australians would identify their mainstream churches as the Church of England, the Uniting Church (an amalgamation of the Methodist, Congregational, and part of the Presbyterian churches), and the Baptist Church. While Australian academics would probably define "mainstream" as Protestant, I think the general population would also include the Roman Catholic Church as mainstream, despite a long history of anti-Catholic sentiment in Australia (Mol 1985, 33-42). Certainly the Roman Catholic Church is both visible and prominent in our society. One quarter of the Australian population has Irish roots, and large numbers of post-World War II immigrants have come from predominantly Catholic countries in the southern Mediterranean and Latin America. Catholics formed

---

MARJORIE NEWTON is the author of *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia*, published by the Institute for Polynesian Studies at BYU-Hawaii. A member of the LDS Church in Australia for more than fifty years, she lives with her husband in Sydney, New South Wales.

the largest Christian group (26 percent of the population) in the 1986 federal census (Castles 1990, 372).

In Australia, the term “mainstream” is often equated with “respectable.” The Baptist Church provides an interesting case study, being regarded in Colonial times as a sect and therefore not quite respectable, until it was boosted up the social scale by the arrival in Australia of new-fangled American churches such as the Mormons, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Now, in turn, the Mormon Church and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and, probably to a lesser extent, Jehovah’s Witnesses, are becoming if not “respectable,” then at least verging on acceptance into the mainstream with the appearance of more unusual religions such as the Unification Church (Moonies), the Church of Scientology, and non-Christian religions like the Hare Krishna.

So, for Mormons in Australia—and in many other international areas—the challenge is to *become* mainline, rather than the challenge of being mainline. If the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its leaders and members aspire to become mainline, I see several challenges in Australia.

First, there is the challenge of obtaining the numerical growth necessary to become “nationally visible and prominent.” For over a century (1851–1955), the Mormon Church was numerically insignificant in Australia. During the last thirty-five years, however, LDS membership in Australia has increased by more than 2000 percent (from 3,500 in July 1955 to 76,000 in July 1990), while the population increased by less than 100 percent (from 9 million to 17 million) in the same period. As a result of this growth, the LDS Church finally achieved separate listing for the first time in the 1981 federal census results. Previously, Latter-day Saints were included in the total of assorted “other religions.” However, one qualification needs to be made. While the Church claimed some 60,000 Australians as members in 1981, only 32,444 Australians claimed the Church. That is, then, only about half were willing to be recorded on the census as Latter-day Saints. However, should the same proportional growth of the Church to the Australian population continue over the next thirty-five years, by the year 2025, the Mormon Church in Australia will have a nominal population ratio of 1:35 instead of the present 1:240. Even with a 50 percent inactivity rate, the Church would certainly be “nationally visible and prominent” in census figures and number of chapel buildings.

Another challenge to be faced by the LDS Church in the quest for mainline status in Australia is overcoming the continuing stigma of polygamy. Polygamy and door-knocking are the twin aspects of Mor-

monism known to all Australians. In fact, the stigma of Mormon discrimination against the blacks is fading much faster in Australia than the stigma of polygamy. There are comparatively few aboriginal members, and they were never denied the priesthood. The polygamy image, on the other hand, lingers.

In the United States one phenomenon which has contributed to the LDS Church's mainline status is the national visibility and prominence not only of Church-sponsored organizations such as the Tabernacle Choir, but of many individual Latter-day Saints. Compared with the general population, a disproportionate number of Mormons in the United States have become prominent in government, industry, sports, theatre, and service organizations, not to mention assorted awards and titles such as "Mother of the Year" garnered by Latter-day Saints. There are as yet very few nationally prominent Latter-day Saints in Australia, certainly none in public positions comparable to cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, or state governors. No LDS members sit in any of the seven Australian parliaments, and, as far as I know, only one Australian city or town has an LDS mayor. There are few Australian LDS academics. In fact, there are very few Australian LDS "tall poppies" at all. Few Australian Latter-day Saints are involved even as rank-and-file members, let alone officers, in service clubs and community organizations. In this respect, the Reorganized Church, or the Saints' Church, as its members prefer it to be known in Australia, is far more visible in the Australian community. Despite its comparatively small numbers (approximately 4,000 compared with 76,000 Latter-day Saints), the Saints' Church is well-known for its sponsorship of Camp Quality and its provision and maintenance of retirement and nursing homes, holiday camps, and similar projects which benefit the larger community. LDS Church leaders in Australia are currently encouraging members to look outward and serve more in the community, with a view to achieving more community visibility so that suspicion and misconceptions may be finally put to rest.

Despite a continuing flow of immigrants who bring great cultural diversity, Australians are now more self-consciously Australian than ever before. In order to become mainline in Australia, the LDS Church may also need to modify its American image—not its American roots, but its American image and American cultural imprint—so that it might be possible to become Mormon without committing what author Rana Kabbani has called "cultural treason" (1989, ix). Many Australian Latter-day Saints feel a great need for their leaders to distinguish between gospel and cultural values. Although most of the former overt Americanism has been removed from curriculum materials, covert Americanism still permeates many aspects of the program;

consequently, the Church in Australia still has an American image which is not well received by most Australians, members and non-members alike.

Yet even as Church leaders are striving for universalism, there is reason to doubt whether a universal program is possible. In October 1986, for example, our Young Women joined with Young Women around the world in sending testimonial messages aloft in balloons. But most Church members in Australia live on the eastern seaboard. October is our spring, and the prevailing winds on the east coast are westerlies. Many of the balloons, I was told, floated happily out to sea, utterly futile as an exercise in testimony bearing but an ecological hazard for the whales and dolphins.

The fragmented nature of our current organization also mitigates against the Church being perceived as mainline in Australia. While the area president is responsible for the whole South Pacific, no president is assigned to preside over all LDS Church units in Australia or even in one state; there are only various stake and mission presidents and regional representatives, each with limited jurisdiction. When a major news story with religious implications breaks, as, for example, the Rushdie affair, the death of a pope, or even the results of a Gallup Poll on moral issues, the Australian media invite responses from various churches. Each of the mainstream churches has an ecclesiastical leader as spokesperson; the LDS Church has a public communications director. Our director is extremely capable and articulate and conveys a most acceptable image of the Church. But no matter how good a job he does, a comment from the LDS Church's professional PR man lacks the prestige—the sheer weight of office—of a moderator-general of the Presbyterian Church, a Roman Catholic cardinal, or an Anglican archbishop.

While many of these concerns would apply in other international areas of the Church, three interrelated problems are specifically Australian and may increasingly affect the Church's quest for mainline status, particularly in major Australian cities. These are the aging population, continuous immigration, and growing poverty. Most immigrants cluster in Sydney and Melbourne; both cities, especially Sydney, are rapidly becoming Manhattanized. Home prices and rentals are increasing beyond the economic means of young families, single parents, immigrants, and retired people. As these groups are being forced into less costly areas, finding enough leaders to staff the inner-city stakes is becoming ever more difficult. Missionary work is also becoming more difficult as the message needs to be given in so many different languages. Ethnic wards have been created, posing language problems for the supervising stake leaders.

These difficulties raise some questions about the process of becoming mainstream. If we are heading toward baptism numbers which will place us in the mainstream, whom are we seeking? Can we try too hard to be mainstream in the sense of “respectable”?

I have observed that some leaders—both Australian and American—hope for a middle-class, mainline, “respectable” image for the Church in Australia. Middle-class converts have been gladly welcomed and meetinghouses are built when possible in middle-class suburbs. Obviously the conversion of numbers of the elderly, of single-parent families, of immigrants struggling to start life over in Australia, places an enormous strain on Church leaders, home and visiting teachers, and on tithing and fast-offering funds. But when an apostle instructs missionaries in one Australian mission that they are not to seek and teach people such as prostitutes and drug addicts, when missionaries in Papua New Guinea are instructed to baptize only middle-class nationals who will be self-supporting and provide leadership possibilities, when a mission president in Australia promises a restaurant dinner to the first missionary to baptize a doctor,<sup>1</sup> I am troubled. I seem to hear the voice of the Savior: “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13). Well-to-do sinners? Surely “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father” (James 1:27) still has more to do with visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction than with presenting a middle-class image. To me, the greatest challenge for the international Church will be for Mormonism to remain Christian as it consciously strives to become mainline.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Castles, Ian. *Year Book Australia 1990*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1990.
- Kabbani, Rana. *Letter to Christendom*. London: Virago Press, 1989.
- Long, John C. “What Is Mainstream”? *Progressions: A Lilly Endowment Occasional Report* 2 (January 1990): 5.
- Mol, Hans. *The Faith of Australians*. North Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985.

---

<sup>1</sup> All examples, including names of leaders making the statements, mission names and dates, told to the author by missionaries serving in the respective missions at the time. All names withheld by request.