

Familial, Socioeconomic, and Religious Behavior: A Comparison of LDS and Non-LDS Women

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A PERSISTENT CHALLENGE FACING MORMONISM is striking a balance between accommodating the broader society and maintaining some sense of unique identity.¹ This problem is not unique to Mormonism, however. Sociological wisdom holds that new religious movements are in tension with the broader societies from which they emerge.² New movements emphasize other-worldly rewards and are critical of material success. Over time these movements generally go through a process of accommodation or disappear. In this essay I examine the balance between preserving a unique life-style and adaptation to broader societal norms by comparing LDS women's educational attainment, employment, religious participation, and family behavior with women nationally.

Early Mormonism was often in tension with the broader society. Tension was created because the domineering nature of Mormon religious culture often conflicted with American sensibilities of separation of church and state, practices such as polygamy raised public disdain, and Mormon missionaries were sometimes critical of capitalist society. Nevertheless, many activities of the LDS church were not exclusively focused on non-material rewards. City building and investments in industrial development were aimed toward worldly success. European converts were

1. Armand L. Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence: The Mormon Reaction to Americanization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Spring 1989): 30-67.

2. Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

encouraged to migrate in order to help establish the Kingdom of God. This kingdom incorporated economic production with religious culture and ecclesiastical leadership.³ This early emphasis on economic achievement paved the way later for more complete acceptance of American economic institutions.

Twentieth-century Mormonism has often opted for accommodation to capitalist economic systems. In contemporary Mormonism economic achievement is valued. Successful Mormon achievers are honored by the culture, and many high church leaders are drawn from the ranks of successful businessmen and lawyers. The church has a reputation for having more assets per capita than any other religious group of comparable size,⁴ and economic self-reliance is taught as a quasi-religious principle. Recent evidence indicates that Mormons have above average educational attainment and that higher education is positively associated with church participation.⁵ In short, economic achievement is condoned by and continues to be an important avenue to high status in Mormon society.

Mormon women's economic roles, however, have received little scholarly attention. Besides playing a key role in an economy that depended heavily on household production, early Mormon women were sometimes solely responsible for providing for their children because of widowhood or divorce, separation from a polygamous husband, or absence of a husband engaged in a church calling.⁶ Collectively, women were also called on to produce silk, save grain, produce goods that were not available in the local economy, and constrain their consumption patterns.⁷

In the twentieth century, statements by church leaders have increasingly emphasized the importance of the family.⁸ The church ideal for women emphasizes homemaking and discourages employment outside the home. As homemakers, women are taught that their roles as wife and mother are paramount and that gainful employment is inappropriate if it conflicts with these family responsibilities.⁹ This emphasis on gender-

3. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958).

4. John Heinerman and Anson Shupe, *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

5. Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," *Review of Religious Research* 26 (1984), 1:43-58.

6. Linda Thatcher, "Women Alone: The Economic and Emotional Plight of Early LDS Women," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Winter 1992): 45-57.

7. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of the Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

8. Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984).

9. Linda P. Wilcox, "Mormon Motherhood: Official Images," in Maureen Ursenbach

typed familial roles for women has emerged as an important ideological difference between Mormons and mainstream American society.

Thus conflicting definitions of appropriate gender roles pose a dilemma for Mormon women. Pressures for accommodation to national norms that increasingly emphasize female employment are not inconsistent with Mormonism's acceptance of socioeconomic achievement as a legitimate goal. On the other hand, pressures for preservation of a distinctive life-style come from church leaders' reinforcement of values favoring the pre-eminence of familial roles for LDS women.

To understand how Mormon women are resolving these competing forces, this essay examines relationships among familial, socioeconomic, and religious roles. If employment rates and family patterns of LDS women are similar to national averages then we would conclude that they have accommodated. On the other hand, higher rates of marriage and larger family sizes along with lower employment rates would indicate that LDS women are guided by a different set of values. In addition, the emphasis placed on familial roles in the LDS culture may create greater perceived incompatibility between familial and socioeconomic roles. This would lead to a stronger negative correlation between family variables such as marriage and children and socioeconomic variables such as education and employment among Mormons. Finally, to the degree that Mormonism effectively promotes a familialistic role model for women, we would expect positive correlations between attachment to Mormonism (as measured by frequency of church attendance and family variables) and negative correlations between frequency of church attendance and socioeconomic variables.

DATA

In order to obtain a large enough sample of Mormons to justify statistical analysis, it was necessary to combine three national surveys conducted in the 1980s. Two cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth¹⁰ and the National Survey of Families and Households¹¹ were merged. Women under age 18 are excluded from the analysis because most

Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 208-26.

10. *National Survey of Family Growth* (Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Center for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, 1982-88).

11. *National Survey of Families and Households*, James Sweet and Larry Bumpass, principal investigators (Madison, WI: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987).

have not completed school and many have not started thinking seriously about marriage and childbearing. Each of these surveys included information about employment status, education, marital status, desired family size, frequency of church attendance, and religious affiliation. These characteristics will be used to explore relationships among socioeconomic status, family traits, and religious involvement, comparing Mormons with other Americans.

RESULTS

Overall, Mormon women are about as likely to be gainfully employed (54.5 percent) as are women nationally (56.1 percent), but Mormons are slightly more likely to work part time (19.3 percent compared to 15.8 percent nationally). The pattern is different, however, for married and unmarried women (see Fig. 1). Nationally, there is little difference in employment rates of married and unmarried women except that part-time work is more likely among married women. For Mormons, in contrast, married women have lower overall employment rates than the national average while single women have higher rates than is the case nationally. Perhaps single Mormon women are responding to the church's emphasis on self-reliance and married women are responding to the church's emphasis on familial roles. More employment among singles and less employment among married women creates an overall rate very similar to the national average. Thus, similarity in employment rates between Mormons and non-Mormons cannot be interpreted to mean Mormons have ignored the church's teachings on employment and family roles.

The second figure shows a positive relationship between education and employment. The relationship is stronger for non-Mormons than for Mormons, however. Full-time work, in particular, rises with higher educational achievement. For example, Mormon women with a college degree are more than twice as likely to work full time as are those who did not complete high school.

The relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and desired family size is demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4. Desired family size is used because younger women have not yet finished childbearing and their current family size does not accurately reflect their orientation toward having children. Regardless of employment status or education, Mormon women want substantially larger families than is the case nationally. Some contradiction is evident, however, in patterns of association. Full-time employment is associated with smaller desired family size among Mormons but has little association with desired family size in the national sample. On the other hand, higher education is associated with smaller desired family size in the national sample but not among Mormons.

Figure 1
PERCENT EMPLOYED BY MARITAL STATUS

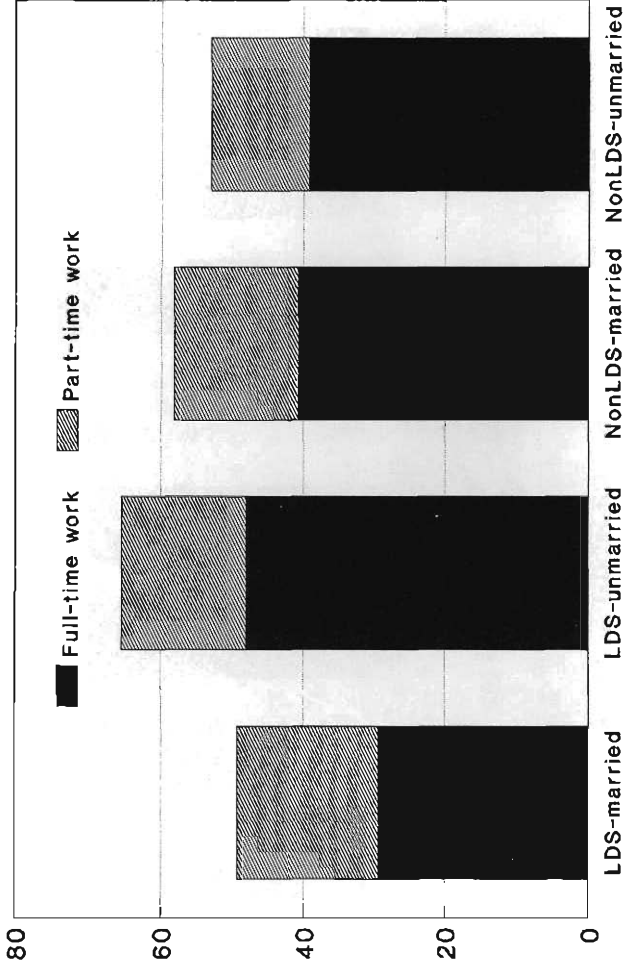


Figure 2
PERCENT EMPLOYED BY EDUCATION

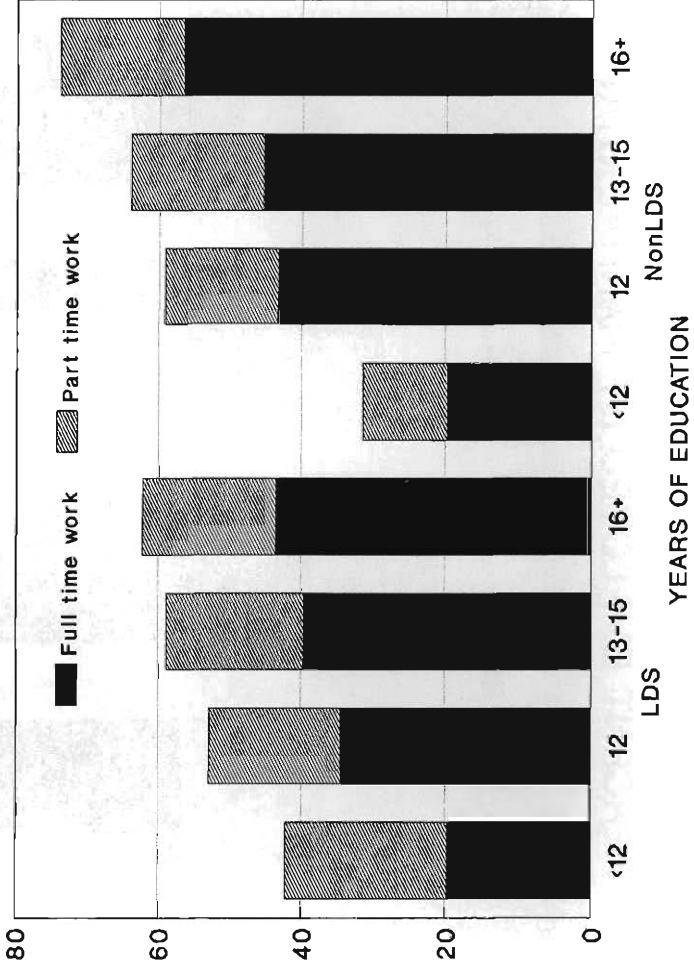


Figure 3
CHILDREN DESIRED BY EMPLOYMENT

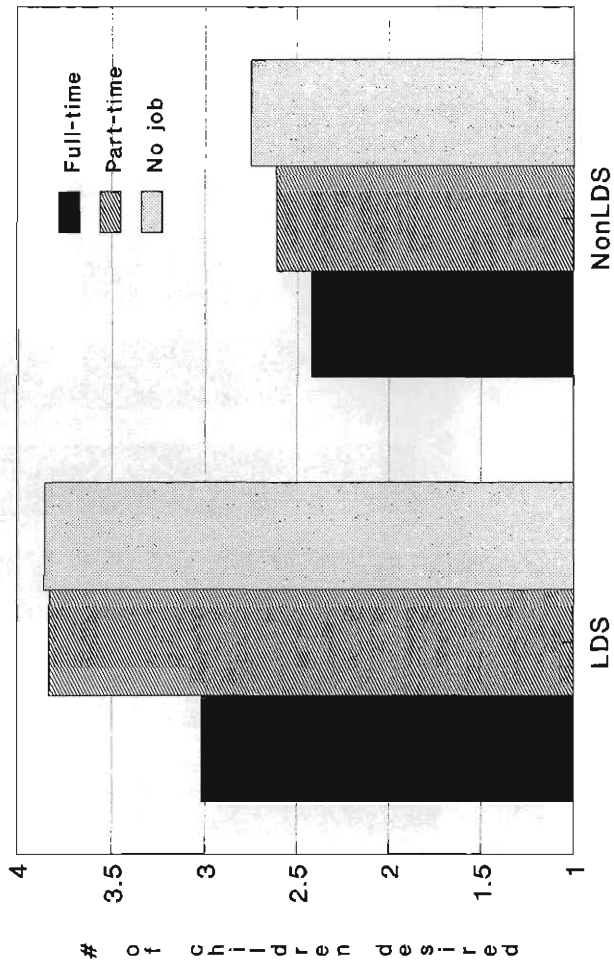
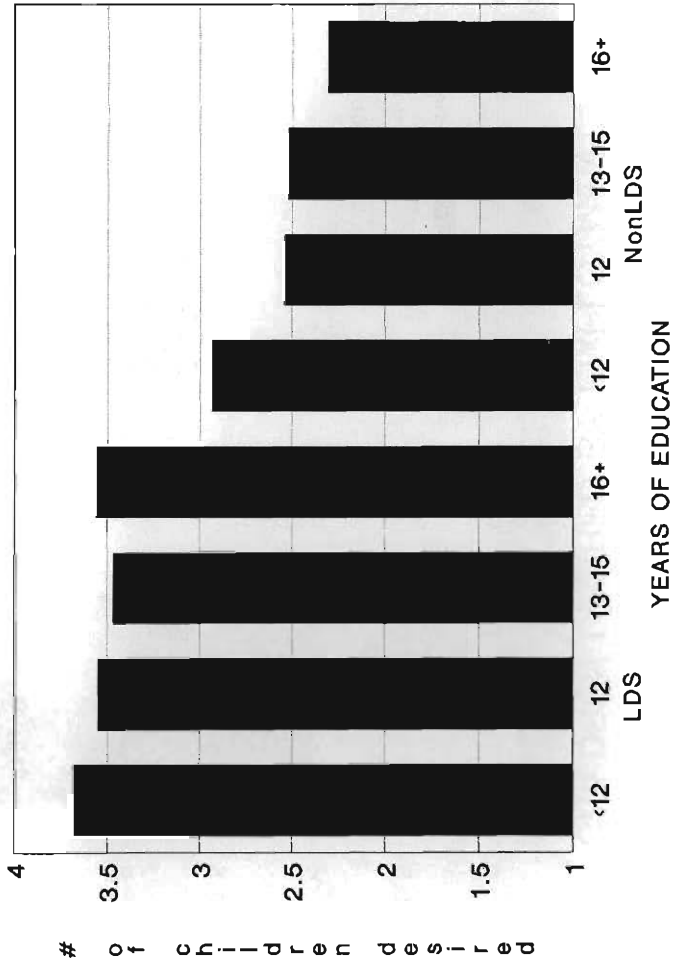


Figure 4
CHILDREN DESIRED BY EDUCATION



Apparently, the meaning of employment and education is different in Mormonism. Results suggest that some Mormon women perceive incompatibility between full-time employment and raising a family, but the incompatibility does not extend to part-time employment or educational achievement.

Patterns of church attendance associated with socioeconomic behavior are similar to those for family variables (see Figs. 5 and 6). Although Mormon women are more likely than others to attend church regularly regardless of employment status, full-time employment does appear to deter church attendance among Mormon women. On the other hand, education has a healthy positive relationship with church attendance for Mormon women but not for other women in the sample.

Figure 7 demonstrates that the relationship between marital status and church attendance is greater for Mormons than for non-Mormons.

A summary of relationships is presented in Table 1. Mormon women who work full time are more educated, less likely to be married, want fewer children, and attend church less frequently than other Mormon women. Thus it appears that full-time employment conflicts with LDS values regarding family and church involvement. The same cannot be said of part-time workers, however. Part-time workers are similar to other women in terms of education, marital status, desired family size, and church attendance. Part-time work appears to provide a solution to competing economic and familial demands.

In contrast with full-time employment, higher educational attainment is positively associated with family variables and church attendance among Mormons. Educated Mormon women attend church more frequently and are somewhat more likely to be married than those with less education. Not surprisingly, being married, wanting more children, and frequent church attendance are positively correlated for LDS women.

Correlations for the non-LDS women show some interesting differences. First, full-time work has a higher correlation with education but a lower correlation with marital status, children desired, and church attendance for non-Mormon women. This suggests that full-time employment does not necessarily conflict with family roles and church participation in the national population. Rather the conflict appears to be a Mormon phenomenon. Second, higher education has a stronger negative correlation with desired family size but a weaker positive correlation with church attendance among non-Mormon women. Education, it appears, is more consistent with marriage, childbearing, and church activity for Mormons than is the case nationally. Third, the links among marriage, childbearing, and church involvement are not as strong for non-Mormons as for Mormons.

As the final step in the analysis, we examine the implications of family

Figure 5
WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY EMPLOYMENT

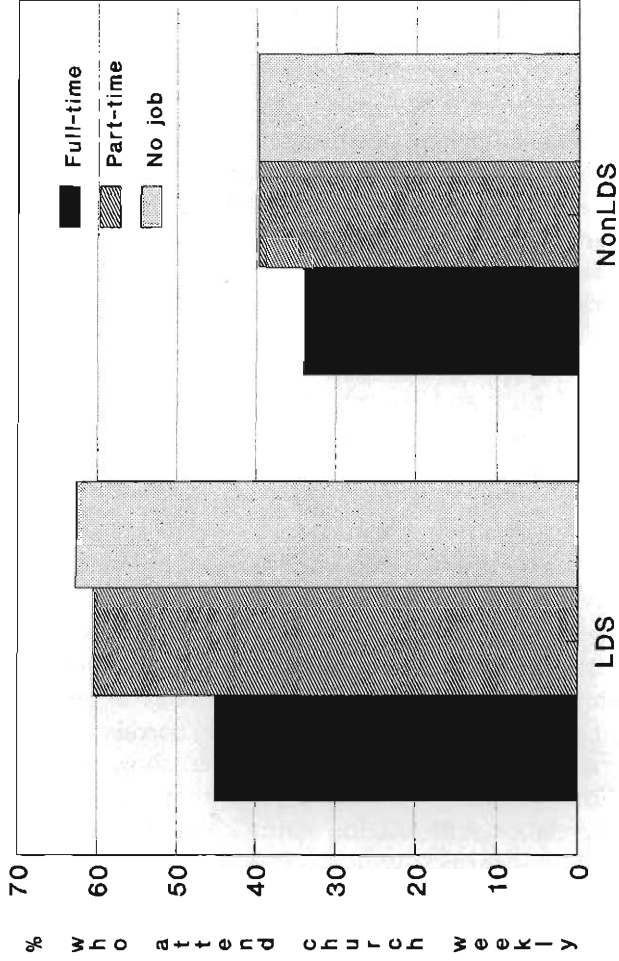


Figure 6
WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY EDUCATION

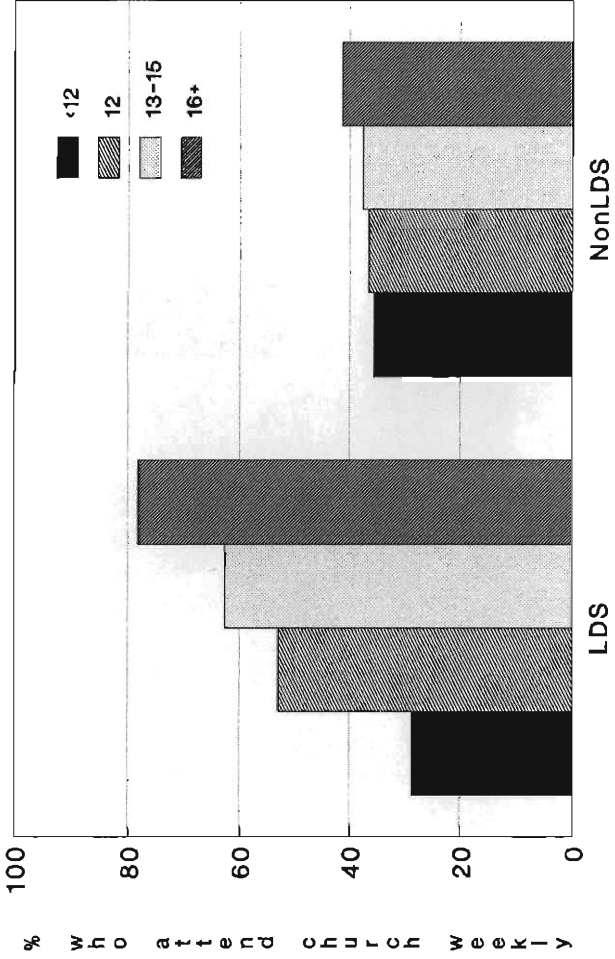
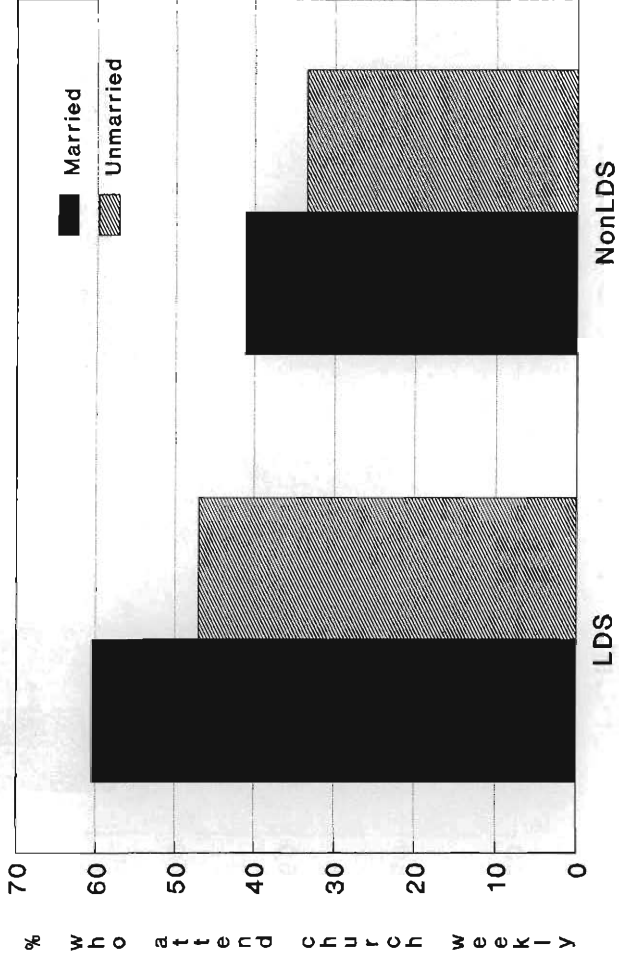


Figure 7
WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY MARRIAGE



	Work Full-time	Work Part-time	Education	Married	Children desired	Church attendance
Work Full-time	1.000	-.360**	.106*	-.181**	-.205**	-.164**
Work Part-time	-.354**	1.000	-.001	.032	.070	.016
Education	.224**	.069**	1.000	.083	-.031	.259**
Married	.017**	.049**	.126**	1.000	.159**	.133**
Children desired	-.092**	.005	-.147**	.053**	1.000	.215**
Church attendance	-.034**	.018**	.025**	.059**	.089**	1.000
** p<.01						
* p<.05						

Table 1. Correlations among Family Traits, Socioeconomic Status, and Religious Attendance (Mormons above the Diagonal, Others below).

and socioeconomic traits for church participation. A multiple-regression model was estimated with church attendance as the dependent variable and each other variable in Table 1 as predictors. Beta coefficients from multiple regression show the relative association among variables when other factors are held constant. Beta values near zero indicate no relationship, while values near 1.0 indicate a near perfect relationship. Among Mormons, education is the best predictor and has a positive relationship with attendance (beta = .263). Desired children also has a moderate positive association (beta = .188), and full-time employment has about the same influence in the negative direction (beta = -.173). These three factors account for 13 percent of the variation in church attendance.

Among non-LDS respondents, family and socioeconomic traits have little influence on church attendance. Larger desired family size (beta = .087), being married (beta = .046), and education (beta = .047) each has a small positive association with attendance, while full-time workers are slightly less likely to attend church (beta = -.030). Collectively these factors

only explain 1.2 percent of the variation in non-LDS church attendance. In short, the connections among religious involvement, family status, and socioeconomic attainment appear to be substantially weaker in the national population than is the case for Mormons.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results show that Mormon women differ from non-LDS women in three respects. First, their life-style appears to be more oriented toward family and church as indicated by higher rates of marriage, larger desired family size, and more frequent church attendance. These differences suggest that Mormons have not completely accommodated to national norms. Employment rates, however, are similar for LDS and non-LDS women, and LDS women have higher educational attainment. These similarities suggest that significant adaptation has occurred.

Second, full-time work appears to conflict with marriage, having a family, and church participation to a greater degree for Mormons. These data do not tell us why. Perhaps the larger than average family size and the expectation of serving in church callings are difficult to achieve when so much time is already committed to a job. Nevertheless, Mormon women who work full time still want larger families and attend church more often than do non-Mormon women—even more than non-Mormon women who are not employed. Women who work full time may be more influenced by social norms outside of Mormonism including those regarding appropriate church activity and family planning. Finally, official or informal actions by Mormons toward employed women may have led to alienation and withdrawal from the LDS community. It is also important to note the relationships observed are not exceptionally strong, indicating substantial similarity among non-employed, full-time, and part-time workers.

The third difference is that higher educational attainment is more compatible with having a larger family and regular church attendance among Mormons. The LDS church has encouraged education as a worthy goal. It also relies heavily on lay staffing of positions that are often more readily filled outside Mormonism by those with educational credentials. Thus, education may be a source of status in the Mormon community. Finally, those having the motivation to go farther in school may feel comfortable with the achievement orientation embedded in Mormon culture.

These differences between LDS women and women in the nation create a source of potential conflict. Higher education is more consistent with Mormon values regarding church and family than is full-time employment. Yet educational attainment and full-time employment are positively related. As the women's movement and national economic trends sustain

continued career achievement and educational attainment for women, this conflict is likely to grow more intense.

Part-time employment appears to be one means of resolving conflict between socioeconomic attainment and family. Part-time employees are similar to non-employed women in terms of family and religious characteristics. Perhaps the lower commitment of part-time work allows women the flexibility to maintain family commitment and church involvement. Unfortunately, part-time jobs have many disadvantages such as lower wages, fewer benefits, and less opportunities for advancement. These disadvantages may limit the viability of part-time work as a long-term solution.

At first glance, an ideal solution for the church would be for women to pursue educational goals but to avoid full-time work. The positive correlation between educational attainment and full-time work suggests that this alternative would not fit everyone. Patterns of family violence raise an even more serious concern with this solution. A study of Utah families¹² found that the women most likely to physically abuse their children have a college degree but do not work full time. The juxtaposition of high educational achievement and limited roles outside the home may create serious frustrations.

If one were forced to choose between emphasizing education or de-emphasizing full-time work, and the goal were to encourage church involvement, then one should focus on education. This is because the positive correlation for education and attendance is larger than the negative correlation for full-time employment and attendance. Yet the consequence of higher educational attainment would most likely be a modest increase in the percentage of full-time employed women.

Because a major emphasis and concern expressed by LDS leaders is on the quality of family life, solutions should have this goal in mind. National research suggests that the effect of women's employment status on family and marital quality depends a great deal on context.¹³ Supportive attitudes by husbands and children and workable child care are particularly important. More generally, it appears that family life can be enhanced by finding ways to make employment more compatible with family life for men as well as for women. Trends in the economy and the family indicate that this will be an increasingly important challenge for Mormons in the years to come.

12. Boyd C. Rollins and Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi, "Physical Violence in Utah Households," *Journal of Family Violence* 5 (1990), 4:301-309.

13. Phyllis Moen, *Women's Two Roles: A Contemporary Dilemma* (New York: Auburn House, 1992).