Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe

Wilfried Decoo

As a twenty-two-year-old convert of just a few years, I was called in June 1969 to preside over a small branch of the church in Belgium. In the tiny office of the old house serving as our chapel, I discovered a black binder containing the branch membership records. I was shocked to find there the names of some 200 members (baptized since the opening of the mission in 1948), for our sacrament meeting attendance had been averaging only twenty. With a retention rate of 1:10, our flock had obviously suffered far beyond the proverbial 99:1 in the parable of Jesus. My responsibility as branch president was indeed daunting, for there was virtually no help available from other active priesthood holders. Fortunately, however, I was single, had just graduated from college, and had only a part-time job, so I was able to devote all my spare time to locating and visiting these 180 inactive members.

In the process I discovered a world of disillusionment, sorrow, and misery unknown in my youthful experience: The majority of these inactive members came from lower socio-economic classes and from inner-city areas that I had never before entered. Many were single, widowed, or divorced. Many others were in part-member families which had been torn apart by religious contention. Of course, some were unwilling to obey commandments and had dropped out of church activity through transgression. Especially common, however, were agonizing stories of struggle against hostility in families and in the surrounding environment, of persecution from outside the church and of disillusionment within, as many explained to me why they wanted nothing more to do with the

church. Yet to me these were all lost sheep, and I continued visiting and working with those who were willing, helping them solve their financial, social, emotional, or marital problems. In retrospect, however, it is clear that I had neither the personal nor the professional resources required for this endeavor. At the same time, with the help of the missionaries, we did everything we could to build the branch with new converts. When I was released as branch president after only fourteen months (to accept a professional position in central Africa), average sacrament meeting attendance had increased to fifty.

Yet now, after twenty-six years, only four of those fifty are still active, even though that small branch has now become two wards in a local stake. The constant turnover from active to inactive members remains with us. For every active member we seem to have lost another dozen over the years into inactivity. The situation is not so different elsewhere: From personal observations during my travels throughout the world, I know that between 50 percent and 70 percent of the members of record are inactive. If we consider also the many losses through administrative "clean-ups" of the records and formal excommunications, our losses throughout the church since mid-century probably number into the millions. Of the 300,000 new members whom our missionaries might bring into the church in any given year, we can anticipate that 150,000 or 200,000 will eventually drop out, many of them in a very short time. Yet none of us should be surprised that our current reactivation efforts are hardly working, for they depend on a small corps of local leaders, home teachers, and visiting teachers, some of whom are on the verge of defection themselves.

This is far more than a problem of organizational failure. If we take our religion seriously, we are talking about the prospect of a kind of spiritual death for those millions whom we have lost; indeed, perhaps "spiritual holocaust" is not too strong a term.[1] For many the suffering begins already in this life. I know, from years of experience in working with inactive members, of the agony—some of it lifelong—involved in the process of leaving the church. Here are people who once joyfully discovered the gospel, gained testimonies, and then turned their lives upside down and even severed relationships with families and friends to follow gospel principles, only to sink back eventually into the bitter pool of disillusion-

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1. I had intended to use the term "Mormon holocaust" in the title of this essay but was restrained by some of the reviewers of the manuscript, who regarded the term as hyperbolic and potentially offensive to Jews. I mean only to call attention to those doctrines emphasized in Heb. 6:4-6; 2 Pet. 2:20-21; 3 Ne. 27:19; D&C 20:29, 76:79; and in the discussions of concepts like covenants, disobedience, endurance, and spiritual death in Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* or in Joseph Fielding Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation*.

ment.[2]

I do not offer here a sophisticated scientific study but a personal and subjective analysis of my own thirty years' experience in church service in Belgium and the Netherlands. This experience includes leadership both at the local level and in mission presidencies. I care deeply about the future of the church. I also feel that we must be able to face our problems openly and realistically, without resorting to blind triumphalism and without fear of outside criticism. We must respect and sustain the authority of those given the heavy burden of leadership in this endeavor, but we do not ease that burden by withholding informed and conscientious observations about organizational problems, whether at the local, mission, or international level.[3]

I recognize the fundamental responsibility of each individual to cultivate his or her own testimony, despite hardship, sacrifice, and temptation. That is the meaning of agency. We are enjoined to endure to the end. It might well be true, furthermore, that transgression and failure to repent constitute the most common reason for losing the spirit and leaving the church. Nevertheless, the main point of this essay is to call attention to other factors that undermine testimonies, sap endurance, and weaken resistance to temptation. These factors combine in different ways for different individuals; some of them lead directly to inactivity, others more indirectly. If the church is to thrive in the twenty-first century, we must

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2. It is probably difficult for most American Mormons to appreciate how fundamental is the disruption to a convert's social life, both on entering *and* on exiting the LDS church in Europe. Most Americans seem more used to religious diversity and mobility, which tend to touch relationships outside of religion in only minor ways. However, in countries where a "pillar" of families, institutions, and social networks has been dominated by a single ideological tradition, converts to a new religion set themselves outside of normal social life in many ways (see n5). In so doing they come to depend increasingly on the social support and tightening social bonds with other converts, which must then be painfully severed as one later drops out through disillusionment or transgression. This predicament is less true of converts from among immigrants and refugees (e.g., from Africa), who often move as "religious tourists" from one new religion to another after they get to Europe, seeming to retain mostly pleasant memories of their sojourn in Mormonism as they move on to the next stop.

3. To avoid misunderstanding, let me define three terms I will be using: By *Church unit* I mean any and all kinds of local branches and wards, whether in Utah or elsewhere in the world; of course, some problems are common to church units everywhere, but others are unique to units of specific sizes or in specific locations. *Mission field* in the generic sense refers to any place where missionary work goes on; but in this essay I wish to stress the particular predicament where one or more ancestral religions have dominated social and cultural life for centuries, even in many secular respects, making for a *confrontational* relationship in which the minuscule LDS membership is seen as an eccentric, even dangerous, American sect or cult. By *international church* I will be referring not merely to the world outside North America but primarily to the *non-English-speaking* parts of the world, which suffer both spiritually and intellectually from their dependence on the narrow scope of church materials available in translation, despite the church's best efforts.

find ways to deal with these factors more effectively.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES ON CHURCH MEMBERS IN EUROPE

Problems with Incoming Members

Converts to new religions tend to be marginal, in one sense or another, to the societies in which they live. That is, they tend to be people with somewhat less to lose than most others in a given society, because their "investments" are not as great in conventional pursuits and institutions. Thus single people are generally easier to convert than people with families; immigrants and newcomers are easier to convert than well-established residents; people of modest means and occupations are easier to convert than members of elites; those who already have some attraction to (or familiarity with) the languages and cultures of other societies (especially a society in which the new religion might have originated) are among the first attracted to new missionaries; and so on. Such forms of marginality are not at all stigmatizing and have been prominently represented among LDS converts for the past 165 years.[4]

Yet there are other forms of marginality that are more problematic but perhaps just as likely to be apparent in the lives of many investigators and converts who reach out to the missionaries in the pain of their alienation or in their need for some other kind of fulfillment. These are the "walking wounded," socially and psychologically speaking. Despite their eccentricities, they must be accepted, integrated, and nurtured in the community of the Saints once they join the church.

Probably every unit of the church has some of these sad souls, and they are not all converts, of course. In the larger wards or branches they can be assimilated and their potential for disruption can be contained. In the mission field, however, both their presence and their influence can be disproportionately large, partly because a small branch might not be large enough to integrate them readily, and partly because branch presidents and bishops are not allowed to evaluate the readiness for baptism of even seriously troubled and eccentric converts if missionaries and mission leaders are determined to baptize them.

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4. For discussions of the part played in the conversion process by "marginality," "structural availability," and similar concepts, see D. A. Snow, L. A. Zurcher, and S. Ekland-Olson, "Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment," *American Sociological Review* 45 (Oct. 1980): 787-801; D. G. Bromley and A. D. Shupe, "'Just a Few Years Seem Like a Lifetime': A Role Theory Approach to Participation in Religious Movements," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change* 2 (1979): 159-85; and A. L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 213.

So it is that in many units in the mission field, and even in some of the well established wards, local leaders must contend with everything from overt disturbances in meetings and classes to spiritual fanaticism, playing at pastoral roles, meddling in each other's families, *ad hoc* prophecy, promotion of divergent doctrines, and the like. This is in addition to transgressions in the form of sexual lapses, addiction, and even fraud. Many converts have marital, legal, financial, and emotional problems for which they seek assistance after they join the church. They frequently make their problems and peculiarities public in foyer visits before and after meetings, in testimony meetings, in assigned talks, or even in class discussions. In certain cities legal and illegal aliens from Africa and eastern Europe are prominent among these troubled converts. Despite sincere efforts on the parts of the general unit membership to deal with such people charitably, in time a number of members become discouraged by the turmoil and stop coming to church. Among the heroes in such situations are those who remain for decades, in spite of everything; for some units are torn apart in the process, and local leaders, themselves often weak and inexperienced, are burned out.

Isolation from the Surrounding Society

During recent generations LDS converts in Europe have been urged by church leaders not to emigrate to America but to stay and build Zion in their respective stakes. As a result church life in Europe usually means a significant withdrawal from the society and institutions of one's birth without a comparably dense social life in the church. Of course, European converts expect to give up much from their previous lives when they join the church. However, most Americans do not realize just how much isolation Europeans may experience upon entering the church. In a religiously pluralistic society like the United States, few converts are disconnected from other important social networks.

In many European countries, by contrast, conversion to an unconventional "sect" means not only cultural isolation (from many shared customs and traditions) but also *structural* isolation because of the "pillarized" nature of society. That is, even in the present secular age many social services (schools, hospitals, health insurance, employment security, etc.) are provided either by Catholic, Lutheran, or other religious institutions, or alternatively by socialist or liberal counterparts with explicitly non-religious ideologies. Mormon converts are obviously not easily accommodated in any of these compartments or "pillars." Even the selection of a school for the children, or union affiliation for employment, is often determined by "pillars," leaving Mormons sometimes "out of the

loop" by definition.[5] In addition to these formal structural handicaps, Mormon converts typically experience social isolation also in less formal relationships with families, peers, and communities.

Family and Friends. In the European setting, whether or not a family is "religious," it is almost always regarded as a tragedy for a family member to join the LDS church. My own case is typical. As a teenager living in a Catholic home in a Catholic country, I was (in the eyes of my parents) spiritually kidnapped into a weird sect by two foreigners who had dropped by uninvited and unwanted. In a matter of days their son had simply abandoned the faith and traditions of his ancestors. They felt bewildered, betrayed, and destitute of hope. In the intervening years they have come to accept the inevitability of my remaining a Latter-day Saint, but they have never understood how a sound-minded European could join such a blasphemous American sect. Something broke in our relationship and has never been fully restored.

This breach between converts and their families is not limited to the moment of conversion but continues to plague family relationships. In the event of a temple marriage the non-Mormon parents and relatives cannot attend; when a child is born, there will be no christening for them to attend, and none of them will be selected as godparents; there is no sharing of religious commemorations at Christmas or Easter; if the LDS member attends a Catholic funeral for another member of the family, he or she will be conspicuous by declining to take communion; and so on. Where the convert's spouse is not LDS, or is an LDS defector, there is even more anguish. Even if the marriage survives, the partners often grow apart, and they frequently quarrel over the religious upbringing of the children, even pitting children against one or the other of the parents. In my thirty years' church experience the most vitriolic clashes have occurred where the convert's family is Catholic. These cases have involved not only verbal and physical abuse, but expulsions from home, disinheritance, legal suits over child custody, and similar forms of conflict.[6]

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5. For more on the "pillarized" nature of traditional Belgian society, see J. Billiet and K. Dobbelaere, "Vers une Désinstitutionalisation du Pilier Chrétien?" in L. Voyé et al., eds., *La Belgique et Ses Dieux* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Cabay, 1985), 119-52; and K. Dobbelaere and L. Voyé, "From Pillar to Postmodernity: The Changing Situation of Religion in Belgium," *Sociological Analysis* 51 (Supplement, 1990): S1-S13. On the isolating consequences for Mormons in particular, see my "Mormonism in a European Catholic Region: A Contribution to the Social Psychology of LDS Converts," *Brigham Young University Studies* 24 (1984): 61-77.

6. The level of hostility in such conflicts is attributable in large part to the ways in which unconventional sects and cults are portrayed in publications and in the mass media. As LDS church leaders, we do what we can to minimize the hostility and to correct media images. Lately I have taken to urging members to write detailed personal records about their experiences, which someday will comprise a valuable historical record of the price paid by many European Saints for their conversions.

Community Life. It is perhaps difficult for the people of one society to understand the nature and intensity of community life in another society, but Belgium is fairly typical of Europe: A glance through local newspapers and other public bulletins reveals a variety of meetings or celebrations for numerous clubs and social organizations, sports and cultural events, and special days (Museum Day, Forest Day, Open Monument Day, and many others). There are humanitarian projects and services for the elderly, the disabled, refugees, hospitals, conservation, and also local chapters of Oxfam, Amnesty International, Doctors without Frontiers, Foster Parents, and many other causes. Schools, businesses, and factories sponsor annual events of their own. Not all such events are scheduled on Sundays, of course, but often they are; and to the extent that local Latter-day Saints feel constrained to stay away, they are effectively isolated from community life.

This is particularly hard for many LDS adolescents and young adults, especially if they are not first-generation members who have had the conversion experience; for they are denied a sense of belonging in their peer groups at a time of life when such belonging is important to their development. The same isolation is even harder for new converts if they were heavily involved in community life before joining the church. This is one of the reasons that so few involved and substantial people from the community can be induced to join the church, for it means effectively withdrawing from community life. The conflict of loyalty between the church and the outside is more acute here than in the U.S., and leaders too often simply warn in ominous terms about the ways of the wicked world, rather than help us integrate the good in both worlds.

The problem is two-fold: On the one hand, the church seems to ignore the socio-cultural realities of the surrounding society; on the other, church units, even in the mission field, are expected to organize their own social and cultural activities, including outings, musical events, Boy Scout events, and so on, often without the resources to make these activities truly successful. One example will illustrate the problem: Every Sunday the national Scout movement of Belgium sponsors well-organized and well-financed indoor and outdoor activities all over the country involving 85,000 boys and girls with their well-trained leaders. By contrast, a certain Belgian LDS branch, disdaining such Sunday activities, instead gathered together all seven of its scouts on a couple of Saturdays for a parallel program under an inadequately trained leader and with inadequate facilities. This courageous little group was enthusiastically hailed as heroes in a local church magazine story but without acknowledgement that their program failed within a few months. Were those children really well served by keeping them away from "outside" scout troops and activities?

The church demands made on members, both on Sunday and during the week, leave little room for involvement in the life of the larger community; nor does the church propose ways in which members can combine living the essentials of the gospel with participation in the activities of the host society, certainly not if those activities take place on Sunday. It is not that the European Saints miss the leisure activities or entertainment offered only on Sundays; these are willingly sacrificed by those who are truly converted. Rather it is the general sense of disengagement and isolation from the rest of the community that sometimes seem required of church members.

INTERNAL PRESSURES ON CHURCH MEMBERS IN EUROPE

Isolation from the World Church

Many European Saints feel isolated even from the worldwide LDS community. To some extent this feeling results from the lack of varied church literature available in the local languages. To be sure, the church does a great deal of translating into various languages, but the translated materials tend to address only the essential moral, spiritual, and organizational needs.[7] Accordingly, the European Saints are hungry for news about the international church. They are anxious to feel a part of this vibrant international movement and to learn as much as possible about its accomplishments, challenges, and even problems on both the regional and the international levels. Of course, the international version of the church magazine is available in several languages, and its section on local news, however primitive, is appreciated; but it contains only a tiny fraction, if anything, of what is happening in the church at large, and no mention is ever made of anything problematic. Members living in small problem-ridden units thus wonder painfully why their units are so atypical.[8]

Beyond this basic hunger for realistic news about the world church, many Saints are cut off also from the many important developments and

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7. I well remember a leadership meeting at which a local leader asked a visiting general authority if it would be possible for the church distribution center in Frankfurt to make available books from the Deseret and Bookcraft companies, even in English for local English-speaking members, with permission perhaps to translate some of the more popular books into other languages. The visiting authority responded categorically that the scriptures should be enough for any of the Saints. Yet in the foyer I observed his wife reading a book by Hugh Nibley and his daughter a novel by Jack Weyland.

8. Ironically, visiting authorities often unintentionally reinforce this anguish and feeling of isolation with their glowing success stories of high rates of baptism, home teaching, and seminary attendance elsewhere.

discoveries in the world of LDS scholarship. American Saints can scarcely appreciate this predicament, given their ready access to the many LDS books, journals, media productions, videos, and educational events, even for their children. The very availability of these materials, even for those Saints who do not use them, provides them nevertheless with constant reinforcement for the feeling that they belong to a thriving enterprise. The need in Europe for such "extra" materials is apparent from my experience during the early 1980s as editor and publisher of *Horizon*, an independent bimonthly magazine published for Dutch-speaking Saints. This magazine featured international and local church news, sketches of local and foreign Saints, prophets' biographies, the history of the church in various countries, easy-reading LDS stories, and special articles selected and translated for their combination of intellectual and faith-promoting impact. *Horizon* drew upon sources like F.A.R.M.S. and authors like Leonard Arrington, Truman Madsen, Steven Sondrup, John Sorenson, and John Welch. I was eventually constrained to cease publishing this magazine because of its very success: it was starting to displace the official church magazine, indicating that I had achieved my goal of demonstrating the existence of the very need I have been discussing here.[9]

Most people who join the church in Europe do not require much serious "repentance" in the process, since few have much serious sin to repent for. Rather, the most durable converts join the church for the combined spiritual and intellectual content of its claims and unique teachings: the first vision, the Book of Mormon, the visits of heavenly messengers, the plan of salvation, the restoration of the ancient order of things, and the many other exciting doctrines. Having obtained such knowledge as investigators, they are eager to continue adding "knowledge upon knowledge" (D&C 42:61). However, most church lesson material tends to emphasize general, well-understood Christian teachings and morality at the expense of unique LDS doctrines. With no alternative sources available in their languages for spiritual and intellectual enrichment, many European Saints feel a tremendous void. What's worse is that this situation is in stark contrast to the knowledge-driven societies in which European Saints reside, where they are constantly exposed to debates, discussions, and documentaries at school and in the mass media, and where the LDS youth, in particular, are presented with scientific and other questions never addressed in church lesson materials.

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9. A survey of readers indicated a widespread hunger *especially* for articles that combined the intellectual and the faith-promoting elements. The results of this survey were published in *Horizon* 2 (Nov. 1983): 6. At the time publication ceased, the magazine had 2,000 subscribers, and another 2,000 copies were distributed gratis to libraries and waiting rooms.

Fundamentalism and Fanaticism[10]

The church in the mission field is often and understandably the "Church Militant." It is nourished by the spirit of missionaries sent to preach repentance. The strict rules and instructions given to missionaries for their conduct are often internalized by converts as well: total obedience, total dedication to the Lord's work, and total avoidance of the evil world. To a considerable extent, one must admire such a crusading spirit in the valiant Saints, as they struggle to build the kingdom. Yet this spirit can easily deteriorate into fundamentalism, with "preachers," male and female, constantly harping in church meetings on their versions of obedience and obligation. Some cross over into fanaticism, adopting even the rigorous missionary rules not really intended for the Saints in general (no worldly music, radio, television, or reading of anything but the scriptures, etc.), calling for youth to avoid academic studies as destructive to faith, for "natural healing" methods in place of medical care, and so on. In these strictures we can see the common tendencies of apostate groups to assert their right to impose new rules on the membership.

Such a fundamentalist spirit has more in common with the discredited doctrines of human depravity, total dependence on divine grace, and the impossibility of perfection than with the doctrines of joy, optimism, and eternal progression to godhood as taught by Joseph Smith. As zealots continue week after week to focus on extreme positions, rarely corrected by the leaders, new members become confused about what the gospel message really is. In the momentum of their own enthusiastic conversions, they might follow the zealots for awhile, striving to obey even the rules and principles invented by the latter. In the process of trying thus to prove themselves, they lose all the joy the gospel promises, as church membership becomes an intolerable burden and they finally reach a breaking point and begin to slip away. At that stage they are in danger of being judged weaklings and apostates, or (even worse) they begin to see themselves in that way.

The Marriage Challenge

At a local conference some time ago a visiting authority addressed the audience on the blessings of living the gospel at home, going to the temple, and entering the eternal covenant of marriage, all topics that rep-

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10. By "fundamentalism" I am referring to a tendency toward overzealous interpretation of certain commandments, with an obsessive focus on certain ones in particular, and an insistence that others must accept the same understandings. By "fanaticism" I am referring to a degree of fundamentalism going even beyond what the church will officially tolerate. The line between the two is obviously easy to cross.

resent the highest ideals of the restored gospel. As the leader was speaking, he included references about his own blessed family: his exemplary, supportive wife, sitting with him on the stand, well-dressed, radiant; and his several children, all of whom had served wonderful missions. I was sitting on the stand too, and as I looked out over the audience of some 400, I could count at most twenty couples married in the temple. I reflected also on the dozen or so couples of my age group in the district who had had temple marriages fifteen or twenty years ago, and I realized that my wife and I were the only one of those couples still married. All of the other marriages had foundered within three years. From what I know about LDS life elsewhere in Europe, our local situation is not unusual. What accounts for this large discrepancy between the ideal and the actual?

First, there is the disproportionate presence of single people as a general reality in the mission field. Many converts are not only single but somewhat beyond normal marriage age and from troubled social backgrounds, often including divorce, sometimes with children; for these are the kinds of converts especially attracted to the missionaries. Despite their patient waiting and hoping, most who desire to marry never find partners. To be sure, other single converts, and children of converts, are young and eligible. Yet even they face a limited LDS marriage market. Many of the young women, in particular, after long and patient waiting finally marry non-members and leave the church in the process; others remain faithful but single.

A visiting general authority once reported on a church study indicating that contacts with 300 potential marriage partners is adequate for most individuals to be able to find mates. Few districts or stakes in Europe are able to offer their young people more than a small fraction of that circle. Of course, the church program for young adults brings them together in conferences and camps, often from long distances, which improves their prospects. Even then, however, the social, intellectual, and ethnic heterogeneity in such gatherings restrains the prospects or, where a marriage is eventually realized, increases the risk of discord and divorce. They hardly have time to get acquainted, given the distances between their homes and the small number of personal encounters possible. Young adults are thus often pushed by parents and church leaders into opportunistic marriages without adequate preparation or courtship, just because LDS partners are so hard to find.

The second condition affecting LDS marriage and family life in Europe is the large proportion of part-member families. Obviously this condition is found all over the church, but it is especially common in the mission fields. The conversion of one spouse in a couple is more common than the conversion of both. A similar and equally common predicament

is presented when one of the spouses in an LDS couple drops into inactivity. In either of these situations a great deal of stress is placed on the marriage by disagreements over keeping the commandments, such as tithing or the Word of Wisdom, over the amounts and kinds of church activity tolerated, and over the expectations for the children. Naturally the faithful and believing partner, in particular, will feel a lot of anxiety and uncertainty about his or her eternal future. In the mission field the church is almost totally lacking in professional resources to help couples deal with this pervasive predicament, which has to be handled instead by well-meaning but inexperienced priesthood leaders. The result is that the church is far more likely to lose part-member and part-active families (and their children) than to keep or reactivate them.

The teaching and preaching in the church on the importance of eternal marriage and family is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the church cannot shrink from its responsibility to teach the fullness of the gospel and to urge all members to strive for the highest ideals. On the other, such teaching, especially if it is not done with sensitivity, sometimes has the unintended effect of producing pain and distress by reminding members of the large gap between the eternal ideals and their own mortal realities, leading to discouragement and eventual inactivity. The prospect of eventual marriage and family in the next life is an important proviso for those with the patience to wait, but for others it does not assuage the pain of the present.[11]

Normal Disenchantment and Beyond

As in other places, and indeed in other religions, LDS converts in Europe are subject to what we might call "normal" disenchantment. This is the process of spiritual and social transformation from the early charisma, zeal, and enthusiasm of conversion to the more subdued and routinized life of the ordinary member. The process goes more rapidly for some than for others. This is not only normal, it is essentially constructive if it takes place within a context of careful and loving fellowshipping; for it enables the new convert to learn the standard "church ways" and to be integrated into the roles and callings that go with active church membership.

Beyond this normal process, however, lies the stormy sea of *disillusionment*, by which I mean a spiritual, intellectual, and social demoralization, accompanied by an eventual loss of faith and commitment.

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11. In cases where LDS families are broken by divorce, the ex-partners will often feel guilty and out of place, even if no transgression was involved, and will drift into inactivity. No doubt this predicament occurs elsewhere in the church as well, but in the relatively small units in Europe a failed marriage is all the more conspicuous and stigmatizing.

Converts can drift toward this sea or be pushed by the experiences they have in the church during their earliest years or even months. For some the disillusionment comes quickly, as they are first swept off their feet by the enthusiasm of the missionaries, baptized after attendance at only one or two meetings, and then obliged to accommodate to routine and reality when they are turned over to the jurisdiction of the overworked unit leaders. A number of new converts have the testimony and stamina to weather this stormy time and eventually take hold of their church membership. For others, however, the whole experience adds up to a brief, emotional side-venture with the Mormons.

For still others the disillusionment occurs after a period of normal church activity, sometimes a rather lengthy period, and is therefore all the more painful. Church attendance comes to lose its attraction after three hours each Sunday of dull speakers and bland lessons, punctuated occasionally only by the rantings of local fanatics. Even the best teaching and preaching sometimes seem limited to platitudes or idealistic moralizing with little relevance to the real struggles of LDS life in the mission field. If a person is burdened with heavy church callings and duties in a troubled unit, the discouragement is all the worse. We lose many members each year through this process of disillusionment, and we have not yet found a way to stanch the flow.

TOWARD THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: ISSUES AND POSSIBILITIES

So far I have explored in some detail a number of difficulties currently standing in the way of the success and growth of the church during the coming century. Such a theme is unavoidably accompanied by a negative tone and runs the risk of some distortion in the reality of the European situation. Let me therefore emphasize two important points at this stage: (1) I do not mean to suggest that all church units in Europe are ridden with the problems I have been discussing. The problems are more severe in some units than in others, and many European Saints enjoy strong testimonies, fulfilling family lives, and the other joys of gospel living. Clearly the church is working well for them. (2) I do not mean to suggest that the problems discussed so far are unknown to church leaders, general or local. They remind us regularly to seek out the lost sheep, and the whole system of fellowshipping, home teaching, and visiting teaching is intended to accomplish just that. Yet it is also clear that the gravity and extensiveness of the problems discussed here are not adequately handled by our present arrangements, so the disappearance of our lost sheep continues.

In this final section of the essay I would like to suggest some possibilities for future developments that might alleviate some of these prob-

lems. I do so as an active member with a deep concern of my own about the future, and particularly about the tens of thousands of "lost sheep" currently on church rolls.[12] How can any of us who understand the plan of salvation look with equanimity on the loss of so many who might, from an eternal perspective, have gained so much? As leaders and members, we must find ways to make conversions more durable and to retrieve and reactivate members who have drifted away. I will proceed first with some thoughts on improving the prospects for durable future conversions; then I will consider the equally important matter of building LDS communities that are viable in a surrounding secular world.

Toward More Durable Conversions

Some church members and leaders seem to believe that cities and countries in which our missionaries have labored for many decades have somehow been "covered," that large proportions of the populace have been exposed to the gospel message. In fact, probably *no more than 1 percent* of the people in any European country, or even fewer, have ever truly had a chance to listen to that message. The reason is that our missionaries have gone year after year to the same kinds of people—those usually at home during the tracting day—and even to the *very same* people again and again. One unintended consequence has been the tendency to attract converts selectively from among those most available and needful rather than from those equipped to bring strength to our wards and branches. We need to devise alternative ways of reaching the 99 percent or more who have yet to hear our story for the first time.

We must, of course, continue to offer the gospel to all kinds of people, since it is a healing gospel as well as an exalting one. Yet at present we are systematically excluding other kinds of converts, especially professional men and women not at home during the day. We do this partly through our reliance on contacts made through tracting or through chance meetings in public places. We do it also through our reliance on simplistic and formulaic missionary lessons, delivered by youthful teachers ill equipped to answer the serious but unanticipated questions of thoughtful investi-

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12. Not the least of my concerns is that some of the problems created in the older mission fields might be avoided in newer mission fields, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Some Saints are fond of telling stories of "miraculous conversions" in ex-communist countries and citing remarkable figures. These accounts, however, contrast with what I have learned from personal visits with well-informed sources in those countries: Some branches that once had a hundred or two hundred members have already collapsed to only a dozen still active. This should surprise no one. People in great material need, temporarily infatuated with Western ideas, have always been open to proselyting by American missionaries; but some of the problems discussed in this essay are already contributing to the massive defection of members in former communist countries as well.

gators. Even if the sincere testimonies of the missionaries are confirmed by the Holy Spirit, investigators deserve better and fuller responses to their questions; and surely gospel scholarship has those answers. How might we reach out to other segments of the population with more thorough and appealing teaching materials?

First, we might offer professionally polished television documentaries, "infomercials," and/or radio programs, not the public relations productions with generic Christian themes already in use, but direct and candid pieces setting forth the unique claims of the church. These would of course require considerable financing for market research and evaluation, for production, and for the broadcast time itself. Yet they would reach a far larger proportion and variety of the populations in the various countries, especially those kinds of people not home during the day or otherwise unwilling to open their doors to strangers going from house to house. Such people might be willing to ask for such visitors after they have been intrigued by inspiring media presentations, and they might also come from social and educational backgrounds which equip them with assets and talents to bring into the church.

The same kinds of people might respond also to free interactive software programs or CD-Rom presentations with both image and sound, which could reach millions of middle-class and professional people with their own home computers. With interactive programs people can easily move through their menus for segments on church doctrine, history, organization, or other aspects in whatever order appeals to them. A related approach is the rapidly growing world of Internet. Already there are many different independent LDS web sites, discussion groups, e-mail exchanges, and the like.[13] What we are still missing is an official LDS missionary site on the web, from which interested people can download a full LDS presentation on their own computers (perhaps with a Tabernacle Choir performance as a bonus).[14]

A second kind of innovation in our proselyting, besides the employment of both new and traditional media, might be the recruitment of missionaries with somewhat more education and maturity. Here I am not referring to elderly couples, who already make important contributions in increasing numbers, but to the usual young men and women who accept mission calls. At present they tend to consist of youths on either side of age twenty with little or no college education. Of course, even in the early days of the church (whether in the first century or the nineteenth) some missionaries were rather young—but not, as a rule, quite *so* young.

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13. See Bryan Waterman, "A Guide to the Mormon Universe," *Sunstone* 17 (Dec. 1994): 64-65; and the growing number of "web-wards" on the web itself.

14. The *Salt Lake Tribune* (2 Sept. 1995) quoted LDS spokesman Don LeFevre as saying that the church has "under review" the creation of an official church web site.

Perhaps at least a significant portion of our youthful missionary corps could be called slightly later in life, after completion of their formal education, when they have acquired somewhat more seasoning and wisdom. If such a postponement would mean a reluctance to accept mission calls in some cases, it might in other cases make for missionaries who could be more effective with mainstream investigators.[15]

A third modification might be a longer period of preparation before an investigator is baptized. On the one hand, I understand and appreciate the sense of urgency that accompanies our proselyting system at present: We have long been taught that these are the last days, that the harvest time is short. If people have truly repented and accepted the gospel, they should not have to jump through a lot of hoops to get to the baptismal font. Also, the missionaries themselves understandably look to the number of baptisms as measures of their own success. Yet, on the other hand, in our preoccupation with sheer numbers we have often baptized people prematurely in the expectation that some spiritual form of "natural selection" would eventually separate the weak from the strong.

For many new members, and for the church units which they have joined, our experience in Europe and elsewhere has shown us the drawbacks of this proselyting philosophy. It has produced the opposite of the desired result. Instead of saving souls, it has placed in spiritual jeopardy at least half of those baptized by persuading them to make sacred covenants which they were not ready or able to fulfill. Why could we not ask prospective converts to attend church meetings and keep the commandments for perhaps a year before baptism? We might lose some who are not stable or fully converted, or whose early enthusiasm cools somewhat in the process; but those who endure for that year will be far more likely to endure for a lifetime. Furthermore, local leaders could become more involved than they are now both in the decision to accept new members for baptism and in the process of their integration into the church unit, which would enhance their sense of responsibility for new members. All of this might mean that missionaries who first introduce a given investigator to the gospel will not be in town for the baptism, but that consideration should not take precedence over adequate convert preparation.

A longer preparation might also help avoid or lessen tragic clashes with family, friends, and the larger community. Candidates will have more time to work out tensions, to brace themselves for a new and overwhelming change in life, and even to invite family members and friends to join in the investigation process, which will be less threatening given

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15. For prospective missionaries from Europe, a call *after* completion of post-secondary schooling would also, in most cases, fit better with the prevailing system of higher education. The present timing of mission calls might fit the American system well enough, but in Europe it can be disruptive or even fatal to an eventually successful completion of higher education.

the longer time frame. Some people will probably attempt to dissuade the potential convert from baptism, but others might be intrigued enough to become investigators themselves. In any case, if the potential convert cannot stand up to the social consequences of joining the church, it is better to learn that before baptism than afterward. However, my confidence in the outcome of this process, I must confess, derives in part from my own personal experience. Since I was a minor when I first expressed a desire for baptism, and my parents would not approve, I was required to wait three years. During that waiting period my knowledge, commitment, and testimony of the gospel only increased, while the sanctity and importance of the baptismal ordinance loomed ever larger in my mind.

Either during a pre-baptism period of preparation, or after baptism, or both, converts need strengthening with a more gradual integration into the responsibilities of church membership. Presumably the church has been doing some research on the process of new member integration in recent years, but it is difficult to see how the results of that research have made a difference. What can we do to help new members reduce family conflicts that occur as they seem to offend the rest of the family by walking away from the ancestral faith and by striving to observe the Sabbath, the Word of Wisdom, and tithing?

Is it wise to bestow priesthood offices and heavy auxiliary callings immediately on new members? Might that not compromise the sanctity of such callings and introduce unnecessary stress too early in the convert's new relationship with the church? On the one hand, it is desirable to begin the total integration of new members immediately at some level, and to be sure they feel a necessary part of the Lord's work. On the other hand, we need to be careful to adapt this principle to individual circumstances. Some new members will be more likely to stay away from church meetings than to participate if they feel overburdened, especially if their church responsibilities come too often between them and their families. Relatedly, does it help or hinder new members' relationship with the church for them and their family to be visited so often by home teachers, visiting teachers, and various other leaders? In many homes such visits are regarded as invasions of privacy, especially by the non-members present. Finally, can't we provide new converts with more guidance in how European Latter-day Saints can remain true to their Mormon identity while still participating constructively in the social and cultural life of the local community?

The Mormon Community

Probably the most complex challenge we face in the internationalization of the church in the twenty-first century is this: Can we make

changes in the ways we organize and experience the LDS community that will reduce and contain the massive defections of recent decades? The answer is all the more complex because of the disparate needs of the various Saints; a solution to problems for one church member or unit will not be a solution for others. All I can do here is point to a number of key issues and themes.

The Boundary Issue. How should we define and communicate LDS distinctiveness? On the one hand, the church has mounted a strong public relations campaign in recent decades to emphasize our common Christian heritage with other denominations. On the other hand, our LDS heritage from the beginning has emphasized the state of *apostasy* in which the rest of Christianity now wallows. Joseph Smith was told that other creeds are "an abomination" in the Lord's eyes. How far can we go in both directions simultaneously? Ultimately there is a big difference between being *a* Christian church and *the* one true Christian church; and only the latter posture is consistent with our extensive proselyting effort. Sometimes we seem to water down our *doctrinal* distinctiveness for the sake of good public relations, preferring instead to emphasize *social and moral conservatism* (obedience, life-style conformity, sexual chastity, anti-abortion, and the like), all of which are important in their own right as *products* of conversion to the doctrine; but they do not make us distinctive by comparison with either Roman Catholicism or conservative Protestantism. Most LDS converts prefer to *deny* any connection with traditional Christianity, having rejected it as an apostate remnant. They come to us to be fed on strong doctrine, and we run the risk of losing them if our conference sermons, lesson manuals, and press releases become too generically Christian.

Cultural Adaptation or Correlation? The issue of "adapting" Mormonism to local cultures has already drawn much attention.[16] I appreciate the concern of some of my American LDS friends about the danger of imposing American values on church members in other cultures. Some even favor the reduction of Mormonism to a minimal spiritual core, leaving each local culture to make adaptations in accordance with its own needs and traditions. I tend toward a different opinion. First, given the disproportionate presence of troubled and spiritually immature converts with their own eccentricities and preferences, even a minimal measure of freedom to adapt can easily lead to serious deviations and even schisms. It is "correlation," properly understood as carefully monitored standardization,

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16. See, for example, F. Lamond Tullis, ed., *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978); Edwin B. Firmage, "Restoring the Church: Zion in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries," *Sunstone* 13 (Jan. 1989): 33-40; James B. Allen, "On Becoming a Universal Church," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Spring 1992): 13-36; and Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*, 204-14.

that guarantees our unity and strength in the essentials.

Second, among industrial societies, at least, no matter on which side of the Atlantic, there has been considerable cultural convergence in recent decades, and many residual "cultural differences" are actually superficial. To be sure, they can still cause irritation, but they should not be exaggerated. There is no reason that a certain amount of standardization or "correlation" from church headquarters should prove more onerous or less necessary in Europe than in America, given a reasonable amount of flexibility and controlled diversification. Here I am talking about different organizational patterns, different meeting schedules, and different unit scales (some of this is already underway). Other needs include more varied and pedagogically sound lesson materials and a better international church magazine to address varied local concerns.

Third, in the name of more local independence the European church must not be deprived of the important spiritual and intellectual resources (in translation) that only the church can provide (a point made earlier to which I will return again).

Relation to the Host Society. Another important issue is how church members can participate in the social and cultural life of the surrounding community while still maintaining a strong LDS identity. The strain between these two imperatives is one of the reasons for LDS defection. We need more analysis to discover ways in which a committed Mormon can combine living the essentials of the gospel along with continued participation in acceptable and constructive aspects of non-Mormon community life. Such would imply some structural changes in the church to permit a member more opportunity for involvement in the surrounding society without feeling guilty for neglecting church obligations. This leads directly to the next point.

Adapting Church Programs to Local and Individual Circumstances. Perhaps one of the most basic and constructive adaptations we could make would be to individualize the definition of "active member." Some members need and want a lot of church activity, while others are being crushed by too much. Instead of the one-size-fits-all definition, we might measure "activity" with due consideration for the kinds and weights of a member's responsibilities outside the church (family, profession, community, and others). We might consider also a member's heart and spirit, the evidence in one's life that he or she has internalized the teachings of the gospel. We need, in other words, a little pragmatism and common sense in the ways in which we deal with all the members of the local LDS community. This is especially important in the cases of part-member families, of those with demanding occupations, of the less healthy, and even of those who are by nature more modest and retiring.

Examples of such needed adaptations include the home teaching and

visiting teaching programs. In Europe at present no program elicits more vehement injunctions from local leaders, or imposes more strain on the small corps of obedient souls, than these visiting programs. Given the insoluble problems of so many troubled members, the masses of inactives, and the long distances that must often be travelled, the burden is often unreasonable. Even worse, home and visiting teaching sometimes deteriorates into meddling in each other's affairs, gossiping, and criticizing leaders. Adaptations could be made to relieve some of these strains: Visit the most apathetic or hostile inactives only once a year; visit active families infrequently also, recognizing that they are less needful than other members, and that "required" church visits may go against the European tradition of home privacy, anyway; use telephone calls in place of more frequent visits; provide gift subscriptions to a new and lively LDS magazine (see below); and make better use of professional services in the surrounding community for dealing with serious social problems among church families.

Maintaining Membership Interest. Perhaps more than anything we need a different international magazine. The present magazine (which goes by different names in different languages) is much in need of expansion, enrichment, and features that reveal LDS life and problems in realistic, analytical terms. As demonstrated by my experience with *Horizon,* such a creative magazine can also reach many people outside the small circle of active Latter-day Saints, including inactive members, investigators, their families, journalists, and even leaders in the larger community. Let me illustrate with an example out of my own profession: Until a few years ago the Flemish Ministry of Education published a dull monthly magazine for 100,000 teachers. The contents were always predictable. Ministry policies were always justified; problems were concealed; the many success stories were unrealistic; and so on. Then a new Minister of Education came along and turned the publication over to a team of devoted and creative professionals. With research on readers' needs, with creative writers, with modern media techniques, and with engaging graphics, including humorous cartoons, the magazine has been transformed. Real problems are now addressed: the burned-out teacher, school violence, teenagers' academic and sexual problems, and so on, but in constructive and upbeat ways. There are still the success stories and ministry regulations, but these are now presented in an engaging and witty style, with due allowance for variations in circumstances. The magazine now provides a successful forum for what is really happening in education. It gives readers a feeling of belonging to a community and helps channel their frustrations into a desire to promote needed change.

Teaching in the church is also in great need of improvement if it is to motivate members to remain active. A little research on the teaching pro-

cess might be beneficial. How might we create teaching materials that will be largely independent of the teacher? Few of our classes or teachers at present provide the kinds of intellectually rich, thought-provoking lessons that stress the originality and power of our religion. Lesson materials could be easily upgraded by the many faithful scholars at BYU and elsewhere. How can we produce or train good teachers? In professional pedagogical research useful data for the improvement of both techniques and materials can often be provided by analyzing video recordings of class sessions. Perhaps the church could benefit by sponsoring some of this kind of research as a basis for improving our teaching across all the auxiliaries and quorums.

CONCLUSION

As I look into the twenty-first century and try to summarize the concerns and possibilities I have expressed here, I find myself favoring simultaneously two different trends which might seem, at first glance, to be contradictory. Yet they are not, for they focus on two different levels. On the spiritual and intellectual level I recommend *strengthening* our message of doctrinal distinctiveness, backed by an open and lively program of public information and dissemination, which will give us a sense of pride in being Mormons. However, at the operational level of church governance and regulation I would like to see a *loosening* of policy, insofar as gospel standards permit, especially in regard to those regulations and requirements that isolate Latter-day Saints from their surrounding social environments, so that they might more fully participate in those environments while still enjoying the blessings of the gospel.

In recent decades church policy has often seemed to move in directions opposite to the two I would favor, perhaps in response to conditions in Utah or in North America more generally. However, it might well be that the success of the international church during the next century will be achieved instead through a successful combination of the two trends I have proposed.

I would like to conclude by reiterating my earlier caveat that the mission field in Europe has many branches and wards that are doing well. Many Saints live happy and well-balanced lives, both in the church and in the world; have strong testimonies of the gospel; and have, since their baptisms, felt overwhelmed with gratitude for the privilege of membership in the church. I count myself among their number.

Yet in this essay I have focused on the reality that for many decades the church has suffered from massive defections, hundreds of thousands if not millions. To be sure, many of those defections can be attributed to individual transgression, weakness, and failure, and I have not discussed

those. Instead I have addressed other factors and emphasized the awesome responsibility that we face for bringing back our lost sheep and for reducing further losses. My ultimate purpose, and my keenest desire, have therefore been constructive; I have desired only to acquaint readers with problems and issues as I have seen them in my three decades of church membership and leadership, and to suggest some possibilities for improving the holding power of the church, at least in my part of the kingdom, as we enter a new century.