

# Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala: Report from a Barrio<sup>1</sup>

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## A NEW WORLD RELIGION?

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (usually called Mormon or LDS church) is having enormous success in most parts of the world. Growth is particularly impressive in Latin America. In 1971 there were only 217,500 LDS members on this continent, accounting for no more than seven percent of the church's total membership.<sup>2</sup> In late 1997, on the other hand, 3.4 million LDS members lived in Latin America, over one-third of the total LDS world membership.<sup>3</sup> The Mormon church in Latin America is currently strongest in Chile, Uruguay, Guatemala (and Central America as a whole), and the Andean countries of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.<sup>4</sup> Here, between one and three percent (Chile) of the population has been baptized into the Mormon church. The LDS church in Latin America had its highest average annual growth rates for 1995–97 in

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1. A 1996 version of this paper was intended for publication in an anthology that was never published. Mark Leone, John Sorenson, and Andrew Tobiason provided critical commentaries on the original paper. Later, Armand L. Mauss provided detailed comments, which were of enormous assistance in writing this second and completely revised version.

2. F. LaMond Tullis, "Church Development Issues Among Latin Americans: Introduction," in F. LaMond Tullis, ed., *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 88.

3. *Church Almanac 1999–2000* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2000), 544, 547–549.

4. These countries suggest that Rodney Stark is wrong when claiming that "the Mormons are strongest in the most, not the least, modernized nations of Latin America" (Rodney Stark, "Modernization, Secularization, and Mormon Success," in Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, eds., *In God We Trust*, 2nd ed. [New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990], 212).

Paraguay (24%), Nicaragua (18%), Honduras (12%), El Salvador (10%), and Panama (11%). Yet, the 1995–97 average annual growth rate for Guatemala was only 5%, and for Uruguay and Mexico only about 3.5%.<sup>5</sup>

What is the initial attraction of the LDS church for Latin Americans, and why do so many new converts drop out of the church within a year to become inactive? Are there parallels between Mormon growth in Latin America and the success of evangelical Protestantism there? Will the LDS church show the flexibility to include local cultural adaptations in its religious practices, as for instance the Roman Catholic Church has done in the past?

LDS leaders in Latin America are usually very young (between 20 and 30), and their lack of experience often causes them to rely heavily on official church manuals from the U.S. This lack of flexibility causes problems and cultural misunderstandings in Latin America. John Hawkins (1988), for instance, found to his surprise that Mormons had a somewhat scandalous reputation in the small Guatemalan town where he conducted anthropological fieldwork. What was going on? The LDS ward had dedicated leaders who went by the book: "The manuals said to have a youth program and to hold it on a weekday evening."<sup>7</sup> Many callings went unfilled, so Priesthood and Relief Society leaders did not have time to accompany the youngsters to nightly meetings. The youngsters were left to themselves. Two young LDS women had affairs with married men. Catholic friends wondered whether Mormons cared about the reputation of their daughters. So the townspeople reasoned: "Since Mormons did not chaperone their daughters at youth activities—neither during the evening walk to the chapel, nor at the chapel, nor during the night walk home—Mormons must be a loose and immoral people."<sup>8</sup> No wonder LDS church growth was slow in this town.

To illustrate LDS membership growth and attrition in Latin America, I will use evidence from earlier research projects in Costa Rica (1990) and especially in Guatemala (1993–95). I will show that LDS membership growth projections are by definition gross over-estimations and should be used critically.<sup>9</sup> First, I will present information on data and methods.

5. See Henri Gooren, "Reconsidering Mormon Membership Growth in Guatemala: Statistics, Explanations, and Identities," paper presented at the International Mormon Studies Conference in Durham, UK, April 19–23, 1999.

6. Cf. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990).

7. John P. Hawkins, "Behavioral Differences Are Like Language Differences; or, 'Oh Say, What Is Truth?' vs. 'Do As I'm Doing,'" in Mary E. Stovall and Carol Cornwall Madson, eds., *A Heritage of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988), 159.

8. *Ibid.*, 161.

9. LDS church membership statistics and projections should be used with care,

Then I will discuss the realities and paradoxes of Mormon growth in Guatemala. Finally, I will offer slices of life from LDS members in Guatemala, suggesting the reasons they are attracted to the Mormon church in the first place and the reasons so many drop out within a year. I will end with some preliminary conclusions.

#### DATA AND METHODS

The information presented here comes from two sources. The first is my Ph.D. study of small-scale entrepreneurs of various churches (Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, and Mormon) in and around a low-income neighborhood of Guatemala City called La Florida. The central question was: how does a person's membership in a particular household and church help or limit the operation of a small firm? Fieldwork was conducted from 1993 to 1995 and consisted of participant observation in churches and enterprises, open-ended interviews with church members, 13 tape-recorded life history interviews with entrepreneurs from three churches (two Catholics, three Neo-Pentecostals, and eight Mormons) and a review of literature. All quotations in the "slices of life" section are from the LDS life histories. Unless otherwise indicated, the information presented dates from 1995.

I was able to get the bishoprics' cooperation in conducting a membership survey of both La Florida and Santa Marta wards in 1993.<sup>10</sup> The response rate was only about 25% (N=50), but the results hinted at some small differences between the wards. For the period of the study, Santa Marta had a younger membership (average age 31, against 39 for La Florida) with a high turnover. Half of all members were single, compared to only 12 percent in La Florida. Santa Marta members had higher levels of education. Both wards, however, showed a huge majority of established church members: people who have been in the church for over 10 years. These are the people with important callings and temple recommendations.

The second, though less important, source of information is my master's degree study of the growth dynamics and problems of an LDS ward

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especially when extrapolated (far) into the future. Stark's (1990: 206) assertion that 'there may well be more than two hundred million Mormons on earth in a hundred years' seems overdone (Modernization, Secularization, 206. See also Rodney Stark, "The Rise of the New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 18-27 and "So Far, So Good: A Brief Assessment of Mormon Membership Projections," *Review of Religious Research* 38, no. 2 (1996): 175-178).

10. The survey was conducted on November 28, 1993 (N = 50), so the response was about 25%, much too small to be more than barely suggestive of certain recurrent traits in these wards.

in San José, Costa Rica.<sup>11</sup> The fieldwork took place in 1990 in the residential area of Los Yoses, east of the center of San José. It consisted of participant-observation during various types of church meetings and many informal interviews with members, leaders, and missionaries. The "First Ward" (*Barrio Uno*) comprised a huge area of eastern San José, including the suburbs San Pedro, Sabanilla, Vargas Araya, Lourdes, Santa Marta, Curridabat, and San Ramón<sup>12</sup> (Gooren 1991: 16). It had 330 registered members, 170 of whom (52 percent) were active. The Los Yoses ward certainly had a stronger middle-class flavor than the Guatemalan *barrios*. Costa Rica had 28,000 LDS members late in 1997 or roughly 0.77 percent of the total population. Guatemala, on the other hand, had 164,000 members corresponding to 1.3 percent of its population.

#### GUATEMALA, GUATEMALA CITY, AND LA FLORIDA

Guatemala is the second largest of the Central American republics. More than half of its eleven million inhabitants<sup>13</sup> are Indians or *indígenas*. The country's major social problems include (1) a very uneven land and income distribution leading to massive poverty, (2) discrimination and exploitation of Indian labor by the dominant *Ladino* minority, and (3) a highly inefficient state apparatus used to safeguard the interests of the rural agro-export oligarchy and the armed forces.

Between 1944 and 1954 two democratically elected, reform-oriented governments experimented with land redistribution and literacy programs. A CIA sponsored military coup by Colonel Castillo Armas in 1954, however, started a thirty-year period of increasingly inefficient, corrupt, and brutal military governments. Since 1960, various guerrilla forces have been formed and decimated in some of the cruelest counter-insurgency warfare of the western hemisphere. Over 150,000 people have been killed, over 50,000 have disappeared, over 50,000 have left the country and about a million have been displaced inside the country.<sup>14</sup> Since the return to formal democracy in 1985, there have been five civilian presidents. The armed conflict officially ended in 1996 with a peace treaty between the Arzú-government and the guerrillas. However, local

11. Henri Gooren, *De expanderende mormoonse kerk in Latijns Amerika: Scheisen uit een wijk in San José, Costa Rica* (Masters Thesis, Utrecht University, Holland, 1991).

12. *Ibid.*, 16.

13. In late 1997, according to the World Bank. See *World Development Report 1998-1999* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

14. See Robert M. Carmack, *Harvest of Violence—The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 295; Hilde Hey, "Gross Human Rights Violations: A Search for Causes—A Study of Guatemala and Costa Rica" (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, Holland, 1995), 65-66; and Angela Delli Sante, *Nightmare or Reality: Guatemala in the 1980s* (Amsterdam: Thela, 1996).

and national governmental structures remain weak. Poverty is widespread. Crime rates are very high and keep rising, and the judicial system is ineffective and unable to prevent selective political assassinations (like that of Roman Catholic bishop Gerardi in 1998).

Since the 1970s, poverty and the war have forced many people to move to the metropolitan area of Guatemala City, known as AMG or *Area Metropolitana de Guatemala*. It is estimated that today over two million people, or about one-fifth of the total population, live in the AMG. Two-thirds of these live below the poverty line in a belt of shantytowns, which are often located near the steep gorges that carve their way through Guatemala City. One third live in dire poverty, unable to meet even basic needs for food and shelter.<sup>15</sup> La Florida, the research site, is a low-income neighborhood about 10 kilometers west of the city center with a population of almost 37,000 in an area of one square kilometer, making it the most densely populated part of Guatemala City. First settled by squatters between 1949 and 1952, it is nowadays an established *barrio* or *colonia*: most houses are made of bricks and many of its streets are paved. About half of all houses have water and sewer systems; 75 percent of all houses have electricity. However, these services are interrupted frequently, affecting the LDS church building as well.<sup>16</sup>

#### MORMON GROWTH IN GUATEMALA: REALITIES AND PARADOXES

LDS church history in Guatemala started in September 1946 with a preparatory visit by a North American mission president stationed in Mexico. One year later four missionaries were sent to Guatemala and Costa Rica. In 1948 the first Guatemalan was baptized. The Central America Mission was founded in 1952. The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by local church-building (ie., the founding and consolidation of branches and wards) as the number of Mormons kept growing steadily. Costa Rica, for example, went from 3,800 registered LDS members in 1977 to 7,100 in 1986 and 28,000 (0.77 percent of the population) by year-end 1997. But the growth in Guatemala is even more impressive. While in 1956 there were still only 250 baptized members, by 1967 there were 10,000! The latest figure, from year-end 1997, was 164,000 baptized Mormons or about 1.3 percent of the total Guatemalan population.<sup>17</sup>

15. *Perfil estadístico Centroamericano* (San José, Costa Rica: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales [FLACSO], 1993), 12.

16. Main sources for this paragraph: Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, "Establecimientos informales de hogares populares en Ciudad de Guatemala: Un enfoque de género," unpubl. FLACSO ms. (n.d.: 1993?); and *Caracterización de las áreas precarias en la Ciudad de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: SEGEPLAN/UNICEF/Criterio, 1991).

17. *Church Almanac* (1998), 307, 329. Gooren (Reconsidering Mormon Membership Growth) gives detailed information and an analysis of LDS growth periods in Guatemala.

Guatemala has had its own LDS temple since 1984. In late 1993, there were four missions with almost 600 Mormon missionaries. The metropolitan area of Guatemala City (AMG) in December 1993 had between 50,000 and 70,000 LDS church members.<sup>18</sup> This means between 33 and 47 percent of all church members lived there, a considerably higher percentage than the 20 percent of the general population concentrated in the AMG. These percentages seem to confirm David Knowlton's assertion that the LDS church in Latin America is essentially urban-based.<sup>19</sup> But how did it come to this?

THE HISTORY OF LDS GROWTH IN GUATEMALA  
CAN BE DIVIDED INTO FIVE PERIODS

- 1) 1949–56: high growth—average annual growth rate around 27%.
- 2) 1956–67: boom years—average annual growth rate around 42%.
- 3) 1967–78: stagnation—average annual growth rate around 1%.
- 4) 1978–90: high growth—average annual growth rate around 20%.
- 5) 1990–98: very low growth—average annual growth rate around 3.5%.

The first crucial time period was 1978–82, at the start of the high growth period. The economic crisis, armed conflict, and political repression were at their worst, and “anomy” (personal or societal lawlessness and chaos) was high, thus, preparing the way for high LDS growth rates in the 1980s. The main LDS boom years in Guatemala were 1978–90. What were the attractions of Mormonism for Latin Americans in general and Guatemalans in particular? Instead of simply repeating the arguments in the general literature, I will construct my own analytical framework of theoretical explanations, starting with the typology in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Analytical Framework for Understanding LDS Church Growth in Guatemala

	(I) Internal Factors	(II) External Factors
Religious	Appeal of the doctrine Missionary activities	Dissatisfaction with Roman Catholic Church Competition with Protestants and RCC
Non-religious	Appeal of organization Natural growth/retention	Economic and social anomy Urbanization process

18. Source: LDS Central America Area Office, Guatemala City, 1993.

19. See Knowlton, “Mormonism in Latin America: Towards the Twenty-first Century,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 169. He correctly notes that David Martin (Tongues of Fire, 96) has a contrasting opinion based on a literature in which rural studies dominate.

Figure 1 asserts that the factors influencing LDS church growth could be either religious or non-religious, and either internal or external to the church itself. There are four external factors: two religious and two non-religious. The *non-religious external factors* have already been discussed in the early literature on LDS growth in Latin America.<sup>20</sup> They refer to the great social, economic, and political changes of the 1960s and 1970s: the urbanization process, the *exode rural*, rapid industrialization, and the formation of military governments using violent repression all over Latin America.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, the economic, social, and psychological anomy that was thought to be caused by these changes would make many Latin Americans ready candidates for conversion to the Mormon church, in parallel with similar theories on the success of Protestantism in the region.<sup>22</sup> External religious factors have received far less attention in the literature, but the vast majority of people who now consider themselves LDS used to be Roman Catholics—if only nominally. They must have experienced some sort of dissatisfaction with Catholicism in order to abandon it. A few authors mention resistance against the money and time demands of the Roman Catholic *fiesta* system, with its alcohol abuse.<sup>23</sup> Since these elements were also seen as motivating people to become Protestants, a question arises as to whether the Mormon church is currently directly competing with the many Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>24</sup>

The *internal religious factors*<sup>25</sup> are the appeal of LDS doctrine and LDS

20. See Wesley Craig, Jr., "The Church in Latin America: Progress and Challenge" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5, no. 3 (1970): 66–74; and Tullis, Church Development Issues.

21. The impact of political upheaval is particularly stressed by Knowlton, "Missionaries and Terror: The Assassination of Two Elders in Bolivia," *Sunstone* 13 (August 1989): 10–15; "Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 2 (1992): 47; and Mormonism in Latin America, 166–171.

22. See Emilio Willems, *Followers of the New Faith: Culture Change and the Rise of Protestantism in Brazil and Chile* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); Bryan R. Roberts, "Protestant Groups and Coping with Urban Life in Guatemala," *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 6 (1968): 753–767; and Christian Lalive d'Épinay, *Haven of the Masses: A Study of the Pentecostal Movement in Chile* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969).

23. David Knowlton, "Mormonism and Social Change in Huacuyo, Bolivia," unpublished paper (n.d.); Annis (1987) elaborates the same idea for Protestantism in Sheldon Annis, *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1987).

24. The literature only deals with religious competition between Protestants and Catholics in Latin America, e.g., in Stoll (1990); Edward L. Clearly, "Protestants and Catholics: Rivals or Siblings?" in *Coming of Age: Protestantism in Contemporary Latin America*, Daniel R. Miller, ed. (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994) 205–233, and Daniel H. Levine, "Protestants and Catholics in Latin America: A Family Portrait" in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995) 155–178.

25. Internal religious factors are stressed particularly by the church growth move-

missionary activities. Some elements of Mormon doctrine are mentioned as being attractive, especially the fact that the Priesthood is open to all men<sup>26</sup> and the “promise of eternal family bonds and eventual godhood.”<sup>27</sup> The Word of Wisdom appeals to many men who have struggled with alcohol problems.<sup>28</sup> Finally, some people like the Mormon church because it teaches members about household budgets, raising children, genealogy, and social skills.<sup>29</sup>

The literature stresses above all the importance of LDS missionary activities. A greater and more efficient Mormon commitment to numerical growth originated in the 1960s, during the tenure of church president David O. McKay (1951–70). The mission program was greatly reorganized: missionaries and mission presidents received better training and the evangelization methods were standardized and professionalized. The time between first contact with an investigator and the eventual baptism became shorter and shorter: from “several months” in the 1950s to between two and six weeks in 1995. Meanwhile, the number of worldwide missionaries sharply increased: from 9,000 in 1950 to over 29,000 in 1985 and 48,630 in late 1995 to 60,000 by the year 2000. The administration of church president Spencer W. Kimball (1973–85) also explicitly stressed international growth.<sup>30</sup>

Its thousands of highly visible, adolescent missionaries give the LDS church an important advantage in the religious market in Latin America. Radiating youth, energy, US culture, and middle-class values, they attract many Latin Americans, who are often about the same age. In part, this also applies to the increasing number of LDS missionaries who are from Latin

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ment in missiology, e.g., Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, fully revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987 [1970]), and in the “resource mobilization perspective,” e.g., Keith Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press 1984), 206–207.

26. Knowlton, *Mormonism and Social Change* (n.d.).

27. Armand L. Mauss, “Mormonism in the Twenty-first Century: Marketing for Miracles,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 238.

28. Henri Gooren, *Rich Among the Poor: Church, Firm, and Household among Small-scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala City* (Amsterdam: Thela, 1999), 154–157, 165–168.

29. *Ibid.*, 158.

30. This paragraph is based on: R. Beekman, “The Mormon Mini-Empire,” *NACLA’s Latin America and Empire Report* 6, no. 5 (May–June 1972): 2–10, 31; Tullis, *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures*, 102; Mark L. Grover, “Mormonism in Brazil,” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1985), 129; Gooren, *De expanderende mormoonse kerk*, 30; 1997–1998 *Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1996): 6, interviews with various missionaries in Guatemala City in 1995; Lowell C. Bennion and Lawrence A. Young, “The Uncertain Dynamics of LDS Expansion, 1950–2020,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 8–32; Gordon Shepherd & Gary Shepherd, “Membership Growth, Church Activity, and Missionary Recruitment,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 35–38, 48; Gooren, *Rich Among the Poor*; and the *Salt Lake Tribune* of January 15, 2000.

America. Not surprisingly, they too do especially well with the younger generations. By putting pressure on "investigators" (potential new converts), missionaries are able to baptize at least half of them within a month. However, their knowledge of LDS doctrine is rudimentary and many fail to realize the full extent of the obligations of church membership.<sup>31</sup>

The *internal non-religious factors* are the appeal of the organization and membership retention by natural growth. More recently, the importance of high Mormon fertility has also been stressed in the literature.<sup>32</sup> The appeal of the strong, top-down LDS organization has been noted since its early history.<sup>33</sup> Callings—voluntary church assignments—can help members to acquire leadership skills.<sup>34</sup> At the local level, the ward (congregation) also serves as a social community, providing networks and support.<sup>35</sup>

Guatemala is a Mormon success story. However, the membership figures in Figure 2 refer to the number of registered, baptized members, including children under age nine. The concept of church activity is very important for this paper. Basically, an active member is someone who goes to church regularly and who fills his or her calling requirements. "Active" members are expected to go to church every Sunday, and certainly no less than three times a month.<sup>36</sup> According to LDS insiders in Guatemala, the dropout or inactivity rate stands at between about 45 and

31. Thirty years later Wesley Craig's 1970 observation still stands: "Little question remains as to the initial attractiveness of the LDS Church to many Latin Americans. Increasing numbers of baptisms attest to its centripetal force in drawing converts. More salient at this point is the question, 'Can converts become integrated and find satisfaction materially as well as spiritually?' No formal studies have been carried out on the subject of LDS inactivity in Latin America; however, indications are that in many areas there is a high loss of church membership after baptism" (Church in Latin America, 73–74).

32. See Tim B. Heaton, "Religious Influences on Mormon Fertility: Cross-National Comparisons," *Review of Religious Research* 30 (1989): 401–11; Bennion and Young, 25–29; and Armand Mauss, "Guest Editor's Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 2–3.

33. In a quote both famous and infamous among Mormon scholars, political economist Richard T. Ely wrote in a 1903 essay on the Mormon Church in *Harper's Magazine*: "So far as I can judge from what I have seen, the organization of the Mormons is the most nearly perfect piece of social mechanism with which I have ever, in any way, come in contact, excepting alone the German army" (quoted in Stark, *Modernization, Secularization*, 205). On the other hand, Beekman (*Mormon Mini-Empire*, 6) has criticized the Mormon church for its highly authoritarian organization.

34. See Craig, *The Church in Latin America*, 68; Grover, *Mormonism in Brazil*, 139; Knowlton, *Thoughts on Mormonism*, 47–48, and *Mormonism in Latin America*, 169–171; and Gooren, *Rich Among the Poor*, 168–171.

35. See Grover, 128; and Gooren, *De expanderende mormoonse kerk*, 57–58, and *Rich Among the Poor*.

36. Yet in North America, the operational definition of "active" member, for record-keeping purposes, is Sunday attendance at least once a month, preferably at Priesthood or Relief Society meetings.

Figure 2

Registered (In)active Mormon Membership in Guatemala and Costa Rica; La Florida and Los Yoses Wards

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Guatemala	164,000 (year-end 1997) registered members 82,000 (estimate) or 50% active members
La Florida Ward	82,000 (estimate) or 50% inactive members 400 (mid-1995) registered members 100 (25%) active members 300 (75%) inactive members
Costa Rica	28,000 (year-end 1997) registered members 14,000 (estimate) or 50% active members 14,000 (estimate) or 50% inactive members
Los Yoses Ward	330 (mid-1990) registered members 170 (52%) active members 160 (48%) inactive members

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75 percent.<sup>37</sup> Taking the low, conservative estimate of 50 percent, this would mean there are about 82,000 active members in all of Guatemala.<sup>38</sup>

The high inactivity rates of 45 to 75 percent of all baptized members suggest that the functioning at ward level is often problematic.<sup>39</sup> Retention of members is extremely low compared to LDS figures in the U.S.: only 25 to 55 percent. Weekly attendance in Latin America was only 25 percent in 1990, against 40 to 50 percent in the US.<sup>40</sup> In part, these high dropout rates were concomitant with the extremely high LDS growth rates of 1978–90.

According to the literature, LDS growth in South America picked up primarily after the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>41</sup> In Guatemala, however, growth was very high even in the pioneer years (1949–67), but the recent boom years were 1978–90 (see above). Many characteristics of the new LDS converts may be found in the literature. The new members were

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37. Costa Rica had 50 percent inactive members in 1990; the Netherlands had 65 percent (De expanderende mormoonse kerk, 58).

38. Of, course, all denominations suffer attrition from inactivity. Assuming the membership statistics of other churches in Guatemala are accurate, the LDS Church ranks at least among the five biggest non-Catholic churches. Its number of active church-goers might be the highest in the country (De expanderende mormoonse kerk, 66).

39. These high LDS dropout rates are typical for all of Latin America. Out of 28 new converts I was able to follow in the Los Yoses ward in San José, Costa Rica, only nine (32 percent) became well-integrated into the ward while four others (14 percent) showed up occasionally. See De expanderende mormoonse kerk, 34.

40. Tim B. Heaton (1998: 119): "Vital Statistics," *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members*, James T. Duke, ed. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 105–132.

41. See Beekman, *Mormon Mini-Empire*, 3; Tullis, *Church Development Issues*, 102; and F. LaMond Tullis, "The Church Moves Outside the United States: Some Observations from Latin America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 1 (1980): 65; and Shepard & Shepard, *Membership Growth*, 48.

supposedly typically young—age 20 to 25—married couples living in cities.<sup>42</sup> Their class background has been reported differently as “middle class bureaucrats,”<sup>43</sup> poor and lower middle class,<sup>44</sup> or working class and poor.<sup>45</sup> Women were over-represented among LDS members.<sup>46</sup> But what is the membership profile of the new converts in Guatemala—or at least the ones who stay in the church?

If converts are attracted to the adolescent missionaries, the strict rules of conduct in the LDS church (the Word of Wisdom), the style of worship and hymns, the strong church organization, and possibly even to the doctrine and the proposed path towards salvation,<sup>47</sup> why then do over half of all new members drop out within one year after their conversions? The literature stresses mostly internal factors: the weak church organization in Latin America,<sup>48</sup> the demanding nature of Mormon membership,<sup>49</sup> and particularly the lack of good leadership in the LDS church in Latin America.<sup>50</sup> But one can think of more “down to earth” reasons for the low retention: the high time demands, the responsibility of callings, the need to be able to read and write, and conflicts between members or between leaders and members.

Hence it is important to take a closer look at the LDS church members in Latin America themselves: What kind of people are they? Why do they join? What are they looking for? What are their problems? And, finally, why do so many of them drop out? We can answer some of these questions from learning more about the La Florida Ward where we have a fuller statistical picture and from personal narratives obtained through interviews with members.

#### THE LA FLORIDA WARD

In the LDS church building on 5 Avenida, two LDS wards met separately: La Florida and Santa Marta.<sup>51</sup> The branch and wards belonged to a

42. Knowlton, *Mormonism in Latin America*, 169.

43. Beekman, 5.

44. See Craig, *Church in Latin America*, 1970, 68; F. LaMond Tullis, “Three Myths About Mormons in Latin America,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon thought* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 85; and Tullis, *Church Development*, 99; Gooren, *De expanderende mormoonse kerk*, 29, and *Rich among the Poor*, 78; and David C. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” in Douglas J. Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London, Cassell, 1996), 70.

45. Knowlton, *Missionaries and Terror*, 14.

46. Heaton, *Vital Statistics*, 119–120.

47. In fact, converts in Latin America usually only have a rudimentary knowledge of LDS doctrine.

48. Knowlton, *Thoughts on Mermonism*, and *Mormonism in Latin America*.

49. Mauss, *Mormonism in Twenty-first Century*, 240.

50. Tullis, *The Church Moves Outside the United States*, 72.

51. Santa Marta was a neighboring *barrio* north of 5 Avenida, which was even poorer

stake also called La Florida. Founded in 1986, it had about 3,500 registered members from ten *colonias* (low-income neighborhoods). Of these only 800 to 1,000 (i.e. 23 to 29 percent) were active. Of the active members only 250 had temple recommends,<sup>52</sup> i.e. were judged and certified by their leaders to be fully orthodox in faith and diligent in attendance and activities.

The huge La Florida church building dated from 1971–72 and looked a bit shabby, though the garden was well kept. The sacrament meeting hall had room for over 200 people. There were two small adjacent rooms with standard LDS folding separations for Relief Society and Priesthood meetings. When the separations were opened, a huge hall was created for stake conferences. The benches were made of fine tropical wood as was the raised platform where the bishopric and speakers were seated. The microphone rarely worked. Church members in general were quite poor. Typical lower-class jobs were bricklayer, washing-lady, *maquiladora* worker, and shop assistant. Typical upper-lower class professions were primary school teacher, *operario* (skilled worker), secretary, junior controller, or plumber.

Four key local leaders in La Florida all happened to be small-scale entrepreneurs: Mario<sup>53</sup> was bishop; Juan was president of the quorum of elders (Priesthood organization); Ramiro was the bishop's first counselor; and Patricio was second counselor. All had been church members for over 15 years, three for over 25 years. All had been through long periods of inactivity.

The La Florida Ward had 300 (75 percent) inactive members and only 100 (25 percent) active members, roughly corresponding to the stake average. The active membership consisted of 65 adults and 35 children under age 12. Three-quarters of the adults had temple-recommends which means they complied with church rules such as paying their tithing, obeying church moral standards, and going to church on Sunday. The average church attendance on Sunday was 90 (roughly 85 to 95), which, of course, corresponded to the number of active church members.<sup>54</sup>

than La Florida. The ward also had about 400 registered members. Roughly 100 to 130 members were active (25 to 33 percent), but only about 30 of them had a temple recommend. The average attendance was 110 to 120. These figures were similar to those of La Florida ward. Finally, there also existed a Nueva Florida branch, which met in the church building of Primero de Julio, northeast of La Florida. Its members lived in the eastern half of La Florida: all streets and avenues east of 5 Calle. This branch, however, was not included in my 1993–95 study.

52. Source of all stake figures: La Florida stake conference, March 5, 1995.

53. All names are fictitious. The interview quotes as they appear in the section called "Slices of Life from LDS Members in Guatemala" were all translated by me from Spanish. The life history interviews were conducted between March and June 1995.

54. See Figure 2 for an overview of LDS membership statistics for Guatemala and Costa Rica, and for the La Florida and Los Yoses wards.

## PERSONAL NARRATIVES FROM LDS MEMBERS IN GUATEMALA

I will use quotes from six informants in this section. They are all from the La Florida and Santa Marta wards of Guatemala City, which are representative of the LDS church in metropolitan Latin America. Guillermo (29, single) had been working as a self-employed shoemaker for a year. He had converted to the LDS church in 1984, but had been inactive for a long time because of alcohol problems. Beatriz (34, self-employed in her tiny beauty parlor for two years) converted to the LDS church when her husband Mario reactivated his membership. Mario (37) had converted to the church in 1978, but had been inactive for eight years. He ran his parents' ironware company. Patricio (39, married with five children) had started his construction company 13 years earlier and converted to the Mormon church while he was struggling with alcohol problems. Bernardo (65, married with five children) had had his carpentry workshop since 1982. Although he'd converted to the LDS church in 1969, he had often backslid because of his alcoholism, which he finally overcame through Alcoholics Anonymous. Ramiro (35, married, four children) had been earning money as a plumber since he was only 13. He was the only second-generation Mormon I encountered, but he too had become inactive during his adolescence while struggling with alcohol and morality problems.

While every person has, of course, his or her own conversion story, one can distinguish certain recurring themes in the accounts of the LDS members I interviewed. Three of these themes are illustrated in the following excerpts:

*A. Conversion and Retention as a Means of Achieving a Closeness to God.*

For *Guillermo*, a desire for baptism was connected to a new understanding of Christ: "Other religions presented Christ like a tyrant [and] told me I was a son of the devil [who] would go to hell with him. By contrast, when I heard the talk of the Sisters, they presented a Christ of love." *Guillermo* also saw the hand of God in the little shoemaking workshop he had: "If I go on respecting the covenants with the Lord, He will make me prosper. Because I am only a steward here, He is the owner and. . . I am His worker." *Beatriz* liked the fact that one can learn so many things in church, for instance about running a household, about genealogy and one's forefathers, about leading a spiritual life. *Patricio* came back to the LDS church after a period of drifting into alcoholism and began to "feel this joy inside. . . It's something that you really cannot explain. It's something very big. You feel more worthy, coming a bit closer to God; that you're more intimate." After overcoming his alcoholism at Alcoholics Anonymous, *Bernardo* had obtained "a testimony that it's the true church, that the people are imperfect, but the doctrine is perfect; it's true, it's God-given. God is the one who governs the church."

*B. Conversion and Retention as a Source of Psychological Strength and Social Support for Overcoming Alcoholism, Drug Use, and Other Personal Weaknesses.*

*Patricio* described what happened when he came out of a stupor after drinking continuously for two months, almost without eating: "I knelt down and I felt some hands on my head. And when the hands came I felt nothing anymore. When I managed to wake up, I was in a bed in the Roosevelt hospital. . . . Well, I felt that God did a miracle. I didn't even feel a hangover. There I felt the complete change of the Lord in me. Ever since that day I've never drunk again. I got fully involved in church, and I feel that I've changed a lot." After *Ramiro* became active again in the church, he backslid and started drinking again. "When you're involved in church, you know that if you do something wrong around the corner, it's as if there's someone watching you. . . . I felt bad, because I felt I wasn't doing things correctly, the way the Lord wanted. So this made me experience my conscience; it was hammering into me that I wasn't behaving correctly. So I had to make this choice: either I went straight to the street to live my life, or I stayed in church and tried to use the principles which the church would give me." He stopped drinking and remained active in church from then on. *Guillermo* had lived on the street and was part of a youth gang. He'd used marijuana and had drunk too much. But one day the drugs did not make him feel better anymore. He prayed to God for forgiveness and says that God guided him, in a trance-like state, back to the same Mormon ward where he had been baptized seven years before. "From that moment my life began to change because I stopped using drugs. . . . I made an effort to be a different person, to try to support my family and see how I could get them ahead."

*C. Conversion and Retention as a Framework for Personal Growth and Empowerment*

Bishop *Mario* (37) explained that the church members "are taught that we have to be self-reliant, that we have to obtain what's necessary to bring well-being to our family. So it's hard for a member to come and say: I don't have anything to eat now, but such cases do exist."<sup>55</sup> *Bernardo* (65) had recently lost over \$7,800 (U.S.) in a robbery at his La Florida carpentry workshop. But he did not give up his dream of having his own business because "the church has taught me to be self-reliant. At least now that I've lost everything [to thieves], with what I have learned I can do something. There's no need for anybody to give me anything since I have to struggle to do it myself." *Guillermo* felt his shoemaking firm was

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55. In La Florida Ward, five or six families occasionally received welfare assistance, usually in the form of money or canned food. See Gooren, *Rich Among the Poor*, 92.

a gift from God: "I didn't do anything; the Lord put it in my hands. It happened through a brother of the church. . . more specifically the bishop. He had some money at home and one day he called me, interviewed me, and asked about my work and all that. I told him, and he said: 'Look, Guillermo, I've been thinking. It would be good for you if you become independent, and how much money do you need more or less to achieve that?'"

Another opportunity for personal growth and empowerment is provided by church callings. Bishop *Mario* said: "Any calling in church can give this blessing of knowing that you're useful for other people. But through this service you make progress by knowing people's problems and helping to solve them. It gives you life experience. When you are confronted with these problems, you'll know how to solve them." *Ramiro* often felt uncertain of his capability as a teacher. "But I feel that if I say no, the Lord will stop blessing me. So I have to make a sacrifice trying to do it, even though I don't like it and I think I cannot do it. The Scriptures say that the Lord will not give you a task you cannot accomplish. . . . And the truth is that when you're in this process, you realize that things are going well."

### C. Conversion and Retention as an Ongoing Struggle.

The affirming tone in these accounts contrasts with that in others that clearly reveal recurrent struggles of LDS members with obstacles to their continuing activity in the church. I will distinguish between individual struggles with the rather demanding LDS standards of good conduct and behavior and failures in the LDS church system of socialization and retention.

#### 1. Personal struggles with alcohol and morality.

*Ramiro*, even though he was a second-generation Mormon, spent much of his youth outside the church before finally accepting his family responsibilities: "The truth is, as a kid you don't even know what you want. There are so many things to learn. . . that frankly you sometimes try to do what you want most, instead of what is good for you. . . . Having gospel principles and all the doctrine and knowing the Word of Wisdom—knowing all that—I still had to try liquor, become an alcoholic, go out with the boys [to] the wrong places, like houses of women and all that." *Bernardo* (65) said: "After getting to know the church, I became an alcoholic about 25 years ago more or less. I was already baptized. I was in the church, but suddenly I started to like liquor and I lost it. I didn't go to church for ten years more or less. . . . [The ward members] did everything they could: they visited a lot; they gave me a lot of advice. But since it's like a disease—treacherous, progressive, and, well, incurable—they couldn't do anything. Until I asked God for help and I did my part."

## 2. Failures of the LDS Church System of Socialization and Retention.

Still inactivity in the church cannot always be attributed to individual lapses. Soon after his conversion to Mormonism, *Guillermo* slid back into drinking again. He complained that the home teachers never visited him during this difficult period: "My mother asked some of my church friends for help and they didn't give it." *Ramiro* said that the church had not been able to help him stop drinking. It was only after his first daughter was born that he realized his evasion of responsibility: his children would suffer if he spent money on liquor. *Bernardo* mentioned the same motivation for finally overcoming his alcoholism.

The leaders sometimes made mistakes as well. *Guillermo* again: "I don't want to disparage the church or the brothers, but there are some brothers who don't make an effort to do their part. . . . [I]f some leaders are failing, how are they going to guide and call to repentance the brothers when they themselves don't have the character to be an example of virtue? They can't say: okay, do this." *Ramiro* pointed out that many new members lacked sufficient motivation and preparation for the demands of membership. When they received callings, they felt too uncertain to perform well and, instead, became inactive.

## CONCLUSION

The LDS church has had enormous success in Latin America and especially in Guatemala. To understand why this has happened, it is helpful to distinguish between religious and non-religious factors, both of which may be either internal or external to the LDS church itself. Non-religious external explanations such as poverty, urbanization, anomy, and the need to build up new communities are also invoked to explain the success of evangelical Protestantism in the region.<sup>56</sup> Poverty, alcoholism, and other social problems cause people in Guatemala, especially young people, to look for a *cambio de vida* or change of life. Husbands strive for a more disciplined and better organized life: to give up drinking, smoking, and womanizing; to take care of the family; and to try to make progress in their work. They simply want a better future for their children. Many young families in Latin America are actively seeking an environment that will help them put their lives in order. They are religious

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56. Cf. Willems; Roberts; Martin and Gooren, *Rich Among the Poor*, and Henri Gooren, "Reconsidering Protestant Growth in Guatemala, 1900–1995," in James W. Dow and Alan R. Sandstrom, eds., *Holy Saints and Fiery Preachers: The Anthropology of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America* (New York: Praeger, 2001). An important addition is the increased religious freedom in Latin America, as pointed out in Anthony Gill, "Government Regulation, Social Anomie and Protestant Growth in Latin America: A Cross-National Analysis," *Rationality and Society* 11, no. 3 (1999), 287–316.

seekers with questions about morality, God, and the education of their children. They can also be seen as "religious shoppers," looking for a church that will fit their needs.<sup>57</sup>

To explain the success of Mormonism, one must also scrutinize the religious factors effecting church growth. It seems clear that certain dissatisfactions with Roman Catholicism prompt many Latin Americans to experiment with other religions. Evangelical growth in Guatemala was particularly strong between 1976 and 1982,<sup>58</sup> in other words, right before the LDS boom of 1983–90.<sup>59</sup> Direct religious competition between Protestants and Mormons might be a neglected factor in the literature. The apex of LDS growth in Guatemala was 1988–90 with average annual growth rates of 25%. This coincided exactly with the start of the growth stagnation in various Protestant churches in 1986–88. More research is clearly needed on this apparently inverse relationship.

Mormonism has strong appeals for Latin Americans. One obvious attraction is its young and enthusiastic missionary force, of course. Yet there are many elements in the LDS doctrine, the LDS rules of conduct, and the LDS church organization that attract Guatemalans. Excerpts from interviews with members of the La Florida Ward provide ample evidence. As we have seen, many people had converted to Mormonism for spiritual reasons as a means to achieve a closeness to God. Patricio explicitly describes the "joy" he felt inside after his conversion. Membership in the LDS church could also be a source of psychological strength and social support for overcoming various personal weaknesses, such as alcoholism and drug abuse. The Word of Wisdom was a valuable source of strength to alcoholics. The community of believers in the ward also provided support, although Guillermo's case is an important reminder that this was not always the case. Finally, participation in church activities and especially callings could help people obtain more life experience, leadership skills, and above all, more self-discipline. So for all active LDS members, church membership became a framework for personal growth and empowerment.<sup>60</sup> The question then is why some converts manage to use the church as a mechanism to improve their lives, whereas the other 50% of new members, who become inactive within a year, apparently do not. Is it, for instance, a matter of self-reliance, something that the LDS church seeks to teach all over the world to people of different cultures, languages, social classes, and levels of edu-

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57. Among LDS members in San José's First Ward, there were former Pentecostals, former Seventh-Day Adventists, and even one former Hare Krishna member. Obviously, however, the majority were former Roman Catholics.

58. Gooren, *Reconsidering Protestant Growth*.

59. Gooren, *Reconsidering Mormon Membership Growth*.

60. Gooren, *Rich Among the Poor*. Chapter 6 contains much material on this theme.

cation? The Guatemalan case does suggest that self-reliance is a key concept that is understood very well by small-scale entrepreneurs.

However, church membership comes in many different forms and may have many different consequences. Ramiro, the only second-generation Mormon interviewed, drifted away from the church during his adolescence when he engaged in drinking and fornication. Bernardo actually became an alcoholic *after* converting to the LDS church. If new members are not successfully, or not soon enough, acculturated (socialized) in the LDS way of life, things may go terribly wrong. Even the four main leaders of the La Florida ward had all been inactive for some years at least. Converting to Mormonism, then, is a life-long process and should be understood and studied as such.

The institutional weaknesses of the LDS church in Latin America are, of course, very important factors in the retention process. When the LDS mission is functioning very well and lots of new members are pouring into badly-organized wards with young and inexperienced leaders whose idea of authority is influenced by cultural concepts like *machismo*, things are bound to go wrong—especially if there are insufficient elders to support the bishopric as home teachers and if callings are left unfilled because nobody wants the responsibility.

In low-income neighborhoods like Guatemala City's La Florida, most people are too busy just surviving economically. They can hardly find the time to get involved in church life or in an unpaid calling, and they opt instead for a rather passive role, dodging their responsibilities wherever possible in favor of a kind of "minimalist membership." The new La Florida bishop described them as being in a "spiritual sleep." The interviews show that many go on drinking after converting to the LDS church. Some first had to go to Alcoholics Anonymous to kick their drinking habits, and subsequently were reactivated in the church. The local leaders had simply failed to get these passive members involved in church life. Rotating, unpaid leadership positions did not function well in a situation of poverty and little formal education. Bishops and stake presidents were unable to imitate the North American managerial leadership model. Many bishops wanted to control everything themselves because they felt they could not rely on (passive) ward members. The *caudillo* (charismatic warlord) then became the leadership model instead of the manager. This, in turn, made rank-and-file members even more passive.<sup>61</sup>

These same leaders were often more critical of U.S. influence in the LDS church, and in Latin America generally, than were other members.

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61. A similar process is reported in Pentecostal churches in Latin America. See, for instance, Lalive d'Epinay and Stoll.

To my surprise, anti-Americanism was strongest among well-trained local leaders in Costa Rica and Guatemala who had been to the States and did not like it. They were also at times offended by U.S. nationalism among North American members living in Latin America. However, these leaders were also critical of their own Latin culture with vices like *machismo*, alcoholism, and adultery. Some leaders in Costa Rica told me in private that, according to prophecies, Utah would become a corrupt place and the LDS church would prosper among the Lamanites in Central America. This was reminiscent of the ethnic pride in being "Lamanites" among members in Antigua Guatemala, as reported by Thomas W. Murphy.<sup>62</sup>

Will LDS members in Latin America have the freedom to pursue their own Latin version of being a "good Mormon"? This issue lies at the heart of a particularly relevant theme in the current era of globalization: the interaction between global and local organizations. The theme is not new, of course: the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has been experiencing it for almost two thousand years. Local expressions of a global religion have often been described in terms of syncretism, popular religion, or local schisms. The LDS church has opted for the term "International Church" but is still in the process of defining what, exactly, this means. So far it seems mostly to mean that procedures in Utah are to be followed all over the world.

After having reorganized the mission program in the 1960s, the LDS church is currently trying to consolidate its membership growth in Latin America by training local leaders, offering new education and job opportunities to members, and by developing programs to find and win back inactive members. If the LDS church in Latin America can strike the right balance between local expressions of LDS doctrine and the U.S. handbooks and manuals, between the Latin and the U.S. "way of doing things," growth might go on at a rate of 5–10% annually for many more years. Depending on this balance, the inactivity rates might also remain high. As long as birth rates in Latin America remain high, there will always be young people interested in joining the Mormon church—if only for a short while.

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62. Thomas W. Murphy, "Reinventing Mormonism: Guatemala as Harbinger of the Future?" *Dialogue: Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 177–192.