

The World of the Latter-day Saints – A Life Plan Model

By Melvyn Hammarberg

The 2002 Winter Olympics brought worldwide attention to Salt Lake City, headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The church, whose members are often referred to as Mormons, has shaped its state politically, culturally, and socially. Rapid growth during the past 50 years has extended the reach of the church around the world.

THE TRAIL TO UTAH

The LDS church began in upstate New York in the late 1820s under the leadership of prophet-founder Joseph Smith, Jr. Its roots are in the Christian restorationist

movement, a populist effort to return to the practices of the early, New Testament church. Persecuted for their innovative beliefs and practices, the Mormons moved increasingly westward before the Civil War to several areas, including Kirtland, Ohio; the area near Independence, Mo.; and Nauvoo, Ill. After Smith was killed in 1844, leadership passed to Brigham Young, who led followers across the Rocky Mountains into what was then Mexican territory. From 1847 on, the church's pioneers settled in Utah's Great Basin area. The land was reincorporated into the United States by the treaty of Hidalgo-Guadalupe in 1848.



Utah celebrates "Days of '47" with a parade and other festivities on July 24 to commemorate the pioneers' entry into the Great Basin. Patriotism is very much in evidence as young women carry the red, white, and blue.



Encircled by Melchizedek priesthood holders, including Bishop Justin Bell (left foreground) and First Counselor Bob Fairbanks (right foreground), Bridger Jensen is being ordained a deacon in the Aaronic priesthood.

Following the Civil War, the Mormons were increasingly harassed by the federal government for their polygamous marriage and family system. These were practices that the LDS church reluctantly renounced in 1890. During the 20th century, the LDS church entered the American mainstream. And in the period following World War II, the church developed a massive worldwide missionary outreach, an ongoing effort that was no doubt augmented by high media visibility during the Winter Olympics. In recent years, membership in the church has expanded meteorically (see sidebar this page).

THE LDS LIFE PLAN

Among Latter-day Saints, the life of every person involves three main stages — the preexistence, mortal existence, and postmortal existence. Spiritual development

is conceived as beginning in the preexistence, where the spirit self as a member of the hosts of heaven participated in what the LDS church calls the council in heaven. In this council, Heavenly Father announced his plan of salvation and chose Jesus Christ as his son to work out its conditions. In the words of former general authority Bruce R. McConkie, Heavenly Father's "spirit children would go down to earth, gain bodies of flesh and blood, be tried and tested in all things, and have opportunity by obedience to come back again to the Eternal Presence." Another spirit person, Satan, also sought the son's role of redeemer, promising that "one soul shall not be lost," but at the cost of free agency. The central issue in this story is "agency," the freedom of all spirits to choose the good, right, and beneficial order of life as proposed by Jesus Christ or to be coerced as proposed by Satan. In what is referred to as the war in heaven, one-third of the hosts of heaven chose Satan's plan and were then cast down to earth as the devil and his angels. Mortal life on earth is therefore viewed as a time of testing in the use of spiritual

THE GROWTH OF THE LDS CHURCH

In a sure sign that the LDS church has reached a mass audience, *Time* magazine featured a cover story titled "Mormons, Inc." in the August 4, 1997, issue. One of that article's authors, Richard Ostling, teamed with his wife, Joan, to write a recent assessment of the church, *Mormon America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), which called the LDS church one of the world's fastest growing and most influential religions. Jan Shipps, historian of religion, has suggested that the LDS church should be considered an emerging world religion. Its membership now totals nearly 12 million, with more than half of those members born outside the United States. Noting the dramatic demographic expansion of the church since World War II, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark estimates that it will grow to 265 million members by 2080. (Current growth is ahead of that schedule, driven by more than 60,000 young men and women serving voluntary 18-month to two-year proselytizing missions on all continents. The revised *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) also devotes a special section to the growth of the LDS church and notes the remarkable explosion of scholarly attention it has received.



Kim Brightwell teaches Primary children during "sharing time" in Crystal Heights Second ward, Salt Lake City. Primary is the teaching arm of the church.

agency and as preparation for a postmortal existence that offers a return to eternity in the presence of Heavenly Father in the kingdom of God.

MORMON CHILDHOOD

If the first status of a person is as a preexistent spirit, the first transition of the life plan is birth. Birth is viewed as a transition for the spirit self as it passes through a "veil" between the preexistence and mortal existence, at which time memories of the preexistence are clouded over. Shortly after birth, an ordinance of naming and blessing children, called a "father's blessing," is performed during a monthly fast and testimony meeting held in the local ward chapel. Wards are both local congregations and their geographic neighborhoods. Ordinances, in LDS understanding, are rituals having effects that enhance the physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare of recipients; they must be done under the authority of the church's Melchizedek priesthood, which comprises all of the church's worthy adult men. The naming and blessing ordinance identifies a child as born in the covenant, inaugurating early childhood.



Bishop Ennis Anderson of Crystal Heights Second ward in Salt Lake City pins a small flower on the baptismal dress of McKenzie Mayne during her baptismal and confirmation ceremony.

During the first eight years of life, a child is viewed as morally innocent, though acquiring an initial spiritual awareness. During a discussion group with mothers, Nancy Tingey said, "We've talked about children's spiritual development as if they're starting from a clean slate, but to me they already know a lot of what we're talking about. It's just that the veil has been drawn at birth." After age 8, a child is viewed as accountable not only to Heavenly Father but also to earthly members of God's kingdom, and must be appropriately reminded and prepared to take on this increased responsibility.

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Personal agency or choice, therefore, is to be exercised through obedience to God's laws and commandments.

One of the most important early choices a child makes concerns whether or not to be baptized into the

church. This decision, which cannot be made until age 8, depends on the development of an initial “testimony” of the truth of the “Gospel” (the church’s teachings about the plan of salvation, its history, implementation, and ordinances). At the time of her baptism, 8-year-old McKenzie Mayne understood its essence as “choice.” She told me, “It’s really an exciting experience where you get to choose if you want to get baptized or not, and when you get baptized...you just get under the water once...all the way under, without anything sticking up.” The ordinance of baptism, then, marks a second point of transition which, when coupled with the ordinance of confirmation for receiving the gift (or power) of the Holy Ghost, bestows membership in the church and inaugurates later childhood.

Later childhood is a period of learning more about the Gospel while broadening one’s spiritual awareness and experience, and thus increasing and strengthening one’s testimony. Boys and girls seek knowledge of the Gospel, which is confirmed through feelings of the presence of the Holy Ghost, who is viewed as a manifestation of Heavenly Father’s presence and guidance. The increasing strength of one’s testimony is partial preparation for the next stage in the cultural life plan beginning at age 12, when boys enter the Aaronic Priesthood and girls enter the Young Women’s program. Only young men are called, set apart, and ordained by a special ordinance, however. The alternative status for young women is preparation for motherhood, with its powers, rights, duties, and responsibilities, but there is no separate and special ordinance that confers it.

ENTERING YOUNG ADULTHOOD

From age 12, then, young men and young women follow separate but parallel paths, while also sharing many joint activities. The young men pass through Aaronic priesthood callings as deacons, teachers, and priests, involving age-graded powers and responsibilities. These roles are paralleled by similar group roles for young women identified as beehives, MIA maids, and laurels, but without the explicit priesthood powers. During these teen years, young people learn church standards of worthiness that are common to all church members — chastity, obedience, and tithing — and participate in a study program called Seminary, which offers church-based classes during the high school years. Many young people test the limits of these standards and some drop out.

At age 19, young men become Elders in the Melchizedek Priesthood as preparation for taking out their Endowments in the temple, prior to going on a mission. With a new kind of seriousness, a “worthiness

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I am currently working on a book that has a distinctive focus on the spiritual side of LDS life. My research on the Latter-day Saints is ethnographic rather than historical or demographic. I moved to Utah for participant-observation-interview fieldwork from June 1994 through March 1995, taking up residence in Crystal Heights Second ward in Highland stake, Salt Lake City. I did additional research in Alderwood Second ward, Lynnwood stake, near Seattle, and Country Club ward, in Phoenix East stake, Phoenix. I added research in the Philadelphia Mission (September 1995 through April 1997), with further follow-up work in Salt Lake City during the summer of 1997. I have interviewed missionaries returned from foreign, as well as stateside, missions.



In addition to fieldwork, I have been following events in the LDS church through weekly editions of *Church News* (a supplement to *Deseret News*, a Salt Lake City newspaper published by the church), and monthly editions of *Ensign* (a church magazine for adults), *New Era* (for young adults), and *The Friend* (for children). I have also been studying

many of the church’s publications, particularly curriculum materials used for Primary instruction (ages 18 months through 11 years), Sunday School (age 12 through adulthood), young men’s and young women’s organizations, Relief Society materials for all adult women, and materials for the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthood, along with film, video, and musical materials — all of which provide information about the belief system, values, and enculturation practices of the church.

My construction of a cultural model of the church’s life plan derives from these materials and structures my research. A cultural model is a complex set of cognitive schemas or images that guide, direct, and interpret everyday experiences among the members of a society or group. As I have constructed it, the LDS life plan represents the sequence of stages that mark the LDS “self” in its “behavioral environment,” offering prescribed and idealized statuses, social identities, and transitions over the life course. This LDS life plan is set within a cosmological worldview that LDS members envision as stretching from eternity to eternity.



During Youth Standards Day in Alderwood Second ward, Lynnwood stake, Washington, Young Men’s leader Dean Bennion demonstrates what it means to shoot a straight arrow as he makes his point about the role of church standards in the lives of youth.

interview” precedes these callings because they imply adult responsibilities within the church as the kingdom of God on earth. In a worthiness interview, a member examines his life and commitment to the Gospel in consultation with the ward bishop. If he finds himself worthy of the kingdom according to the church’s norms and standards (as judged by keeping the Word of Wisdom, following the guidance of the living Prophet, paying his tithing, and living a morally clean life without sexual misconduct), then he will receive a “recommend” signed by the bishop for admission to temple ordinances.

At the same time, young women enter upon adulthood by becoming members of the Women’s Relief Society, and they consider either marriage or going on a mission of their own. Women generally postpone taking out their Endowments until one of these decisions is reached. Going on a mission is essentially obligatory for young men aged 19 to 26, though not all take up or complete a mission. For young women, going on a mission is a privilege rather than an obligation. It is not to be undertaken before the age of 21. On the other hand, motherhood has about it a

sense of obligation and duty parallel to the priesthood.

The Endowment is an ordinance preparatory to full participation in temple work and, in that sense, is a symbol of initial adult participation in the life of the church. The ordinance itself symbolizes and enacts central elements in the plan of salvation and includes covenants of fealty to Heavenly Father and the church. No one may go on a mission without taking out his or her Endowments.

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND DIVORCE

For both young men and young women, marriage becomes the next transition toward full adulthood in the church’s culture. In the cultural model of church standards, marriage is a temple ordinance that seals a husband and wife to each other for time and eternity under priesthood authority. It therefore depends upon the worthiness of each partner; both must hold a temple recommend. A civil ceremony is simply an accommodation to the laws of the land and the short-term needs of couples who have chosen to marry; after a period of reflection and the attainment of worthiness, these couples may progress to a temple marriage. Not surprisingly, church authorities exert considerable pressure to seek a temple marriage from the beginning. And for those who do not marry, there is a burgeoning crisis of identity, mitigated somewhat by the church’s development of singles’ wards and special programs, and by the hope for marriage in the postmortal world.

The birth of a child is viewed by members as the realization of full adulthood in the church and as increasing the blessings of a temple marriage. Children born of parents sealed in the temple are viewed as “born in the covenant,” while children born to parents of a civil union do not have this status. Should a couple who have married civilly have children and later enter upon temple marriage, then children born before the temple marriage may be sealed to their parents as a way of binding them into the covenant of their parents’ marriage. These children acquire a retroactive status similar to being born in the covenant.

Added blessings come to the marriage when the children themselves marry and bear grandchildren. Then a Latter-day Saint can look across at least five generations in the building up of the kingdom of God — their own grandparents and parents, their generational peers, and their children and grandchildren. Many people in the



A photographer captures an image outside the Salt Lake Temple of a couple who were sealed in marriage for time and eternity moments earlier in one of the temple's sealing rooms. Temple Square is a popular place for wedding photographs.

church have direct face-to-face relationships with ancestors and descendants beyond even these generational boundaries. The family network of kin, so real to members, also serves as a metaphor for all spirit selves as children of Heavenly Father, and by implication, Heavenly Mother, from eternity to eternity — an understanding that is the basis for the church's extensive genealogical program.

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One of the complications of this marital and kinship arrangement is divorce, which may involve either civil divorce or both civil and temple divorce. Under priesthood authority, temple divorce dissolves the sealing

ordinance for time and eternity and therefore puts the eternal status of the parties at risk. Because of earlier plural marriage practices, the continuing hold of the plural marriage doctrine, the role of patriarchy, and the implications of divorce (and remarriage) for kinship connections, temple divorce is an area of church regulations that is hedged about in a number of ways. Men, for instance, have no need to seek a temple divorce because the plural marriage doctrine allows for multiple wives in eternity. Women are discouraged from seeking a temple divorce so that they may be assured of a marital relationship in eternity for the sake of their children, and in order to enter the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom themselves.

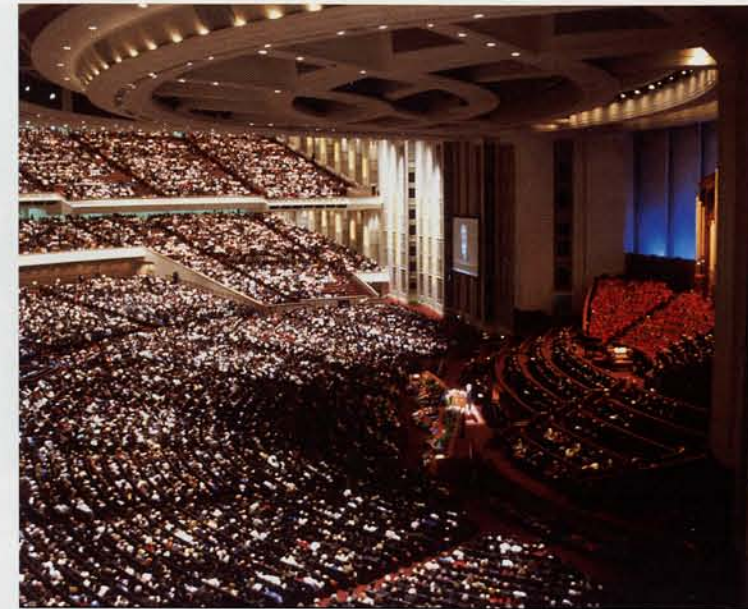
CHURCH SERVICE IN ADULTHOOD

Adult life among the Latter-day Saints is filled with a myriad of activities in church callings, temple work, and opportunities for service. To hold a calling means to be called, sustained, and set apart for a special role within one of the many spheres of organized church life, such as Primary instruction, Sunday School, the

Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, Young Women's and Young Men's organizations, the Relief Society, and other special areas of responsibility in wards, stakes, and churchwide offices. If a calling is a priesthood calling — into a Bishopric, for instance, or the stake Presidency or stake High Council — then one will be not only called, sustained, and set apart, but ordained as well. These callings will last for varying periods of time, until a person is released at the discretion of the priesthood-calling authority. The assortment of callings and releases is varied, without any necessary progression, and comes in addition to one's occupational, family, and community roles, which are also seen as extensions of church service.

Men who hold priesthood callings at the highest levels of the church — including members of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and members of the first two quorums of Seventies — are referred to as General Authorities, men revered as worthy, holy, and wise. The First Presidency includes the president of the church, who also carries the titles of prophet, seer, and revelator. Currently, that man is 90-year-old Gordon B. Hinckley, the 15th president of the church. He stands in the order of direct succession from Joseph Smith, Jr., as a living prophet in the dispensation known as “the fullness of time.” He also stands in the succession of all prophets through whom Heavenly Father has spoken to all of the spirit children who have ever been born into mortality. For Latter-day Saints, there is no greater authority on earth. He embodies the guiding rule of Heavenly Father and presides over the priesthood.

Supporting the president are the first and second counselors in the First Presidency, who are chosen for their callings by the president. Thus, the president does not serve alone and can call upon and delegate duties and responsibilities to his counselors. The calling as prophet, seer, and revelator continues until the death of the president. The senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve then succeeds to the Presidency, reorganizes the First Presidency, and fills any vacancies. Together, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles number 15 people, whose utterances are a form of scripture to guide the faithful. What the president commands in presiding over the priesthood is essentially the word and rule of God as current and binding revelation for the church.



The interior of the new conference center seats more than 21,000 members.

Discipline is also a necessary part of adult priesthood responsibility in the church. It is administered in wards and stakes under priesthood authority by exhortation, private counsel, and by formal disciplinary councils. The dark side of mortal life is that the devil and his minions are at work in the world, seeking to counter Heavenly Father and seduce people into disobedience. Sin is interpreted as giving in to the temptation to set oneself against Heavenly Father in violation of God's rule. Satan falsely promises a granting of godhood without effort and righteous living, and, in his role as the devil, uses deceit to entice followers. That is why Jesus worked out redemption as a way by which godhood can be achieved, even by those who have succumbed to sin, if they will give up the sin, repent, and return to the true path, allowing Jesus to pay the penalty of their sin for them. This payment, called the Atonement, is a sacrifice Jesus has already made by his death and resurrection. Disciplinary councils, therefore, are “councils of love” because they are intended to restore to the true path those who have succumbed to temptation.

Temple work is a key element of adult activity. The LDS church now has more than 100 temples operating around the world or planned or under construction. These buildings are not places of congregational



At the General Conference in October 1994, today's president, Gordon B. Hinckley, was presiding during the vote to sustain Howard W. Hunter as prophet, seer, and revelator. President Hunter died about five months later and was succeeded in that office by Hinckley. In the row behind him are members of the Quorum of the Twelve.

worship, but rather places where living members perform vicarious "work for the dead," consisting of proxy baptisms, endowments, and sealings for deceased ancestors. This temple work is guided by a belief that all persons who have ever lived on earth are the spirit offspring of divine parents to whom they may return as worthy of a heavenly glory if these ordinances are performed under priestly authority. The spirit of the deceased person may accept the ordinance work that is done on earth on their behalf. Many forms of service

FOR FURTHER READING

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Elder Jerry Arndt and Elder Patrick McConaghy served as missionaries in the Philadelphia Mission. They are shown here outside Veterans Stadium during the transition, when new missionaries arrive and those completing their mission depart.

occupy LDS adults, including work in the church's welfare system and callings in the mission system.

POSTMORTAL EXISTENCE


A funeral marks the completion of the mortal phase of existence. The body is dressed with temple garments when this is appropriate. Members of the Relief Society assist in this preparation for deceased women, and Melchizedek priests assist for deceased men. A service is usually held in the ward chapel, followed by the burial of the body. In LDS belief, the postmortal spirit self then enters a state of existence called either "paradise" or "spirit prison."

Not all spirits will have completed their ordinance work or met the conditions of righteous obedience necessary for progression in the celestial kingdom, and some will have actively opposed the plan of salvation. However, those who have met conditions of obedience can serve as "ministering angels" to those in spirit prison. And all may progress along the path toward a more perfect condition by repentance and acceptance of the vicarious temple work done on earth on their behalf, until all the ordinances are completed. In this way, agency of the spirit self is preserved in postmortal existence. Then, with the first resurrection, all spirits will be clothed with immortal bodies of flesh and bones, and Christ will reign with the saints for a thousand years.

The second resurrection will inaugurate the final destiny of all spirits. The highest hope and glory of the plan of salvation, as foretold in the Endowment ordi-

The dark side of mortal life is that the devil and his minions are at work in the world, seeking to counter Heavenly Father.

nance, is for those reembodied spirit persons who have fulfilled their covenants to return to Heavenly Father and Mother as married persons in their own extended family. They will meet the Lord face to face in the highest realm of glory in the celestial kingdom. There, with their spouses, they will become gods among the gods on earth transformed into the full kingdom of God.

The hope of happiness, joy, and perfection is a strong guiding force in the lives of Latter-day Saints and is what they conceive as their quest for glory. Entering the realm of glory is the ultimate objective of the model that is the Latter-day Saints' life plan. As the church continues to grow, its life plan will serve as a culturally constituted template that has directive force and orients increasing numbers of far-flung Mormons to the ongoing processes of social life. 

Melvyn Hammarberg has been conducting anthropological research among the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since the early 1970s. He is currently writing a book on the church's contemporary culture with the working title Quest for Glory. He is Consulting Curator, American Section, UPM, and Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania. He serves as chair of the graduate group in American Civilization and undergraduate chair in the Department of Anthropology. He is author of The Indiana Voter: Historical Dynamics of Party Attachment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) and editor of Interpreting American Culture: A Regional Approach (Dundee, Scotland: Modern Studies Association, 1992). He authored the Penn Inventory for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (1990), employed worldwide for assessing PTSD.

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