



6. THE BASIS OF MORMON SUCCESS

Since 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has sustained explosive growth. Many observers have struggled to understand why Mormonism continues to flourish. To answer this question, I present a refined theoretical model of why religious movements succeed.

My initial version of this model (Stark 1987) was stimulated by my observation that the many case studies of new religious movements were in almost every instance studies of a group that had failed or would soon do so. How could the failures be separated from the rare groups that succeed? I developed an integrated set of eight propositions and illustrated them with historical materials. More recently, I incorporated my model into my lengthy study of the rise of Christianity (Stark 1996a). Subsequently, I extended my model to apply to all religious movements, having initially excluded sects (Stark 1996b). That is the version I utilize here. In this chapter I will examine whether (and to what extent) the Church of Jesus Christ satisfies each element of my theory. Rather than using illustrative and qualitative materials alone, I will test major propositions using quantitative data from a variety of sources.

CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

As discussed earlier, and stated here as a proposition: People will be more willing to join a religious group to the degree that doing so minimizes their expenditure of cultural capital.

In the form stated above, the principle of the conservation of cultural capital explains individual behavior vis-à-vis conversion. Since my concern

here is with the fate of religious movements, a macro-level form of the proposition is needed and becomes the first of the ten propositions constituting the theory: (1) *New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that they retain cultural continuity with the conventional faith(s) of the societies in which they seek converts.*

Mormonism is deeply rooted in Christian culture. It is not transplanted Hinduism or a novel amalgam of Eastern mysticism or pure novelty. Rather, Mormonism embraces the *entire* Christian-Judaic tradition and adds to it in logical fashion, incorporating a more modern worldview. Latter-day Saints continue to read and study the Old and New Testaments, but they also accept the authority of the Book of Mormon, “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” Since 1830, the LDS Church has published over 120 million copies of the Book of Mormon in over one hundred languages; LDS members and missionaries distributed over 4.6 million copies in 2003 alone.

The Book of Mormon expands the scriptural narrative of the Bible to include the New World. Indeed, it continues the story of Israel, beginning with the settlement of the Americas by Hebrews well before the birth of Jesus. The first two books, 1 and 2 Nephi, explain how Lehi, with his wife, Sariah, his four sons—Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi—and their families and followers left Jerusalem just before the Babylonian captivity, boarded a large ship built by Nephi and his brothers at God’s command, and sailed off to a new land across the sea:

And it came to pass after we had all gone down to the ship, and had taken with us our provisions and things which had been commanded us, we did put forth into the sea and were driven forth before the wind towards the promised land. . . . And it came to pass that after we had sailed for the space of many days we did arrive at the promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents; and we did call it the promised land. (1 Nephi 18:8, 23)

According to the Book of Mormon, these were the main ancestors of the population of the Western Hemisphere. Eventually they split into two great tribes, the Lamanites (descendants of Lehi’s wicked son Laman) and the Nephites (descendants of Lehi’s faithful son Nephi). A series of battles between the two tribes is described until 3 Nephi, which recounts Jesus’ visit to the Americas following the Resurrection and resulting in a long period of peace. But reading further we learn that the people turned once again to sin and conflict, leading to a great battle fought at the Hill Cumorah, whereupon the Nephites were wiped out. Thus, persons descended from pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere are called Laman-

ites, although because of intermarriage between groups they may also have Nephite and other ancestry.

The Book of Mormon not only extends the geographic scope of the Bible but also clarifies it in many ways. Catholic sociologist Thomas O'Dea (1957:30) noted its lucidity:

There is nothing obscure or unclear in its doctrine. Even the notion of prophecy and revelation, so central to it, leads to intellectual clarity. The revelation of the *Book of Mormon* is not a glimpse of higher and incomprehensible truths but reveals God's words to men with a democratic comprehensibility. "Plainness" of doctrine—straightforwardness and an absence of subtle casuistries—was for its rural audience a mark of its genuineness.

Joseph Smith's subsequent revelations added to this clarity and provided a much fuller and more comprehensible view of Jehovah and of the fundamental basis of existence. Joseph did not add mysteries to Christianity; he dispelled them and offered a more complete cosmology.

In an age such as ours, marked by rapid change and constant technological innovation, there is a widespread predisposition to expect new tidings of all kinds. We expect to know more about everything than once was known. Yet Christianity has, for the most part, argued that the Age of Revelations is past, that two thousand years ago God said everything there was to be said. In contrast, the Latter-day Saints argue that God has more to say as humans gain in their capacity to understand: "And now, O all ye that have imagined up unto yourselves a god who can do no miracles, I would ask of you, have all these things passed, of which I have spoken? Has the end come yet? Behold I say unto you, Nay; and God has not ceased to be a God of miracles" (Mormon 9:15). Even the most bitter Christian critics of the Book of Mormon have noted its modernity and the immense suitability of the Mormon message for the contemporary consciousness. Indeed, they have used this as proof that the work is of modern authorship. But, for the Latter-day Saints, this is simply proof that it was intended by God for latter-day readers, and they dare Christian theologians to deny that God is capable of foreseeing history.

I shall delay an examination of important LDS additions to Christian theology until the discussion of tension and strictness. Here we may examine several tests of the principle of the conservation of cultural capital.

The first of these is that Jehovah's Witnesses will have an advantage over the Latter-day Saints when both seek converts within Christian societies. This is supported by the fact that Witnesses outnumber Latter-day Saints in

Europe. In contrast, the two movements have achieved quite similar results in Asia, where both lack cultural continuity.

The immense LDS preponderance in the South Pacific is easily understood despite Mormonism's apparent lack of continuity with local religious culture. Polynesians are an unhistorical people in that they do not appear in secular histories until the arrival of European explorers, and they only appear very briefly then. However, a passage in the Book of Mormon (Alma 63:5)¹ has long been interpreted to refer to the settlement of Polynesia, and a considerable amount of Mormon culture has grown up on this topic. Polynesians have responded very favorably to their Mormon history.

At first glance it would seem that Christian sects, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, should have an advantage in Latin America on the basis of cultural continuity. This is not reflected in membership statistics, however, as the Witnesses are outnumbered by Latter-day Saints in Latin America. But upon closer inspection it appears that Latter-day Saints enjoy greater cultural continuity in Latin America than do the Witnesses, despite claims that it is a Catholic continent.

The principle of the conservation of cultural capital favors the Witnesses over the Latter-day Saints only if Latin America has been sufficiently Christianized. But it seems to me that most Latin Americans have such a small investment in traditional Christian cultural capital that the Witnesses have little advantage. Moreover, the alleged cultural continuity between Mormonism and pre-Columbian faiths that have never died out may give the Latter-day Saints a substantial advantage.

Elsewhere I have demonstrated that despite claims that Latin America consists of Catholic societies its people are exceedingly unchurched (Stark 1992a). Although more than 90 percent of the population in most Latin American nations is claimed as Catholic, levels of practice are extremely low, and for huge numbers of people "religion" is probably little more than an exotic mixture of fragments of Christianity and pre-Columbian religion, plus a great deal of folk magic.

Some evidence of this can be seen in the widespread belief in reincarnation found in Latin American nations. According to the World Values Surveys conducted in 1990 and 1991, 56 percent of Brazilians, 49 percent of Chileans, 43 percent of Mexicans, and 40 percent of Argentinians believe in reincarnation. Moreover, within these Latin nations belief in reincarnation is concentrated among the Catholics. For "Catholics" who believe in reincarnation (and probably many other notions heretical to mainstream Catholicism), conversion to a Christian sect such as the Jehovah's Witnesses probably would require as large a capital investment as would conversion to Mormonism.

Furthermore, according to the Book of Mormon, today's descendants of pre-Columbian Americans are, through Lehi, direct descendants of Abraham. To be Mormon is their birthright, and many Latin American Mormons interpret this as a superior claim to membership in comparison with Saints of European ancestry who are, in some sense, Latter-day Saints only by "adoption" (Murphy 1996). Moreover, the Book of Mormon is accepted by Latin American converts, especially in Central America, as the authentic history of pre-Columbian times. Thomas W. Murphy (1996) found that Guatemalan Latter-day Saints referred to many ancient Mayan ruins by names found in the Book of Mormon. Of equal significance are the many parallels Guatemalan Saints identify between the Book of Mormon and a pre-Columbian Mayan epic known as the *Popol Vuh*. According to Murphy (1996:182–83):

The *Popol Vuh* . . . is required reading in public schools. . . . Guatemalan members told me that although the names of the people and places were different, both books spoke of the visit of Jesus to the Americas, gods, wars, the tower of Babel, Creation, Trinity, and Satan. . . .

Jesus was explicitly identified by Guatemalan Mormons with the Sovereign Plumed Serpent in the *Popol Vuh*.

Not only does the focus of Mormonism on the Western Hemisphere and on pre-Columbian times provide substantial cultural continuity with indigenous religious culture, but it also has had a major impact on LDS missionary approaches to that culture (Mauss 2003). Recall that only a few months after the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ in 1830 Joseph Smith sent four missionaries to the Indians in Missouri. This reflects the immense concern Latter-day Saints have about all the peoples native to the New World. Consequently, they have directed a very substantial proportion of their missionary effort to Latin America. This extra effort may also help explain why they have outperformed the Jehovah's Witnesses there.

Finally, Mormonism is very closely associated with Americanism—if for no other reason than the presence of large numbers of young American missionaries. Given the alienation of most American intellectuals (and especially social scientists) from American culture, it would be easy to overlook the great admiration for this culture that exists in many other parts of the world. Just as British converts to Mormonism might have found it hard to distinguish the attractions of the religion from the attractions of emigration, so, too, many Latin American converts might find it very difficult to separate Mormonism from the modern American lifestyle.

Indeed, many Latin American Leftists cannot separate the two (Young

1994). Thus, in 1989 Leftist terrorists in Bolivia murdered two young Mormon missionaries on grounds that they were violating Bolivia's sovereignty on behalf of Yankee interests. The same rationale was expressed by the Shining Path terrorists in Peru following their murder of Mormon missionaries. In fact, there have been hundreds of bombings, arsons, and acts of vandalism against LDS Church buildings in Latin America, reflecting attacks on "whatever smells Yankee," according to a U.S. State Department spokesperson (Young 1994:51). Indeed, rapid LDS growth arouses the political Right as well as the Left in many Latin nations because the Latter-day Saints proselytize the Indians, which antagonizes the wealthy landowners (Young 1994).

Lawrence A. Young has written of the "challenges encountered by the Mormon church as it seeks to enter Latin America, where the church . . . carries a heavy load of cultural baggage related to its being marked an American church" (1994:52). He also suggests the need for the church to "develop indigenous religious expressions." These points are probably well taken, especially in an analysis of causes of conflict between the Latter-day Saints and various host societies, but it seems important not to overlook the attractions of Americanism in the overall conversion process. Nor should we minimize the impressions made on locals by the mere fact that all these attractive, lively, young, *American* missionaries are self-supporting volunteers—that people who could be in college or otherwise enjoying the fruits of North American prosperity have instead chosen to share their faith with Latin Americans, regardless of the latter's social status.

IF PROPHECY FAILS

Other things being equal, failed prophecies are harmful for religious movements. Although prophecies may arouse a great deal of excitement and attract many new followers beforehand, the subsequent disappointment usually offsets these benefits. Contrary to textbook summaries, cognitive dissonance theory does not propose that failed prophecies typically strengthen a religious group. Nor is it established that religious groups respond initially to a failed prophecy with increased levels of proselytizing. A careful reading of the famous example (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956) reveals no such group effect actually occurred, and no subsequent studies have found it (Bainbridge 1997).

This discussion leads to the second proposition in the theory: (2) *New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are nonempirical.* Religions are less vulnerable to the extent that their doctrines are focused on a nonempirical reality and are not subject to empirical tests.

Mormon liberals often concern themselves with conflicts between the Book of Mormon and archaeological research. Claims that Lehi and his followers found wild cows and horses do not seem to square with the fossil record. Of course, Christian liberals have long been expressing similar concerns about the biblical account of the Creation and the flood. But if these things worry liberals, it must be noticed that tens of millions of evangelical Christians are not troubled about the flood, nor are millions of Latter-day Saints worried about Lehi's horses.

The basic problem for both Christian and Mormon liberals is that they inevitably project their inability to believe on everyone else. Mormon liberals worry about disconfirmations of the Book of Mormon because they don't really believe that it is an ancient and inspired scripture but think that it is something Joseph Smith composed, consciously or otherwise. Orthodox Latter-day Saints, believing the book to be the Word of God, are not only able to accommodate some discrepancies but also fully expect archaeologists to find evidence in support of scripture, which is why the church has supported a considerable amount of New World archaeology (Givens 2002).

Interestingly enough, the orthodox have had some substantial successes. For example, John L. Sorenson (1985) devoted many years to constructing a map of the Book of Mormon. Working entirely with textual references, he located places in relation to one another (how long did it take to walk from Nephi to Zarahemla and in what direction?) and to the topography as described therein. This map turned out to be a remarkable fit for the area surrounding the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico and northern Guatemala. In any event, fundamental assertions about geography and culture found in the Book of Mormon are not very susceptible to disproof by archaeologists or anyone else, and Mormon doctrines are not at risk of being too empirical. Of perhaps even greater importance, the LDS Church is not given to empirically vulnerable prophesying, unlike various Protestant sects that engage in dating the end of time. It is these short-term and dramatic prophecies that cause so much damage when they fail, as shown by studies of the impact of the failure of the end to come in 1975 upon commitment among Jehovah's Witnesses (Singelenberg 1989).

MEDIUM TENSION (STRICTNESS)

In order to grow, a religious movement must offer religious culture that sets it apart from the general, secular culture. That is, movements must be distinctive and impose relatively strict moral standards. (3) *New religious move-*

ments are likely to succeed to the extent that they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment—are strict, but not too strict.

In its initial form (Stark 1987) this proposition made no mention of strictness. However, the implications of the proposition are more fully revealed if the theoretical work on “strictness” is made an explicit part (Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1992, 1994; Stark and Iannaccone 1993). Strictness refers to the degree that a religious group maintains “a separate and distinctive life style or morality in personal and family life, in such areas as dress, diet, drinking, entertainment, uses of time, sex, child rearing, and the like.” Or, a group is not strict to the degree that it affirms “the current . . . mainline life style in these respects” (Iannaccone 1994:1190).

From the start, Latter-day Saints have maintained a relatively high but usually manageable level of tension with their surrounding society. When anti-Mormon antagonism in Illinois resulted in the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and mobs demanded that Latter-day Saints leave the state at once, the initial LDS response was to withdraw into their own isolated society in Utah. But as non-Mormons began to populate the West persecution resumed and focused on plural marriage, which was by then openly practiced, especially by the most prominent Latter-day Saints. During the 1880s, the federal government launched an all-out effort to prosecute polygamists under a new statute. Some polygamous families fled to Canada, others to Mexico; many LDS leaders went into hiding. Faced with these dangers, the Church of Jesus Christ reduced its tension with the external society in 1890 by prohibiting new plural marriages. This drew a favorable response from U.S. President Benjamin Harrison, who in 1893 issued a proclamation of amnesty to all polygamists who had entered into that relationship prior to November 1, 1890.

Subsequently, the church periodically has moved to prevent its tension with non-Latter-day Saint society from becoming excessive, most dramatically in 1978 when the revelation was announced that henceforth men of all races would be eligible for the Mormon priesthood. This is not to suggest that the church changed its position in response to external pressures (which actually seem to have been lower in 1978 than during the 1960s). Indeed, it appears to this outsider that the pressures were largely internal because many members, including President Spencer W. Kimball, did a lot of praying about the matter. In any event, the effect of this and other modifications has been not so much to decrease tension with the outside world as to keep it within tolerable limits. Put another way, the Latter-day Saints have softened many of their original positions on a variety of issues, and they have modified many practices, but the net result has been to maintain a relatively stable degree of tension over time (Mauss 1994).

Today, Latter-day Saint tension with the outside world takes two primary forms. First, the Saints are stricter in terms of the moral rules governing their lifestyles and the levels of commitment expected of the individual member. Second, they embrace a significantly different theology.

Latter-day Saints do not drink coffee or tea. Many also avoid caffeinated soft drinks. And they reject tobacco and alcohol. It is worth noting that these are *norms*, not rules, in that no one is expelled for drinking coffee or liquor or for smoking. Moreover, Latter-day Saints also condemn pre- and extramarital sex—both draw official church sanctions.

In addition, Latter-day Saints are expected to devote a great deal of time and energy to church activities and to tithe their incomes. Table 6.1 demonstrates the positive effects of strictness by comparing active and nominal Mormons and then merging the two groups to show what Mormon congregations would look like if the free riders, those who contribute little but take a lot, were included. The data are based on merged 1972 through 1994 General Social Surveys, which included 430 persons who identified themselves as Latter-day Saints (excluding members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known today as the “Community of Christ”). Active Saints are defined as those who attend church at least once a week. Nominal Saints attend less often: two-thirds said they attended less than once a month. Of course, all church congregations have some very active and some very inactive members. What strict congregations lack is an excess of lukewarm members who participate somewhat but not very enthusiastically. That is, Latter-day Saints who don’t go to church every week tend not to show up often enough to reduce the religious rewards of the active members.

More than 90 percent of active Latter-day Saints strongly identify with their faith. But this percentage would fall to less than two-thirds if the nominal members were counted. Prayer activity would fall drastically in a congregation in which the nominals took some part, but intermarriage would not be affected at all—mixed marriages being low even among nominal Latter-day Saints. No active member in the sample smokes, but nominal Latter-day Saints smoke at the national average. Hardly any (6 percent) active Latter-day Saints drink alcohol, but the majority of nominal members do. The same contrast shows up regarding going to bars and taverns. Thus, strictness creates highly committed, distinctive LDS congregations by weeding out the potential free riders.

Distinctiveness also characterizes LDS theology, for it is as much a departure from traditional Christianity as that faith was, in turn, from Judaism. Mormonism deals with many questions left unanswered by historical Christianity, including the origins of God, the creation of new souls, and

TABLE 6.1 Active and Nominal Latter-day Saints, from General Social Surveys, 1972–1994

PERCENTAGE WHO	ACTIVE	NOMINAL	COMBINED	U.S.
	(239)	(191)	(430)	(31,945)
HAVE “STRONG” IDENTIFICATION WITH DENOMINATION	91	25	62	39
PRAY DAILY	92	46	71	56
HAVE LDS SPOUSE ^B	99	92	97	
	(167)	(72)	(239)	
SMOKE	0	33	13	35
DRINK	6	59	27	71
GO TO A BAR AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR	5	50	26	49

^a Number of cases is slightly smaller for items not asked each year.

^b Married persons only.

the ultimate aim of the individual human biography. It postulates an infinite number of universes, each created and ruled over by an omnipotent God *and* his wife—the couple is the basic unit in Mormon thought. We live in one of these universes. Where did God and his wife come from? Once they were mere humans just as we are. They rose to divinity and hence to create and rule their own universe after a long period of spiritual development. Individual humans on earth possess immortal souls that were infused in each at the moment of birth. These souls, in turn, are the offspring of the divine couple, produced through their union. Each human thus begins not merely in the image of God but as the literal child of the gods, possessed of the divine substance. Therefore each human can aspire to godhood, and each LDS couple can hope one day to create and rule their own universe, which is why eternal, celestial marriages, sealed in LDS temples, are of such great significance. Latter-day Saints do not mean merely to worship God, nor do they contemplate only spending eternity with God. They mean to become divine.

These novel aspects of Mormon theology are more than sufficient to generate several shelves of angry anti-Mormon books in every evangelical Christian bookstore. And this ad ran for years in *Christianity Today*: “MORMONISM IS A FALSE RELIGION. For a FREE one-year subscription that offers a revealing look at Mormonism from a Christian perspective, call . . .”

LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY

While it is convenient to speak of organizations doing this or that, we must always keep in mind that, in fact, organizations never do anything. Only people can act, and individual actions can be interpreted as being on behalf of an organization only to the extent that they are coordinated and directed. That is, all successful social movements require effective leaders, and to be effective the leaders' authority must be seen as legitimate. Stated as a complex proposition: (4) *Religious movements will succeed to the extent that they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective.*

This, in turn, will depend upon two factors:

4a. *Adequate authority requires clear doctrinal justifications for an effective and legitimate leadership.*

4b. *Authority is regarded as more legitimate and gains in effectiveness to the degree that members perceive themselves as participants in the system of authority.*

There are many bases for legitimate authority within organizations, depending on factors such as whether members are paid to participate, or whether special skills and experience are recognized as vital qualifications to lead, or both. However, when organizations stress doctrines, as all religious movements do, these doctrines must define the basis for leadership. Who may lead, and how is leadership obtained? What powers are granted to leaders? What sanctions may leaders impose? These are vital matters, brought into clear relief by the many examples of groups that failed (or are failing) for lack of doctrines defining a legitimate basis for effective leadership.

That doctrines can directly cause ineffective leadership is widely evident in contemporary New Age and "metaphysical" groups. If everyone is a "student," and everyone's ideas and insights are equally valid, then no one can say what must be done or who is to do what, when. The result is the existence of virtual nonorganizations—mere affinity or discussion groups incapable of action (Wagner 1983). In similar fashion the early Christian Gnostics could not sustain effective organizations because their fundamental doctrines prevented them from ever being anything more than a loose network of individual adepts, each pursuing secret knowledge through private, personal means (Pagels 1979). In contrast, from the start Christianity had doctrines appropriate for an effective structure of authority since Christ himself was believed to have selected his successors as head of the church.

LDS doctrine speaks with a clear, powerful voice on the matter of leadership. The church president is considered to be "prophet, seer, and revelator." That is, since Joseph Smith was granted revelations by God, his successors to

the presidency gain similar powers—what Max Weber described as a replacement of the charisma of the prophet by the charisma of office. The president gains office simply by being the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the ruling body of the church. The Quorum selects its own new members to replace those who die and those who join the First Presidency. The president and two counselors he chooses through inspiration and with the approval of the rest of the Quorum constitute this presidency.

The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles oversee both the temporal and the spiritual affairs of the church. They frequently promulgate new policies and affirm old ones, often doing so by letter to general and local church officers. This example, as reported in the *Deseret News Church Almanac* (1996:7), is instructive:

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve reaffirmed the Church's policy on discipline 2 November 1993, saying, "We have the responsibility to preserve the doctrinal purity of the Church." The letter explained that apostasy refers to church members who "repeatedly act in clear, open and deliberate public opposition to the Church or its leaders; or persist in teaching as Church doctrine information that is not Church doctrine after being corrected by their bishops or higher authority; or continue to follow the teachings of apostate cults (such as those that advocate plural marriage) after being corrected by their bishops or higher authority."

The references to offenders being corrected by bishops affirm local LDS authority. Each ward (congregation) is led by a bishop and his two counselors. They may inspect the lives of the rank-and-file and impose a number of sanctions upon miscreants. They can withdraw a member's temple "recommend," which provides access to LDS temples. Members may also be disfellowshipped for a period, during which they may not perform various ward functions such as teaching Sunday school or giving prayers at meetings. Excommunication is the most severe sanction and is very rarely used, being reserved for grievous offenses such as adultery.

The church enjoys a vigorous leadership whose legitimacy is clearly and firmly based on doctrines. But it would be wrong to stress only the hierarchical nature of LDS authority and its authoritarian aspects, for the Latter-day Saints display an amazing degree of amateur participation at all levels of their formal structure. Moreover, this highly authoritarian body also displays extraordinary levels of participatory democracy—to a considerable extent the rank-and-file Saints are the church. A central aspect of this is that among the Latter-day Saints to be a priest is an unpaid, part-time role that all committed males are expected to fulfill.

First, LDS men serve as priests² within their own families. Family home evening is conducted by the father and is partly devotional, partly focused on family activities together, and partly given to exploring any problems within the family. Second, these same men serve as priests to one another's families through their role as monthly visitors. Every Mormon household (including single people living alone) is visited each month by two men from the ward (congregation) within which the household is located. The visitors are assigned on a regular basis, and the visit is devoted to religious and personal counseling. Questions concerning a teenager's new friends could easily come up during a home visit, as could family financial problems, marital difficulties, or absences from religious services. Indeed, Latter-day Saints who have not attended church for years are still visited monthly. Visitors are required to call unless a person requests formal excommunication—a step many members do not take even if they are quite disaffected. Hence, should their outlook ever change, the church is still in touch with them and positioned to welcome them back.

While the impact of the visitor system must be great on Latter-day Saints generally, consider the impact on the visitors themselves. They routinely perform pastoral duties of great importance—they are being real, not nominal, priests. Indeed, all LDS priests are unpaid “amateurs”—each ward is led by a bishop who must earn his own living in a secular occupation, all stake (a group of several wards) presidents are self-supporting, and so on up through the church structure. Although the president of the church and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles carry out their duties full time and receive living expenses (which are not extravagant by any means), they rose to those lofty ranks without financial assistance. This is also true for the tens of thousands of young Mormon missionaries around the world. The church provides a ticket to and from their mission post. All other expenses during their two-year tour are paid by their families or by funds they saved prior to going on their mission—no missionary is permitted to work a regular job during full-time missionary service. All young Mormon men (nineteen to twenty-five years old) of good moral standing are encouraged to go on their mission, and about one-third actually do (Shepherd and Shepherd 1998:9).

An unpaid, lay priesthood has several very important consequences. First, the Latter-day Saints attract no clergy motivated by a secure living, for the job of bishop usually involves financial sacrifices. Second, they do not suffer from having their affairs directed by persons of very little practical experience, something that tends to be true for groups having a professional clergy. Church leaders typically have had very successful secular careers. The late Ezra Taft Benson, thirteenth president of the church, served as U.S. secretary of agriculture from 1953 to 1961 during the administration of Dwight

Eisenhower. His successor, the late Howard W. Hunter, fourteenth president of the church, was a prominent corporate lawyer before being named to the Quorum. One member of the Quorum served as president of the Society for Vascular Surgery, another was a nuclear engineer, and former corporate executives abound.

To more fully appreciate the diffusion of authority within the church, consider the composition of the average congregation gathered in any ward hall on a Sunday. Unpaid amateurs conduct the services. Many of those sitting in the audience have conducted the services in the past and could again on a moment's notice. Many present are former bishops or counselors. Many others will become bishops. A substantial number in attendance (of both sexes) have gone on full-time missions. Everyone, male and female, devotes many hours each month to volunteer work for the church. How could they not feel that they participate in the system of authority?

Moreover, for an "authoritarian" body, the church is amazingly unspecific and nondirective on many important issues. Consider the tithe. What could be more important to an organization than funding? Yet the church steadfastly refuses to define the tithe. Is it 10 percent of gross income or of net income? Both views are widely held. If a family has someone on a mission, can that person's expenses be deducted from the tithe? Some say yes, some say no. The church won't say. How is it determined who has tithed? Every year the bishop asks the head of each household whether the family tithed in the past year. Those who say yes, did. And what if a Latter-day Saint responds that he or she gave less than a tithe? Seldom will the bishop express disapproval.

THE LDS LABOR FORCE

In order to grow, religious movements need missionaries. Other things being equal, the more missionaries seeking converts, and the harder these missionaries work, the faster a religious movement will grow. In addition to doing missionary work, a large, volunteer religious labor force contributes to the strength of religious movements in other important ways (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark 1995). For example, labor can often be substituted for capital. Thus, while many religious groups not only must pay their clergy but also must pay for all their clerical, cleaning, and maintenance services, other groups are able to rely on volunteer labor to provide all these things. This leads to the following proposition: (5) *Religious movements will grow to the extent that they can generate a highly motivated, volunteer religious labor force, including many members willing to proselytize.*

The Latter-day Saints rely entirely on volunteers to perform all activities in the local congregation. This is facilitated by Saints' response to the expectation that they contribute time to church work. In fact, this expectation generates so much available local labor that bishops and others in the ward devote substantial effort to finding things for volunteers to do, and it often turns out that a lot of the time is spent performing social services for other members.

But the most visible part of the LDS labor force is made up of those young men and women who knock on your door and offer to tell you about their religion. By 2002 more than 850,000 Latter-day Saints had served a tour of mission duty since 1830. According to sociologists Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, "There is no other religious denomination in the world—Catholic, Protestant, or non-Christian—whose full-time proselyting force is even close in size to that recruited, trained, and supported by the LDS Church" (1998:9). In 2002 alone, there were 61,638 full-time Latter-day Saint missionaries (see table 6.2). Approximately 75 percent are young men, 18 percent single women, and 7 percent senior citizen couples, as of 2003. These missionaries receive intensive proselyting and language training (over fifty languages are taught) at one of the church's seventeen Missionary Training Centers worldwide. These missionary campuses are located in Provo, Utah; Preston, England; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Sao Paulo, Brazil; Mexico City, Mexico; Santiago, Chile; Bogota, Columbia; Lima, Peru; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Hamilton, New Zealand; Manila, the Philippines; Tokyo, Japan; Seoul, South Korea; Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic; Madrid, Spain; Accra, Ghana; and Johannesburg, South Africa.

Remember, however, that members, not full-time missionaries, are the most efficient agents of conversion. Nevertheless, missionaries do serve as the primary means for bringing a conversion to fruition as they take primary responsibility for religious instruction both before and after the person is baptized into the church. That is, missionaries often enter the picture when a person has already been brought to a serious level of interest by Mormon friends, or relatives, or both. Mormon relatives also are a major part of the informal LDS labor force.

It is possible that going on a mission has more impact on Latter-day Saint commitment than it does on Mormon conversion. The expectation of going on a mission motivates years of preparation by LDS teenagers who attend seminary sessions each morning before school. Then the missionary experience does not only reflect commitment, it builds it. It is one thing to be raised in a religion; it is quite something else to go out in young adulthood and witness full-time for your religion—not only to teach your religion to others but also to participate in their conversion. The missionary experience ensures a deep level of understanding of Mormon doctrines in intellectual

TABLE 6.2 LDS Missionary Growth Since 1830

YEAR	MEMBERS	MISSIONS	MISSIONARIES	COUNTRIES ^a
1830 ^b	6	0	0	1
1844	26,146	3	586	8 ^c
1947 ^d	1,016,170	43	2,132	29
1963	2,117,451	77	11,653	43
1971	3,090,953	98	15,205	50
1978	4,166,854	165	27,669	54
1982	5,162,619	180	26,606	86
1986	6,166,983	193	29,265	95
1989	7,308,700	228	39,739	100
1991	8,089,540	267	43,395	130
1994	9,024,569	303	48,708	156
1997	10,070,524	318	56,531	162
2002	11,721,548	335	61,638	165

^a And territories.

^b At founding, April 6, 1830.

^c Estimated.

^d Figures given hereafter are as calculated at year's end.

terms and also at the gut level of how they inspire the individual. Moreover, to have gained converts serves to validate the truth of the religion to the missionary (Festinger 1957). In fact, to gain converts greatly increases the missionary's obligation to remain faithful—to then lapse from the church is, in a deeply emotional way, to break faith with those converts.

The immense importance of the missionary experience for Latter-day Saints is underscored by the frequency with which reunions are held to draw together members of all ages who served in a particular mission area. Just prior to the semiannual general conference of the church, Utah newspapers advertise hundreds of reunion notices. Much as their common experience once bound together Americans who had served in the armed forces (an experience that cuts across age differences and cuts out nonveterans), so does the mission experience provide a common cultural currency for Latter-day Saints.

But it is not faith alone that sustains Mormon commitment to the mission; Latter-day Saints fully recognize its remarkable socializing effects on those who go. This is evident on a visit to Brigham Young University, where large numbers of students (especially men) are returned missionaries. Not

only are they two years older than the average undergraduate elsewhere, but they are also far more self-assured, polished, mature, and, above all, confident. A Mormon colleague who sent five sons on missions told me: "A boy who has spent two years going door-to-door in a strange place, where they may speak a strange language, trying to get people to join a strange religion, never lacks for confidence again in his life. Whatever else happens to him, he knows in his heart that he can handle tough assignments and that earning a living is not going to be a problem." Moreover, people who have been on missions are extremely well prepared for the lifelong sharing of faith that really gets results—forming attachments to non-Latter-day Saints and building their interest in the church. Latter-day Saints are also good recruiters because they are unusually successful people. That is, when non-Latter-day Saints encounter the Mormon subculture they meet a closely knit community with an exemplary family life and a community of high achievers.

THE LDS ETHIC

In my judgment, Mormon success is rooted in theology. Christian theology enjoins people not to sin but acknowledges that no human is capable of sinlessness. Mormon theology maintains that each person is expected to achieve sinlessness. The process may take several eternities of posthumous effort, but there is no reason not to get started on the job now. If Christians feel guilt when they sin, Latter-day Saints often seem to feel disappointment and impatience. This appears to be the psychological basis for the very optimistic, "can do" spirit so many have noticed among Latter-day Saints. A person who aspires to divinity is not likely to flinch from challenges in a business or professional career.

Mormon theology also stimulates achievement in direct ways, for it places a premium on rationality and intellectual growth. As Thomas O'Dea (1957:147–48) points out, the expectation that Latter-day Saints can achieve divinity rests not only on spiritual development but also on knowledge. God is not merely pure in spirit, but he fully comprehends the whole universe—indeed, he is its creator. "The Mormon definition of life makes the earthly sojourn basically an educative process. Knowledge is necessary to mastery, and the way to deification is through mastery, for not only does education aid man in fulfilling present tasks, it advances him in his eternal progress."

In a set of LDS scriptures, the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith revealed that the knowledge "we attain unto in this life will rise with us in the resurrection," and therefore the more we learn now, the more our "advantage in the world to come." Elsewhere in the same work Smith urged, "Seek

ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (see O'Dea 1957:147-48).

These were not pious platitudes. An LDS emphasis on education, both for children and for adults, was manifested in schools and in formal educational programs almost from the founding of the church. Considering the virtual nonexistence of higher education in the United States in the 1840s, it is astonishing that the Latter-day Saints established a municipal university in Nauvoo, where modern and ancient languages, history, literature, and mathematics were taught (O'Dea 1957).

Then in 1850, when the Latter-day Saints had only begun their immense struggle to create a new society in Utah, Brigham Young set aside funds to support a public university—the University of Deseret, now the University of Utah. The university opened briefly in the 1850s, but then it was put on hold as other matters became too pressing. It was reopened for good in 1868 with 223 pupils, 103 of them women. Sixteen of the women belonged to Brigham Young's family, and his daughter Susa edited the college paper (Arrington 1985:337). This was entirely in keeping with Young's views that "we have sisters here who, if they had the privilege of studying, would make just as good mathematicians or accountants as any man" (Arrington and Bitten 1979:227). It should also be noted that one of the conditions imposed by the federal government in extending statehood to Utah in 1896 was the *repeal* of woman's suffrage. Until then, women had voted in Utah.

Not content with a state university, in 1875 the church opened the forerunner to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Today it is one of the largest private and the largest church-supported universities in the nation, enrolling more than thirty thousand students.

ADEQUATE FERTILITY

In order to succeed, (6) *religious movements must maintain a level of fertility sufficient to at least offset member mortality*. If a religious movement's appeal is too narrow this may result in a demographic composition incapable of sustaining its ranks. If a group is unable to replace itself through fertility, when the initial generation of converts begins to die its rising rate of mortality may cancel out even a high rate of conversion. In contrast, a religious movement can sustain substantial growth through fertility alone. For example, the Amish have not attracted converts for several decades, and in each generation there is substantial defection. Yet, at the end of each year the number of Amish is greater than before due to their normal demographic composition and a high fertility rate.

Religious movements typically overrecruit women (Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Cornwall 1988; Thompson 1991; Miller and Hoffman 1995; Stark 1996a). But this seems not to matter unless it reduces fertility. The early Christian communities had a substantial excess of females, but Christian women probably had higher rates of fertility than did pagan women (Stark 1996a). However, when movements greatly overrecruit women who are beyond their childbearing years, that is quite another matter. For example, by greatly overrecruiting older women, Christian Scientists soon faced the need for very high rates of conversion merely to offset high rates of mortality (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Thus, what had been a very rapidly growing movement suddenly ceased to grow and soon entered a period of accelerating decline.

Latter-day Saints have larger families than do non-Latter-day Saints. This has been carefully documented many times (Heaton and Calkins 1983; Heaton and Goodman 1985; Heaton 1986a).

ECOLOGICAL FACTORS

To the extent that a religious economy is crowded with effective and successful firms, it will be harder for new firms to make headway (Stark 1985; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, [1987] 1996, 1997; Stark and Iannaccone 1993, 1994). Stated as a proposition: (7) *Other things being equal, new and unconventional religious organizations will prosper to the extent that they compete against weak, local, conventional religious organizations within a relatively unregulated religious economy.* Put another way, new religious organizations will do best where conventional religious mobilization is lowest—at least to the degree that the state gives such groups a chance to exist. Thus, we ought to find that where conventional church membership and church attendance rates are low the incidence of unconventional religious movements will be high.

The individual-level form of this proposition is that *converts to religious groups will come primarily from the ranks of the religiously inactive*, and that people already involved in a religious body will be relatively unlikely to switch. There has been a considerable amount of research sustaining both the macro- and the micro-level versions of the proposition (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, [1987] 1996).

Applied to the Latter-day Saints, this suggests that their growth will be more rapid where there is a relatively large population of the unchurched and inactive. Table 6.3 shows tests of this hypothesis in Canada and in the United States. The data based on the twenty-five Canadian metropolitan

TABLE 6.3 Religious Ecology and LDS Growth

25 CANADIAN METROPOLITAN AREAS (1991), CORRELATIONS (R) WITH PERCENT GIVING THEIR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AS "NONE"		
LDS MEMBERSHIP	.60**	
AMERICAN STATES (1993), CORRELATIONS (R) WITH:		
	PERCENT GIVING THEIR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AS "NONE" ^a	CHURCH MEMBERSHIP RATE PER 1,000
LDS MEMBERSHIP ^b	.65**	-.52

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

^a Based on the American National Survey of Religious Identity data. Alaska and Hawaii not included in the survey.

^b Utah and Idaho omitted as extreme outliers.

areas show a strong correlation between Mormon membership and the percentage who gave their religious affiliation as "none" in the 1991 census. As predicted, the Latter-day Saints thrive where there is a lower overall level of religious affiliation.

To test the hypothesis in the United States requires recognition that the extremely high Mormon membership rates for Utah and Idaho are more the result of migration and fertility than of conversion. For the rest of the nation, however, conversion overrides migration as the source of local Latter-day Saints. Thus, with Utah and Idaho omitted from the calculations, the predicted correlations show up strongly. Latter-day Saints are relatively more numerous where local churches are weak, as measured both by membership rates and by the percentage giving their religious affiliation as "none."

NETWORK TIES

As already mentioned, religious commitment is sustained by interpersonal attachments. People value their religion more highly to the extent that a high value is communicated to them by those around them. Moreover, social relations are part of the tangible rewards of participating in a religious movement—affection, respect, sociability, and companionship being vital exchange commodities. Therefore, religious movements lacking strong internal networks of social relationships, being made up of casual acquaint-

tances instead, will be notably lacking in commitment as they will also be lacking in the capacity to reward members.

Weak internal networks have doomed many religious movements. I have already noted how doctrines and practices leading to singularity have impeded authority; they also undercut network ties within groups such as the Gnostics or various New Age movements. Moreover, I suspect that all movements lacking in strictness will also be lacking in network ties because there is nothing about their religion that sets them apart from the general public. Liberal Protestant denominations illustrate this principle. Their congregations are more like theater audiences than groups, for only small minorities of liberal Protestants report having close personal friends among members of their local congregation. In contrast, large majorities of members of conservative Protestant sects report that most or all of their best friends are members of their congregation (Stark and Glock 1968).

Conversely, many religious movements are also doomed because of internal networks that are too all-embracing, thus making it difficult and often impossible for members to maintain or form attachments with outsiders. When that is the case, conversion is impossible. People do not usually join religious groups because they suddenly find the doctrines appealing. They convert when their ties to members outweigh their ties to nonmembers—for most people, conversion consists of aligning their religious behavior with that of their friends, as discussed in chapter 3. When members do not have outside friends, such realignments do not occur. Hence, this proposition: (8) *New religious movements will succeed to the extent that they sustain strong internal attachments while remaining open social networks, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders.*

The need for strong internal social networks is particularly great to the extent that the group is in tension with its sociocultural environment. Thus, Latter-day Saints in Utah and southern Idaho are reinforced in their commitment not only in church, or within a Mormon subculture, but daily from an LDS-dominated environment. Elsewhere, however, strong Mormon networks are needed to sustain Saints within a “gentile” society. Such networks are established and sustained in a number of ways. First, the ward hall is not simply a church. It is a community and social center providing Scouting, sports teams, teen social activities (including dances), as well as activities for singles, young married couples, widows, and so on. An array of volunteer social services also are organized through the ward, such as hospital and nursing home visitation, taking meals to the ill and elderly, babysitting cooperatives, day care, and more.

Furthermore, the seminary system plays a crucial role in forming and sustaining teenage network ties. Rather than send their children to paro-

chial schools, Latter-day Saints send their teenagers to religious instruction classes (seminary) before the regular school day begins. In consequence, LDS teenagers go off to high school with their seminary classmates, the shared before-school activity serving to form them into Mormon cliques at school. Given that LDS prohibitions on premarital sex, coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs are at variance with current secular teenage norms, these cliques play a very important role in effective adolescent socialization. Of course, the system sometimes fails, but there is some truth to the joke that rebellious Mormon teenagers show off to their friends by sneaking a Pepsi.

It would be quite wrong, however, to describe Latter-day Saints in non-LDS communities as an isolated subculture. Most LDS children and teens have non-LDS friends. Most Mormon adults have a great deal of contact with non-Mormons and have non-Mormon friends. Indeed, the church encourages them to cultivate such friendships since these ties are the primary source of converts. Church publications offer many suggestions about how to make friends with neighbors, especially newcomers to the neighborhood, and how to include them in ward social activities. LDS members also are advised to avoid premature discussions of religion, to let such talk wait until potential converts have built ties to Mormon social networks (Stark and Bainbridge 1980b, 1985).

STAYING STRICT

If strictness is the key to high morale and rapid growth, then: (9) *Religious movements will continue to grow only to the extent that they maintain sufficient tension with their environment—they remain sufficiently strict.*

Earlier in this chapter I noted that over the years the Latter-day Saints have modified their positions on a number of issues, thus keeping their tension with the outside world within tolerable limits. In the nineteenth century, when federal officers searched for LDS leaders, intending to have them sent to prison on bigamy charges, the level of tension began to exceed the level compatible with continued growth. The church met the crisis by rejecting polygamy. It must also be noted, however, that plural marriage was not only an *external* source of tension. The fact is that most Mormon families were not polygamous—natural sex ratios and inadequate wealth inevitably limited polygamy to social elites. This resulted in some resentment from the nonpolygamous majority. In similar fashion, when the Church of Jesus Christ extended the qualifications for the priesthood to include black males, it not only reduced outside attacks on the organization as racist but also defused growing internal dissatisfaction and resolved confusion and incon-

sistencies in foreign missions where many nonwhite males already had been admitted to the priesthood.

However, as mentioned before, the major aspect of the modification of Mormon doctrines and practices is that most respond to general social changes in a way that sustains a *constant degree* of tension over time. A fine study by Laurence R. Iannaccone and Carrie A. Miles (1991) shows that the LDS Church has responded to changes in women's roles in the general society but at a rate that has kept the gap between Mormon and secular sex-role norms at a relatively similar level over time. For example, although the Mormon priesthood is still restricted to males, it has now become common for young women, rather than only young men, to go on missions, and the scope of female responsibilities has generally been expanded. However, the emphasis on distinctive gender roles, and particularly on the father as head of the household, continues to draw feminist antagonism, indicative of tension.

The tendency for Latter-day Saints to maintain a sort of moving equilibrium vis-à-vis their differences from non-Latter-day Saints can be seen in fertility trends. Mormon fertility has paralleled changes in the general American fertility throughout the twentieth century. Just like non-LDS fertility, LDS fertility declined sharply during the Great Depression, rose rapidly during the Baby Boom, and subsequently has been declining. But, throughout, Mormon fertility has exceeded that of non-Mormon Americans at a relatively constant rate of about 50 percent (Heaton and Calkins 1983).

Despite their higher fertility, however, the Latter-day Saints currently grow far more rapidly through conversion than fertility. In 2003, for example, 99,457 children of LDS parents were baptized, whereas 242,923 converts were baptized: for every child baptism there are 2.4 convert baptisms (Watson 2004:26). Thus, the church benefits from the well-known fact that converts are far less willing than those born into a faith to accommodate doctrines to reduce strictness.

EFFECTIVE SOCIALIZATION

To succeed, (10) *religious movements must socialize the young sufficiently well as to minimize both defection and the appeal of reduced strictness.* As mentioned, many groups have perished for lack of fertility. A sufficiently high rate of defection by those born into the faith produces the same effect as low fertility. That is, much conversion is needed simply to offset mortality if fertility is canceled by defection. Furthermore, religious movements must

socialize the young sufficiently well not only to minimize defections but also to minimize pressures to reduce strictness.

An important mechanism in this regard is to involve people in the movement while they are young. As noted earlier, the mission plays a vital role in this task. Teenagers who anticipate going on missions will invest greater time and effort in learning Mormon history and doctrines, and this will have very significant socializing effects even on many of those who end up not going.

Finally, because strictness generates strong congregational life wherein the enthusiasm of each member communicates the high value of the religion, LDS children grow up in an atmosphere that strongly reinforces their commitment. Moreover, the most attractive role models within the Mormon subculture are notable for their religious enthusiasm. Mormon religious life is not directed by a bookish, professional clergy, many of whom lack any obvious worldly abilities, let alone accomplishments. Church leadership (male and female) involves the most prominent and successful members. Hence, the message to ambitious young Latter-day Saints: Successful people are religious people.

CONCLUSION

By applying my general theoretical model of why religious movements succeed to the case of Mormonism, it is easy to understand why the Church of Jesus Christ continues to outpace other American religions, both at home and abroad. Clearly, Mormonism satisfies each of the ten elements of my larger theory, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The Latter-day Saints often retain cultural continuity with the conventional faiths of the societies in which they seek converts; their doctrines are nonempirical; they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment; they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective; they generate a highly motivated, volunteer religious labor force, including many willing to proselytize; they maintain a level of fertility sufficient to offset member mortality; they compete against weak, local, conventional religious organizations within a relatively unregulated religious economy; they sustain strong internal attachments while remaining an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders; they maintain sufficient tension with their environment—they remain sufficiently strict; and they socialize their young sufficiently well as to minimize both defection and the appeal of reduced strictness. How could they not succeed?

NOTES

1. "And it came to pass that Hagoth, he being an exceedingly curious man, therefore he went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship, on the borders of the land Bountiful, by the land Desolation, and launched it forth onto the west sea, by the narrow neck which led to the land northward" (Alma 63:5). This is interpreted as a voyage of settlement to Polynesia from somewhere along the Pacific coast of central Latin America. Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon Tiki* voyage in 1947 from Peru to Polynesia was regarded by many Latter-day Saints as confirmation of the story of Hagoth.

2. I use the word "priest" in the generic sense, although there are various levels of Mormon priesthood.